The Effect of Task-based Activities on EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

Nowadays, preparing learners to communicate successfully in language classes is of utmost importance. But teachers face a lot of difficulties in teaching English in EFL contexts. One of the major problems is students' unwillingness to take part in reading classes. Reading classes seem boring for students who find no occasion to show their ability and no need to challenge their brain to answer teachers' display questions.

Introduction

The truth might be teachers' unawareness of making language classes meaningful, and therefore enjoyable and memorable for students. Task-based language teaching has been proved to be an effective way for improving learners' linguistic and communicative competence.

This study has investigated the effect of task-based activities on EFL learners' reading comprehension. In order to accomplish the research, 60 learners were chosen in one of the private institutions (Jahad-e-Daneshgahi) in Tabriz. An experimental method of research was employed. The experimental group was taught according to the elements of task-based learning. The control group didn't receive such treatment. After 18 sessions, a post-test was given. Through the analysis of the obtained data, t-test, it was found that there were significant differences between the control and experimental groups on the dependent variable, reading comprehension. Therefore, there is an empirical piece of evidence to support the language teachers who use this method.

Statement of the problem and purpose of the study

The kind of English language teaching that can be observed in most Iranian high schools and private language institutes is that the teacher teaches and the students listen, then the student

produce (or regurgitate information on a written test) and the teacher evaluates. The knowledge is declarative, decontextualized and inert. Knowledge is not personally built or applied. More progressive teaching is seen when teachers model strategies of learning in the context of task completion, and then students try to do the task the same way the teacher did it but teachers are often seen to spend a lot of time in class asking questions for which they and students already know the answers; thus, there is no information gap to fill. In fact, these display questions demonstrate usage rather than use of the target language. Display questions only demonstrate knowledge of forms and structures while neglecting communicative functions. They do not encourage improvisation or creativity. According to Widdowson (1978), we must progress from learning about the language, (Language usage) to considering how language works in a communicative sense, (Language use). Richards, Platt and Platt (1992, as cited in Liao, 2001) claim that classroom activities will be mechanical and artificial without information gaps.

Another kind of teaching, especially in private institutions is that teachers enter the class with a task-based book in hand, saying" this is task one, now you are group A and you are group B, do it". But are they really aware of what a task is, and how they should manage the class in a task-based form. Most of the time, the straight- forward answer is no. There might be some exceptions, too. But these are the things that happen in most of our classes in Iran.

My main purpose in conducting this research is focusing on meaning together with the form of language. As far as I know, there have been little empirical studies on task-based language teaching and learning within the Iranian context. There have been a lot of arguments among researchers on what a task is, what its components are and so on. But there is little information on how to use a task-based book in the class, what procedures to use, and how to manage the class in task-based form. So, the main purpose of this study is to determine how task-based activities affect learners' reading comprehension.

List of abbreviations

    CLT: Communicative Language Teaching

    TBLT: Task-based Language Teaching

    TBLL: Task-based Language Learning

    TBA: Task-based Activities

    PPP: Present Practice Produce

Introduction

Given that individual learning agendas determine what is "learnt" in the language classroom, it is generally recognized that students need to be fully involved in what happens there. Task-based learning satisfies this need, involving the learners at every level of the educational process as they pass through comprehension, decision-making, implementation, preparation, rehearsal, performance and reflection. If carried out in the target language, these stages have obvious advantages in terms of authenticity and meaning, but task-based work can also be beneficial in encouraging learners to address their learning needs, to assess themselves, and to become self-directed (Finch, 1999, p. 179).

Since the mid 1980s (Nunan 1989a; Prabhu 1987; Skehan 1996), task-based syllabus design and task-based teaching, which have their origins in research on second language acquisition (SLA), has attracted some researchers and curriculum developers in second/foreign language instruction as a result of wide-spread interest in the functional views of language and communicative language teaching. As a result of such views, some practitioners and researchers proposed that task should be the key unit within the syllabus. Task-based Learning (TBL) grows out of the more general notion of communicative language teaching (CLT). Task-based Learning (TBL) is an effort to incorporate what is known about the processes involved in second language learning and in the findings of the second language classroom which take task as the unit of analysis. In TBL students engage in interaction in order to fulfill the task.

