

## **Task-Based Learning: An Effective Way of Developing Communication Skills**

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**Abstract:** In task-based learning the emphasis is on meaning and the learners are required to use the language for learning. Teaching English through tasks has been considered useful to employ in the language classroom because students are believed to learn the target language better when tasks are used as vehicles in language teaching. Tasks involve language and they provide a natural context for students to learn English with ease. In second language acquisition the use of tasks for communicative teaching has received a great deal of support from researchers. This paper aims to show why task-based learning holds an important place in foreign language learning. In particular; whether the use of task-based learning in the language classroom contributes to communicative language teaching is an issue the present paper deals with.

**Key Words:** Task, Task-based Learning, Communication, Language Learning

### **1. Introduction**

Engaging learners in real language use has been considered as the most effective way to teach a foreign language which is done by designing tasks- discussions, problems, games, etc. (Willis & Willis, 2007). Similarly, Prabhu (1987) who first developed task-based learning believes that students learn the target language better if they focus on the task. Task which holds an important place in foreign language teaching is defined as an activity that necessarily involves language (Richards, Platt & Weber, 1985). In other words, task work provides better opportunities for language learners to use the language as vehicles. Prabhu (1987) defines a task as an activity in which learners create an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which requires teachers to regulate that process. According to Nunan (1989) 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. It can be concluded from the abovementioned definitions that the emphasis is on meaning in task-based learning. A task has a specified objective, thus learners have to use the target language in order to attain the objective. Lee (2000) believes that a task has an objective obtainable only by the interaction among participants, a mechanism for structuring and sequencing interaction, and a focus on meaning exchange. Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001) are of the opinion that task requires learners to use the target language with an emphasis on meaning. By means of performing a set of activities, language learners convey messages and develop their communicative skills. Learners are

immersed in meaningful communication to attain a goal which helps them with better language development.

## 2. Task-based Learning and Communication Skills

Task-based learning provides learners a chance to use the target language in order to improve language proficiency under teacher guidance. In task-based learning the learner places himself/herself in a real situation where oral communication is needed to perform task. A task is an activity where the target language is used by the learner for a communication purpose in order to achieve an outcome (Willis, 1996). Based on this definition it can be said that the goal of tasks is to create a real purpose for language use in which learners interact communicatively. Willis (1996) suggests three stages in task-based learning:

- the pre-task
- the task cycle
- and the language focus

In the pre-task stage the teacher introduces the topic and teaches some words or phrases in order students to understand the task instructions better. In the task-cycle stage the tasks are performed by the learners. The learners carry out the tasks in the target language. In the language focus stage teacher and the learners talk about the language used so that the learners stand a better of making corrections for the next task. In order the tasks performed by the students to be useful for them, they need to include some certain features.

Ellis (2003) identifies the following features of a task:

- A task is a work plan
- A task primarily focuses on meaning
- A task is designed to use the language in real-world processes
- A task can involve any of the four language skills
- A task engages cognitive processes
- A task has a clearly defined communicative outcome

Tasks include activities in which a problem is solved. While performing the tasks in the classroom, learners use the language in natural contexts. In other words, learners are involved in a meaningful situation by means of tasks. During task completion the emphasis is on both the process of doing and the content. Simply put, language learners integrate *what* and *how* by task-based learning. It is believed that through working with activities learners use the language skills for task completion; thus, acquisition will take place.

Similarly, Shekan (1998) puts forward five characteristics of a task as:

- Meaning is of paramount importance
- Learners are not given other people's meaning to regurgitate
- Task has a relationship with real world activities

- Task completion has significance
- The assessment of the task is in terms of outcome

The emphasis in task-based learning is on understanding. Language learners are involved in tasks to negotiate meaning. Rather focusing on the than correct use of the language, meaning and communication are given attention to. Simply put, meaning is primary and form is left aside. Thus, learners function as users rather than learners because tasks require them to involve in verbal interaction. Task-based learning focuses on the process of communication by setting learners tasks to complete using the target language that will lead to language acquisition as learners will have to endeavor to express themselves or understand others; therefore, one advantage of this task-based learning is that learners are given the opportunity to use the full range of skills and language they have at the same time (Lindsay & Knight, 2006).

Swan (2005) suggests the following principles of task-based instruction:

- Instructed language learning should primarily involve natural or naturalistic language use, and the activities are designed to get the meaning rather than language.
- Task-based learning is learner-centered. As the goal is improving communication skills, the learning process focuses on the learner.
- Task-based instruction can be done best by providing opportunities for focus on the form, which will draw students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose prime focus is on meaning or communication.
- More formal pre- or post-task language study may be useful. Learners will notice language features which will help with acquisition.

Learners need to use the target language in a natural environment. The completion of tasks in the classroom provides learners a setting in which they can perform the activities naturally. Task-based learning is designed to allow learners to perform a task through using the target language; thus, it is learner-centered. Moreover, learners use the language freely. It should be noted that language development becomes more effective if form and meaning is created. Although task-based learning gives more attention to meaning, learners acquire the target language better if form and meaning is integrated while performing the tasks.

Task-based language teaching strengthened the following principles suggested by Nunan (2004):

- Task-based learning provides the immediate needs of the learner.
- The focus is on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language; therefore the learner needs to produce ideas and opinions.
- The use of authentic materials in the learning process. Abstract knowledge in task-based learning is put into practice and used in real world application.
- Learners focus not only on the language but also on the learning process itself
- The contribution of learner's personal experiences to classroom learning
- The classroom language and the language used outside the classroom should be linked

Task-based learning is an easy way of language acquisition. Learners stand a better chance of practicing with the language while performing tasks. That learners communicate with each other in the target language and perform tasks is an effective way to meet their needs for the development of communication skills. Language learners need to use the language in the real world. Task-based learning allows learners not only to acquire language but also practice it. By means of performing tasks with others in the classroom learners try out communication strategies.

### 3. Conclusion

Although for beginners tasks might lead to loss of confidence as they do not have a good command of language, the prominence of task-based learning lies in the fact that language learners engage in authentic use of language by performing activities for the development of language. It goes without saying that, the role of teachers to prepare learners in task-based learning is significant. If teachers prepare grammatical structures and vocabulary which learners need to perform their tasks in the pre-task stage, the language difficulty learners might face is minimized.

Task-based learning increases learners' language development, because it will give them the opportunity to experiment with the target language. Tasks will enable learners to use the target language for communicative purposes. Task-based learning is useful for students in that it involves the four language skills. An important feature of tasks is that it leads to interaction with others. For task completion, communication interaction is essential; for that reason, task-based learning helps language learners improve their communication skills.

In addition, language learners will develop confidence as they will have an opportunity to practice the knowledge they already have and at the same time will enable them to benefit from others who are involved in performing the tasks. It is important to note that learners use the language purposefully in task-based learning. Hence, learners are motivated to have practice with others and learners use the language in an authentic setting which helps learners become more efficient users and gain automaticity.

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