

TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING, FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

Vinnitsia National Technical University

Abstract

This paper presents task-based language teaching, gives a definition of a task, describes three main approaches to task-based language teaching and specifies basic characteristics of task-based language teaching. It stresses the role of task-based language teaching as a powerful approach for maximizing language learning and teaching, reveals its benefits and challenges as well.

Key words: task-based language teaching; task; foreign language teaching.

Анотація

Ця стаття знайомить з навчанням мови, базованої на завданні, наводить опис завдання, описує три основних підходи до навчання мові та визначає основні характеристики. У ній підкреслюється роль навчання мові, базованій на завданні, як потужного підходу до вивчення і навчання мові, висвітлюються як переваги, так і недоліки.

Ключові слова: навчання мові, базоване на виконанні завдання; завдання; викладання іноземних мов.

Language teaching approaches and methods are constantly changing and reassessed. New ideas keep emerging as the growing complexity of the means of communication and the opportunities created by technology put language skills to new uses. In addition, the political, social and economic impact of globalization, the new demands of the labour market that result from it, the pursuit of competitiveness, the challenges of intercultural communication and the diversification of culture are all phenomena that have opened new perspectives on the central role that foreign languages have come to play in the development of contemporary societies.

This has far-reaching consequences in terms foreign language learning. Learners have become more aware of these changing circumstances. They now seek practical solutions for their needs in real contexts, and this has entailed a radical departure from the school's traditional teacher-directed curriculum. The Common European Framework for Reference has helped teachers to rethink their strategies and attitudes and has opened new research avenues in the field [1].

It is therefore important for teachers to learn about the latest developments in the field and to get some practical ideas that can help them further develop their teaching skills, optimize their students' learning and renew their practices.

Recently, the popularity of Task-Based Learning (TBL) has made many researchers, teachers, and methodologists evaluate the effectiveness of this approach. Although it has been used for many years, its popularity has increased. One of the main reasons for this attention is the desire of educators to promote real communication or the exchange of meanings rather than forms. Another reason for such interest is the fact that practitioners advocate better language learning when students are not focused only on linguistic forms [2]. If task-based instruction takes place, language learning is more meaningful and natural. The task is

currently considered to be the most effective means of promoting second language acquisition (SLA) in the classroom. According to Richards and Rodgers "engaging learners in task work provides a better context for the activation of learning processes"[3]. These authors say the negotiation of meaning in TBL provides the input and output necessary for language acquisition.

If one wants to define a task, there is not a single definition. Here are some examples of how individuals in the field have characterized "task". Nunan considers a task as "a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is primarily focused on meaning rather than form" [4]. According to this definition, students will use prior knowledge in order to achieve their goal; if any new information is needed (e.g. linguistic forms or vocabulary), the teacher will act as a knower who provides it so that students do not interrupt the process and achieve the expected outcome. For Willis (1996) a task is an activity "where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome"[5]. It is more effective to use a meaning-based approach than a form-based approach. Students express their thoughts even if some of the language is inaccurate. In this respect, Skehan adds that tasks primarily focus on meaning and resemble real-life situations [6]. Since tasks are goal-directed activities, participants decide which language forms to use to achieve the goal. Van den Branden explains how in second language research, tasks have been used to study language production, interaction, negotiation of meaning -all aspects to improve second language acquisition (SLA). This author defines a task as "an activity in which a person engages in order to attain an objective, and which necessitates the use of language" [7]. It is evident in this definition that there is a language form needed to perform a task; however, the language is the means not the end. Language is the vehicle to reach successful communication when having real-life communicative situations. Nowadays, the most commonly used and widely accepted definition of task is that of language activity in which there is a focus on meaning. We define Task-Based Learning as an approach that requires teachers to plan lessons, not merely class activities, for real communication.

All the definitions given above share the idea that tasks are goal-oriented activities and meaning-centered; tasks are designed to facilitate students' participation in meaningful activities. Language involves communication and this communication occurs only when the environment offers the opportunity to exchange real and meaningful thoughts. Some of the differences rely on the fact that a task has many purposes depending on the student and teachers' needs.