Zone of Proximal Development

In 1970s, there was agreement that language has to be acquired as a result of deeper experience, that is, by means of some learning tasks. Since that time there has been an interest among researchers and curriculum developers to pay attention to tasks as a main unit of analysis in language teaching.

According to Wilhem, Baker, and Dube (2001), Vygotsky was the first person who introduced the "Zone of Proximal Development". He believed that the notion of instruction would have teachers doing complex tasks in meaningful contexts with students helping as much as they can. He went on to claim that through repetitions of the tasks, students take on

more and more of the responsibility. Teacher helps them when they need him and he names the new strategies which are employed by the student. Finally, students do the task on their own (Bodrova & Leong, 1999; Moor, 2001; Curzon, 1997; Daniels, 2001).

When the child masters a new task, the things he could do with help yesterday is what he can do independently today. Vygotskians believe that the things that lie outside of the child's ZPD cannot be learned by the child, no matter what help is given. Assistance must be provided in such a way that the child must actively construct and make meaning not just to respond but assistance should be planned so that it can gradually be withdrawn over time, as the child is able to perform independently (Bodrova & Leong, 1999).

Procedural syllabus

The procedural syllabus is associated with the work of Prabhu in India from 1979-1984. Prabhu's procedural syllabus which is regarded as one version of TBL was built around a syllabus which contained no linguistic specifications but instead involved a series of tasks in the form of problem solving activities. Prabhu believes that the Bangalore project is teaching through communication rather than pre-selection, which is a matching of notion and form. Prabhu denies the sufficiency of a comprehensible input, but supports the idea that students need plenty of opportunities to develop their comprehension abilities before any production. He believes that acquisition of a linguistic structure is not an instant, one-step procedure and agrees with Krashen that language form is acquired subconsciously by the operation of some internal system of abstract rules and principles, when the learners' attention is not focused on language; rather it is focused on meaning, i.e., task completion.

The main hypothesis of the Bangalore project was that structure could be learned when attention was focused on meaning. For Prabhu, two consequences follow. The first includes the prohibition of any linguistic syllabus, because he argues for natural classroom communication. The content of lessons is planned according to tasks and activities, but there is no pre-selection of linguistic content. The second consequence is to band formal teaching procedures, like drilling and error correction, where the result is form-focus rather than message-focus. "In the general avoidance of these procedures the teacher is expected to behave like the parent of an L1 child" (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

Task-based learning and teaching

Prabhu's procedural syllabus is one of the well-documented published researches on task-based language learning. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), in TBLT language learning depends on immersing students not only in comprehensible input but also in tasks which require them to negotiate meaning and engage in naturalistic and meaningful communication.

According to Ellis (2002), the underlying principle in TBLT is that having learners perform tasks will help them to develop knowledge and skills in the second language in accordance with the way their own language learning mechanisms work. Tasks function as "devices for creating the conditions required for language acquisition" (Ellis, 2002, p. 226). TBL implies a shift from some traditional teacher roles. For Nunan (1989, as cited in Harmer, 2001), teachers cannot always act as a controller if they want students to manipulate, comprehend and interact with a task. For Allwright (1984, as cited in Foley, 1991), in order for lessons to take place at all, classroom interaction has to be managed, and by all present, not just by the teacher. Thus, for Allwright, it is not the content of the lesson that is the focal point or basis for learning but the process of classroom interaction that generates opportunities for learning. "Class behavior is owned by the whole group, of which the teacher is but one member" (Kohonen, 1992, as cited in Bailey & Nunan, 1996, p. 53).

