

A Review of Studies on Task-based Language Teaching

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Abstract: In the 1980s, a new teaching method - Task-based Language Teaching - gradually emerged in the field of Western education. Task-based Language Teaching is a practical teaching method that involves specific communication and language tasks throughout the teaching process. It has specific content and is easy to operate, making it a very popular educational method in the current education circles. This article is a review paper that summarizes the definitions and classifications of tasks in Task-based Language Teaching by reviewing different well-known scholars' previous research on Task-based Language Teaching. It lists two models proposed by Willis and Ellis for implementing Task-based Language Teaching. This article also takes three predecessors' research on the application of this teaching method in actual English classrooms as an example to illustrate its effectiveness in a practical environment. The article also analyzes the advantages and disadvantages of Task-based Language Teaching, and summarizes how teachers can design tasks to avoid various drawbacks of Task-based Language Teaching and improve teaching efficiency when using it.

Keywords: task-based language teaching, task, English teaching

1. Introduction

English is widely recognized as the key to success in various industries, being the universal language of nowadays and the language which is the most popular learned and taught globally [1]. Its significance cannot be understated, as English has been attached more importance to and has been a widely used tongue worldwide, making it essential to learn in all corners of the globe. With its proven effectiveness and ability to provide future opportunities, the number of English learners around the world continues to grow steadily. As a result, English teaching has evolved into an independent discipline, with educators constantly refining their teaching methods [2]. English classrooms have witnessed a shift in language teaching methods in recent years - from teacher-centered guidance to a more student-centered approach. This change recognizes the importance of addressing learners' needs and their ability to use language effectively in real-life situations [3].

One teaching method that has gained popularity is the task-based approach, which originated in the United States in the 1980s and is rooted in the constructivist school of teaching methods. According to Prabhu, when learners focus on tasks rather than language forms, they may learn more easily [4]. By engaging learners in meaningful tasks, they are capable of developing their English level in a more natural and practical manner. This approach fosters communication and enables

learners to apply their language knowledge in authentic contexts [4]. Task-based learning, according to Brown, places tasks at the heart of the teaching approach, viewing the learning process as a sequence of tasks directly tied to and supporting the curricular objectives. Its aim extends beyond just practicing language for language's sake [5]. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is an effective method of teaching languages that is based on research on second language acquisition. This model is a strategy for learning foreign languages that was put out as a result of research on second language acquisition. It views particular tasks as the impetus for learning, views the act of completing tasks as the learning process, and views task outputs as a reflection of teaching success [6].

This article clarifies what TBLT is from three aspects: the definition, classification, and implementation of tasks in TBLT by different scholars. This article also analyzes the effectiveness of TBLT application in English teaching classrooms by relevant scholars in recent years, and summarizes the advantages and disadvantages of TBLT as a teaching model.

2. TBLT

2.1. Definition of Task in TBLT

According to Nunan, a communicative task is a classroom activity that requires learners to engage with the target language in a way that focuses on meaning rather than just the form or structure of the language. The primary goal of a communicative task is to promote meaningful communication and interaction among learners. In addition to focusing on meaning, a communicative task should also have a sense of completeness. This means that the task itself should be a complete communication act that can stand alone and make sense in real-world communicative contexts. For example, a task could be a role-play where learners have to pretend to be in a specific situation and engage in a conversation or negotiation [7].

Other scholars have also defined tasks from different perspectives. Skehan delved deeper into task-based teaching in his classic work *A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning*. He believes that only by meeting the following characteristics can it be called a "task". Skehan proposes five characteristics of a task: the meaning of the task activity is primary; it enhances students' communication skills without encouraging the use of any particular linguistic form; tasks and comparable activities in the actual world have a specific link; it has a communication issue to solve; completing tasks is the primary consideration [8]. Ellis believes that "tasks are language use activities that primarily aim to express meaning [9]." Bygate&Swain argue that a task can be seen as purposeful and meaningful that learners are encouraged to apply language to reach a certain goal, which could be to solve a problem, complete a task, or accomplish a specific objective, emphasizing the expression of meaning during the process [10].

Although scholars have different definitions of tasks, by comparing their views, it can be seen that many of them stress that tasks should be associated with true life. In the process of fulfilling tasks, learners should fully utilize their cognitive abilities through experiencing and participating the tasks, and if necessary, interacting, communicating, and cooperating with each other. What's more, learners should mobilize their existing target language knowledge as well, and recognize and utilize the target language in exercise which can be summarized as learning by doing.

