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The Effectiveness of Task-based Language Teaching to ESP Bachelor Students at Two Universities in Bulgaria and Romania

Abstract

This paper aims at analyzing and comparing the approach of Task-based language teaching (TBLT) to bachelor students taking classes of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at two universities in Bulgaria and Romania. The outcomes of the research show that both Bulgarian and Romanian students express their favorable preferences towards using this approach. This is a case study implemented on a local level in two neighboring countries in the region of Southeastern Europe.

Keywords: communicative competence, tasks, Task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Bulgaria, Romania

Introduction

Undeniably English is the main language of technology, media, business, international marketing, and advertising, and as such, has become a global language (Bogachenko, 2016). This trend has led to an increased demand for fluency growth in English which has become crucial for job opportunities and professional realization. The hegemony of English as a first foreign language in Bulgaria and Romania has been really strong since the Fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and by far reinforced after the accession of both countries to the European Union (EU) in 2007. In 18 education systems, English is a compulsory language (including Bulgaria and Romania) that all students must learn at one point during their compulsory education (Baïdak et al., 2017, p. 9).

In line with these EU recommendations, the authors of this study have chosen to analyze and compare the effectiveness of the **Task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach** in teaching **English for Specific Purposes (ESP)** to bachelor students of their university majors of Information Technologies and Tourism in Bulgaria and Economic Sciences in Romania as a logical and most appropriate teaching method adequate for the contemporary university settings, learners' English language needs, and their professional realization on the job market.

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach

Many researchers and teachers alike are committed to improving the quality of teaching English and among the various theories, methods and approaches of teaching and learning that have emerged TBLT deriving from the communicative language teaching approach has become rather popular in the last two decades in spite of certain controversies.

The TBLT approach is regarded as an appropriate means of teaching ESP in this study, because it places emphasis on the **meaning** rather than the language form and **task-based** activities offer students an opportunity to develop cognitive processes.

The present study takes as a prerequisite the definition of a “task” as explained by Willis (1996) in his *Framework for Task-based Learning*: tasks are activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) to achieve an outcome (p. 23).

According to Nunan (2004), tasks may be divided into target tasks (real world ones) and pedagogical tasks. Target tasks are similar to those activities that learners have to do outside the classroom. Pedagogical tasks are those that have been designed to be suitable for the classroom setting. David Nunan’s definition of a pedagogical task, expressed in his *Task-based Language Teaching* (2004), is quite comprehensive. According to him, it is a “piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which their intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form” (p. 72). In order to express different communicative meanings, students do have to resort to grammar, so meaning and form are obviously interrelated.

TBLT emphasizes the fact that learning should be an active and interactive process; it should not be based on mere transmission of knowledge from teacher to learners and it should encourage the students to learn collaboratively in small groups.

Researchers commonly agree that language learning should be based on communicative interaction, the task involving language used in the real-world and conferring authenticity to classroom communication. Based on an experiential “learning by doing philosophy”, TBLT bridges the gap between class and real life, changing the roles of the teachers from instructors to guides or assistants and placing the students at the core of the learning process. As participants share their knowledge, experience and opinions, they can use the language effectively, be exposed to new input and constantly improve their language skills. As a learner-centred approach TBLT draws knowledge from the learner, considers his needs and uses tasks according to these aspects. It is a permanent negotiation between the teacher as facilitator and learner in their collaborative relationship.

There are other numerous advantages to elaborating this approach in class, too: by devising communicative tasks, TBLT increases learners’ real language use; it is a learner-centered approach; while learning students cooperate, they can interact during their common effort of performing a task; if they see they can communicate effectively, their motivation to learn is increased; authentic texts are used in the learning process; the selection is based on students’ needs and, last but not least, students have the opportunity to focus on the learning process itself, not only language.

Context

Country profiles: Bulgaria and Romania

Bulgaria and Romania are border countries divided by the river Danube to the northern part of Bulgaria and to the southern part of Romania. Both are situated in the region of Southeastern Europe. Bulgaria's population is 7,057,504 (July 2018 est.) and Romania's population is three times bigger – 21,457,116 (July 2018 est.). In the first country Bulgarian is the official language (76.8%), Turkish (8.2%), Romani (3.8%), other (0.7%), unspecified (10.5%) (2011 est.) (The World Factbook, 2018a). In the second country Romanian is the official language (85.4%), Hungarian (6.3%), Romani (1.2%), other (1%), unspecified (6.1%) (2011 est.) (The World Factbook, 2018b).

