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A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF TASK-BASED LEARNING

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Abstract

This paper examines some proposals for a favorite method in language teaching and learning: task-based learning. It gives a comprehensive review of relevant recent literature with particular consideration of the advantages and drawbacks of TBL. It first discusses the nature and communication-orientedness of task-based learning. The paper then offers the major characteristics of TBL with a special emphasis on the teacher's and students' role in TBL. Finally, it discusses the significant advantages and drawback of TBL.

***Key Words**: task-based, communicative approach, teacher role, student role.*

GÖREV TEMELLİ ÖĞRETİM YÖNTEMİNE ELEŞTİREL BİR BAKIŞ

Özet

Bu çalışma, dil öğretiminde önemli bir yöntem olan görev temelli dil öğretiminin çeşitli önerilerini incelemektedir. Burada, yakın zamanda görev temelli dil öğretiminde yapılmış çalışmalar kapsamlı bir şekilde incelenerek bu yöntemin avantajları ve farklı bakış açıları gösterilecektir. Öncelikle görev temelli dil öğretiminin doğası ve iletişimsel olarak tasarlanmış yapısı tartışılacaktır. Daha sonra ise bu yöntemin temel özellikleri öğretmen ve öğrenci rolleri temel alınarak incelenecektir. Son olarak yöntemin avantajları ve sorunlu yönleri tartışılacaktır.

***Anahtar Kelimeler**: görev temelli, iletişimsel yaklaşım, öğretmen rolü, öğrenci rolü.*

1. Introduction

Traditional learning environments (for example, grammar translation and audio-lingual) are those where the language is taught to a group of foreign or second language learners. In such cases, the focus is on the language itself, rather than on the information carried out by the language or the way it is processed and used. The teacher's aim is to assure that students learn the new vocabulary and grammatical rules of the new language.

According to Lightbrown and Spada (1999), however, communicative and task-based instructional environments involve goals that put the emphasis on interaction, conversation, and language use, not learning language itself. Task-based language learning is an approach of language learning that involves doing a familiar task by using the target language. As these are familiar tasks, there is a large range of task possibilities; for example, visiting the doctor, conducting an interview, or calling customer services for help. Teachers in a wide range of settings are eager and obedient to what the curriculum leaders tell them about how they should teach, and the publishers almost everywhere describe their course books as task-based. This caused Littlewood (2004) argue that "the task-based approach has achieved something of the new orthodoxy" (p.319).

Task-based learning was first developed by N. Prabhu in Bangladore, southern India. Prabhu believed that students may learn more effectively when their minds are focused on the task, rather than on the language they are using (Prabhu, 1987; as cited in Littlewood, 2004)

Nunan (2006) defines task as a piece of classroom work involving learners in a understanding, directing, producing or interacting way in the target language while the students' attention is focused on activating their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the aim is to express meaning rather than to manipulate form. The task should also have a sense of wholeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, middle and an end.

The topics discussed in communicative and task-based environments are generally topics of general interest to the learner. Task-based learning involves those instructions in which classroom activities are tasks similar to those which learners may engage in outside the second language classroom. Tasks may be complex, for example, creating a school newspaper or easier such as making a hotel reservation (Lightbrown and Spada, 1999).

There are not many published examples of complete language programs which claim that they are totally based on formulations of task-based language teaching. The literature contains mainly descriptions of examples of task-based activities. Breen (1987; as cited in Richards and Roberts, 2001: 233) makes a broad description of a task:

> A language learning task can be regarded as a springboard for learning work. In a broad sense, it is a structured plan for the provision of opportunities for the refinement of knowledge and capabilities entailed in a new language and its use during communication. Such a work plan will have its own particular objective, appropriate content which is to be worked upon, and a working procedure… A simple and brief exercise is a task, and also are more complex and comprehensive work plans

> which require spontaneous communication of meaning or the solving of the problems in learning and communicating. Any language test can be included within this spectrum of tasks. All materials designed for language teaching-through their particular organization of content and the working procedures they assume or propose for the learning of content- can be seen as compendia of tasks.

Brown (2001) assumes that in task-based instruction, the main concern is not the small pieces of language, but rather the practical purposes for which language must be used. Whereas content based instruction focuses on subject matter content, task-based instruction focuses on a whole set of real-world tasks. And input for tasks may come from different sources such as speeches, conversations, narratives, public announcements, cartoon strips, interviews, oral descriptions, etc. He also states that task-based curricula are different from content-based, theme-based, and experiential instruction in that the course objectives are more language based. While in task-based instruction the focus is on communication, purpose and meaning, the goals are linguistics in nature. These goals are not in the traditional sense of just focusing on grammar or phonology, but they include preserving the centrality of functions like greeting, expressing opinions as well.

