A Report on Implementing the Task-Based Approach in an Advanced Listening and Speaking Class

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Abstract

Recent years have witnessed a profusion of works on the task-based approach as an effective teaching methodology that promotes communication and interaction skills. This approach is an activity in which the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose to achieve an outcome. However, little research has been done to examine practically the mechanism of task design and its effect on providing a communicative competence. This paper aims to question the usefulness of implementing task-based teaching as a communicative approach which promotes interaction and good language learning in an advanced level classroom. The task is targeted at a particular group of advanced learners who are part of a Listening and Speaking class. The aim of the task was to provide the learners with authentic opportunities to practice their speaking skills. The findings show that the learners successfully performed the task, they identified the given problem through a good discussion and interacted effectively during the stages of the task. However, there was no variety in the language use as they restricted themselves to one form of the language. This paper suggests some points that need to be taken into consideration by teachers when planning to implement TBLT in their classrooms.

Keywords: Language learning, task-based language teaching, TBLT, teaching.

Introduction

Over the last two decades, there have been a plethora of works on task-based language teaching and learning (TBLT) (e.g. Skehan, 1998a; Willis, 1996; Bygate et al., 2001; Ellis, 2000). The interest in TBLT is motivated by the fact that a 'task' is seen to be of great importance for both second language acquisition researchers and language teachers. Researchers can use 'tasks' as a means of eliciting samples of language learners for research purposes (Corder, 1981), and language teachers can use 'tasks' as devices to help them organise the content and methodology of language teaching (Prabhu, 1987). Bygate et al. (2001) have carried out a research study to investigate the 'pedagogic tasks', and reveal that 'task' is viewed in different ways depending on the perspective of the research or of the pedagogy. For example, researchers "…may view a task in terms of a set of variables that impact on performance and language acquisition whereas teachers see it as a unit of work in an overall scheme of work" (Ellis, 2000: 194).

Although 'task' has been a central concept in second language teaching and research, its meaning and use is still a controversial issue. The increasing recognition of the task as an important element in language teaching has led to a range of different definitions for what exactly is meant by the term 'task'; and, also, has led to different proposals for task-based syllabuses (e.g. Breen, 1987; Willis, 1996; Long, 1985; Prabhu, 1987; Long & Crookes, 1992). It is worth saying that most of the definitions in the field of applied linguistics have appeared in the late 1990s, an era known as "The Age of the Task" (Johnson, 2001: 194).

For Willis (1990) a task means an activity which involves the use of language but in which the focus is on the outcome of the activity rather than on the language used to achieve that outcome. Willis (1996: 1) believes that "…the aim of tasks is to create a real purpose for language use and to provide a natural context for language study". Also, Bachman and Palmer (1996: 44) consider a 'task' to be "…an activity which involves individuals in using language for the purpose of achieving a particular goal or objective in a particular situation".
Skehan (1998: 95), on the other hand, provides a broader definition and lists five characteristics of the task. Skehan suggest that in using TBLT, meaning is primary and there are some communication problems to resolve.

Further, any task should have some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities and the task completion should be given some priority. Finally, the assessment of the task is in terms of outcomes. Hu (2013) argues that TBLT promotes real life purposes to language classes where learners can prepare and practice the language constantly.

However, Ellis's (2003) definition nearly includes most of the TBLT features which are suggested by other researchers. He suggests six criteria for considering something to be classified as a task. The 'Critical Features of a Task' according to Ellis (2003: 9-10) are as follows:

o A task is a work plan.
o A task involves a primary focus on meaning.
o A task involves real world processes of language use.
o A task can involve any of the four language skills.
o A task engages cognitive processes.
o A task has a clearly defined communicative outcome.

Design of the study

Various designs have been proposed for task-based language teaching (e.g. Willis, 1996; Prabhu 1987; Skehan 1996). However, these designs have been termed differently by different researchers who all agree on its three principal phases (i.e., pre-, while-, and post-task) which reflect the chronology of any task-based session. The present task follows Ellis' (2003) framework i.e. pre-, while-, and post task phases and some adaptations were made from Willis and Willis (2007: 18) who stress that "…form should be subordinated to meaning and, for this reason, should come after, rather than before a task".

This paper aims to specifically examine whether or not the learners used comparative and conditional language without being told to. The following parts present the task framework and task components i.e. objectives and the predicted outcomes. Then, a holistic description of the task design and implementation will be provided. After that the task will be assessed and followed by some suggestions and recommendations.

Task framework

The task-based approach was adopted to provide learners with opportunities to perform their speaking skills in activities that accentuated practicing the language rather than learning it. In addition, this method aimed to develop the learners' implicit knowledge and assist their fluency (Ellis, 2003). In order to implement and evaluate the task in a real classroom, a Listening and Speaking class was chosen; however, the researcher was restricted by a number of conditions. Firstly, that the task should only substitute the first part of the lesson and should be 30 minutes long. Secondly, the theme and the aims of the task should fit in with the pre-existing lesson which was *'Transport Alternatives in the 21st Century'*. So, the task is designed in accordance with Ellis's (2003) framework i.e. pre-task, while-task, and post-task phases.