2.2. Classification of Task in TBLT

Nunan divides tasks into two categories: real-life tasks and pedagogical tasks [7]. The former indicates the activity of using language in daily real life, while the latter means the activity of learning language knowledge. Real-life tasks are on the basis of pretending the real world, which asks learners to perform or simulate conversation act activities outside the classroom, such as asking the way, pointing the way and expressing opinions. Real-life tasks also include writing resumes, writing

complaint letters, obtaining information through the phone, booking rooms, and filling out real-life language usage situations such as registration forms, study abroad application forms, hotel accommodation registration forms, etc., in order to engage in authentic language communication [11]. The real-life tasks create real-life scenarios in the classroom, allowing students to complete various real-life tasks in these simulated scenarios, thereby cultivating students' ability to use foreign languages.

Pedagogical tasks refer to tasks that students are highly unlikely to be required to do outside of the classroom. These tasks are not directly related to real-life situations, but rather arise in the classroom as a special context and are designed for teaching purposes. The purpose of pedagogical tasks is to assist in achieving teaching objectives, helping students better understand and apply the acquired knowledge, thereby improving their language abilities. Just like Fu said, pedagogical tasks will be selected with reference to pedagogy and psycholinguistics. This kind of task has little real-world relevance but validity because it is nonetheless intellectually valid and meaning-focused and therefore puts language to use, even though it provides learners with a chance to take part in activities that are less likely to occur in the world outside their classroom [12].

In terms of the characteristics of the activity and the purpose of communication, Pica divided tasks into five types: jigsaw tasks, information-gap tasks, problem-solving tasks, decision-making tasks, and opinion-exchanging tasks [13].

2.3. How to Implement TBLT

Willis divides the task execution into three phases: pre-task phase, task cycle phase, and post-task phase. The focus varies at different periods [14]. The pre-task stage mainly acts as a starter to warm up, including introducing the tasks, stimulating students' active participation, and providing authentic language materials. At this stage, students familiarize themselves with relevant background information by finishing tasks, having a basic understanding of the content of the passage, and getting ready to successfully complete the second stage of communication tasks. When implementing tasks, different interactive methods are adopted by teachers and students, such as paired or group discussions, role-playing, debates, to push the process of completing the assignment. The task implementation phase consists of three sections: task, planning, and reporting. The post-task stage, also known as the Language Focus stage or the Language Teaching stage, comprises analyzing and practicing language. The activity moves from the meaning of the language to the form of the language, to help students solidify their basic language points and ensure the execution of the plan. Bula-Villalobos and Murillo-Miranda concluded that TBLT is built on the concept that tasks are crucial – essential conditions – for language teaching and planning [15].

Ellis established the following order based on this idea: pre-task, during-task and post-task. Pre-task determines the task's outcome and students perform a similar task. In during-task, there's a deadline and a participant count. In the post-task, the learner is asked to report their findings and the task is repeated [9].

3. Overview of the Effectiveness of TBLT in English Teaching

TBLT is an experimentally researched pedagogy that has attracted the attention of language programs worldwide. TBLT provides an alternative to traditional grammar pedagogy-translation or current practice product pedagogy by emphasizing interaction in real-life tasks. There are several previous meta-analyses investigating the impact of individual task or task-based processing on second language (L2) development, and three more recent trials are listed below.

Ahmed and Bidin experimented on the effectiveness of task-based language teaching in improving undergraduate students' writing skills at common colleges in Malaysia [16]. The study involved a

total of 30 international students from various countries who were selected as participants for the research. They have all received higher education and participated in English proficiency tests. The study was conducted in 2015, and the experimental group received TBLT treatment in class with the theme “Types of Articles”, enhancing learners’ ability to write in descriptive language as the key goal of experiential teaching. The study participants in the experimental group underwent post-testing after receiving TBLT treatment. Similarly, the control group underwent pre and post-tests without any TBLT treatment. The experimenter collected data on the writing skills of learners in the experimental and control groups during the pre and post-tests to determine any improvements in writing skills through the introduction of TBLT therapy. The research results manifest that most students have confirmed through feedback that the implementation of TBLT is effective. The study conducted on the experimental group of language learners revealed significant improvements in their second language performance indicators, including complexity, fluency, and accuracy. This suggests that the teaching methods or interventions employed in the experimental group are of advantage to their language acquisition outcomes.

