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DELVING INTO SECONDARY SCHOOL EFL TEACHERS' PRACTICES FACILITATED BY TASK-BASED LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of Task-Based Instruction (TBI) has resulted in a productive transformation for many foreign language teachers, since it emphasizes the importance of context and meaningful language use. This study presents an overview of the Task-Based Instruction, provides a framework and elaborates task characteristics. It investigates secondary school EFL teachers' experiences with the task-based approach through semi-structured interviews. The results show that despite the fact that some teachers are not trained in Task-Based Teaching, they are eager to implement this approach due to the fact that it enhances the communicative competency and provides students with maximized ways of using the target language. The results show that this pedagogical transformation necessitates material adaptation, as well as careful task design, planning and preparation. As per the examination procedure, it is evident that task-based teaching is not created with examination in mind. Its aim is to support students in using English outside the classroom, even if the language they produce is not always grammatically accurate. It is possible to prepare learners for examinations through form-focused activities which are accompanied by tasks and later on reflected in the examination. Above all, Task-Based Instruction is concerned with learners' ability to use language effectively. Therefore, this paper considers some key areas for future research, and it stresses the need for teacher training, in order for successful implementation to take place.

Key words: task-based instruction, foreign language teaching, task characteristics, task framework.

INTRODUCTION

Task-Based Instruction in Language Teaching

In contrast to traditional approaches, where students are given the instructions to the task and where they are required to manipulate, in Task-Based Instruction, tasks create context, where learners learn the language effectively for real-life situations. In this respect, Task-Based Language Teaching involves learners in interacting and using language for communicative purposes. As a learner-centered approach, it takes into account the functional use of language along with meaningful objectives. In Task-Based Teaching, teachers should aim to promote collaborative knowledge. According to Ellis (2009) "[t]eaching', of course, involves more than just a syllabus; it also includes methodology (i.e. the means by which the syllabus is implemented)"(p.232). In fact, the design of task-based lesson follows methodological procedures for carrying out effective and appropriate lessons. Foster (2009) states that "...teachers are required to mix and match their class activities to embrace all kinds of learner styles" (p.257). Put differently, teachers need to consider their learners' needs and design lessons according to their students' needs. In addition, the key aspects of the Task-Based Instruction are interaction and involvement. Hence, teachers are the ones orchestrating the tasks, leaving their learners curious and interested in the topics. If we compare the traditional form-focused pedagogy and task-based pedagogy, we will notice that in task-based teaching, both teachers and learners are concerned with promoting meaningful language and none of them act as the authority in the classroom. Both the teacher and the learners negotiate the learning process. According to Buehl (2001), the idea of task-based teaching is to "tailor what you are doing to match your students and your goals" (p.7). Therefore, a successful task-based lesson aims at the ability to relate to the language demands and students' needs. Hence, it is very important to understand, that through the implementation of Task-Based Instruction, teachers contribute to learner autonomy and promote a way of teaching the language effectively, so that learners have a purpose in their mind during the learning process.

Task characteristics

When defining tasks, a clear distinction between real-world task or target tasks, and pedagogical tasks should be made. As the name itself refers, target tasks deal with the language beyond the classroom, whereas pedagogical tasks deal with language that takes place in the classroom. In language education, tasks refer to activities, in which the target language is used by learners for communicative purpose. Tasks differ from exercises in that they are used in context and are authentic and free, whereas exercises are run by the teacher and do not always refer to the context, moreover, they are form-focused and have linguistic outcomes. Tasks are not restricted, and learners are given the freedom to use whatever language that they have in their disposal to convey their messages and accomplish the task goals. Although various definitions of a 'task' have been provided, we can clearly say that they all stress to some extent the same task features. Skehan (1998), states the key features of a task:

- meaning is primary
- learners are not given other people's meaning to regurgitate
- there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities
- task completion has some priority
- the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome

Accordingly, a task is an activity that calls for meaning-focused language use. Long (2016) defines the uses of tasks as "...the real-world communicative uses to which learners will put the L2 beyond the classroom" (p.6). The overall purpose of the task is to promote language learning through a pragmatic approach. In this way, a task is not a mechanical repetition of grammar structures or vocabulary rather than an activity which enables students to use language in their disposal, in order to establish contexts for natural language use. A task should be engaging and involve learners actively. This is why, "[a] task is not an action carried out on task participants; rather, a task is an activity which participants, themselves, must carry out" (Pica et al., 1993, p.12). In this way, through tasks, students are provided with a 'purpose' to use the target language (Lee, 2000, p. 30). Tasks promote genuine meaning-focused interaction between the learners and the teacher. Consequently, tasks are motivating and interactive because they relate to students' own experiences and encourage them to apply the knowledge in real-world situations.

