TASK-BASED LEARNING IN EDUCATION

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Abstract

Tasks have been used for hundreds of years. While in the past the task was a piece of translation often from a literary source, recently, tasks have included projects for producing posters, oral presentations and dramatic performances. Every language teacher realizes the importance of the student-centered and flexible approach and the demand for Communicative Language Teaching which helps to understand the language in context and to use it in situations in real life. Language is the vehicle for attaining task goals, but the emphasis is on meaning and communication.

Tasks have been used for hundreds of years. While in the past the task was a piece of translation often from a literary source, recently, tasks have included projects for producing posters, oral presentations and dramatic performances. Every language teacher realizes the importance of the learner-centred and flexible approach and the demand for Communicative Language Teaching which helps to understand the language in context and to use it in situations in real life. Language is the vehicle for attaining task goals, but the emphasis is on meaning and communication.

In task-based learning, the tasks are essential to the learning activity, it is based on the principle that learners may study more efficiently when their minds are focused on the task, rather than on the language they are using.

The learners begin with the task. When they have fulfilled it, the teacher draws attention to the language used, making corrections and adjustments to the learners' presentation.

Task-based learning can be very successful at intermediate levels, but many teachers question its effectiveness at lower levels. Nowadays the methodology requires a change in the traditional teacher's role. The teacher does not initiate and 'present' language or 'help' during the task phase. The teacher is an observer during the task phase and becomes a language informant only during the 'language focus' stage.

Jane Willis suggests three basic stages: the Pre-task, the Task cycle and the Language focus. These components have been carefully planned to create most favourable conditions for language acquisition, and thus provide rich learning opportunities to suit different types of learners.

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In the Pre-task stage, the teacher explores the topic with the class and may emphasize supportive words and phrases, helping students to understand the task instructions. The students may hear a recording of other people doing the same task. During the Task cycle stage, the students carry out the task in pairs or small groups while the teacher monitors from a distance. This cycle gives them speaking and writing contact with opportunities for students to learn from each other. The learners then plan how they will tell the rest of the group what they did and how it went, and then they report on the task either orally or in writing, and compare notes on what has happened. The task cycle also gives students opportunities to use whatever language they have, both in private (where mistakes, hesitations, and approximate renderings do not matter as long as the meaning is clear) and in public (where there is an included need to make every effort for correctness of form and meaning, so as not to lose face). In the Language focus stage, the learners observe and talk about exact features of any listening or reading text which they have looked at for the task and the teacher may present some form of preparation of specific language features which the task has provoked.

If a teacher is creative, s/he can still find ways to surmount the difficulties related to the systematized and controlled education system in order to make learning more significant.

Task based teaching and learning is teaching and learning a language by using language to achieve open ended tasks. Learners are given an objective to complete but are left with some independence in coming close to this objective. A task is defined by David Nunan as "an activity (or technique) where students are urged to accomplish something or solve some problem using their language. Preferably, this activity is open-ended; there is no set way to accomplish their goal" (1989).

A student who is academically educated should be able to:

- understand a variety of academic vocabulary in context;
- recognize and use symbols and expressions;
- understand associations between different parts of a text and know how to use language that serves to make the different parts of a text make sense;
- interpret different kinds of text type (genre), and show understanding for the significance that they express;
- comprehend, use and create information presented in graphic or visual format;
- know what counts as proof for an argument, apply the information or its implications to other situations than the one within reach
- make meaning of a text beyond the level of the sentence.

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Fluent speakers use language to carry out tasks such a solving problems, developing plans and working together to complete projects. The use of similar task-based activities in the classroom is an exceptional way to encourage students to use the language. Tasks may involve solving a word problem, creating a crossword puzzle, making a video, preparing a presentation or drawing a plan. Activities in the language classroom simulate communication outside the classroom when they are structured with such a purpose. In these classroom activities, students use the language to fill an information gap by getting answers or expanding a partial understanding. Students work in pairs when they have to complete a task. Then learners talk to each other until both pairs have the necessary information to solve the task. For learners it is very important to work in pairs or small groups in order to use language as frequently as possible. The teacher should give students structures in the form of a defined task and result. This structure will allow learners to collaborate as they develop a work plan, discuss the substance of the task and report the result. Thus they will be able to use language in a variety of ways and learn from each other.

Effective collaborative activities have three characteristics:

- communication gap: each learner has significant information that the others don't have
- task orientation: each activity has a defined result, such a solving a problem or drawing a map
- time limit: learners have a predetermined amount of time to complete the task

Motivating learners

Motivation is provided by the need to realize the objectives of the task and to report back on it. Success in doing this can intensify longer term motivation. Motivation to listen to fluent speakers doing the task is strong too, because in attempting the task, learners will observe gaps in their own language and will listen cautiously to hear how fluent speakers express themselves.

Learning to communicate in another language takes a long time. It is one of the most demanding tasks the students are likely to assume and they can easily become discouraged. But there are different techniques that teachers could use to keep their students involved and stimulated by helping them understand the language acquisition method, connect language learning with their larger educational goals, and succeed as language learners. Students need to understand that learning a language is not the same as learning about a language, but it means becoming able to use it to understand, speak and think as they do in their first language. It is also essential to know that language learning takes place in stages. Interpretive

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skills (listening, reading) develop more quickly than expressive skills (speaking, writing) and the capacity to use a foreign language confidently necessitates the longest phase of development.