Task components

Objectives

The task had linguistic and non-linguistic goals. Linguistically, the learners were able to use agreeing, disagreeing, and comparative language in a more communicative way. Regarding the non-linguistic goals, the task aimed to afford learners with opportunities to practice free speaking, negotiate meaning and make a consensus decision.

Predicted outcomes

At an advanced level, the learners were expected to:

o Use complex language in a highly communicative context without overt explanation.
o Learn new vocabulary and use them effectively in the next part of the lesson.
o Be actively involved in the discussion, they are provided with different inputs and divided into pairs and small groups.

Procedure and implementation

Twenty-six adult learners of English participated in the study, they aged between 20-35 (11 males, and 15 females). The task took place at a Listening and Speaking class.

The topic '*Transport Alternatives in the 21ˢᵗ Century*' was already determined and the researcher's task was to replace the beginning of the lessons. As has been mentioned above, the task was designed according to Ellis' (2003) three-phase procedure. The data were obtained from the use of video and audio recordings which helped to a large extent in evaluating and reflecting on the task in an objective way. The following sections illustrate each phase in terms of the content, the teacher's way of teaching and the learners' interaction and involvement in the task.

Pre-task phase

At the beginning of this stage the teacher introduced herself to the class to remove some apparent apprehension on the part of the learners. As the learners have been together for a while and they already know each other, the teacher only asked them to introduce themselves briefly. This introductory stage was expected to relax the students; however, there was some hesitation and discomfort on the part of some of the learners. All the learners were divided into pairs. They were asked to face each other and to describe pictures which they were both given and which were almost the same - both showed a gridlocked road (see Appendix A).

The teacher directly asked the learners to identify the problem in each picture without any preparation time and without showing the picture to their partners. It was noticed that the learners recognized the problem - 'traffic congestion' - very quickly. After that, the learners discussed the question that was written below the picture, i.e. (How much of a problem is this kind of situation in your country?). The purpose of this activity was to activate the learners' schemata knowledge, as well as to provide them with opportunities to speak freely with reference to their own countries. This was done by affording them a context picture and an open question. Based on the observation, it was noticed that the groups who were sitting near the recordings showed a high level of participation and interaction. They were active, talked about the situation and provided specific problems related to their own countries. On the other hand, the other groups were relatively quiet. After finishing this activity, the teacher asked each group about their discussion and shared some opinions in an attempt to elicit the term that describes the problem more accurately. There was a kind of encouragement from the teacher at this stage; the conversation went like this:

1	T	What words can be used to describe too many cars in the city?
2	S1	traffic jam
3	T	Traffic jam or?
4	S1	Congestion!
5	T	Congestion, yeah traffic congestion, so we're going to look at traffic congestion and
6		the possible solutions to the problem.

While- task phase

The teacher re-distributed the learners into three groups to provide the opportunity to speak to a broader and different range of learners. Each group was given a sheet containing two pictures which were different from the ones given to the other groups. Therefore, in total, there were six different pictures distributed on 3 sheets of paper among 3 groups (see Appendix B). This question was written below the pictures (Does each of these solutions: Increase the amount of traffic? Decrease the need for traffic? Combine (1) and (2)? The purpose of this question was to draw the learners' attention towards the next stage of the task, by introducing relevant ideas and vocabulary. It also introduced a paraphrase of the main theme of the main listening task (from the pre-prepared lesson), which would covertly prime the students to the topic.

At the beginning of this stage, it was observed that the more fluent and capable learner talked while their partners only nodded in agreement, without producing full sentences. The following extract illustrates the situation and shows how the interaction was led by one learner while the other only nodded in affirmation and agreement:

1	S1	I think it's about charging high prices
2	S2	Yeah.
3	S1	Yeah to enter for example certain zones.
4	S2	Yes.
5	S1	Just like city centres.

> 6   S2   Yes, that's all the solutions.

This extract showed that 'Student 1' was active in the discussion while 'Student 2' was only agreeing and had no personal opinion. It is noteworthy that most of the learners were looking at the camera which was in operation all the time. Apparently, this might contribute to their noticeable shyness and discomfort of some learners and it seems to have affected their participation.

