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Task-Based Language Teaching in EFL Context

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Abstract—This study attempts to demonstrate how a task-based syllabus (TBS) can be implemented to facilitate language learning in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) environment. As a first step, this research clarifies what is meant by "task" in the context of the task-based curriculum. Then, important theories that have contributed to the task-based curriculum will be discussed, followed by a discussion of its advantages and disadvantages in the classroom. The researcher then finds ideal teaching scenarios for enhancing language learning strategy awareness and facilitating second language acquisition using a task-based curriculum.

Keywords—Task, Task-based Language Teaching, Task-based Syllabus, Second Language Acquisition, English as a Foreign Language

I. INTRODUCTION

Although there have been notable advancements in comprehending second language acquisition (SLA) and learning, both educators and learners remain unsatisfied with language instruction. Educators, therefore, ponder the following question: why do second-language (L2) learners struggle to communicate effectively? (Nunan, 2004).

In the last two decades, the communicative approach has gained significance in second and foreign language education in order to enable students to communicate successfully in a variety of circumstances and contexts. The curriculum of task-based language instruction (TBLT) is based on the performance of specific tasks as opposed to the study of grammar or vocabulary (Seyyedi, Ismail & Orang, 2013).

Follow Scholars have advocated a task-based curriculum (TBC) as a practical solution for several difficulties in the field of language instruction. The TBS uses the task as the unit of analysis to promote more holistic approaches to second language acquisition, with a focus on meaning and outcome-based evaluation (Skehan, 2003).

Dissatisfaction with prior language teaching strategies such as grammar translation, direct method, audiolingual, etc. may have led to the development of TBLT. According to Rahimpour (2010), TBLT provides a solution to the difficulties presented by traditional approaches. In this method, the job is considered the unit of analysis, and meaning is given precedence over form. Therefore, students may apply any method to finish the assignment and achieve its aim (Willis & Willis, 2007). Nonetheless, some academics have questioned TBLT, arguing

that if students are not required to focus on the form while performing a job, they would acquire a very low level of language proficiency (Nunan, 2004; Skehan, 2003).

II. TASK

In SLA literature, the "concept of a task" varied, according to Long and Crookes (1992). Nevertheless, as Richards and Rodgers (2001) point out, it is widely acknowledged that a task is a language-based activity. According to Willis (1996), a task is any action with a clear goal in which learners employ language to do something. According to Skehan's (2002) definition, a task is an activity in which the meaning is primary, there is some contact with the real world, task completion is given some priority, and task performance is evaluated based on the task's conclusion. Even though there are variances in definitions, most emphasize that tasks are activities that are directed toward the achievement of a certain objective, and that language use is necessary to execute the tasks and achieve the goals. (Van den Branden, 2006).

There are two types of tasks: target tasks and pedagogic tasks. Target tasks are tasks that exist outside of the classroom and are from the "real world." These tasks are developed based on learners' understanding of why they are learning L2 and the purposes for which they will use it (Van den Branden, 2006). In contrast, pedagogical tasks are classroom activities with set requirements that are designed to improve learning (Bygate, 1999). They expose students to the proper target language, which promotes comprehension and production by altering target samples (Long & Crookes, 1992).

III. TBLT THEORIES

A. *Meaning is Primary*

In the 1970s, in the field of English language teaching (ELT), a dynamic view of language arose (Nunan, 2004). The primary emphasis in language teaching and learning was on meaning, resulting in numerous realizations of communicative language instruction (CLT). Task-based language instruction (TBLI) does not provide an exception to this norm. In TBLT, meaning is the starting point (Willis & Willis, 2007), and students are encouraged to build their language systems by engaging with meaning (Skehan, 2003). This importance of meaning is further supported by evaluations of task completion based on nonlinguistic results (Nunan, 2004).

B. *CLT Principles*

As previously indicated, TBLT emerged from CLT, and certain CLT principles may have inspired the concept of the

task. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), the following CLT principles have impacted TBLT:

- Authentic activities are vital for language development.
- Learning occurs more effectively when the language used is relevant to the learner.

Based on these concepts, the TBS concept is developed. Literature characterizes tasks as meaning-driven and related to communication that occurs beyond the classroom (e.g., information exchange, problem-solving, and group evaluation) (Skehan, 2003). According to Van den Branden (2006), individuals learn a language for utilitarian purposes.

C. Acquisition/ Learning Distinction

Early in the 1980s, Krashen proposed a debated theory regarding SLA. He argued that learning a second language requires two distinct brain processes: conscious learning and subconscious learning (Nunan, 2004). According to this idea, language acquisition is a subconscious process including the progress of language competence through language comprehension and language usage for expressive communication (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Thus, through meaningful connection, rules are implicitly assimilated. In contrast, learning is the intentional acquisition of linguistic rules through formal teaching. This method stresses grammatical rules, empowering students to remember rules and recognize rule infractions (Nunan, 2004). This theory holds that learning does not result in acquisition.