The percentage of people speaking at least one foreign language in Bulgaria is 49.5% (NSI, 2017). In Romania the percentage of people who can converse in a foreign language is 48%, English being the foreign language that most Romanians speak (31%), followed by French (17%). University graduates in Romania represent 15.1% of the country's active population, according to the Social Monitor of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Romania Foundation (2017).

The status of teaching ESP at universities in Bulgaria

There are not general requirements for choosing to teach ESP instead of teaching General English at Bulgarian and Romanian universities. It is up to the teacher to choose which mode of teaching they can imply in their day-to-day teaching practice.

ESP is predominantly taught in many universities in Bulgaria preparing students for the applied, technical and business sciences, for example at The University of Forestry; Todor Kableshkov University of Transport; University of National and World Economy; University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy; Varna University of Management, N. Y. Vaptsarov Naval Academy in Varna; University of Library Studies and Information Technologies, etc.

Most often ESP courses are developed for intermediate or advanced learners, specific use of vocabulary, grammar and functions always depending on previously acquired competence, which we deem, should be assessed at least at B1/B2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) to allow a successful curriculum design (Ruzhekova-Rogozherova, 2015, p. 42).

The status of teaching ESP at universities in Romania

In Romanian academic institutions it is compulsory to study at least one foreign language, mainly English and predominantly ESP. The syllabus for ESP taught in Romanian universities is drawn according to the professional needs of their students and to the requirements of the labour market. University of Bucharest, The Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, West University of Timisoara are just a few of the public institutions of higher education with a long and distinguished tradition in teaching foreign languages. The students are expected to have at least an intermediate level B1 according to the CEFR and those majoring in economics and business are studying mainly business language and vocabulary.

In both countries teachers have undergone their formal higher education in English Philology or Applied Linguistics and are expected to have an interest, although sometimes slight, in the specific area of studies of their students.

Objectives of the study

- To analyze the effectiveness of TBLT approach to ESP bachelor students at two universities in Bulgaria and Romania;
- To compare the effectiveness of TBLT approach to ESP bachelor students at two universities in Bulgaria and Romania;
- To improve the use of TBLT approach to ESP bachelor students at the home universities in Bulgaria and Romania by using the comparative data from the research.

Research methodology

This paper aims at examining the attitude of bachelor students at tertiary level of education towards task-based language teaching and its effectiveness for learners. The authors of the study who have kept contact electronically via e-mails have obtained data from 52 students at the Faculty of Economics of the “Constantin Brancusi” University, Targu Jiu, Romania in the third year of studies and the equal number of bachelor students at the Department of Comprehensive Studies of the University of Library Studies and Information Technologies, Sofia, Bulgaria who are studying English during the first and second semester of their first and second year of studies at B1-B2 level of language knowledge according to the CEFR. The data resulted from a questionnaire including 25 closed-ended questions under 5 subcategories (I Methodology; II Tasks; III Communicative competence; IV Student-centeredness; V Personal improvement) regarding the effectiveness of TBLT and its impact upon the students’ performance. Students answer individually choosing from options *Yes*, *No*, or *I don't know*.

Findings

Romania

I Methodology:

Most of the participants in the study declare that they enjoy modern methods of teaching English based on communication instead of traditional ones focusing on reading, grammar or translation. The participants consider that TBLT help them to improve their speaking skills and it is thought to be entertaining.

II Tasks:

Seventy per cent of them prefer authentic texts from magazines, newspapers, course books and do not agree to the idea of having specialized texts translated into English. Even a greater number of them prefer performing tasks which are a reflection of real-life use of the language in their specific area of studies. Task activities are considered to be a good way to improve English vocabulary in the students’ specific area of studies by 84% and 85% of them think that they support and develop their language needs and professional interests.

III Communicative competence:

Most of the participants like engaging in communicative tasks (96%) and, surprisingly, they acknowledge its importance in communication (98%). However, instead of completing purely grammar exercises, they prefer to speak more and appreciate a teacher who encourages them to do so (88%). The participants admit that fluency is more important for them than accuracy (70%) and express their opinion.

IV Student-centeredness:

Equal numbers show that TBLT help students to express their own ideas about the topic of the lesson without being interrupted by the teacher (75%) but they do not like to complete a task without any input or guidance from him or her (76%). The students like pair work and group work during their English classes and 84% of them feel comfortable when talking to their colleagues in English even if not all of them had been exposed to this method before and their perception was possibly affected by their previous experiences of learning English. However, we have noticed that those students who are more proficient tend to monopolize the group or pair work activities.