Despite the fact that TBL emphasizes meaning, form is not put aside. Each of the task models have a period in class to focus on form which is different from focusing on language. For example, Willis and Willis focus on forms at the end of each task cycle, which is defined as a sequence of tasks related to one another [8]. There are three reasons to focus on language form at the end of any task sequence. First, learners understand language within a context. When performing the task, students undoubtedly prepare and make use of language. Second, students focus their attention on language use rather than language form. Each task, during the cycle, has different purposes and characteristics which capture the students' attention and interest in the language that will be used when achieving the target task. Third, students are exposed to language production and reception. Learners engage in real world activities that demand speaking and/or writing and understanding by listening and/or reading. In order for successful communication to take place, teachers do not have to correct every mistake. Teachers have to see language as a tool instead of an end, which means that errors are part of the learning process and not necessarily the result of bad learning or teaching. Therefore, meaningful tasks imply meaningful learning and end with meaningful communication. Likewise, the conditions under which a task is performed will have important consequences for the type of language used by learners in communicative tasks. Ellis refers to this situation when he says that Task-Based Learning and Teaching call for classroom participants to forget they are in the classroom, a teaching-learning setting, and imagine themselves in a more communicatively effective environment where negotiation of meaning is taking place [9]. The reason would seem obvious: the goal of language teaching is or should be the enabling of students to express personal meanings. Certain researchers such as Long underscore the fact that a task needs to include negotiation of meaning in order to effectively propel language acquisition forward [10]. So, it is argued, we should provide our learners with meaningful tasks which include plenty of opportunities for the negotiation of meaning.

Teacher and students' roles change within a task-based approach. TBL presents learning and teaching as collaborative work. Classes are student-centered. Teachers address students' needs and interests by becoming facilitators. According to Willis and Willis, teachers who engage in Task-Based Learning promote real language use; when doing so, they become leaders and organizers of discussion, managers of group or pair

work, motivators to engage students in performing a task and language experts to provide language feedback when needed [8]. The main issues here are the degrees to which the teacher is responsible for content. The role of the students is far from being one of the passive recipients of comprehensible input; students are now seen to take the leading role in their own learning. Van den Branden agrees with the fact that task-based lessons are student-centered, which means students take the main part in the learning process [7]. Learners are autonomous to negotiate course content or to choose linguistic forms when performing a task. Negotiation is done by providing options for the learners; for example, the teacher may suggest a series of topics and students decide which one to begin with. Learners are also group participants. Many of the tasks are done in pairs or groups which will require adaptation for those students used to working individually or those used to whole class instruction. Another role for learners is the one of risk takers. Students constantly face challenges that involve the use of the target language. Students need to make the most of every opportunity to develop language while performing the task. Richards and Rodgers say that both teachers and learners in Task-Based Learning are responsible for the development of classroom interaction [3].

There have been many task-based TBL models for class lessons. Ellis presented a model that focuses on meaning and real-world activities that demand learners to process language for real situations. According to this model, English language development occurs when learners are given enough time to prepare and perform a task. There is some attention to form while communication takes place. Communicative tasks reflect three main approaches: consciousness-raising activities, focused communication activities and interpretation activities. As can be seen from Table 1, the pre-task shows students the grammar they will master in the future and form is engineered by the design of the task. On the other hand, during task stage focuses on communication activities, which means performance is crucial. The way teachers handle error correction and how students react to the task are important. Teachers are expected to let communication flow and find strategies to make error correction in such a way that indirect focus on form is accomplished. Finally, students report to class. They may be exposed to any kind of input and then share with the group their understanding. Ellis' model also shows the conditions under which a task is performed [9]. He suggests a number of ways to regulate tasks: for example time pressure, which is regulated by the amount of time given to learners to perform the task. Familiarity with a topic also influences task performance. If a topic is relevant to students' own experiences, there are more chances of having engagement and intrinsic motivation. Another task-based model was outlined by Willis, who used the format of Pre-Task, Task Cycle and Language Focus. There are three stages: pre-task, task cycle and language focus [5]. During the pre-task stage the teacher identifies and introduces the topic and learners feel motivated to perform the task. The teacher recalls and activates existing knowledge by exploring the topic and highlighting useful words and phrases which might be needed during task performance. The second stage, task cycle, gives learners the opportunity to perform real world tasks with the teacher's monitoring. It is advisable to have students work in pairs or in small groups at this stage. Also, while planning, the teacher should provide all the necessary input by acting as a facilitator. Learners plan how to present the outcome of their work, generally by exchanging and comparing final products. Students report the conclusions they have reached. The final stage, language focus, places emphasis on language features used during the two previous stages. The language focus provides opportunities for students to analyse and practice specific linguistic features arising from task. All in all, Task-Based Learning moves from fluency to accuracy and fluency again, which demonstrates that although form is important, it is not the central part of the task model.

Willis' three-stage task model does not clearly state the evaluation component. The teacher's monitoring during the task cycle is a kind of informal assessment since s/he provides indirect feedback. Nunan states that "assessment/evaluation is concerned with the selection of assessment and evaluation instruments and procedures" [11].