Task Framework

Task-based learning does not mean pushing learners to do one task and then another task and so on. In order for learners to improve and gain the needed knowledge, tasks should be seen only as constituents of a bigger framework. Therefore, Task-based approach consists of three principal phases: pre-task, task-cycle and post-task. These phases prepare learners and guide them through a sequential learning; however, these components can be modified to match learners' needs. Apart from preparing, selecting and sequencing tasks, teachers should also consider the methodology of how to implement tasks in the classroom.

Setting a clear framework for delivering task-based lessons is helpful for teachers and learners, as it helps them immerse themselves in an effective learning process. This provides teachers with a clear structure and lesson planning becomes easier and more effective. It is very important for teachers "to work more effectively with students and to pass the knowledge along to students, so a chain of learning-teaching-learning can develop." (Behrens, 2014, p. 14). It is through this process that learning becomes effective and stimulates learners to engage effectively. It is very important to set clear outcome and explain the purpose of the task. Also, learners can be exposed to a model of how the task should be performed or they can be provided with similarly performed tasks, so that the instructions and expectations are clear and do not confuse our learners.

The *pre-task phase* serves as a preparation time for the task performance. It is very important to set clear outcome and explain the purpose of the task. Hence, learners can be exposed to a model of how the task should be performed or they can be provided with similarly performed tasks, so that the instructions and expectations are clear and do not confuse our learners. This phase familiarizes learners with the task expectations and their demands in completing the task. So, "[t]he pre-task phase introduces the class to the topic and the task, activating topic-related words and phrases." (Willis, 1996, p.40). In this phase, it is crucial to help learners activate their background knowledge and ensure that learners understand the task demands. Some of the pre-task activities might include: "classifying words and phrases; matching phrases to pictures; memory challenge; brainstorming and mind-maps; thinking of questions to ask; teacher recounting a similar experience" (Willis, 1996, p.44). These activities are used to encourage and involve learners, as well as trigger our learners' interest.

In the *during-task phase* the teacher's role is to stop teaching and monitor the class. Therefore, the teacher should step back and leave the learners to complete the task on their own. Of course, the teacher should observe and offer help if needed. Additionally, timing is very

important. Learners should be aware of the timing as it reduces pressure and contributes to an accepting classroom atmosphere. Additionally, the report stage is very important, because "there is a natural curiosity among students to discover how others achieved the same objectives" (Willis, 1996, p.54). Consequently, it is very important for our learners to present orally what they have been working on, since in this way we enhance learners understanding and mutual learning.

The *post-task phase* can have more possible pedagogic goals. It can draw teacher's attention to learners' reports on the task; it can serve as a reflection time, where learners focus on how the task was performed; it can focus on the forms, which resulted as problematic for the learners while they performed the task. Ellis (2003) stresses three main goals of this stage, namely: "(1) to provide an opportunity for a repeat performance of the task; (2) to encourage reflection on how the task was performed; and (3) to encourage attention to form, in particular to those forms that proved problematic to the learners when they performed the task" (p.258). In the same way, learners should express their own viewpoints and ideas and be freely engaged in the tasks. The goal should be practical rather than theoretical; it means that it should have aspects that lead to knowledge of the real-world and practical skills. Lastly, the input should cover data that can be related to real-world situations and the teachers should use authentic material.

METHODOLOGY

Research Questions

For the purpose of this study, the following research questions were addressed:

1. To what extent do secondary school EFL teachers embrace the task-based approach in their teaching practices?
2. What challenges do teachers face when implementing task-based assessment in EFL classes?
3. What training needs do teachers have for effectively implementing Task-Based Instruction in EFL classes?

Study Results

There were 15 secondary school English teachers interviewed. They expressed their views towards the implementation of Task-based teaching in their classes and discussed possible drawbacks. Below are some excerpts contemplated from teachers' interviews:

Table 1

Teachers' responses regarding the use of TBLT

Initial code	Number of participants contributing	Sample quote
Teachers' views towards the Task-based approach	15	"It leads to improved communication and through this approach students become more confident to use the language outside the classroom." (P.8)