Characteristics of Task-Based Instruction

While proponents of Task-Based Instruction naturally vary in their emphases and beliefs, according to Swan (2005: 377), there is a broad agreement on the following principles:

- Instructed language learning should primarily involve natural or naturalistic language use, and the activities are concerned with meaning rather than language.
- Instruction should favor learner-centeredness rather than teacher control.
- Since purely naturalistic learning does not normally lead to target-like accuracy, involvement is necessary in order to foster the acquisition of formal linguistic elements while keeping the perceived advantages of a natural approach.
- This can be done best by providing opportunities for focus on the form, which will draw students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose prime focus is on meaning or communication.
- Communicative tasks are a particularly appropriate tool for such an approach.
- More formal pre- or post-task language study may be useful. This may contribute to acquisition by leading or increasing noticing of formal features during communication.
- Traditional approaches are ineffective and undesirable, especially where they involve passive formal instruction and practice separated from communicative work.

Teacher and Learner Roles in Task-Based Learning

Both the students and the teachers have different roles during task-based learning. Although far from being exhaustive, Richards and Rogers (2001: 235-236) explains the roles of the teachers and the students in task-based learning:

Teacher Roles:

- *Selector and sequencer of tasks*: The teacher has an effective role in selecting, adjusting, and creating tasks and then shaping these tasks in keeping with learner needs, interests, and language skill levels.
- *Preparing learners for tasks*: Some training for pre-task is important for learners. These training activities may contain topic introduction, describing task instructions, helping students learn or recall useful words and phrases to make the task completion easy, and providing partial display of task process.
- *Consciousness-raising*: The teacher uses a mixture of form-focusing techniques, which include attention-focusing pre-task activities, studying the given text, guided exposure to parallel tasks, and use of highlighted material.

Learner Roles:

- *Group Participant*: The st,udents complete many tasks in pairs or small groups. Pair or group work may require some adaptation for those who are more accustomed to whole-class activities and/or individual work,
- *Monitor*: In Task Based Learning, tasks are used as a means of making the learning easier. Classroom activities should be planned in order that students have the chance to observe how language is used in communication. Learners themselves need to "attend" not only to the message in task work, but also to the form in which such messages typically come packed.
- *Risk-taker and innovator*: Many tasks will require learners to create and interpret messages for which they lack full linguistic resources and prior experience. In fact, this is said to be the point of such tasks. The skills of guessing from linguistic and contextual clues, asking for clarification, and consulting with other learners may need to be developed.

The Stages of Task-Based Learning

Task-based Learning offers an alternative teaching approach for language teachers. In a task-based lesson, the teacher does not pre-determine what language will be studied. The lesson is based around the completion of a central task, and the language studied is determined simultaneously as the students complete the task. Frost (2004) shows these certain stages:

Pre-task

The teacher begins the topic and gives the students clear directions on what they need to do at the task stage and may help the students recall some language that may be useful for the task. The pre-task stage can also contain playing a recording of people doing the task. This gives the students a clear model of what will be expected from them. The students can take notes and spend time getting prepared for the task. Ellis (2006) states that the first phase is pre-task and explains the various activities that teachers and students can carry out before they start the task. The purpose of the pre-task phase is to prepare students to perform the task in ways that will help promoting acquisition.

Task

The students complete a task in pairs or groups by using the language resources as the teacher monitors and offers support. This second phase includes a lesson that is essentially conversational in nature and the explicit formulation of messages, also includes opportunities for students to take risks. Another process in this phase includes the shared goals and effective scaffolding for the learners' efforts for communication.

Planning

Students set up a short oral or written report to explain the class what happened during their task. They then practice what they are going to say in their groups. Meanwhile the teacher is available for the students to ask for recommendation to clear up any language questions they may have.

Report

Students then report back to the class orally or read the written report. The teacher chooses the order of when students will present their reports and may give the students some quick feedback on the content. At this stage the teacher may also play a recording of others doing the same task for the students to compare. This phase has some pedagogic goals such as providing a repeat performance of the task, encouraging reflection on how the task was performed, and lastly encouraging forms that are problematic to the learner during the task

Analysis

The teacher then highlights relevant parts from the text of the recording for the students to analyze. They may ask students to notice interesting features within this text. The teacher can also highlight the language that the students used during the report phase for analysis.

