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Task-based language teaching: what every EFL teacher should do

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Abstract

This paper aims at presenting background of task-based language teaching, giving a definition of a task, describing three main approaches to task-based language teaching, specifying basic characteristics of task-based language teaching, highlighting the role of task-based language teaching as a powerful approach for maximizing language learning and teaching, expounding benefits and challenges of task-based language teaching as well as teacher and learner roles in TBLT and making recommendations for language teachers regarding how to implement task-based pedagogy effectively.

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1. Introduction

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has become a significant topic in the field of second language acquisition in terms of fostering process-focused syllabi and devising communicative tasks to enhance learners' real language use via the emergence of the communicative language teaching approach in the early 1980s and much stress on learners' communicative abilities during the past twenty years (Jeon and Hahn, 2000). Little was written about tasks before Prabhu's (1987) work. Since then, the deployment of tasks has become crucial not only as a tool of gathering data from participants but also as an object of study in and of itself. The number of books published on this topic since 2000 (containing Bygate, Skehan, and Swain 2001; Ellis 2003; Johnson 2003; Nunan 2004; Leaver and Willis 2005; Van den Branden 2006; Van den Branden, Bygate, and Norris 2009, among many others) overtly displays the increasing importance of tasks in research (Adams, 2009). Recent research studies indicate three major characteristics of task-based language teaching relevant to classroom practice: TBLT is in line with a learner-centered educational philosophy (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2005), it is made up of specific constituents such as goal, procedure, specific outcome (Skehan, 1998; Murphy, 2003; Nunan, 2004), and it supports content-oriented meaningful activities rather than linguistic forms (Beglar & Hunt, 2002; Carless, 2002; Littlewood, 2004).

Through the proliferation of task-based language teaching and research, there has become a wide diversity in the settings, methods, and theories paving the way for comprehension of tasks and learning. Task-based language

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teaching relies on a myriad of learning theories, covering theories of information processing (cf. Levelt 1989), input processing (cf. VanPatten 1996), Neo-Vogotskian sociocultural theory (cf. Lantolf 2000), the interactionist approach (cf. Mackey and Gass 2006), among others. Tasks are employed widely in research on language learning, together with a number of data collection and analysis techniques. Nevertheless, while task-based language teaching is strongly based on theory and on an increasing body of research, it is also an approach to teaching practice. The interchange between theory, research, and pedagogy requires research on tasks that takes into account aspects of all three areas (Adams, 2009).

The purpose of this paper is to provide background of task-based language teaching, give a definition of a task, categorize three main approaches to task-based language teaching, list common characteristics of task-based language teaching, stress the role of task-based language teaching as a forceful approach for furthering language learning and teaching, explain benefits and challenges of task-based language teaching as well as teacher and learner roles in TBLT and make recommendations for language teachers concerning effective implementation of task-based pedagogy.

2. Background of task-based language teaching

Based on the constructivist theory of learning and communicative language teaching methodology, the task-based viewpoint of language teaching has emerged in response to some constraints of the traditional PPP approach, denoted by the process of presentation, practice, and performance (Ellis, 2003; Long & Crookes, 1991). Hence, it has the significant meaning that language learning is a developmental process enhancing communication and social interaction rather than a product internalized by practicing language items, and that learners master the target language more powerfully when being exposed to meaningful task-based activities in a natural way. It was in the eighties that this viewpoint of language learning gave rise to the flourishing of various task-based approaches (Breen, 1987; Candlin & Murphy, 1987; Nunan, 1989; Prabhu, 1987). Moreover, during the nineties, it developed into a comprehensive structure for the communicative classroom where learners did task-based activities via cycles of pre-task preparation, task performance, and post-task feedback via language focus (Skehan, 1996; Willis, 1996). Obviously, as Ellis (2003) states, task-based language teaching has been re-investigated recently from a variety of perspectives covering oral performance, writing performance, and performance assessment.

