The Scientific Journal of University of Benghazi

http://journals.uob.edu.ly/sjuob

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Its Relationship to Language Acquisition

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Received: 12 / 08 / 2021; accepted: 24 / 11 / 2021

الملخص:

مناهج تدريس اللغة وطرقها تحظي بتسليط الضوء عليها ولاسيما حول نظرية تدريس اللغة وممارستها. ولا تزال هناك آراء مختلفة بشأن فائدتها وملاءمتها. أحد هذه الأساليب أو الطرق يسمى النهج القائم على "المهام(TBLT) "، وظهرت في التسعينات. في هذه النظرية يعطي المعلمون "المهام" بدلاً من تدريس جزء واحد من اللغة (كالقواعد اللغوية) وفقاً للطرق التقليدية في تدريس اللغة (كنموذج تقديم/ العرض، تدريب، وإنتاج أو خلاصة).

الورقة الحالية تقدم بعض المعلومات النظرية المنطقية والتربوية المفيدة حول هذا النهج مثل: الأســـاس المنطقي النظري لتدريس اللغة القائم على المهام ، والقيود المحتملة لتعلم اللغة القائم على المهام ، والعوامل الرئيســـة التي يجب أخذها في الاعتبار عند تخطيط للدروس المســـتندة إلى المهام. ســـتُؤْخَذ كل هذه النقاط في الاعتبار في هذه الورقة.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

المهام (TBLT)، المعلمون، نموذج تقليدي، الدقة، الطلاقة، الإملاء.

Abstract

Language teaching approaches and methods have garnered much attention in language teaching theory and practice. There are still many controversies about their usefulness and appropriateness. One of these approaches is known as the task-based language teaching approach (TBLT), which emerged in the 1990s. In this approach, teachers give 'tasks' rather than teaching an item of language (i.e. structure or form) according to the traditional methods of language teaching (e.g. the Presentation-Practice-Production model). Teaching a lesson using tasks needs careful consideration of the age and interests of the learners.

The current paper provides an overview of some useful theoretical and pedagogical information on task-based language teaching (TBLT), such as the theoretical rationale for task-based language teaching. The paper also highlights the limitations and potential pitfalls of task-based language teaching as well as the main factors that need to be taken into consideration in planning task-based lessons. All of these points will be considered in this paper.

Keywords: accuracy, dictogloss, fluency, task-based language teaching, teachers, the traditional model.

1. INTRODUCTION

There have been various approaches to language teaching. One of these is the Task-Based Approach (TBA), which emerged in the 1990s. Many researchers and theorists (e.g. Skehan, Willis, Long and Crookes) have discussed TBA. There are many types of tasks, but they tend to have the same idea or purpose. Teachers give 'tasks' rather than teaching one piece of the language (i.e. structure or form) according to the traditional model (Presentation Practice Production). It is argued that students do not actually acquire the language through 'control and practice' activities; rather, they can develop their abilities 'through meaningful use of language' (Skehan and Foster 1997:186) to carry out tasks that provide 'an environment which best promotes the natural language learning process' (Foster 1999:69). Furthermore, task-based approaches encourage learners to do activities, which require focusing on meaning instead of form. These activities can be, for instance, 'problem-solving' activities or telling a story. Teachers can develop learners' ability to use a 'target language' when learners are involved in completing specific tasks.

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The first section of the paper will provide definitions and an account of the theoretical basis for task-based language teaching. Limitations of TBA will be discussed in the second section. The final section of the paper will refer to the main factors in planning task-based lessons.

Definitions of 'Task'

Before discussing the theories behind Task-based Language teaching, it is helpful to define what a 'task' is. There are many definitions for 'task' provided in the research literature, e.g. Skehan, Ellis. Ellis (2000:195) defines a task as a 'work plan' which 'typically involves the following (1) some input (i.e. information that learners are required to process and use); and (2) some instruction relating to what outcome the learners are supposed to achieve.' On the other hand, Skehan (1998:268) proposes four criteria of task:

- 'Meaning is primary.'
- 'There is a goal which needs to be worked towards.'
- 'The activity is outcome-evaluated.'
- 'There is a real-world relationship.'