Practice

Finally, the teacher selects language areas to practice based upon the needs of the students and what emerged from the task and report phases. The students then do practice activities to increase their self-confidence and make a note of useful language.

The Advantages of Task-Based Teaching

Task-Based Language Teaching is an application of second language teaching informed by the most recent research findings on second language acquisition. As such, it plays an important role in current language pedagogy (Solares, 2006).

A task-based lesson usually provides the learner with an active role in participating and creating the activities, and consequently increases their motivation for learning. A task-based lesson offers more opportunities for the students to display their thinking through their actions.

The teacher can also be more open to the needs of the students. TBL allows students to use the knowledge they have learnt and apply it productively in the task context (procedural knowledge). This practical experience helps learners to appreciate why certain academic questions are important and provide an experiential substrate for the development of a further academic discourse.

The task usually requires the selection of some objects as an outcome. This can provide a shared focus for which students can work together. In the process, different participants, including peer learners in the team and the tutor, can project different views on the same situation and develop meaningful discussion on the matter. The task will usually generate objects that are also open to cross group evaluation. The students can present their own products and evaluate others. Everyone can take part in evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the work generated within the classroom community. This will induce reflection as well as the development of critical awareness in the students (Ki, 2000).

Criticisms on Task-Based Learning

Few people would question the pedagogical value of employing tasks as a vehicle for promoting communication and authentic language use in second language classrooms. This approach, however, has its own drawbacks.

Swan (2005) states that the claim that Task-Based Learning is a advanced teaching approach, firmly based on the findings of current theory and research, can not be continuous. The hypotheses frequently associated with TBL, to the effect that second-language acquisition happens totally as a result of *noticing* during communicative activity, and are controlled by inflexible developmental sequences, are supported neither by convincing theoretical argument nor by experimental evidence, and are contradicted by common language-learning experience.

TBL offers a different rationale for the use of tasks as well as different criteria for the design and use of tasks. It depends on tasks as a primary source of pedagogical input in teaching and lacks of a systematic grammatical or the type of syllabus that characterizes current versions of TBLT. Moreover, many aspects of TBLT have not been justified, such as proposed schemes for task types, task sequencing, and evaluation of task performance. Therefore, in line with what Swan (2005) suggested above, ac-

cording to Richards and Rogers (2001) the basic assumption of Task-Based Language Teaching, that it provides for a more effective basis for teaching than other language teaching approaches, remains in the domain of ideology rather than fact.

While Task-Based Instruction may fruitfully develop learners' authority of what is known, it is significantly less effective for the systematic teaching of new language. This is especially so where time is limited and out-of-class exposure is unavailable, such as in Turkey. This makes task-based programs inappropriate for most of the world's language learners.

According to Skehan (1996), task-based learning holds some dangers if implemented carelessly. Especially, it is likely to create pressure for instant communication rather than interlanguage change and growth. Speakers may resort to use some communication strategies such as paraphrase, repetition, word coinage, etc. Furthermore Norris, Brown, Hudson, and Bonk (2002) argue task-based learning does not provide any basis for making interpretations beyond the particular task/test context and it cannot simulate all of the factors that define actual language use situations. Moreover, the elicited performances may depend on abilities or knowledge rather than language itself.

It should also be said that task-based interaction is a mainly narrow and learners put great emphasis on communicating meanings, but not necessarily worry about the exact form that they use. Therefore, the whole organization of the interaction is equipped for establishing a tight and selected focus on the achievement of the task. There are a large number of different varieties of interaction in the world outside the L2 classroom, where there is certainly a lot more to communication than performing tasks (Seedhouse, 1999).

2. Conclusion

The problems and difficulties of learning a second language are the major factors for scholars to develop new methods to be employed in language pedagogy. When Prabhu developed Task-based learning, he thought that if students' minds engaged in a task they may learn more effectively because the basic condition of education is learner engagement.

No wonder TBL was seen as another device to handle learning problems and has been the target of many researches during the past two decades. Looking at the development of task-based learning research, the initial priority was given to the definition of tasks and the philosophy behind it. At present, the main concern of leading researchers is the kinds of tasks and whether at which level task-based learning is effective.

In sum, task-based learning has made a significant progress in the last two decades and has remained a potentially fertile approach for many ESL/EFL teachers despite the fact that some researchers still question the effectiveness of TBL.

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