This discrepancy has had a significant impact on TBLT and TBS, despite being highly contentious. TBS uses tasks as its core component of design rather than language features and does not emphasize formal language training since it believes that form-focused education will lead to language form interchange rather than meaning exchange. This does not, however, imply that a form-focused approach has no place within the framework. Focus on Form is a tacit and explicit possibility for preventing fossilization and encouraging language improvement and acquisition (Willis & Willis, 2007).

D. Input/Output Hypothesis

As well as his acquisition/learning concept, Krashen also inspired TBS with a second notion. His Comprehensible Input Theory states that language acquisition arises through comprehension. In particular, acquisition occurs when a learner grasps a message including language that is one level above his/her existing ability. The term for this is Input+1 (Krashen, 1985). Thus, learners' linguistic talents will grow spontaneously without the requirement for language-specific instruction when learners are exposed to a wealth of diverse input (Skehan, 2003).

According to several experts, input alone is insufficient for appropriate language growth. Attention to output is a critical part of language acquisition because using this method, learners can identify gaps in their knowledge and skills, and test their language predictions (Robinson, 2011). Input and output hypotheses can support TBS and the use of tasks as instruments to facilitate meaningful engagement. The learning process and the development of meaningful output are extensive enough for the learner to realize relevant and attainable objectives (Van den Branden, 2006).

E. Long's Interactional Hypothesis

Long & Crookes (1992) advocated output as an essential component of SLA, claiming that learners' interactions in a task provide a mechanism for rendering comprehensible information and negotiating meaning due to problematic forms that occur during task implementation (Robinson, 2011). This relates to how learners encounter and respond to communication obstacles as they accomplish tasks. It has been suggested that learners respond to these issues through interactional modifications that result in conversational changes and feedback once the meaning is challenging and the learner is believed to be most receptive (Skehan, 2003). As a result of the importance placed on interaction and meaning negotiation, TBS has adopted the use of pair and group work for task accomplishment (Bruton, 2002) and has also incorporated a Focus-on-Form, which is an enhancement of Long's negotiation of meaning as an instrument for encouraging language expansion within the task cycle (Seyyedi, Ismail, 2012).

IV. STRENGTHS OF TBLT

A. Authenticity

According to Long and Crookes (1992), the difficulty with the synthetic curriculum is the artificial language it develops. Because they are created based on linguistic criteria, they do not show how individuals speak or write the language. To give the necessary rich and varied input for SLA, TBLT employs authentic classroom resources. Included are a range of internet-based text formats as well as professionally made audio and video recordings. According to Willis (1996), these sources can be regarded as authentic because they were not designed to teach languages, but rather to communicate, inform, and amuse. According to Richards (2006), the following are some benefits of real-life materials:

- They have a motivating effect on students. Many language learners' interests and goals are better served by authentic materials than by pedagogic materials (i.e., textbooks).
- They offer trustworthy cultural evidence. In addition to linguistic and nonlinguistic actions, authentic resources can illustrate other cultural features of L2.
- They provide authentic language settings. Authentic materials portray how language is used in natural contexts and are intended to convey information and communication. Students are therefore exposed to the target language in natural contexts.
- They are more aligned with the needs of learners. Using real-life and authentic resources helps students make the connection between classroom learning and their future professional lives.

According to what has been stated, utilizing authentic materials is beneficial since it exposes students to authentic communication in a diversity of circumstances. When these materials are integrated into TBLT, teachers may better prepare their students for real-world communications (Nunan, 2004).

B. *Nonlinguistic Focus*

The difference between an exercise and a task is that an exercise has a language outcome, whereas a task has a nonlinguistic outcome (Nunan, 2004). Due to its nonlinguistic emphasis, TBLT can assist in moving its emphasis from formal language to language use realized through genuine conversation. Moreover, task performance is judged based on language-related performance, not linguistic performance (Skehan, 1996). According to Van den Branden (2006), tasks encourage the learner to act more as a language user than as a language learner. TBLT encourages L2 learning and increases student motivation because it views language as a tool rather than an end in itself.

V. WEAKNESSES OF TBLT

TBS offers numerous advantages, but it also has certain disadvantages. According to Van Avermaet and Gysen (2006), the design of TBLT systems often presents three interrelated problems: specification, complexity, and evaluation. This section addresses these issues:

A. *Specification*

The term “specificity” denotes the outcomes obtained from tasks that are tailored to the indicated linguistic contexts. There is a risk that this method will result in an infinite string of objectives that educators will find impossible to achieve (Van Avermaet & Gysen, 2006). Long and Crookes (1992) pointed out the issue of finiteness as a possible barrier to TBS design. Both finiteness and specification refer to the factors that set apart various types of tasks. As a result, the TBS is limited by the particularity and suitability of tasks, since the delineation of activities remains murky (Bruton, 2002).