In a study conducted by Kafipour, Mahmoudi, and Khojasteh, the objective was to examine how task-based writing instruction could affect the writing skills of Iranian English learners [17]. The study included 69 intermediate EFL learners who were randomly divided into two groups: the control group and the experimental group. Students in the experimental group were exposed to TBLT techniques while completing different writing tasks. On the other hand, the control group used traditional writing exercises as a means of practicing their writing skills. The researchers administered the pre-and post-test writing portions of two TOEFL exams to get the data. The acquired data were then examined with the assistance of social science statistical software employing descriptive statistics, t-tests, and analysis of variance (ANOVA). The results of the study indicate that Iranian English learners who received task-based writing instruction experienced significant improvements in their writing abilities. This suggests that the use of task-based language teaching techniques effectively enhances learners’ writing skills. Furthermore, the study found that task-based writing instruction not only enhances overall writing ability but also positively impacts specific aspects of writing, such as the use of more sophisticated language structures, smoother expression, and more precise grammatical accuracy.

Noroozi and Taheri conducted a research study comparing the learning effects of the PPP (Presentation, Practice, Production) approach and the TBLT approach. The purpose of the study was to evaluate how these two teaching strategies affected Iranian English learners’ learning results [18]. Participants in the study comprised 18 female and 16 male Iranian English learners, carefully chosen from a private language college in Iran. The research was conducted in two stages: pre-evaluation of the students, teaching and treatment of the students, and immediate post-evaluation. To measure the learning effects of the two teaching methods, the researchers used assessment tasks, grammaticality judgment tests (GJT), and elicited imitation tests (EIT). The assessment tasks were designed to gauge students’ proficiency in applying the target language in authentic language usage scenarios, with GJT and EIT examinations being utilized to gauge students’ declarative and automated knowledge. The results of the study indicate that, overall, the TBLT group outperformed the PPP group and the control group. This suggests that the TBLT approach was more effective in cultivating attention to language features and conveying meanings among the learners. A comprehensive review of the research results from all the tests conducted in Noroozi and Taheri’s study confirms the effectiveness of the TBLT approach in improving students’ grammar accuracy by focusing on form. The study found that students in the TBLT group enjoyed receiving feedback from their teachers, which was predominantly guided by language. One significant advantage of the TBLT approach is the use of focused tasks, which allows students to be frequently guided toward language features while their attention remains focused on conveying meaning. This constant engagement with language features

seems to assist students in directing their attention toward them and ultimately mastering them. Nassaji and Fotos argue that when learners become aware of language features through tasks and activities, they are more likely to notice and recognize them in subsequent communicative input. This heightened attention towards language features helps learners reconstruct implicit knowledge and develop a deeper understanding of the target language [19].

4. Evaluation of TBLT

4.1. Advantages

In contrast with other teaching methods, the major benefits of task-based teaching can be found in students' subjectivity, communicative ability, and veracities [20]. Firstly, designing realistic communication scenarios based on students' age and characteristics can help stimulate their interest in learning during various task execution processes. Since the tasks may be familiar to the students, for example, buying tickets, it will be easier for students to participate, which can give them motivation to learn language [21]. Secondly, in the process of completing tasks, students closely combine knowledge and skills, cultivating their comprehensive abilities such as communication skills, cooperation and problem-solving. Thirdly, in TBLT teaching, students are the executors of tasks. Through pair work and group collaboration, each student has their own tasks and can participate in the classroom, which is conducive to playing a dominant role in learning. Fourthly, Yan argues that under the inspiration and guidance of educators, students have the opportunity to think independently and actively participate in discussions, which is conducive to cultivating their logical and critical thinking abilities, stimulating their learning enthusiasm, and cultivating good learning habits [22].

4.2. Disadvantages

In addition to its advantages, TBLT inevitably has some drawbacks. Willis believes that TBLT's task setup lacks time. Indeed, teachers often face time constraints when it comes to designing tasks and integrating them into their classrooms.

Using traditional exams instead of adopting task-based assessment methods just allows students to regurgitate memorized information rather than demonstrating their language skills in practical, real-world situations. In addition, using vocabulary and grammar can have unpredictable results, especially in the task execution part, creating a sense of uncontrollability. This poses a real challenge to a more traditional learning environment [14]. Sholeh adds that huge class sizes can lead to some problems. TBLT may require extra time to accomplish the tasks and teachers may face challenges in allocating sufficient time to closely monitor students' individual learning process and development and provide individualized guidance and support accordingly [23].

5. Conclusions

Any teaching method has its own limitations. Therefore, teachers should choose appropriate teaching methods based on different teaching content, teaching scenarios, and teaching objects. In the teaching process, educators need to change the traditional teaching philosophy and focus on students, which is also the core concept of the task-based teaching method. When using task-based teaching methods, teachers should prepare well before class, determine appropriate tasks, and effectively integrate teaching content and objectives into the tasks. When students perform tasks, teachers should provide appropriate guidance. It is vital for students to evaluate the completion of the task and reflect on it after completing it. If necessary, the task can be repeated. In this way, TBLT becomes effective in English classrooms.

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