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2. THEORETICAL RATIONALE FOR TASK-BASED LANGUAGE LEARNING

This section discusses theories that relate to task-based language learning as well as second language acquisition. Therefore, these theories focus on studying' acquisition and use of language' and how the learner is involved in the 'comprehension and production' of the language.

(a) The main reason for using a task-based approach in teaching language is to get away from traditional approaches that are called 'synthetic approaches' (Pienemann 1985). 'Synthetic approaches' tend to teach the language 'one piece' at a time: for example, the P-P-P model isolates a 'new structure' of grammar and presents it to learners and provides controlled practice. The aim is to encourage learners to produce these structures in the production stage. As Pienemann (1985:25) points out these approaches (i.e. 'synthetic approaches') have a grading system as 'new structures have to be built on old structures' and 'simple structures taught before the complex.' However, second language research has shown that learners cannot achieve the target language when they are taught one piece at a time because this is not, in fact, how language learning proceeds. Furthermore, presenting grammar is easy; rules are often simplified, the point is that generalisation is more of a hindrance than a help in understanding the language (Willis, 1996 & Willis &Willis, 2007). Hence, many researchers recommend using 'tasks' in teaching language, as there is evidence to show that learners who are encouraged to do a task (e.g. exchange information) are able to communicate and are also likely to acquire language faster and more efficiently (Willis 1996:14), compared to other learners who are used to more traditional approaches (P-P-P).

(b) The second reason is the 'Interaction Hypothesis' and the 'Comprehensible Input Hypothesis' as these are believed to be important to the rationale of task-based learning (TBL) and also are the most important factors in promoting second language acquisition. These two hypotheses are detailed by Long (1996) and Krashen (1985) respectively. Comprehensible Input maintains that learners can gain input (i.e. the information that learners receive to do a particular task, e.g. 'shopping list or writing letter') when they have the opportunity to work as pairs or groups to negotiate meaning (Ellis, 2003: 23). For example, when they are given a task (exchange information) and asked to use 'target language' by asking and answering questions. There is evidence to show that learners can develop their skills by receiving 'comprehensible input' and negotiation can take place when learners work in groups. As Spada and Lightbown (2002:127) point out,

"*Exposure to 'comprehensible input' would be sufficient to allow learners to progress through developmental stages on the grounds that the language that learners needed to make further progress would always be available if there were enough natural language exposure."*

In other words, learners achieve input 'when communication breakdown by interaction and negotiation of meaning' (Ellis, 2000:199). Also, teachers can provide 'feedback' which is available through the task and can help learners to develop their progress (Spade and Lightbown 2002).

Ellis (2000:200) identifies tasks that have interaction and negotiation and states that they have a required information exchange; they involve a two-way (as opposed to one-way) exchange of information and they have a closed outcome. The 'two-way' refers to the tasks that have two ways; i.e., the task requires negotiation and interaction for learners and there is no 'one correct answer.'

(c) The third aspect of task-based language learning is that teaching grammar should not be taught directly but learners can discover rules incidentally. Krashen (1988:26-27) points out the difference between 'acquisition' and 'learning': Language acquisition refers to the use of language 'for real communication' and helps learners to develop their 'linguistic ability'. For example, the rules are not taught directly, but learners can learn them 'unconsciously'. This can be clear when they use the language to communicate with each other. On the other hand, learning refers to 'knowing about language or formal knowledge of a language.' In other words, learners know the rules but they cannot use them in real-time spontaneous communication. This distinction is similar to that between 'implicit' and 'explicit knowledge'; explicit knowledge indicates that learners have certain knowledge about grammar. Thus, it is claimed that this knowledge cannot promote classroom learning because it emphasises teaching conscious rules and also provides correction, which is thought to help learners know the 'right form of the rule' (Krashen 1985:26).