Task-based approach in second language teaching was first performed by Prabhu, who published the Bangalore research report in 1982 and advanced the concept of task-based approach (Wei, 2004). Researchers involved in task-based approach have internalized experience from language research, the research of language learning and the research of foreign language acquisition, and it is getting more and more mature together with them. Its functions and value in constructing learner-centered classrooms and language learning contexts, giving learners the chance to communicate and interact and enhancing learners' ability to deploy the target language and sort out communicative problems were highly appreciated and recognized by researchers in the area of language teaching (Lin, 2009).

Task-based approach has attracted more and more attention in the foreign language teaching field since the 1980s. Being a learner-centered approach, it views language as a communicative tool. Task-based approach aims at presenting opportunities for learners to master language both in speaking and writing via learning activities designed to engage learners in the natural, practical and functional use of language for meaningful purpose (Lin, 2009).

In spite of the widespread employment of tasks in language pedagogy, some prominent challenges behind devising proper task-based syllabi and designing natural task-based materials, both of which have been regarded as key factors to detecting the powerfulness of TBLT in communicative classrooms, still remain unresolved. Many SLA researchers, in response to these challenges, are presently shifting their focus from conceptualizing tasks to arranging and performing tasks relying on observation of the practical efficacy of TBLT methodology in classroom practice (Jeon and Hahn, 2005).

3. Definition of a task

The term task has been defined by many researchers. Long (1985:89) defines task as "a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward". Breen (1987:23) comprehends task as "a range of work plans".

Nunan (1989:10) states that task is “a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form”. Willis, J. (1996: 53) stresses that task is “a goal-oriented activity in which learners use language to achieve a real outcome”. Skehan (1998:95) lists features of “task” as: (1) meaning is primary; (2) there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities; (3) task completion has some priority; (4) the assessment of tasks is in terms of outcome. Ellis (2003) gives the meaning of task as a “work plan” that requires learners’ cognitive processes via the inclusion of Skehan’s four criteria. Despite being various by nature, these definitions of task have some common points. A classroom task is an activity having a particular goal and it contains communicative language use in the process. Because task has a certain relationship with the extralinguistic world, it goes beyond the common classroom exercise. The type of discourse emerging from task is aimed to be similar to the one that emerges naturally in the real world (Ellis, 2000).

4. Approaches to task-based language teaching

There are three main approaches to TBLT, which are Long’s (1985), Skehan’s (1998), and Ellis’s (2003). The table below taken from Ellis (2009) categorizes these three approaches to TBLT according to five characteristics: (1) the provision of opportunities for natural language use; (2) learner-centredness; (3) focus-on-form; (4) the kind of task; and (5) the rejection of traditional approaches to language teaching (e.g. PPP).

Table 1. A comparison of three approaches to TBLT

Characteristic	Long (1985)	Skehan (1988)	Ellis (2003)
Natural language use	Yes	Yes	Yes
Learner-centredness	Yes	Yes	Not necessarily
Focus on form	Yes-through Corrective feedback	Yes-mainly through pre-task	Yes-in all phases of a TBLT lesson
Tasks	Yes- unfocused and focused	Yes- unfocused	Yes- unfocused and focused
Rejection of Traditional approaches	Yes	Yes	No

As is overtly seen in the table, what all these three approaches have in common is that they all stress the characteristic of tasks in establishing contexts for natural language use and that they focus on form. Nevertheless, differences in the three approaches are clear-cut regarding how attention to form is to be achieved, with Long underlining corrective feedback, Skehan task design and pre-task planning, and Ellis a myriad of ways in all three stages of a task-based lesson. Differences in the three approaches are also noticeable with respect to (2) (i.e. Ellis does not view group work as a crucial characteristic), (4) (i.e. While Skehan favours just unfocused tasks, Long and Ellis also view a role for focused tasks), and (5) (While Long and Skehan regard traditional structural teaching as theoretically unsupportable, Ellis views it as complementary to TBLT) (Ellis, 2009).