The implication for TBL is that if learners are provided with a series of tasks which involve both the comprehension and the production of language with a focus on meaning, language development will be prompted. The focus in TBL is on process rather than product, and on how to learn rather than what to Learn. According to Nunan (1989b), task-based curriculum involves 'an integrated set of processes involving, among other things, the specification of both "what" and "how" (p. 1). According to Ellis (2003), various approaches to task-based teaching reflect the issues such as "the role of meaning-based activity, the need for more learner-centered curricula, the importance of affective factors, the contribution of learner-training, and the need for some focus-on-form."Task-based pedagogy provides a way of addressing these various concerns and for this reason alone is attracting increasing attention" (p. 33). Nunan (1991a) mentions five features of task-based approach as follows:

1) An emphasis on learning to communicative through interaction in the target language
2) Introducing authentic texts into the learning situation

3) Providing opportunities for learners to focus not only on language but also on the process itself

4) Enhancing learners own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning

5) Linking classroom language learning with language activation outside the classroom

Different kinds of tasks

Pica, Kanagy and Falodun (1993, as cited in Richards and Rogers, 2001) classify tasks in accordance with the type of interaction that occurs in task accomplishment such as: jigsaw tasks, information-gap tasks, problem-tasks, decision-making tasks and opinion exchange tasks.

Prabhu (1987) identifies three broad task types: information gap, opinion gap, reasoning gap. Nunan (1991b) distinguishes between interpersonal and transactional tasks. He defines the former as one in which communication happens mainly for social purposes. And the latter as one in which communication happens mainly to bring about the exchange of goods and services. Richards and Nunan (1990) group tasks into different kinds of comparing, preparing, evaluation, improving, listing, selecting, ranking, adding/completing and rearranging.

Nunan (2001) distinguishes between real world and pedagogical tasks as follows: "Real world tasks are communicative acts which are achieved through language in the world outside the classroom. Pedagogical tasks are tasks that are carried out in the classroom" (p. 4).

Tasks, exercises and activities

For Skehan (1998, as cited in Brown, 2001) task is an activity in which meaning is primary; there is some communication problem to be solved; there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of a task is in terms of outcome.

According to Nunan (1999), a task is communicative act which usually does not have a restrictive focus on a single grammatical structure. An exercise usually has a restrictive focus on a single language element and has a linguistic outcome. An activity has a restrictive focus on one or more language items, but also has a communicative outcome.

Focus on form

Unless we encourage a focus on form, learners will develop more effective strategies for achieving communicative goals without an accompanying development of their language system. They will develop a 'classroom dialect', which enables them to exchange meanings in spite of the shortcomings of their language. As a result, they may fossilize at a relatively low level of language development (Skehan, 1996, as cited in Willis & Willis, 2001, p. 174). Skehan (1992, as cited in Willis & Willis, 2001) argues that learning becomes more efficient if:

1) Within a task-based methodology, there is a need to focus on accuracy.
2) Within the task- based cycle, there is a critical focus on language form.

A focus-on-form can be achieved in a number of ways: When teachers respond to learner errors, or when they draw learners' attention to the usefulness of specific forms in the task they are performing, or when learners collaboratively try to solve some linguistic problems in order to complete a task (Ellis 2003, p. 26).

Problem-solving activity

"Problem-solving is thinking in relation to some task whose situation is not immediately obvious to the task performer" (Soden, 1994, pp.15-28). Brown (2001) defines problem-solving as "an activity involving specified problem and limitations of means to resolve it; it requires cooperation on part of participants in small or large group" (p. 135).

Information-gap activity

In a typical information/opinion gap activity each learner in a pair or group has information which is partial or different from other partners. The task includes conveying information/opinions not previously known to the other participant. One example of information-gap activity is pair work in which each member has a part of information and tries to convey it verbally to the other (Prabhu, 1987).

Opinion-gap activity

An opinion-gap activity involves "identifying and articulating a personal preference, feeling, or attitude in response to a given situation" (Prabhu, 1987, p. 47).

Reasoning-gap activity

A reasoning-gap activity involves deriving some new information from given information through processes of inference, deduction, practical reasoning, or a perception of relationships or patterns (Prabhu, 1987).

