

## A New Trend in Education: Task-based Methodology for Teachers/Learners

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**Abstract.** Second language research and literature have provided a number of definitions for tasks depending on their underlying assumptions, including the scope and perspectives that are illustrated by linguists researching tasks or task-based teaching and learning. Although Task-Based is not a definite method that teachers must follow systematically, the adoption of Task-Based method as the teaching approach in English language education environments is based on a number of assumptions, principles and theories of second language acquisition. In fact, the adoption of Task-Based was a result of a better understanding of the nature and processes of language learning and also because of the inadequacies of other approaches, for instance, Present-Practice-Product. Task-based English Teaching (TBET) has been adopted not only because it has well-grounded assumptions but also due to the sound rationale behind its implementation within which it can satisfy both supporters of communicative approach and defenders of traditional approaches by drawing on both theory of learning in general and theory of language learning in particular. Contextualized language learning is the main principle of TBET that attracted the attention of second language learning which was coined and later developed by second language researchers and educators in reaction to other teacher-dominated, form-oriented methods. This paper attempts to deal with task-based, the role it plays in language teaching in details and aims to provide some suggestions for L<sub>2</sub> learning.

**Keywords:** Task-Based; Teaching Methods; L<sub>2</sub>

### 1. Introduction

L<sub>2</sub> research and literature have provided a number of definitions for tasks depending on their underlying assumptions, including the scope and perspectives. Breen (1989) stipulates that “a task is a structured plan for the provision of opportunities for the refinement of knowledge and capabilities entitled in a new language and its use during communication”. On the other hand, Long (1985) claims that “a task is a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Richards, Platt, and Weber (1985) define a task as “an activity or action which is carried out as the result of processing or understanding language, i.e. as a response”; for example, drawing a map while listening to a tape. Further, Crookes (1986) cites that “a task is a piece of work or an activity, usually with a specified objective, undertaken as part of an educational course, at work, or used to elicit data for research”. In addition, Prabhu (1987) claims that a task is an activity which requires learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process. Nunan (1989) expresses that a communicative task is a piece of classroom work, which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form. Lee (2000) also states that a task is (1) a classroom activity or exercise that has: (a) an objective obtainable only by the interaction among participants, (b) a mechanism for structuring and sequencing interaction, and (c) a focus on meaning exchange; (2) a language learning endeavor that requires learners to comprehend, manipulate, and/or produce the target language as they perform some set of work plans. Further,

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Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001) define a task as an activity which requires learners to use language with emphasis on meaning to attain objectives. Finally, Skehan (1996) believes that a task is an activity in which, meaning is primary, there is some sort of relationship to the real world; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome. Skehan (1996) distinguishes task-based approach into two forms, a strong, and a weak form, “[a] strong form sees tasks as the basic unit of teaching and drives the acquisition process, whereas the weak form sees tasks as a vital part of language instruction, that is embedded in a more complex pedagogical context” (p. 36). Willis (1996) states tasks are “always activities where the target language is used by the learners for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome” (p. 24). Skehan (1996b) describes tasks as “activities which have meaning as their primary focus. Success in tasks is evaluated in terms of achievement of an outcome, and tasks generally bear some resemblance to real-life language use” (p. 20). However, Bygate et al. still thinks: “A task is an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective, and which is chosen so that it is most likely to provide information for learners which will help them evaluate their own learning” (Bygate et al., 2001, p. 11). Task is therefore assumed to refer to a range of work plans which have the overall purpose of facilitating language learning – from the simple and brief exercise type, to more complex and lengthy activities such as group problem-solving or simulations and decision-making.

The adoption of TBET was a result of a better understanding of the nature and processes of language learning and also because of the inadequacies of other approaches, for instance, Present-Practice-Product (PPP). This model characterizes the pre-selected language items, controlled repetition and direct instruction of grammar. PPP model was criticized for its neglect of the natural order of learner language development. Therefore, it is doubtful whether direct grammar instruction of the PPP model is beneficial to language acquisition (Ritchie, 2003). Based on Skehan (1996b) opinion, learning follows a natural order and instruction of a grammar form does not guarantee acquisition. Considering other teaching methodologies, Swan (1985) has given a critical evaluation of the communicative approach to language teaching. He claims that the communicative approach has its emphasis on meaning, language use and communication; it is often characterized by serious intellectual confusion that is choked with jargon (p. 1). In fact, he thinks that the communicative approach has not been widely adopted as individual applied linguists and teacher trainers vary widely in their acceptance and interpretation of the different ideas.... (p. 2). Richards and Rogers (2001) stipulated that tasks provide a better context for learning language. It was made explicit that task-based language learning is based on a theory of learning; however, TBET has characteristics of the theory of language regarding the following assumptions:

- Language is primarily a means of making meaning.
- Multiple models of language inform task-based learning (i. structural: complexity of tasks; ii. Functional: personal, narrative or decision-making, and iii. Interactional: interactional activity or communicative goal).
- Lexical units are central in language use and language learning.
- “Conversation” is the central focus of language and the keystone of language acquisition.

