

Task-Based Language Teaching: A Paradigm Shift in ESL/EFL Teaching and Learning: A Case Study-Based Approach

Zehra Sultan

Abstract—The study is based on the Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) approach which is found to be very effective in the EFL/ESL classroom. This approach engages learners to acquire the usage of authentic language skills by interacting with the real world through a sequence of pedagogical tasks. The use of technology enhances the effectiveness of this approach. This study throws light on the historical background of TBLT, and its efficacy in the EFL /ESL classroom. In addition, this study precisely talks about the implementation of this approach in the General Foundation Program (GFP) of Muscat College, Oman. It furnishes the list of the pedagogical tasks embedded in the language curriculum of the GFP which are skillfully allied to the College graduate attributes. Moreover, the study also discusses the challenges pertaining to this approach from the point of view of teachers, students and its classroom application. Additionally, the operational success of this methodology is gauged through formative assessments of the GFP which is apparent in the students' progress.

Keywords—Task-based language teaching, authentic language, communicative approach, real world activities, ESL/EFL activities.

I. INTRODUCTION

TBLT, also familiar as task-based instructions (TBI), is the approach that revolves around the achievement of learning objectives through meaningful tasks. In the TBL method, it is essential that there has to be a purpose for the task and students should know its outcome in advance. Moreover, it should be related to a real-life situation.

TBL is an ongoing, progressive process which focuses on using authentic language that makes students use the target language through activities like, conducting interviews and calling customer service etc. The assessments are mainly subjected to the outcome rather than precise usage of language forms. This makes the TBL approach effective in EFL as it develops target language fluency and boosts students' self-confidence. In addition, task-based language learning gives emphasis on Communicative Approach where there are no set grammar rules to be followed. The target language is practiced after the completion of task and the repetition of tasks give practice of the new language to the students. Moreover, the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) does not advocate any method. However, in its 'can do' tasks of language learning, CEFR recommends five skills for mastering a language. These skills include spoken interaction and spoken

production, along with reading, writing and listening. And, hence this action-oriented, communicative approach in speaking skill endorses that CEFR applauds the TBLT approach [1].

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the past, language teaching was dominated by traditional approaches in which learners had to memorize sets of forms and rules without any context. There used to be no correlation in learning and its application to real life. The change began when in 1980, an educationist N. Prabhu developed an active approach. This approach transferred theoretical teaching to concrete learning [2]. In this approach, the learners get engaged in tasks using authentic language. This method enabled learners of ESL/EFL not only to acquire linguistic knowledge but to nurture their existing knowledge as well. This approach was supporting the Communicative Approach of Hymes which was developed out of sociolinguistics [2]

Communicative methodology emphasizes that language can be acquired through communication. It is believed that there is more of communication which is required rather than to the learning of grammar and vocabulary to acquire a new language. Communication is the ability to make oneself understood in socially appropriate ways. Moreover, TBLT is an extension of the Communicative approach, and has many similarities in theory of language. However, TBLT is preferred in ESL/EFL as it accentuates more on the theory of learning so, endorses that learning takes place by doing. TBLT tasks provide opportunities to the learners to practice the use of language by communicating. Likewise, this method correlates learning and practical activities by bringing the real world into classroom.

Another highpoint of the TBLT approach is that it is learner centered. The content of its curriculum is designed by keeping a student's needs in mind. The instructor initiates the tasks but the tasks unfold through a process of informational operation by learners. Learners get the freedom to take the tasks forward from where the instructor initiated to where they preferred to carry.

III. EFFICACY IN THE ESL/EFL CLASSROOM

The rationale behind the effectiveness of task-based learning is firstly that it improves the cognitive skills of the learners. Learners comprehend the target language rather than

Zehra Sultan is with Muscat College, Oman (e-mail: reshmy@muscatcollege.edu.om).

memorizing. The tasks are designed in such a way that the meaning is emphasized, instead of the language form or structure. In addition, tasks give a clear purpose to the learners as they would know the outcome they will achieve at the end. The outcome may vary depending on the tasks, like making a poster for pollution, finding a solution for a problem or writing email, or volunteering in a social cause.

Secondly, the purpose of making learners do authentic tasks in the classroom is to relate the learners to real-world activities so that they know the importance and application of these tasks in their day-to-day lives. Moreover, the learners perform activities they are intended to do or had done in their own mother tongue. It substitutes the “traditional” teaching with real-life situations and this prepares students to solve real world problems.