B. *Complexity*

A task’s difficulty is determined by three factors, which Skehan (1996) describes as follows:

- Code complexity: language difficulty in terms of syntax and lexicon
- Cognitive complexity: the amount of processing required to perform a task and the accessibility of appropriate schematic information
- Communicative stress: A result of time constraints, modalities, scales, risks, or control differences.

Robinson (2011), in contrast, contends that “complexity” and “difficulty” have separate effects on the performance of tasks and, consequently, task order. Consider the following criteria when making decisions on task sequencing:

- Task complexity: the extent to which the structure of the task affects the learner's ability to pay attention, retain information, reason, and process information.
- Task difficulty: factors affecting learning, e.g., differences in attention, memory, and reasoning resources among learners
- Task conditions: the interactivity and communicative goals of the task, as well as the gender, familiarity, and relative status of participants

Both systems are useful for task sequencing, although the development of a valid, user-friendly sequencing criterion

remains an unresolved issue in language instruction and, as a result, TBLT’s shortcomings (Long & Crookes, 1992).

C. *Assessment*

As task-based testing is a relatively new discipline and little research has been conducted in this area, this may be viewed as a limitation. Several obstacles exist in task-based assessment, including adequate rating scales and performance standards, selecting valid tests that yield trustworthy test results, generalizing learning outcomes across tasks to real-world settings, and the high expenses of implementing tasks (Van den Branden, 2006). Currently, certain educational authorities and institutions may not accept the TBS due to its lack of perceived responsibility.

VI. TBLT IN EFL CONTEXT

The most appropriate context for TBLT is an English as a second language (ESL) setting, such as English for Specific Purposes, because learners in both scenarios have clearly defined needs and may instantly utilize their second language in a real-world context (Sheen, 1994). Learners who take limited chances to practice L2 outside of the class in EFL contexts would benefit most from TBLT. This is due to the fact that they do not perceive the value of learning L2. Through its focus on the meaning and employment of real-life resources, TBLT enhances learners’ L2 learning experiences. In this case, direct application of the L2 yields perceptible consequences that lend purpose and value to the L2 learning development. The researcher says the following factors are necessary for TBS to be most beneficial in an EFL setting:

- According to Ellis (2009), TBLT is challenging to implement in large classes, a structural trait of many educational settings.
- The TBS encourages the use of performance-based testing, which is considered to offer various advantages, including beneficial ripple effects on education and the possibility to provide more accurate assessments of students’ abilities to use language in real-world circumstances (Van den Branden, 2006).

VII. ARGUMENTS SUPPORTING TBS

A. *Meets Learning Conditions*

Although learners’ preferred methods of instruction vary as much as their personalities, SLA research has shown four universal requirements for successful education. SLA research identifies four fundamental criteria for effective learning. Willis (1996) labels them exposure, language use, motivation, and linguistic focus. The SBS conforms to the following four characteristics:

- Exposure: The inputs that students might be exposed to in TBS vary from teacher talk to student interaction to authentic language use. Genuine, frequently natural language use is crucial for identifying and processing language characteristics, which is important for acquisition (Willis, 1996). This input is not restricted to sentence-level examples.

- Language Use: The foundation of task-based reasoning is the deliberate application of language to accomplish desired results. Successful task completion is dependent on students having meaningful communication interactions in which they express what they mean, take turns, direct the communication, and participate on their own accord. (Willis & Willis, 2007).
- According to Willis (1996), achievement and satisfaction play a key role in motivation. Students learn through the practice of the L2 in the context of tasks because they are goal-oriented activities. Students are more likely to participate the next time if they feel they've done something after completing an assignment (Willis & Willis, 2007). Task-based learning (TBS) is an intrinsically motivated teaching method since its central tenet is the successful completion of a given task.
- Focus on Form: As learners collaborate and discuss their work, a focus on form conventions arises spontaneously in the task environment. Also, using awareness-raising exercises, learners can examine and practice the language aspects that emerge during task work while maintaining a laser-like focus on the form, as Willis (1996) proposed in his task cycle.

B. Meets Learning Conditions

According to Nunan (2004), TBS is an excellent medium for increasing students' awareness and application of language learning techniques. Every activity given in the classroom is accompanied by a distinct instructional technique. Learners play a vital role in TBS, as each job they complete needs decision-making, strategic planning, and implementation (Seyyedi, Ismail, & Mohamed, 2014). Learners gain autonomy in their L2 learning when they are made more cognizant of and invested in the process, and when they are given the information, they need to make educated decisions about the learning tasks and techniques that will help them reach their task goals. (Nunan, 2004).

CONCLUSION

Analysis of the theoretical effects, strengths, and flaws of TBS reveals that the method has great potential for use in language education. Task-based instruction (TBI) is well-suited for small-group EFL programs that use task-based assessments because it uses tasks as instruments for intelligible input, negotiation of meaning, reward, and a focus on form that supports interlanguage progress and SLA. TBS is still the best program for boosting learners' language skills and increasing learner autonomy, but more study is needed to solve barriers connected with task specificity, task complexity, and task-based evaluation.

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