Moreover, presenting grammar is easy but more difficult aspects are often ignored; for example, '*the third person-s'* is easy to teach because it is a small morpheme that attaches to the verb that occurs with the third person singular (e.g. She drinks coffee). However, it is difficult for learners to use in immediate communication. Thus, implicit knowledge is considered the most important element in language acquisition. It is argued that learners can acquire the target language when their attention is focused on meaning rather than form. This knowledge is developed through explicit taught rules, but it is acquired when there are given opportunities for learners to 'notice' particular language features in a given task. Thus, learners are able to communicate efficiently in real-life situations.

The main point here is that task-based learning encourages learners to focus on meaning. Therefore, they can achieve 'implicit knowledge' and can develop a second language 'incidentally' as a result of fluent and meaningful communication. Hence, Krashen (1988) believes that 'formal teaching' does not help in acquiring a language, because it involves presenting only grammar consciously. Interlanguage for learners is developed by 'interaction opportunities' which has the influence to engage 'acquisition processes' (Skehan 1996:50).

(d) The third argument for moving to task-based learning is 'communicative effectiveness' as developed by Yule (1997). It examines 'task-processes' that have an impact on 'communicative effectiveness' (Ellis 2000:204) and refers to the way learners' interlanguage affects performance during a task. This theory also concentrates on the 'speaker's sensitivity to the listener in the task', more than interaction or negotiation of meaning (Skehan 1998: 270). In other words, it gives more emphasis to the 'discourse markers' that a speaker uses in his/her communication to complete the task effectively rather than how his/her sentences are formed (i.e. whether the structure of sentences is correct). Also, the speaker can receive feedback provided by 'the other speakers in order to monitor output accordingly' (Ellis2000: 205). For example, when the teacher asks the student to describe the directions to a train station. The teacher can evaluate the way the student uses the language to effectively communicate instead of

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assessing the sentences regarding their correct grammatical form (Ellis 2000:205-206).

3. THREE GOALS FOR TASK-BASED INSTRUCTION

Skehan (1996) has suggested three goals for task-based instruction; accuracy, complexity/restructuring and fluency. He believes these goals can enhance L2 learners' acquisition of language.

1. *Accuracy*: relates to performance which is 'native-like in its rule-governed nature' (Skehan 1996:46). The fault or 'inaccuracy' might inhibit communicative effectiveness and learners may start producing fossilised forms. Inaccuracy usually arises when the 'underlying interlanguage system is inadequate or transitional' or inaccuracy could occur because of communicative pressure when the learners focus on 'forms' more than on 'form' and accuracy. Accuracy is a desirable goal because it promotes language awareness and helps enhance communication strategies (Ellis 2000: 202, Zhu 2007:50).

2. *Complexity/Restructuring*: this deals with processes by which 'the interlanguage system becomes more complex, elaborate, and more native-like'. It is important as effective acquisition can take place in this stage of learners' development. It develops a 'great degree of acceptance' in dealing with a target language and communicating efficiently'(Skehan 1996: 47). For example, if the notion is more complex and learners have time to think, then they may express it more effectively. Skehan (1996:48) suggests that it is necessary to motivate students to achieve native speaker performance. Thus, there needs to be helpful input that involves both 'explicit and implicit knowledge'. There are also tasks which have an influence on interlanguage. Learners have an opportunity to restructure and redo an activity to complete the task. At this point, it is better if there is enough time for restructuring, rather than increasing communicative pressure and preparation.

3. *Fluency*: This is the last aspect of task-based instruction. It is 'the capacity of the learner to mobilize his/her system to communicate in real time' (Ellis 2000:202). This can mean that learners can achieve fluency when they are able to use implicit knowledge to produce the target language. Fluency is important for second language learners because it enhances confidence and makes them acceptable as an effective 'interlocutor' (Skehan 1996: 48).

Ellis(2000:202) argues that fluency requires learners to pay attention to 'communication strategies'. For instance, when they are involved in a task to solve a problem, they can use language to communicate rather than use grammatical features.