These assumptions are well-grounded in SLA theories and are believed to facilitate inter-language development and ultimately enhance learning outcome and language proficiency. However, it is important to note that the theory of learning plays an integral role in the basic assumptions underlying task-based learning. Tasks are implemented to facilitate language acquisition which is learner-centered. These features of TBET proposed by Richards and Rogers (2001:228-29) are summarized as follows:

- Tasks provide both the input and output processing necessary for language acquisition – tasks promote processes of negotiation, modification, rephrasing, and experimentation, and allow productive use of language.
- Tasks activities and achievements are motivational – authentic tasks have the following characteristics: elicitation of authentic language, diversified formats and operation, inclusion of physical activities, learners’ own experience and use of a variety of communication styles.

- Learning difficulty can be negotiated and fine-tuned for particular pedagogical purposes – negotiation of difficulty can be achieved by “a trade-off between cognitive processing and focus on form”, or fluency may develop at the expense of accuracy.

Tasks are different from other approaches in a number of ways in providing learners with purposeful learning experiences. Willis (1996) points out that a task is generally considered as “a label for various activities including grammar exercises, practice activities and role plays” (p. 23). The complexity of tasks depends on the number of steps, available solutions, parties, time given, language required, and sources (Long & Crookes, 1992). Therefore, tasks can have a focus on meaning as well as a focus on form when engage learners in communication. Also, the language input provides chances for learners to experience practical use of English according to their needs. These features make tasks different from traditional classroom approaches.

## **2. Strengths of TBET**

Ritchie (2003) suggested that TBET is better than more traditional approaches because learners are exposed to richer language, namely the comprehensible input. It is believed that “language acquisition is more creative and dynamic than simple imprinting of target language utterances” (p. 117). The Task-based (TB) lesson, with its richer input and opportunities for analysis of texts, allows learners to notice what they want, need, or are ready to learn – features of discourse and lexis as well as aspects of grammar. It is also pointed out that such rich input enhances incidental learning. Ritchie (2003) stated that input could become intake in TB lesson when students are given the chance to notice the form, to form hypotheses about the use of this particular form and to conduct an interpretation activity.

The strength of TBET is that it provides learners the opportunities to make use of lexical resources they have either from previous knowledge or the pre-task input. Through interactions or negotiation of meanings, students can eventually develop greater fluency; however, such approaches can lead to the use of “prefabricated chunks” (Skehan, 1996b, p. 22) in communication.

As the newly adopted language teaching approach in a lot of countries such as Hong Kong, TBET values the processes of learning English. Learners are exposed to the language, provided chance for them to use the language with focused learning goals of accuracy, fluency and complexity.

## **3. Challenges of task-based language teaching**

It was eventually found that there are some shortcomings of TBET. First of all, this approach may lead to the use of non-linguistic strategies in student interactions. They may not pay attention to form or vocabulary as long as they can express their meanings using chunks of words or body language or relying on background knowledge. Another issue is the importance of lexical elements in real life communication - that is people use “lexicalized modes of processing” in their interactions. Therefore, language courses should then try to realize the flexibility factor of authentic language in terms of the lexical elements, time constraint, structural elements as well as creativity” (Skehan, 1996b). Puleo and Hird suggest that it is problematic to adopt a task-based approach if students are unwilling to interact in the classroom using the target language as they are unable to negotiate for meaning (2004, p. 36). It was also found that familiar topics and a wider range of choices can elicit more conversations between students. Puleo and Hird then concluded that the choice of task was very crucial for the quality and quantity of interaction. Thus, the ability of teachers to adjust the difficulty of tasks may be able to reduce reluctant students to speak more.

## **4. Conclusion**

Task-Based language teaching has attracted the attention of second language learning which was coined and later developed by second language researchers and educators in reaction to other teacher-dominated, form-oriented methods. Therefore, it can be concluded that tasks should have not only focus on meanings but also on forms. Students should be provided with adequate chance to employ different skills in English for the purpose of communication. Tasks should be flexible and can be adjusted and adopted to suit the language

proficiency of learners. Authentic tasks should be used to achieve learning objectives which in turn would ultimately facilitate English learning.

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