

TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT: A TEACHING SESSION REPORT

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ABSTRACT

Task-based teaching is one of the approaches used in language teaching which aims to offer real-life language needs through real interaction in the target language (Nunan, 2004). It creates a motivating and meaningful context to facilitate second language learning. Learners basically focus on task performance while using the target language rather than practising it through traditional language-based activities. In the recent decades, several educational institutes are applying such an approach to teach a foreign language. This paper attempts to explore the effectiveness of using debates in language teaching and further investigates its implication in Omani context. Overall results show that applying a debate is a very communicative task that students enjoy if the topic meets their interest; however, it needs a qualified teacher who can control the on-going conversation between students and get students equal opportunities to participate.

Key words: real-life tasks, pedagogical tasks, task-based approach, pre-task, while-task, post-task

INTRODUCTION

Recently the importance of a task-based approach has increased in the field of second language teaching (Cuesta, 1995). Ellis (2003) -an advocate of task-based language teaching- declares that a task is an activity but it differs from an exercise because a task involves learners in real-life communication while an exercise expects learners to act mainly as language learners. Besides that, an exercise focuses on language form while a task focuses on meaning though Willis and Willis (2007) believe that the focus on form takes place at the end of the task. There are two main types of tasks: real-life tasks that could be applied outside the class and pedagogical tasks that focus on language acquisition in the classroom. There are also different forms of tasks such as information-gap, problem-solving, decision-making or opinion exchange (Pica et al, 1993 cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Willis and Willis (2007) add other forms of tasks such as listing, sorting, comparing and storytelling.

This report investigates the effectiveness of using a task-based teaching approach to teach speaking and prompt classroom interaction. The focus is on sharing ideas and opinions through a debate, and involving students in an interactive discussion by working in pairs and in groups. The linguistics focus (focus on form) is on the use of 'agreement and disagreement' phrases and expressions. The task is a 'Decision Task' (Luoma 2004, p. 150-151) in which the participants have to discuss and decide together what the advantages

and disadvantages of internet chatting are. This task takes place in Robinson library in Newcastle University, and it takes approximately 30 minutes. There are four international students (2 female and 2 male) who are in the advanced level in INTO programme.

FRAMEWORK

Creating a clear framework for a task is an essential part in task-based teaching because it organises the task goals and students' performance. The speaking task of this study is designed according to Ellis (2003) who believes that the theoretical approach to task-based language teaching has three stages: the pre-task stage, the while-task stage, and the post-task stage. More details of these three stages are given in the methodological procedures for performing the task of this study.

Task Goals

As goals are an integral part in teaching and they affect task design and its use, they are set before the task procedure and its input. Generally speaking, the purpose of this task is to make students able to express their ideas in English taking their peer's contribution into consideration. It also aims to make students collaborate in the creation of interaction and to use some useful expressions and phrases while discussing.

Input

Each task needs special input according to its goals, procedure, and students' level. In this task, the language teacher uses a silent video clip explaining and showing chatting in a public chat room as the main input for the debate. In addition, the teacher distributes a list of useful expressions to be used in students' discussion such as *I agree...*, *I respect your point but...*, *etc.*

Conditions

Students are divided into two groups (group A and group B). Each contains two students who belong to different cultural and linguistic backgrounds and gender: group A involves a Saudi male and a Japanese female while group B consists of a Japanese male and a Libyan female. Opinions and ideas are going to be shared by mixed-background students throughout the discussion.

Procedures

As mentioned above, this task has three stages: the pre-task stage, the within-task stage and post-task stage. This section describes these stages in detail.

1 The Pre-Task Stage

In the pre-task stage, language teachers introduce learners to the task so as to be familiar with it and motivated to participate. According to Prabhu (1987), the pre-stage is the key feature in the task because it is a preparation for performing the main task. Richard and Rodgers (2001) add that a great deal of time should be spent on preparing tasks.

For this reason, the teacher starts the task by showing students a silent video clip about chat rooms for three minutes, and then asks students to guess what it is about. The purpose of this video is to help students be familiar with the topic of the lesson and motivate them to participate in the class. There is a student who does not grasp what the video is about, but with the help of his colleagues, things become clear for him. After students' discussion around the video, the teacher confirms the title of the debate which is 'advantages and disadvantages of chat rooms'.

2 The Within-Task Stage

At the beginning of this stage, the teacher divides students into two groups: group A (Khaled & Aemi) and group B (Maryam & Agury). Then, the teacher distributes a list of possible expressions of agreement and disagreement which are usually used in debates to be read silently in 2 minutes. The list is shown below.

Agreement Expressions

I agree with you 100 percent

That's so true.