		"It's useful for developing the target language proficiency. It also works for the strong and weak students. Everyone can be included in the assigned task." (P.14)
Challenges of implementing the Task-based approach	15	"It is a challenge for several reasons: students' low level of proficiency, preparation by the teacher and sometimes extra resources." (P.7) "The first problem that we face is the variety of students' proficiency level. For example, if I decide to conduct an interview, I would have to adapt it to their level of proficiency." (P.9)
Designing tasks for real world situations	15	"The textbook is only a framework. I almost always modify the tasks in order to make them closer to learners and their experiences." (P.1)
Task-based language assessment	15	"Having a rubric for every activity can certainly help you navigate the assessment process and make it more teacher and student friendly." (P.11) "In any case, it is not easy. Assessment is based (primarily) on task outcome. For such assessing you need to be very careful and experienced. You need to focus on the language fluency not on grammar (language forms)." (P.4)
Fluency vs Accuracy	15	"I would rather focus on the communicative outcome, because this is the way how we learn our mother tongue and we learn the grammar by communicating, this is the best receptive way to learn grammar." (P.6)
Using authentic material	15	"As an English teacher, I have a very positive attitude towards presenting authentic material in my classroom due to the fact that it leads to communicative competence. I constantly use presentations, listening materials, films, broadcasting, brochures, sales catalogues, etc." (P.2)
Classroom roles of the teachers	15	"I am a facilitator. I help and explain, give students time to think and find solutions and afterwards explain the unknown." (P.4)
The need for teacher training in using TBLT effectively	15	"Definitely, teachers need to be trained how to manage the class or how to organize groups, monitor them, and organize space and time in the classroom in order to have successful performance." (P.7) "There are teachers who do not use this approach because they lack knowledge." (P.6)

R.1 To what extent do secondary school EFL teachers embrace the task-based approach in their teaching practices?

The qualitative data shows that most of the teachers have a common understanding of the TBLT approach in terms of its background, its focus, the way TBLT sees language, and the task phases. The participants believe that Task-Based Language Teaching offers an alternative for language teachers, but it is also very helpful for students, since it is a learner-centered approach. They believe that this approach equips learners with meaningful language use and as such it enables students to use the target language in real-life situations. Some teachers believe that it can improve interaction in class and that it is better than traditional methods, because through this approach students become confident in using the language freely. Even though it is perceived positively, we found out from the interviewed teachers, that this approach is not compatible with the way the ministry has foreseen the teaching process.

R2. What challenges do teachers face when implementing task-based assessment in EFL classes?

The majority of the interviewed teachers believe that apart from being considered a demanding approach which requires resources beyond the course books, TBLT also requires more teacher preparation. Beside these drawbacks, teachers still believe that this approach enhances communicative competency and provides students with maximized ways of using the target language. Consequently, teachers assume that this approach is effective and helps students use the target language in real-life situations. Nevertheless, some challenging aspects include the level of students' proficiency and teachers' roles in the classroom. There are teachers who completely lead the learning process; therefore, this indicates that some teachers find it hard to shift from teacher-fronted methods to TBLT. In this respect, the assessment procedure is another factor that hinders teachers' implementation of TBLT. The interviewed teachers believe that assessing authentic language is a challenge in itself, since through the implementation of TBLT they need to assess their students separately which is more time-consuming. Nonetheless, there are teachers who highlight the importance of using rubrics as an assessment tool.

R3. What training needs do teachers have for effectively implementing Task-Based Instruction in EFL classes?

Almost all of the interviewed teachers responded positively when asked if they require additional training, in order to implement TBLT successfully. Moreover, they agree that extra training could help them modify the textbooks and link the material to real-life situations, design authentic tasks, and understand TBLT's benefits, so that EFL students can use the target language with purpose in mind.

FURTHER RESEARCH

Considering the results of this study, textbooks assigned by the ministry often prevent teachers from using the Task-Based Approach freely. Therefore, it is necessary to raise teachers' awareness on the opportunities of integrating tasks in their teaching practices. Based on the findings of this study, there are a number of suggestions that can be made. Investigating teachers' implementation of the task-based approach after they become familiar with the principles and the methodology of this approach can be more effective. Additionally, it can provide more realistic and reliable findings. For teachers who are not fond of challenging approaches, it would be beneficial to provide some solutions in combining the traditional approach with Task-Supported Teaching.

In future research, it could be helpful to investigate and compare teachers' progress and understanding of the Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) over an extended period of time. Another thought-provoking area of research could be to explore in-depth only the barriers that prevent EFL teachers from using the Task-Based Approach. After having done this, try to provide solutions to the problems that they face and clear potential misconceptions through various training sessions and workshops.

CONCLUSION

From the qualitative data, we can see that if teachers are not trained with the principles of the Task-Based Instruction, they might find it hard to adopt this learner-centered approach which focuses on the meaningful use of the target language. Consequently, EFL teachers might

instead feel confident to pursue a form-focused approach, where the accuracy of language production is at the center. This approach is challenging for inexperienced EFL teachers, since whenever they cannot control the natural flow of language in the classroom, they switch to traditional approaches, making it easier for them to lead the learning process. Some teachers also believe that assessing authentic language is hard and that is why a meaning-focused approach would require better understanding of the TBLT principles. Despite the fact that this approach necessitates resources beyond the textbooks and some public schools do not offer many possibilities, the interviewed teachers still perceive this approach positively and are aware of the benefits that it provides to second language learners. As a result, training sessions and workshops are very beneficial, in order to help teachers overcome difficulties and embrace tasks in their teaching practices more effectively.

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