V Personal improvement:

On the other hand, TBLT is thought to contribute to the students' personal improvement since 77% consider that it helped them to develop personally; 85% think that it helped them to cooperate with others; it increased their motivation to learn English (94%) and advanced their critical thinking (84%), contributing to their professional realization in their specific area of studies (86%).

Bulgaria

I Methodology:

More than half of the students (67%) prefer the traditional methods of teaching focusing on reading, grammar or translation whereas the preference for the modern methods of teaching based on communication comprises 77%. The communicative method of teaching through oral or written tasks is appreciated by 75% who consider that it encourages learning. The participants consider that TBLT assists them to improve their speaking skills (86%) and it is thought to be entertaining by 61%.

II Tasks:

Thirty-three per cent of the students are inclined to use specialized texts translated into English compared to 38% who prefer authentic ones and the rest (29%) have no definite idea. A much greater number (85%) prefer tasks which are a reflection of real-life use of the language in their specific area of studies. The same tendency applies to their English vocabulary improvement and language needs and professional interests (80%).

III Communicative competence:

More than half of the students like being engaged in communicative tasks (62%) and prefer a teacher who encourages them to speak more (65%), although they think that grammar is important to communicate effectively (62%). However, less than a half of them admit that accuracy is more important (46%) and 56% feel that TBLT helps to express their personal opinion.

IV Student-centeredness:

Only 52% feel confident to express their own opinion and struggle to complete a task without any guidance from the teacher (50%). Positively, they like pair and group work (80%), and not so convincingly answering the teacher's questions (50%) as well as talking to colleagues in English (54%).

V Personal improvement:

Answers show that students are not really certain whether TBLT approach can contribute to their personal development, cooperation with others, motivation increase to learn English, and professional realization in their specific area of studies because the results are between 34 and 38% in contrast with the lowest level of critical thinking improvement of only 24%.

Discussion

Unlike the Romanian students who opt for the modern methods of teaching English based on communication quite convincingly and appreciate it through oral or written tasks, their Bulgarian counterparts seem to still have a stronger preference for traditional methods, although they also express their positive attitude towards the modern communicative ones and find encouragement in completing such tasks. While both groups of students in Bulgaria and Romania suggest that TBLT approach improves their speaking skills, Romanian participants enjoy it more to the fullest.

Bulgarian students are slightly confused about the importance of using authentic texts unlike the Romanian participants; however, both groups prefer performing tasks which are a reflection of real-life use of the language in their specific area of studies. Both Bulgarian and Romanian students consider task activities to be a good way to improve English vocabulary in the students' specific area of studies and think that they support and develop their language needs and professional interests. Romanian students appreciate to a greater extent a teacher who encourages them to speak more instead of completing purely grammar exercises. Moreover, Romanian participants are more confident in expressing their own ideas about the topic under discussion during classes compared to the Bulgarian ones, but the latter are striving for more independence in task completion. Both groups like pair and group work during their English classes, although Bulgarian students don't like sharing ideas with colleagues unlike their Romanian counterparts.

Quite contrary to the Romanian learners who think that the TBLT approach would contribute to their personal development, motivation for learning a foreign language and critical thinking, the Bulgarian participants are rather reserved towards these methods' positive effect on these characteristics.

Limitations

One limitation of the study refers to the small number of participants and further studies may be done on larger groups in the future, in order to demonstrate the feasibility of the TBLT approach from the students' perspective. Another limitation may be the subjective character of the students' responses which may affect the quality of the study itself. It would be interesting to develop further studies both on larger numbers of students and on ESP teachers from Romania and Bulgaria to give their perspectives and attitudes towards using TBLT at tertiary level.

Conclusion

The questionnaire, designed for our students, was created in accordance with the objective of the study and the information contained in the theoretical framework and included closed-ended questions about TBLT methodology and its efficiency in teaching English. The data in the questionnaire were analyzed in figures, percentages, interpretation and discussion. Based on the findings resulting from research, we drew the conclusions and recommendations.

The findings in this study provide information that can be applied to other students at tertiary level about their perceptions regarding TBLT in English classes, revealing the following implications.

Even if the traditional methods used by some of the students' previous teachers may have affected their perception of language teaching, the participants in this study seem to enjoy the modern ones more. TBLT is based on the principle of engaging students in communication. It is obvious, then, that task-based methods can help learners to better interact with one another and the teacher and to build up confidence in using English.

The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of TBLT in English classes. The information collected clearly indicated that the students had an overall positive attitude towards TBLT, considering that it increased their motivation for learning English and that they can improve their language proficiency by being exposed to such methods.

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