In contrast, accuracy and complexity are required to draw learners' attention to the rule-based system and thus require syntactic processing. Therefore, he suggests that learners should be involved in these three aspects of 'production' in order to achieve the acquisition of the language. Further, Skehan (1998:270) suggests that fluency, accuracy and complexity influence growth and a capacity to effectively use language.

4. THE LIMITATIONS AND POTENTIAL DISADVANTAGES OF TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING

Task-based learning is claimed to be the most successful approach in teaching language. However, task-based learning has been criticised on the following grounds:

Many researchers, e.g. Long and Robinson (1998) argue that the task-based approach should encourage learners to pay attention to some forms or 'linguistics features' when they are involved in doing a task. This is because some grammatical forms are useful and can promote 'explicit knowledge'. According to Skehan (1996:41), a meaningful task that is primary in language processing does not necessarily lead to 'automatic sensitivity to form' and could hinder the development of interlanguage as learners can produce inaccurate forms. Thus, this could cause 'communicative pressure' inhibiting 'interlanguage development'. Learners may start to produce 'lexical units' (i.e. words) in their communication. In this case, learners are able to use 'lexical items' but are unable to produce linguistics elements and as a result, their sentences are not grammatically correct. In other words, focusing on meaning can lead to fluency rather than accuracy and complexity and they cannot achieve the performance of native speakers.

There is also a problem with the 'comprehensible input hypothesis.' According to Nunan (1991:286), who refers to Swain (1985) in her project in Canada, 'Learners received huge amounts of comprehensible input {but it} did not lead to the sort of native-like facility in the target language predicted by the input hypothesis.' So, in this case, input is not enough to learn the language.

Nevertheless, it is often difficult to find clear criteria for the selection and grading of tasks as classrooms have different levels of learners. Also, there is an argument about 'the finiteness' of the task; for example, it is difficult to determine exactly the number of tasks, and where tasks should begin and end. Sometimes a task involves sub-tasks; 'doing the shopping' for instance, may involve 'catching a bus, paying the fare, paying for purchase' (Long & Crookes, 1992:46).

Task-based learning is time-consuming. For example, when the topic is too complex or unfamiliar and the task requires a long time for preparation. Also, in this case, learners may use their first language a lot to translate the meaning of words or phrases which relate to the task (Willis, 1996 &Willis & Willis, 2007). Doing the task in pairs /small groups tends to create classroom noise and can be disruptive. Also, learners might be unequal in level in completing the task. Thus, some learners try to dominate and others freeload by getting their peers to do the work for them (Ellis, 2003:268).

It is argued that learners are not able to pay attention to accuracy, complexity, and fluency at the same time, because they have 'limited capacities' (Foster & Skehan, 1997:216).

5. PLANNING TASK-BASED LESSONS

TBL focuses on learners doing the task in groups or pairs and they are encouraged to use the target language for completing the task. The main role of teachers is to give explanations and help learners to understand the purpose of the task. Furthermore, the most important thing for planning a task-based lesson is that it

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should be '*flexible to give learners benefits from this task'* (Willis, 1996:81). However, in task-based lessons, teachers do not point out what language will be taught in a particular task. Rather, the lesson is based on completing the task and the language should be understood in context.

Willis (1996:40) proposes three phases for task-based learning (TBL) as follows:

- *Pre-Task,*
- *The task cycle consists of: 'Task', 'Planning' and 'Report.'*
- *Language focus subdivides into: 'Analysis' and 'Practice.'*

This is a three-theme model in which tasks are '*goal-orientated activities in which learners use language to achieve real outcome*' (Willis, 1996:53). Now, let us consider these three phases:

1) The first phase is *'pre-task'* which introduces the topic and gives clear instruction to learners. Also, possible words and phrases may be introduced for doing a task. However, teachers in this part do not teach exact words or phrases which are relevant to the task. The topic of the tasks should be familiar and interesting for learners; for example, 'sport or talking about a member of his/her family', rather than complex and boring topics, e.g. economics or politics (Willis 1996:42, Willis & Willis 2007:160). Nevertheless, in pre-task activities learners can hear recordings of other people doing the same or 'similar task'; this can help them to know what to do in their task and serve as a useful model.