Practicing newly developing skills and mastering challenging tasks produce positive emotions; feelings of effectiveness that are obvious even in early infancy.

The sense of competence usually comes when learners have had a chance to use or practice what they are learning. When they have proof through feedback of how well they are learning and can make internal statements, such as "I really understand this" or "I am doing competently," learners experience feelings of efficiency and essential stimulus because they are knowledgeably completing an activity that leads to a valued end.

When people know that they are skilful at what they are learning, they feel confident. This self-assurance comes from knowing that they have become capable.

Evident indicators of fundamental motivation are that learners:

- begin learning activities acceptingly
- desire demanding aspects of tasks.
- spontaneously communicate learning to external interests.
- ask questions to increase their understanding further than the learning within reach.
- find pleasure in the course of learning – the studying, writing, reading.
- are proud of their learning and its consequences.

Teachers should be aware of these indicators so they can adjust their teaching to the benefit of learners.

There are six factors which can serve as sources of motivation from Maslow:

- Social relationships: to make new friends, to feel a need for associations and friendships.
- External expectations: to fulfil instructions from someone else; to accomplish the expectations of someone with formal authority.
- Social welfare: to improve capacity to serve mankind, prepare for service to the society, and improve ability to take part in community work.
- Personal advancement: to accomplish higher position in a job, secure professional progress
- Escape/Stimulation: to reduce boredom, provide a break in the routine of home or work, and provide a difference to other challenging particulars of life.
- Cognitive interest: to learn for the sake of learning, seek knowledge for its own sake, and to please an analytical intellect.

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Communicative Language Teaching

In task-based learning, communication tasks engage learners in a demanding mental process as they create what they want to say, expressing what they think or feel. Tasks eliminate the teacher domination, and learners get chances to open and close conversations, to work together naturally, to interrupt and confront, to ask people to do things and to check that they have been done.

In task-based learning, tasks are always activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose in order to accomplish a product. Tasks are "goal-oriented"; the emphasis is on understanding and suggesting meanings in order to complete the task effectively. While learners are doing tasks, they are using language in a significant way. Language, then, is the means of expression for achieving task goals, but the emphasis is on meaning and communication, not on producing language forms correctly.

Language teaching is based on the idea that the objective of language acquisition is communicative competence: the ability to use the language accurately and properly to accomplish communication goals. The desired result of the language learning process is the ability to communicate proficiently, not the ability to use the language exactly as a native speaker does. Learners should be able to make themselves understood, using their existing ability to the fullest. They should try to avoid misunderstanding in the message (due to defective pronunciation, grammar or vocabulary), offending communication partners (due to socially unsuitable style) and to use strategies for distinguishing and handling communication breakdowns.

Howatt (1984) distinguishes between the weak and the strong versions of Communicative Language Teaching. The weak version stresses the importance of providing learners with opportunities to use English for communicative purposes and thus attempts to incorporate communicative activities into the course of language teaching. The stronger version of communicative language teaching asserts that language can be acquired only through communication. This means that teaching involves not just "activating an existing knowledge of the language", but "stimulating the development of the language system itself". Whether it is the weak or the strong version, the promoters of Communicative Language Teaching have always considered learning a foreign language as acquiring the linguistic resources to carry out different purposes. Some principles of Communicative Language Teaching include:

1. Language should be a means to an end and the focus should be on meaning, not on the form.
2. The learner has to formulate and produce ideas, information, opinions.

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3. Teacher intervention to correct mistakes should be minimal as this distracts from communication.

The communicative approach has left an unforgettable mark on teaching and learning, resulting in the use of communicative activities in classrooms all over the world.

Conclusion

Rather than try to know what "to do to" learners, we work with them to deepen their existing inherent motivation and knowledge. Seeing learners as unique and active, we emphasize communication and respect, realizing that through understanding and sharing our resources together we create greater energy for learning.

TBL aims at motivating language use and providing a variety of learning opportunities for students of all levels and capabilities.

The role of tasks is to encourage learners to stimulate and use whatever language they already have, both for comprehension and for speaking and writing.

The language focus constituent enables learners to study exposure, and organize their knowledge of language structure.

The initial point of organisation of the learners' work is the task, and the language is not an end in itself but an instrument to complete the task.

In the first place, the teacher must create the global objectives. The teacher's job at this phase is to increase the learners' awareness and make them realise what talents and strategies independent learners own and use when they investigate a certain subject, when they seek information and are successful in finding it.

The students, who are familiar with learning information only for the sake of being tested, should be directed towards a practical performance or use of their knowledge.

In its natural form, that a curriculum should be based on tasks and that learning should come out of the tasks rather than preceding them, it perfectly reveals an approach to learning illustrated by supporters of focus-on-form, rather than those who base their curriculum on teaching a series of pre-selected forms. But the claims made for it appear sometimes more like theories than facts. Having learners carry out meaning-related tasks is good for language development and for giving them opportunities for trying out language and getting feedback on their language use.

The premise of communicative competence sustains that language learning occurs in an integrative way through an emphasis on making meaning, in large part by unconscious incorporation of knowledge through much practice in real situations over time.

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