TBL is effective in the ESL/EFL classroom for the following reasons:

1. Tasks provided by the instructor are similar to the type of activities learners are required to do in their lives outside the classroom.
2. Activities relevant to the learners' mental ability are measured through tasks like matching, listing, sequencing, comparing, problem-solving, creative thinking, and sharing personal experiences.
3. Classroom tasks focus on implication and understanding rather than memorizing, recitation and repetition; for example, debates, group discussion, impromptu speaking on the topics related to real-world issues.
4. There is a clear outcome to determine task effectiveness of students' success.
5. Most of the activities encourage pair and group work, so all the students become active participants rather than being passive listeners of the lecture.
6. TBL tasks emphasize on authentic use of language. For instance, having candid role-play in the classroom on how to communicate in a restaurant or at the airport etc.
7. Learning is a process rather than an end product; teachers provide guidance and encourage students to accomplish the task using their present linguistic resources.
8. Tasks include variety to techniques and communication styles like debate, discussion, power point presentation, poster presentation and storytelling to avoid boredom in the classroom.
9. Technology is used for initiating real discussions prompted from documentaries, blogs and online discussions.
10. Tasks assist learners to notice the gap in their language, knowledge and skills.
11. Tasks provide learners the confidence and willingness to communicate in their limited lexis.

Abu Ayaash and Asaaf in their case study recounts the research of Nunan (2004) about type of tasks that engage the learners in TBL classroom to understand, use, generate and interact with the target language in a real-world context [3]. Nunan, as cited in [3], stresses that tasks should focus on conveying meaning from grammatical forms, structures and target lexical items. And for this, Nunan classified the tasks under five categories [3].

TABLE I
LISTS OF TASK TYPES THAT COME UNDER EACH CATEGORY [3]

Category	Task Types
Cognitive	classify, predict, induce, note taking, concept map, inference, discriminate, diagram
Interpersonal	group work, pair work, role play
Linguistic	conversation patterns, practice, use context, summarize, selective listening, skimming
Emotional	self-assessment, self-evaluate, reflection,
Creative	brain storming

IV. TBLT IN READING

Reading is done for pleasure and to gain information. It is an important skill to be nurtured among students. The aim of the reading lesson in ESL/EFL classroom is to inculcate the habit of reading among students and to enhance knowledge.

Normal reading classes are teacher-centered, it is the teacher who talks and students passively listen, take notes or read the text to complete the tasks. On the other hand, the TBL reading class is student-centered. The students follow a specified process to complete the reading tasks.

Students get the opportunity to be involved in the activities pertaining to the tasks. The aim of these activities is to explore the topic and experience the usage of language. The role of the teacher is to design the tasks in such a way that it motivates students to freely explore the topic and comprehend the reading text in an efficient manner [4].

The task-based reading lesson is divided into three stages which are as follows:

1. Pre-Text: Teacher activates the students' background knowledge on the topic through brainstorming activities, it is a kind of warm-up stage.
2. Task Cycle: A student's confidence grows when they realize that they can do the work assigned to them without their teacher's help. Therefore, in this stage students are provided with opportunity to work in pairs or small groups. They are encouraged to discuss and complete the task. The role of the teacher is just a facilitator who monitors the class proceedings, but controls and can stop it if necessary. Moreover, the teacher needs to make sure that all the students are involved in doing the tasks by communicating with each other.
3. Language focus: While monitoring the reading class, the teacher helps the students by correcting their pronunciation and suggesting alternative ways. In addition, the teacher encourages all the students to participate in discussions pertaining to the task and also assigns a group leader to ensure that all group members get an equal opportunity to speak.

Grammar is learnt contextually. Students preview the text, observe the grammar rules and get a rough idea about how the language items are used. The students underline target language and other useful words, phrases, linkers, etc. The teacher asks questions about the topic sentences, thesis statement and supporting details.

In brief, the TBLT reading class is a gateway to practice the speaking and writing skill as well. In the pre-reading stage, the teacher deduces learners' pre-existing knowledge about the

topic by asking questions. Learners do fact-finding by communicating with each other in pairs and small groups. At the end of the reading class, the teacher encourages the students to write an essay on the topic. Hence, all the skills are integrated in a reading lesson [5].

TABLE II
A FRAMEWORK OF ACTIVITIES FOR A TASK-BASED READING LESSON [5]

Phases	Examples of tasks
Pre-reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brainstorming - Guessing the content by using pictures, captions words and phrases from the text.
During reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fact-finding Pre-teaching blocking vocabulary Listing Sequencing Finding similarities and differences Problem-solving tasks
Post-reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sharing personal experience Debate/discussion Composing an essay

V. TBLT IN WRITING CLASS

The writing skill is challenging for ESL/EFL learners. They find it difficult to generate ideas and put them in written form. Moreover, writing being a productive skill, chiefly communicates messages in an essay format along with grammar, lexis, and writing mechanics. And, learners find it troublesome to combine all these elements in a structured essay format. However, the use of the TBL approach in a writing lesson demonstrates significant effects on performance in terms of format, content, organization, writing mechanism grammar and sentence structure [6]. To be precise, the TBL approach builds vocabulary and develops learners' awareness in language accuracy, as it facilitates learners' needs to use the language they know and to improve on what they do not know. Moreover, the planned authentic tasks enable the student to perform activities inside and outside the classroom; that is the reason the activity and the learning outcomes are of great relevance to the use of the real-world language form. The writing products or topics given to the students are applicable to the real-world as well.