It also involves reading a '*part of a text as a lead into a task'* (Willis: 1996: 41); for example, 'dictogloss' or dictation. The students' role is to write down or 'take notes' from their understanding of the topic but it is not necessary to write every word or phrase. When learners finish this stage, the teacher writes some questions on the board to ask if the students have knowledge or are familiar with the topic; for example, preparing for a task about 'travelling by boat.' The teacher here asks students to write down two or three questions that relate to this particular topic. The teacher then asks them to compare these questions with their partners. These questions could be: 'Have you ever travelled by a boat? Are you a good sailor?' and so on (Willis, 1996). In pre-task activities, the teacher can tell if students understand the topic and its purpose, which part will they do first and which part will come last. Also, the timing can be limited. It might be two to five minutes, and thus they can spend time preparing for the task. The pre-task activity gives students the chance to develop their own language system and enhance their task performance (Skehan 1996:53). Learners in this phase should try to use relevant language to complete a task (Skehan 1998:140).

2) The second stage is *'the task', which* is completed in 'pairs or groups', during which learners use the language that they have already learnt. The teacher's role here is to 'monitor' and let students do the task on their own. Also, the teacher helps learners if needed or if they face difficulties in using some vocabulary. However, in this stage, teachers do not correct learners' errors. They are encouraged to use whatever language they have. The time for doing the task is important, and students should have from 'one minute to ten or more, depending on the type of task and its complexity' (Willis, 1996:54; Willis &Willis, 2001:178). At this stage, learners are given the opportunity to develop their fluency when they communicate and pay attention to meaning rather than focus on form. During the task, learners are able to learn new words and phrases from each other. These words and phrases can help to develop their language as a result they become more fluent instead of being accurate and thus give support to weaker students (Willis, 1996:54-55; Yaylı, 2006:450).

The planning stage that follows the task and its purpose should give learners clear instructions on how to prepare a short talk either in 'spoken or written' text. This requires one person from each group or pair to report in their task: for example, what solutions or suggestions they arrived at for their task. Furthermore, motivation is important for learners to work hard and negotiate with each other in order to get more information.

Meanwhile, the teacher should be available in his/her role is as an 'adviser' by answering learners' questions and giving them relevant language to fulfil the task (Willis 1996:56). Learners feel confident in this stage because they have the opportunity to use language and therefore felt more independent. When the teacher gives learners 'positive' advice, they can improve their performance, saying things like, *'That's good. You might like to add a sentence signalling what you are going to talk/write about this section-it may help the listener/reader to follow your ideas better*' (Willis 1996, Willis & Willis 2001, 2007, Zhu 2007).

The report stage: This is the final stage in 'the task cycle' which is either an oral presentation or written report, to draw a conclusion about what happened in the first two stages. Learners are ready to report back to the whole class and time is given here; about 'two minutes or five minutes', depending on the number of students or groups. The main role of the teacher is that of a 'chairperson'. This means introducing the spokesman and his/her topic to the class. The report stage aims to encourage learners to 'focus on meaning' as well as form and it involves two goals of the task 'fluency and accuracy' (Skehan 1998). Feedback is required when the learners finish their reports.

As can be seen, the 'task cycle' is a task done by learners in pairs or groups and it is believed that fluency can develop through their negotiation. In contrast, in the report stage, students are concentrated on accuracy when they are reporting their task to the class, so attention is given to the instructions.

3) *Language focus*: it comes after the task cycle and consists of two parts: 'Analysis' and 'Practice'. The aim of this stage is to help learners to '*identify and think about particular features of language from language use in their own time and their own level'* (Willis, 1996:102, Willis & Willis, 2001).