Reading

According to Rivers (1981), until recently there has been great emphasis on listening and speaking skills. As a result, foreign language teachers are sometimes accused of wishing to produce "fluent chatterboxes who can speak the new language but have nothing worthwhile to say because they have never been given the opportunity to share the thinking of the great minds of another culture and so to widen the horizons of their knowledge and understanding" (Rivers, 1981, p. 259). According to Clarke and Selberstein (1979, as cited in Lono, 1987) reading is 1) an interactive process in which the reader forms a preliminary expectation about the material then chooses the fewest, most productive cues necessary to accept or refuse that expectation. 2) Reading is a twofold phenomenon including a process: comprehending, and a product: comprehension. 3) Reading involves an interaction between thought and language (p. 69).

From a psychological point of view reading is a problem-solving behavior that actively involves the reader in the process of driving and assigning meaning. While doing so, the reader is drawing on contextual information that contains syntactic, and discourse constraints that affect interpretation. (Papulia, as cited in Rivers, 1981, p. 70)

For Widdowson (1979), the comprehension questions that are asked after reading require the learner to rummage around in the text for information in a totally indiscriminate way, without concerning what purpose might be served in so doing. "Reading is thus represented as an end in itself, an activity that has no relevance to real knowledge and experience and therefore no real meaning" (p. 180).

According to Paulston & Bruder (1976), as little time as possible should be spent on going through the written comprehension questions. Class time is much better spent on inference and opinion questions. "Teachers tend to waste a lot of time on comprehension exercises, and it is unproductive"(p. 167).

For lots of reasons reading is the most important activity in any language class. Because it is not only a source of information and a pleasurable activity, but also a means of consolidating and extending one's knowledge of the world. Because of its great importance as a cognitive process reading needs careful attention in language classes. Because it is a communicative act between the reader and writer it requires an interactive and process-oriented methodology. TBLT has strongly influenced thinking in the field of language teaching methodology. The most well-know advice from learning specialists is that "the most effective and efficient learning is meaningful learning" (Chastain 1988, p. 45). So the principal task for teachers is neither repetition nor recycling, but that of helping the students discover strategies for organizing their knowledge into meaningful hierarchies.

Using task-based activities in which every student takes part in understanding, evaluating, discussing, problem-solving, negotiating meaning processes can be effective in meeting the requirements of learner-centered classes. The learners and their world view that is shared with each other in reading classes during performing task-based activities are of great importance in TBLT. When the responsibility of learning and teaching shifts from teacher to the learner, learners themselves take the responsibility for their own learning. They interact with each other in pairs discussing, evaluating, agreeing, disagreeing, exchanging personal information, solving problems all of which are process-oriented and which are of great importance for challenging students' brains.

Procedure

This part consisted of five phases. First 60 female students were given a pre-test. The testees, then, were divided into two 30-member groups on the basis of their obtained scores. As a result, one group was chosen as the experimental group and another as the control group. The division was done randomly.

The second phase was creating pairs in the experimental group. So I tried to put one strong student and one weak student in each group. So fifteen nearly equal groups each consisting of two students were formed.

The third phase which lasted for one 30 minute session concerned with familiarizing the pairs with teaching methodology I wanted to apply in the class. They were told that each student in one group, e.g. student A will read a part of the text and another student, e.g. student B will

read another part. They had to do their parts alone, and then in pairs they should exchange their ideas and try to answer the questions that existed in their books in pairs. Then they should report back to the class how they did the task and what conclusions they reached.

The fourth phase which lasted 16 forty-five minute-sessions was devoted to the treatment itself. This phase included three stages:

A) Pre-task cycle.

B) Task cycle.

C) Post-task cycle.

The first stage was the pre-task stage (preparation). First, students were given a picture related to the topic of the reading. Then they were asked to express their opinions, agreements and disagreements. The students took part in activities that either helped them to recall words or phrases which would be useful during the performance of the main task. I, as the teacher, tried to ask as many referential questions as I could and reduced the number of display questions as possible. The picture was considered as problem-solving task and opinion gap activity because each student expressed different idea and information.