5. Characteristics of task-based language teaching

Although there is a divergence of views among the advocates of task-based language teaching in relation to the core principles of TBLT, Swan (2005) emphasizes that there is a general agreement among them on the characteristics listed below:

- Instructed language learning should mainly contain natural or naturalistic language use, and the activities are related to meaning rather than language.
- Instruction should support learner-centeredness rather than teacher-centeredness.

- Because □ □ totally naturalistic learning does not normally give rise to target-like accuracy, engagement is essential to promote the internalization of formal linguistic elements while keeping the perceived benefits of a natural approach.
- This can be realized best by offering opportunities for focus on the form, which will attract students' attention to linguistic components as they emerge incidentally in lessons whose main focus is on meaning or communication.
- Communicative tasks are especially suitable □ devices for such an approach.
- More formal pre- or post-task language □ study may be beneficial. This may make contribution to internalization by leading or maximizing familiarity with formal characteristics during communication.
- Traditional approaches are unproductive and unsuitable, □ particularly where they require passive formal instruction and practice isolated from communicative work.

6. Task-based language teaching as a powerful approach for maximizing language learning and teaching

Task-based approach is a teaching approach employing tasks as its main pedagogical tools to structure language teaching. Its proponents put forward the viewpoint that task-based approach is the clear enhancement of Communication Linguistics in that they have related principles in teaching. To illustrate, they both admit that activities for real communication are of most prominence in language learning; they both admit that utilizing language to perform meaningful tasks can enhance language learning; they both admit that the language which is meaningful to learners can pave the way for the learning process (Willis, 1996).

Task-based approach is a powerful and advancing learning method. It promotes learning language knowledge and training skills in the process of performing tasks. Teachers are both instructors and guides. Similarly, learners are both receivers and main agents. It is via TBLT that learners will master how to make full use of their own communicative abilities to shift from L1 to the target language. It presents a chance for them to learn cooperatively and activates their probable abilities to employ and deal with the target language in a professional way (Lin, 2009). As Larsen-Freeman (2000) states, since language learners make an effort to perform a task, they have rich opportunity to interact with their peers. It is this interaction that is assumed to ease language acquisition in that learners are to try to comprehend each other and to present their own meaning.

As a language teacher who teaches English as a foreign language to Turkish EFL learners, I employ task-based approach to provide learners with a natural context for language use, present a fruitful input of target language for learners, increase their ability to communicate effectively, and to maximize their motivation to the lesson.

7. Benefits and challenges of task-based language teaching

Task-based language teaching provides many benefits to aid foreign language learning. Ellis (2009) lists these benefits as follows:

- TBLT provides the opportunity for 'natural' learning within the classroom context.
- It stresses meaning over form; however, it can also emphasize learning form.
- It offers learners a fertile input of target language.
- It is intrinsically motivating.
- It is consistent with a learner-focused educational philosophy but also gives permission for teacher input and guidance.
- It contributes to the improvement of communicative fluency while not disregarding accuracy.
- It can be deployed together with a more traditional approach.

Although task-based approach presents many benefits to aid foreign language learning, it is not without some obstacles and challenges. According to Hatip (2005), some challenges of task-based approach are as follows:

- The drawbacks of task-based learning rely not so much on the potential powerfulness of this type of instructional content but on problems of conducting the instruction.

- Task-based learning involves a high level of creativity and dynamism on the part of the teacher. If the teachers are restricted to more traditional roles or do not possess time and resources to provide task-based teaching; this type of teaching may be impracticable.
- Task-based learning necessitates resources beyond the textbooks and related materials generally available in foreign language classrooms.
- Students may, at first, refuse or object to task-based language learning in that this type of instruction is not what many students expect and want from a language class.
- Some learners employ the mother tongue when they face with a difficulty or if the group feels intolerant.
- Some individuals enhance superior communication strategies, e.g. miming and employing gestures, but get by employing just uncommon words and phrases and let others provide the more challenging language they need. This may give rise to the fossilization of those individuals prior to improving very far in the syntax of the target language.
- Some learners are inclined to get caught up in making an effort to find the appropriate word, and do not worry about how it is placed into the discourse.
- There is a danger for learners to attain fluency at the expense of accuracy.