That's for sure

You're absolutely right

Absolutely

(strong)

That's exactly how I feel

Exactly

No doubt about it,

I think you are right

I couldn't agree with you more

I'm with you on this

Disagreement Expressions

I don't think so

No way (strong)

I'm afraid I disagree

I totally disagree (strong)

I'd say the exact opposite

That's not always true

That's not always the case

Everyone has their own opinion, right?

I think you're wrong on this

Where is your logic?

Indeed

Then the teacher asks group A to discuss the advantages of using chat rooms while group B discuss the disadvantages giving supportive reasons for their views and beliefs. While discussing, the students ought to use appropriate expressions from the list above as instructed before. Finally, all students are involved in an interactional debate sharing their opinions based on what they discussed before.

3 The Post-Task Stage

In the post-task stage, the teacher tries to get students reach a compromise between the advantages and disadvantages; e.g. "although chat rooms are useful for language learning but it can also be a waste of time". The purpose of this stage is to help students know how to end a debate respecting each other's opinion and not forcing their views to others.

TASK DESIGN

Outcomes of the task

According to the task goals, specific outcomes are predicted; some of which are achieved while others not. For example, one predicted outcome is that students will not resort to their mother tongue as students in each group come from different linguistic backgrounds. Accordingly, based on this variation, students use English in their discussion as the only means of communication between them. Also, it is assumed that after showing the video clip, students feel confident to speak about chat rooms as the topic becomes familiar and interesting. Frankly speaking, this prediction comes true in the actual situation; most students willingly show their attitudes towards it and offer some reasons behind them. The predicted compromise in the end is also reached and everyone seems to be satisfied.

On the other hand, some predicted outcomes are not fully achieved. Interaction among each group helps students to share and negotiate the meaning (Larsen- freeman, 2000). Besides, it is believed that working in pairs provides equal opportunities to convey meaning. However, it is noticed that some students are more talkative than their peers - maybe because their peers do not like to participate as they feel shy or are out of ideas. Moreover, it is predicted that students will be able to use some useful expressions for debate but it is observed that there is limited use of debate expressions. Probably this is because students are interested a lot in the topic so that they do not give attention to use these expressions.

TASK ASSESSMENT

Speaking Assessment scale adapted from Luoma (2004) & IELTS is used in the task assessment. As it is difficult for a teacher to assess the task during teaching, the task is recorded and the assessment is conducted after the task finished. To assess the task achievement, specific assessment criteria are used for each task goal (Appendix A).

The first criterion focuses on form; students are evaluated using the following assessment criteria: Pronunciation Intelligibility, Lexical Resource and Grammatical Accuracy. The second criterion assesses students' use of interaction strategies and how they collaborate with each other. Third, students are assessed on how much and effective they use 'agreement and disagreement' expressions. Each criterion has three levels: A, B, and C (for more details see appendix A). The teacher assesses each student in all assessment criteria as follow.

Group A:

As mentioned previously, this group has two students (Aemi and Khaled). Aemi seems to be very good in Pronunciation, Intelligibility, Lexical Resource, and Grammatical Accuracy but she is not that competent in Turn-Taking and Using agreement and disagreement forms. Khaled is excellent in all criteria except Grammatical Accuracy for which he is a little bit poor in it.

Group B:

Group B has two students (Maryam and Aguri). This group participate more than the other group. Maryam performed excellently in task except that she does not use many agreement and disagreement forms and the same with Aguri.

REFLECTION AND SUGGESTIONS

From the task performance, it is noticed that there are some positive and negative points in which they will be discussed in this section. The reasons behind them and suggested solutions are provided as well.

Generally, it is noticed that there are more opportunities for participation and turn taking and this may be due to the small number of participants. In addition, as the topic is familiar to students, they seem to be interested in the debate which increases speaking opportunities among students. Furthermore, due to the different linguistic backgrounds students come from, English is used as lingua franca and so there is no use of their mother tongue in the task. Also, the short duration of the task helps students to be active and avoid getting bored during the task. In addition to that, using the video clip in the pre-task is a good idea because it helps learners to understand what the task is about and makes them interested.

Some negative points are also faced during the task in which they can be solved through the teacher's intervention most of the time. In fact, the role of the teacher and students in a task-based class is different from a traditional class. As Willis and Willis (2007) say, the teacher working in a task-based class has to meet many demands: she has to organize students into groups, provides facilities, encourages students to participate, provides them the knowledge they need and sometimes explains language forms. In this task, there are four obstacles the teacher has to deal with. First, although there are many chances for

participation, is there is limited talk among some students which is probably because of low language proficiency, shyness and lack of knowledge. Such a problem can be solved by the teacher's scaffolding. The teacher can act as a prompter helping students who are stuck and out of ideas, and getting shy students out of their shells.