The second stage was the task cycle or follow up activities. Here, the learners performed the task in pairs. Student A had a part of reading that student B didn't have, and vice versa. They covered their parts alone, then after 10 minutes they worked in pairs and expressed their ideas to each other. Then they reported to the whole class how they did the task and what conclusions they reached. During this stage students worked in pairs to do the activities they were asked to. These activities included information-gap, opinion-gap and reasoning-gap activities.

The final stage was post-task cycle or follow up activities, which is also known as analysis stage, during which students noticed interesting features or patterns in the text.

Meanwhile, the control group received no such treatment. They read their readings alone, and then they listened to the teacher or to the more capable students to read it for the whole class. They asked the meaning of the words that they did not know and finally answered the teacher's questions.

Both the experimental and control groups' lesson plans were based on the same reading selections and exercises. However, the experimental group's plans provided opportunities for pair work and a lot of interaction between pairs. Conversely, students in control group worked individually and shared their answers with the class. It should be mentioned that the teacher was the same for both experimental and control groups and did her best not to favor task-based learning against institution's method which is claimed to be task-based, to have unbiased results.

The fifth and final stage was post-test which was done after the treatment. Students in both control and experimental groups were given the same TOEFL questions as post-test.

The time between pre-test and post-test was long enough (two months) to reduce the test-re-test effect. It should be mentioned that this test was given to discover the differences in the results of the learners' achievement in both groups due to the given treatment.

Data analysis

Table 1: Pre-test, post-test results

	$\bar{x}c$	$\bar{x}e$	SD_c	SD_e
Pre-test	28/23	27/5	9/22	9/68
Post-test	29/5	33/4	9/02	8/48

Analysis of Pre-test Scores through t- test

$$t_{obs} = -0/3 < t_{critical}(\alpha \ d_f = 58 \, p < 0/05 = 1/67)$$

No significant differences at the pre-test stage

Analysis of Post-test Scores through t-est

$$t_{obs} = 1/73 > t_{critical}(\alpha \ d_f = 58 \, p < 0/05 = 1/67)$$

Statistically significant difference at the post-test stage

Discussion and conclusion

Since the emergence of communicative approaches there have been a lot of views on the nature of language teaching and learning. Nowadays, teaching is not seen as a product but as

a process. So activities in which students are involved in real communication and which promote learning are considered very important. TBLT has proved itself useful in meeting learners' needs and in providing lots of interaction opportunities in EFL classes.

With regard to Vygotsky's ZPD, it can be inferred that human learning occurs first through interaction and then it becomes a part of individual's cognition. Therefore, learning occurs when the learners interact with more capable peers. The implication for TBL is that if learners are provided with a series of tasks which involve both the comprehension and the production of language with a focus on meaning language development will be prompted. So the trend has changed from what to learn to how to learn. But unfortunately, the concept of TBLT has been misused by most English Language Institutions. And some teachers are not even familiar with the basic principles of it.

In this research, I tried to investigate the effect of TBA in reading classes. The main purpose was to observe whether there were any noticeable changes in EFL learners' performance when the reading classes were taught by using TBLT and also to focus learners' attention on the form of language together with the meaning. As such, the underlying hypothesis is that (Task-Based Activities) TBA have positive effects on EFL learners' reading comprehension. To confirm this hypothesis and to answer the proposed research question two homogeneous groups were chosen and one group received the treatment, sharing readings in pairs. The results indicated a difference between the mean scores of the two groups.

A t-test model was used to be confident about the significance of the differences. Using the means and standard deviations obtained from the post-test the value of observed t was calculated. Then the observed t was compared with critical t in 0/05 level of significance with the df of 58. Since the observed t was greater than critical t, the proposed null hypothesis was rejected. Consequently, we can be sure of the existence of a significant difference between the two groups' performance after the treatment, and to confirm the main hypothesis and research question positively.

We suggest that reading comprehension can be improved by using TBA, especially information-gap, opinion-gap, reasoning-gap and problem-solving tasks, when each student has part of the information that another student does not have, they try to fill the gaps of their understanding by sharing their ideas and to solve the problems they face in answering

comprehension questions. In addition, when teachers ask some questions for which there is no single correct answer (opinion-gap), students are encouraged to express their ideas which in turn promotes language development.

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