Teachers using TBLT ideas report increased confidence, enjoyment and motivation among learners. Nevertheless, there can be misunderstanding about what a task is, leading either to lack of application of theory (calling something a task that is not a task) or over-application of theory (assuming that tasks must always be about spoken interaction, or about pair and group work). There can also be misunderstanding about the purposes of tasks, once more leading to lack of application of theory (maintaining strong teacher-led grammar instruction elements) or over-application of theory (assuming that the teacher has no role to play, at least at the task execution stage). That theory and research into TBLT are both under- and over-applied in practice highlights the challenge of identifying exactly what TBLT is or should be, because significant differences emerge in the ways in which its proponents conceptualise the approach [11].

To make my lessons more diverse and interesting, if it is possible due to the syllabi, I've also tried to use the TBL method at my lessons. People say that every experience means having some experience on itself, even if it is a negative one. When we first meet with my students after a short introduction to the objectives of the course I offer them a task based on information, which has to be changed into questions. But the main idea of it is finding a person with the same answer as they have (family, hobby, read book, etc.). To do it in a group of 10-15 students they are asked to stand up, leave their places and feel free to ask their groupmates questions and move around the classroom to find necessary data. You know, most of them prefer to stay where they are, keeping waiting to be asked by others.

Having learnt about types of computers and input and output devices, they read a dialogue "At a computer shop". For the next lesson I tell them to compose their own one, using learnt expressions but discussing any beloved device in it. Their partner is usually their desk neighbour. I don't know why but only few of them are ready to present the dialogue. Taking into account their done task and neglecting mistakes, both lexical and grammatical, I usually feel embarrassed when they ask me in a cheerful way "What's our grade?" expecting to get "A". Then I ask myself if the mark is the utmost thing in studying?

Every year we have a traditional week of Foreign Languages. It's up to us, university teachers to choose a group and activity to be done. I've chosen a group of good and motivated in English studying students. The day happened to be on the Shrove Tuesday. I wondered if they would like to have something special like a Pancake Day? They agreed but when they were offered to have a real tea party with hot pancakes in our classroom, it turned out that nobody could cook them. I told that I would do it. They said that they would buy sweets. At the first meeting after the winter breaks we started talking about traditions and observing winter holidays in Ukraine and Britain. I switched on "For Auld Lang Syne" and gave them 8 lines of it to be learnt by heart and sung at our party. Besides, each of them was to prepare any funny or moral story, a song or a rhyme to their own taste in English. Was it a big party? None of them prepared a story, but for the girl who, I knew would be difficult to do it and therefore she was told to mime the process of making pancakes when the others translated her gestures into English. None of them learnt the song, but for the boy who had learnt it previously at school. Two of them brought biscuits and three of them were late. While eating pancakes and drinking tea I told to myself that it had been the first and the last attempt to do something like that. Really I don't know how to make them active and encourage them. I suppose it happened because I misunderstand task-based language teaching or something else goes wrong.

Task-Based Learning offers more advantages than disadvantages. When carrying out the tasks, learners do not concentrate on language features, but on reaching their goal. Learners are engaged in each one of the tasks since life experiences and previous knowledge support learning. Language is used in everyday life and accounts for students' interests. When using the previous task-based lesson, learners are more motivated and engaged in the learning process. Learners make decisions according to their interest which ends in meaningful learning. Language is used for communication. However, the difficulties of following a Task-Based Learning approach lay in teachers' and students' attitudes. Another shortcoming of a Task-Based approach is the apparent lack of focus on grammar, there is a focus on form.

REFERENCES:

1. NEW TRENDS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING [Electronic resource]. – Mode of access: <http://petallproject.eu/petall/index.php/es/international-conference>
2. Task-Based Language Learning: Old Approach, New Style. A New Lesson to Learn [Electronic resource]. – Mode of access: <https://revistas.unal.edu.co/index.php/profile/article/view/17691/36825>
3. Richards, J., & Rodgers, T. (2004). Approaches and methods in language teaching. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., (p. 223)
4. Nunan, D. (1989). Designing tasks for the communicative classroom. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (p. 10)
5. Willis, J. (1996). A framework for task based learning. Harlow: Longman. (p. 23, 38)
6. Skehan, P. (1996). A framework for the implementation of task-based learning. Applied Linguistics, 17, 38-62.
7. Van den Branden, K. (2006). Task based language education. From theory to practice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., (p. 4).
8. Willis, D., & Willis, J. (2007). Doing task based teaching. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
9. Ellis, R. (2003). Task based language learning and teaching. New York: Oxford University Press.
10. Long, M. (1983). Native speaker/non-native speaker conversation and the negotiation of comprehensible input. Applied Linguistics, 4, 126-141.
11. Nunan, D. (2004). Task based language teaching. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Магас Людмила Миколаївна, викладач кафедри іноземних мов, Вінницький національний технічний університет, м. Вінниця, ludmag71@gmail.com

Magas Liudmyla Mykolaivna, an FLD teacher, Vinnytsia National Technical University, Vinnytsia
ludmag71@gmail.com