Post-task phase

At this stage, the learners were divided into two groups. Each group is given a new sheet showing six pictures of possible traffic solutions. The pictures are the same ones used in the while-task but this time they are randomly arranged and the learners have to order them in terms of the best to the worst solutions. The teacher asked the learners to imagine that it is their responsibility to solve the transport problem and offered them £60,000,000 to do so. This constitutes essentially a decision-making and ranking task. That is to decide on the order of priority for the six possible traffic solutions in order to solve the traffic problem in their countries. Therefore, due to the nature of the task, some linguistic features were expected to be used at this stage. They were:

- Comparisons and superlatives to complete the ranking task.
- Agreeing and disagreeing to reach a consensus and persuade others of one's opinion.
- Conditional or hypothetical language, due to the nature of creating an 'unreal' situation, language such as "…but *if* we *choose* this solution, *wouldn't* there *be*….?"
- Topic-specific vocabulary which is the aim of the task in order to give the students a greater opportunity of success in completing the subsequent listening task, thus 'priming' them with the opportunity to pre-use target language before actually hearing it in the listening task.

The learners were given approximately 10 minutes to prioritize the six solutions. In fact, this task was the most communicative and interesting stage. The majority were engaged in the activity and there was a degree of courteous disagreement between the members of the second group (not the recorded one). On the one hand, the learners successfully reached a consensus and convinced one another of the best and the worst solutions; they also were able to use the new vocabulary in a full context. On the other hand, there was not any usage of complex language as the learners only used 'but' as a form of disagreement.

In fact, the learners' attention was not drawn to the focus on form following Willis and Willis' (2007) stance which contradicts that of Skehan (1996). Skehan emphasises that learners should be informed overtly of where they are focusing their attention, whether on fluency, accuracy or complexity. Although the learners were actively engaged in this task, there were three students who were relatively silent. The teacher moved between the groups and asked them to report on their choices; she encouraged the quiet learners to participate and to give their opinions. The teacher also stressed to the learners the need to rationalise their answers by giving a brief description of why they have chosen one particular solution over the other.

Task assessment

The task was mainly assessed by classroom observation using a checklist (see Appendix C). For more in-depth analysis, video and audio tapes were in operation during the implementation of the task. These recordings helped in recognising the learners' interaction and the way they carried out the task. Additionally, a questionnaire (see Appendix D) was distributed at the end of the task in order to understand the learners' perspectives of the activities. However, rubrics were not used as they do not take outside circumstances into consideration. The success of the task must be measured by the convergence between the teachers' expectations and the learners' interpretations (Breen, 1989). Based on this view, the task can be judged as being successful since it achieved most of the predicted outcomes. The main aim of the task was to encourage the learners to practice their speaking skills and this was effectively achieved according to the classroom observation and the learners' answers to the questionnaire. Although there were three learners who did not participate much in the task, this cannot be considered as a failure in terms of the task. Some interpretations can be presented in this case. Firstly, Ellis (2003: 202) argues that teachers need to be aware that some points that arise from a task "…may not be exactly what was planned and that is not a consequence of poor planning or bad teaching but of the participants adapting the task to their own purposes." Secondly, the task was implemented in a multicultural class in which learners have different views and perspectives and this, according to Ellis (ibid), inevitably modifies and has an effect on the results of each task.

This was also supported by Allwright and Bailey (1991: 162) who indicated that "…even if everything else seems favorable, learners can 'switch off' because they do not like the way content of their course is presented in the teaching materials". In addition, a role-play, decision-making and ranking activities were chosen to alleviate potential boredom and to create an interactive learning environment. However, there was a lack of interest on the part of some learners who were quiet and did not participate. Generally, the task was competently carried out by the learners. They identified the problem, talked about similar problems in their countries, provided solutions and prioritised them from the best to the worst. The different activities helped the learners to acquire new vocabulary and to use them in the following stage.

Speaking of the teacher's role, it was to give instructions and to listen to the talk without much intervention or the provision of corrections. As a result, there was some language misuse and lack of fluency on the part of the majority of the learners. In fact, the teacher deliberately did not correct any language mistakes since the aim of the task was to encourage speaking and communication. Therefore, it was thought that students might have felt insecure and might have thought of the language structures rather than the meaning, which contradicts the TBLT principles. The task would be more beneficial if the teacher had drawn the learners' attention to the linguistic forms which they were expected to use and had encouraged them to scaffold each other.

Additionally, there were a number of external factors which were believed to have had an impact on the task implementation and assessment. Firstly, the institutional conditions contributed to the teacher's inability to choose the topic and the aims for the task. Secondly, the use of the video recorder in the classroom affected, to a certain extent, the learner' interactions in the activities, and some learners expressed their anxiety and discomfort. Thirdly, the learners have been together for a while, studying with the same teacher, and have been used to a particular way of teaching. Therefore, implementing a new teaching methodology by a new teacher with an observer in attendance was more likely to create an unnatural classroom, especially in an adult class with individuals who may not accept changes very readily.

Generally, the implementation of TBLT in language classrooms is an effective way to develop learners' self-awareness and class atmosphere. This, ultimately, raises the learners' awareness of the importance of being responsible and taking a main role in the learning process by creating meaningful tasks that facilitate the acquisition of the target language (Córdoba, 2016).