8. Teacher and learner roles in task-based language teaching

The language teacher aiming at implementing task-based language teaching in the foreign language classroom should perform three main roles: (1) *selector and sequencer of tasks*; (2) *preparing learners for tasks*; and (3) *consciousness-raising*. Relevant to the first teacher role, it can be stressed that the language teacher has an active role in choosing, adapting and designing tasks and then building these tasks in keeping with learner needs, expectations, interests and language skill levels. Related to the second teacher role, it can be stated that some training for pre-task is prominent for language learners. These training activities may include topic introduction, specifying task instructions, assisting students in learning or recalling beneficial words and phrases to make the task accomplishment easy, and offering partial display of task process. As for the third teacher role, it can be emphasized that the teacher deploys an amalgamation of form-focusing techniques, covering attention-focusing pre-task activities, examining the given text, guided exposure to similar tasks, and employment of highlighted material (Richards and Rogers, 2001).

The language learner who is exposed to the implementation of task-based language teaching in the foreign language classroom should carry out three major roles: (1) *group participant*; (2) *monitor*; and (3) *risk-taker and innovator*. Regarding the first learner role, it can be indicated that the learners perform a number of tasks either in pairs or small groups. Pair or group work may involve some adaptation for those learners who are more used to whole-class activities and/or individual work. Related to the second learner role, it can be stressed that tasks are employed as a tool for facilitating the learning process in task-based learning. Classroom activities should be organized so that learners can have the opportunity to observe how language is utilized in communication. Learners themselves should “attend” both to the message in task work and to the form where such messages typically come packed. Relevant to the third learner role, it can be stated that many tasks will push learners to generate and expound messages for which they do not have full linguistic resources and prior experience. In reality, this is said to be the point of such tasks. The skills of making guesses from linguistic and contextual clues, asking for explanation, and consulting with other learners may need to be enhanced (Richards and Rogers, 2001).

9. Conclusion and recommendations for language teachers

Task-based learning has developed prominently in the last two decades and has remained a potentially productive approach for a number of ESL/EFL teachers although some researchers still examine the powerfulness of TBL

(Büyükkarcı, 2009). Task-based approach, as Lin (2009) states, represents a trendy concept in language teaching. The purpose of teaching is not to assist learners in obtaining scheduled targets but to provide them with the context and conditions where language acquisition can take place. The teachers' roles have also been altered from instructor to establishers of study setting, assistants, guides, and advocates of the learning activities. Learners are the subjects in the classroom, which indicates that they are the key figures in the learning process. They are not empty vessels to be filled by the teachers any more but torches to be lit via offering appropriate learning settings and tasks.

The pedagogical benefits of task-based teaching of EFL are numerous. Task-based approach has blocked the distance between class and real life and has altered the malpractice in which teachers totally isolated traditional foreign language teaching from real life. Task-based approach assists learners in internalizing language skills in a natural way and shows learners how to sort out the problems that they encounter in real life (Lin, 2009). At this juncture, language teachers aiming at infusing task-based approach into their language classrooms should attribute prominence to the following points for the effective implementation of task-based pedagogy (Ellis, 2009):

- The tasks must be adapted to the linguistic proficiency levels of the students (e.g. if the students have restricted proficiency, tasks should first be of the input supplying rather than output-producing type).
- Tasks should be trialled to provide that they contribute to suitable L2 use and revised within the framework of experience.
- For TBLT to work, teachers should have an overt comprehension of what a task is.
- Teachers and students should be made familiar with the purpose and logic behind doing tasks (e.g. they should comprehend that tasks contribute to incidental learning of the kind that will pave the way for the development of their communicative skills).
- Principally, the teachers engaging in teaching a task-based course must be engaged in the design of the task materials.

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