Second, there is limited use of useful expressions and this may be because students appear to concentrate more on the content and thus forget to use the debate expressions. As mentioned previously, the duration of the task is 30 minutes which is not enough to internalize the expression first and later employ them in their debate. This means that the task should be performed in more than 30-minutes lesson. If this debate is prepared in three lessons, the PPP approach may work. For instance, the expressions should be exposed to the participants in the first lesson. Then, they will practice using these expressions in different contexts in the second lesson and in the final lesson they will adopt these expressions in their debate.

Third, some students seem to be dominant in their groups because their peers are not willing to participate. Therefore, the teacher should control the participation in each group; in other words, when the teacher feels that one student is taking the lead, she should try to stop him smoothly and prompt his peer to comment on his views.

Fourth, the classroom does not have enough equipment to do this task; e.g., there is no data show to view the video or even a board. Luckily, there is a limited number of participants otherwise this can eliminate the effectiveness of the task achievement as not all students will be able to view the video through lap top.

TASK IMPLICATION IN THE OMANI CONTEXT

Learners in Oman take approximately 5 English classes of 40 minutes which is not enough if English is planned to be used in everyday life. Therefore, in such case, learners need to learn the language more naturally and authentically to use it in real-life communication. So, in such case, task-based approach helps a lot to offer real-life lessons for the learners. The Omani curriculum "*English for Me*" includes various interesting activities that are meaningful and purposeful which are organised through topic-based syllabus. In each unit, students practise the language skills through interesting and up-to-level activities. However, there are few real-life tasks and most of the activities and exercises are language focus.

This part discusses the effects of applying the task of this study in Omani school. Generally speaking, a debate provides a naturalistic context for language learning; the language learners use English as a means of communication to share information and experience to express their views and reach a compromise. Although the focus is on some debate expressions, the discussion is conducted using a variety of language forms, lexical phrases, collocations and patterns. Thus, if debates are widely applied in Omani schools, this

increases the communicative purpose of language learning and makes language classrooms more purposeful.

On the other hand, they may not yield the same results as the previous study for the following reasons. Firstly, in this task, learners use English as lingua franca because students come from different linguistic backgrounds; however, students in Oman belong to the same language and culture. Consequently, there is a possibility that Omani students may resort to their mother tongue while performing the task. Secondly, this topic is not suitable for Omani school students because there is a number of students who may not have broad knowledge about chat rooms due to internet access or parents' restriction on the use of such chats. In this case, language teachers have to do the effort to elect a topic that is familiar, interesting and suit the culture to make the debate more personal and efficient. The number of students in the class is another reason, because this task demands a small number of learners to provide more opportunities for participation but in an Omani class there are more than 30 learners in the class. Accordingly, the language teachers should be qualified enough to get all students active in the debate.

CONCLUSION

Task-based approach increases the learner's interest in the target language and facilitates their learning (Willis and Willis, 2007). There are several authentic tasks that teachers can employ in language classroom to make language learning more meaningful such as sharing information or experiences, playing a game, solving a problem, etc. This paper reflects on a speaking task "a debate" which took place in Robeson library in Newcastle University in terms of its effectiveness to language teaching. Apparently, the task seems to work well and learners enjoy discussing a topic like "chat rooms". It provides more opportunities to learners to participate due to the small number of the two groups. Moreover, since the learners come from different linguistic backgrounds, English is the only means for communication. Although the task has been well-prepared, some unpredicted problems happened like limited participation with some students and limited use of debate expression. The teacher has to play a great role in such cases like managing learners' participation and organizing the steps of debates. This study also proves that if debates are applied in Omani schools, they may yield different results as there may be some obstacles mainly due to the large number of students in a class and shared mother tongue.

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APPENDIX A

1. Intelligible Pronunciation	
Performance/ Band	Explanation/Analytic Descriptors
A	Pronunciation is clear and participants' turns are understood
B	Pronunciation might require some getting used to
C	Pronunciation may require a lot of attention

2. Use of Relevant Vocabulary	
Performance/ Band	Explanation/Analytic Descriptors
A	Relevant vocabulary used
B	Vocabulary used is partially/somehow relevant
C	No relevant vocabulary

3. Grammatical Accuracy	
Performance/ Band	Explanation/Analytic Descriptors

A	Almost no grammatical errors
B	There are grammatical errors but do not hinder communication
C	There are grammatical errors that hinder communication

4. Taking into account and making use of peer turns

Performance/ Band	Explanation/Analytic Descriptors
A	Understand peer's turns and know how to fit his/her own turns to these to create a coherent discussion
B	Discussion is coherent most of the time but now and then a speaker produces an incoherent turn, or the tie between the speaker's and the previous speaker's turns would be awkward
C	The speaker would not utter many words and would show few signs of having comprehended the peer's turns.

5. Using agreement and disagreement forms

Performance/ Band	Explanation/Analytic Descriptors
A	Uttering any form more than 5 times
B	Uttering any form 3-5 times
C	Uttering any form 0-2 times