VI. TASK-BASED LANGUAGE LEARNING ACTIVITIES IN GFP OF MUSCAT COLLEGE

The GFP of Muscat College uses plethora of tasks, approaches and strategies to make teaching and learning effective, as well as long lasting for students. A series of workshops, discussions and show and tells have been conducted by the Language Centre to sanction the effectiveness of this approach. Students' feedbacks have also strengthened its usefulness. The potentiality of this approach is witnessed by the positive results seen in the students of Muscat College. The pedagogical tasks are designed in such a way that they incorporate the College Graduate Attributes.

The following tasks have been incorporated in the Course Outline and Formative Assessments in the different levels of the GFP, Muscat College;

1. write an email to the lecturers seeking an appointment,
2. visit a museum and discuss the artefacts in group discussion,

3. conduct an interview to find specific information (with the lecturers of other departments),
4. organize community service projects like cleaning a beach, helping stray animals, donating to the needy, etc.
5. donate blood,
6. make a poster for the vocabulary items,
7. plan a class party,
8. conduct research on the College undergraduate program,
9. watch a movie and write its review,
10. role play of movie shows where students purchase tickets and snacks,
11. peer teaching and study groups for reading tasks,
12. watch documentaries of National Geographic and BBC and answer questions; followed by a group discussion on the topic,
13. write blog posts,
14. make a business plan,
15. design a logo for a product,
16. promote a product,
17. participate in the College MasterChef competition.

Challenges of Using Task-Based Language Learning

There are certain challenges involved in the task-based language learning approach. First of all, from the language teachers' perspective, it requires immense creativity and enthusiasm. If teachers are influenced by the traditional method of teaching, then it becomes impractical. The resources have to go beyond the textbook. Moreover, if there is inadequacy of time and shortage of resources to provide TBL tasks then this approach becomes ineffective. As cited by Zheng and Borg in their research on TBL teaching in China, teachers have expressed that carrying out tasks are more time-consuming than PPP sequences, and are more difficult to manage in numerous classrooms [7].

Secondly, as per the students' viewpoint, some of them refuse to learn through this type of instruction in language class as they do not expect to make language learning practical. They believe that learning a language can take place only through knowing and understanding grammar rules and memorizing vocabulary. Furthermore, some students find it convenient and time saving to use their first language through online translation apps to understand the concept, which they find is the easiest way, instead of improving their language by using the communicative approach.

Thirdly, there are some contextual factors in the classroom application of TBLT, like, the size of the classroom should not be exceeding 20-25. In addition, a 40-minute English lesson is inadequate to complete the pedagogical task sequence. Moreover, if there are improper instructions then the great benefit of TBLT, which is that learners become independent, negates into high indiscipline and noise. And, learners lose interest and switch to communication in their L1, thus, deviate from the pedagogical tasks [8].

VII. CONCLUSION

To sum up, TBLT clearly has immense effectiveness on students' success as it has emerged from students' needs rather

than the tasks available in the text books. The tasks are designed closer to real-life communication situations; therefore, students are found to be more motivated to absorb the language. The most highlighting aspect of the approach is it improves the cognitive skills of the learners. Students learn the language by understanding the target language instead of memorizing grammar rules and lexis. However, instructors have to be flexible as task-based learning is a developmental process which cannot be predicted, but has to be guided patiently to assess the learners' progress. In essence, this approach curtails the instructor's role to a guide and mentor whereas, students take the center stage in classroom. Likewise, in the task-based reading class, the teacher is just a facilitator and mentor who designs a range of reading tasks which accommodates student-centered learning. The main purpose of these activities is to inculcate the reading habit and also develop to reading proficiency among students. In terms of the task-based writing class, this approach improves the writing style, content, organization, writing mechanics and elements. Moreover, the usage of authentic tasks enables students to use a variety of lexis that they already know and build up what they do not know.

TBLT is chosen as one of the approaches in Muscat College. The drawbacks are addressed through careful and proper monitoring by instructors. The average class size supports organized implementation of the tasks. The tasks are implemented in all the levels to garner wide range of College Graduate Attributes. Hereafter, LC of Muscat College has witnessed improvement in their students' learning as TBLT approach is ardently practiced in teaching and religiously assessed to gauge its efficacy. However, more research and case studies are required to reduce the challenges in terms of both the student and teacher perspectives.

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