Analysis: This involves students noticing or discovering the language features through 'consciousness-raising activities' after the task is done. It is used to explain the structure directly. Students are invited to identify the 'new structure from the task after they have known the meaning' (Skehan, 1998:278). For example, they note that the task is used in the present or past tense /they might be asked to identify which sentences are used in the passive form and so on. The teacher's role identifies the relevant part of the task and encourages students to analyse it. Moreover, students can highlight the relevant words or phrases to use during the report phase for analysis.

Practice: It aims to give learners the confidence to use the target language. In practice, the learners focus on meaning or discover structures as in the report stage. They should practice what they

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have learned from the previous stage (Willis, 1996:58). Practice activities can include repetition, listening and completing the sentences.

Dictogloss is an example of task-based lessons.

Dictogloss is 'a reconstruction activity' where learners listen to 'a short text once or twice' in normal speech. Then, students start to take notes or write down words or phrases from the text. It has four phases as follows:

Preparation (Pre-task): This involves introducing the topic to students and highlighting some useful words or phrases that may be involved in this text. It may take a few minutes (2-5).

Dictation (Task): The teacher reads the text twice; in the first reading students just listen and after that, they start to write down any words that they recognise in the second reading (Ferguson 2004).

Reconstruction: In this phase, student's work in small groups/ pairs and try to reconstruct the text from memory. Here is an example of a reconstructed the text:

"There was a young woman from Riga who went for a ride on a tiger. The tiger come back with the woman inside and a smile on the tiger" (Thornbury 1997:331).

Analysis and correction: Its aim is to analyse the text and provide correction. The teacher starts to highlight the common errors such as (use of the present simple instead of the past tense). The teacher then gives learners the original text to compare it with their own version (Ferguson 2004). As can be seen, this task can improve accuracy as well as fluency because it encourages learners to focus on form and gives them a chance to use it in a communicative way. Moreover, it gives opportunities to L2 learners to make negotiations and interactions when they work in groups or pairs.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper began by explaining the theoretical rationale of task-based language teaching and its relationship to second language acquisition. Many researchers and theorists argue that teaching language as 'chunks' was not helpful for learners, as they could not achieve fluency and appropriate use of the target language. In contrast, learners, need adequate exposure to understand the language. Thus, TBL can provide opportunities for learners to express their own meaning by using the target language in the real world. Also, TBL gives them the motivation to speak and negotiate with each other because they want to successfully complete the task. It does not ask learners to focus on form because it is based on the belief that grammatical features can appear incidentally. In my opinion, task-based learning is one of the effective modern methodologies for teaching foreign languages as it is a flexible method in which teachers can choose various and appropriate tasks for their students**.**

As can be seen, this paper attempted to review and discuss the literature, in order to provide a comprehensive account of the task-based approach (TBA) and how to apply it in the second language classroom. For the next paper, a study will investigate the effects of task-based language teaching(TBLT) in the acquisition of the structure of the present perfect tense by Libyan EFL learners.

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40.

Appendix 1

An example of how learners create interaction

Extract 1

1. L1: The rode from the town to the Kampong Kelantan….the coconut =

2. L2: = Again, again.

3. L1: The rode is from the town to Kampong Kelantan (7.5 sec) the town is in

4. the town is in the

JasonBay.

5. L2: Again. The town, where is the town?

6. L1: The town is on the JasonBay.

7. L2: The, road?

8. L1: The road from the town to Kampong Kelantan (11.0 sec)

OK?

9. L2: OK.

10. L1: The mountain is behind the beach and the JasonBay (8.1 sec)

The river is from

11. the jungle to the Desaru (9.7) The mou- the volcano is above the

Kampong

12. Kelantan (7.2 sec) The coconut tree is along the beach

(From Seedhouse 1999)

Appendix 2

An Example of a Dictogloss Task

Dictogloss Task: This is the original text:

There was a young woman of Riga

Who went for a ride on a tiger

There returned from the ride

With the woman inside

And a smile on the face of the tiger

(Data from: Thornbury 1997)

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