Suggestions and recommendations

If the task to be implemented in another context, for example, in an EFL context, some points need to be taken into account. The focus on form should be considered carefully in the design process as suggested by Long (1991: 45-46) who argues that explicit focus-on-form "…draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication". Secondly, teachers need to be aware that the success of TBLT can only be judged in terms of whether or not learners actually produce the target forms with an adequate level of conformity (Willis and Willis, 2007).Thirdly, teachers should bear in mind the fact that TBLT does not guarantee that the learners will adopt the planned form. Thus, they need to provide specific learning aims and facilitate natural acquisition of the language as much as possible. However, this can be very demanding and tiresome. Fourthly, learners can be involved in the design process, perhaps by choosing the theme for the task. However, in the majority of EFL contexts, teachers have to teach the prepared syllabus. They can, however, adapt their teaching by adopting the already prepared materials to fit the principles and procedures of TBLT and use them alongside traditional methods.

In some case, audio and video tapes are not allowed for religious or social reasons. If this is the case, then teachers need to organise more effective evaluation forms (e.g. checklists, portfolios, rubrics) in order to be able to assess their tasks and their students' performance.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to report on implementing a task-based approach and evaluating its effectiveness in an advanced learners' classroom. The main focus of the task was to provide learners with the opportunity to speak freely in the classroom by accomplishing different activities (i.e. problem-solving, decision-making and ordering). Additionally, there was an implicit focus on comparative and conditional language. The findings show that the task can be considered to have been relatively successful since it achieved most of the intended outcomes. Nevertheless, some drawbacks to the task implementation have been identified. Overall, there is no doubt that TBLT is a motivating approach that emphasizes meaning over form, although it can cater for form as well.

Despite some criticism that this approach has received, it serves as a way of providing the opportunity for natural learning within the classroom; also, it is compatible with a learner-centered pedagogy. However, if TBLT is to be used effectively, it requires a great deal of hard work and demands a good amount of time for its design. Besides, teachers who decide to implement this approach in a course syllabus need to have good background knowledge and need to be aware of its merits and shortcomings.

Acknowledgement

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Appendix A

Pictures Used in the pre-task phase

Appendix B

Pictures used in the while-task phase

Group 1
- Each picture represents a possible solution to the problem you have been talking about. What kind of solutions are they?
- Does each of these solutions…
1)…increase the amount of traffic?
2)…decrease the need for traffic?
3)…combine (1) and (2)?

Group 2
- Each picture represents a possible solution to the problem you have been talking about. What kind of solutions are they?
- Does each of these solutions…
1)…increase the amount of traffic?
2)…decrease the need for traffic?
3)…combine (1) and (2)?

Group 3
- Each picture represents a possible solution to the problem you have been talking about. What kind of solutions are they?
- Does each of these solutions…
1)…increase the amount of traffic?
2)…decrease the need for traffic?
3)…combine (1) and (2)?

Appendix CChecklist for Task Observer[1] on TBLT group activity

Question	Yes	No	IEG[2]
Are the goals of the task obvious to the student(s)?			
Does the task reflect real-world or pedagogic rationale?			
Does the task encourage learners to apply classroom learning to the real world?			
Does the task engage the learners' interest?			
Do the procedures prompt genuine communicative interaction among the students?			
Are the learners encouraged to negotiate meaning?			
Does anything unexpected occur as the task is being carried out?			
Does the task specific certain language? (see Q. below)			
Is the task at the appropriate level of difficulty for the students?			
Do tasks exhibit 'task continuity'?			
Are a range of macro-skills integrated into the sequence of tasks?			
Does the task appear to link to the subsequent task?			
Does the task appear to link to the main task?			
Does the task appear to link to the lesson as a whole?			
Does the task enable the teacher to determine how successfully the learners have performed?			
Does the task contain some means for the student to judge how well he/she has performed?			
Is the task realistic in terms of the resources and teacher-expertise it demands?			
Do the students engage in 'achievement strategies' (see Ellis, pp.70-77) as a resulting of attempting the task?			

Appendix D

✦ **This questionnaire is intended to evaluate the task you have just had. Please answer the following questions: Please tick the relevant box to evaluate the task.**

1. **The task was informative; you learned new things.**
   □ strongly agree □ agree □ neither agree or disagree □ do not agree □ strongly disagree
2. **The task was well-structured.**
   □ strongly agree □ agree □ neither agree or disagree □ do not agree □ strongly disagree
3. **The time the task took was**
   □ Very long □ long □ about right □ short □ very short
4. **The task was fitting to the rest of the lesson.**
   □ strongly agree □ agree □ neither agree or disagree □ do not agree □ strongly disagree
5. **You learned new structures from the task.**
   □ strongly agree □ agree □ neither agree or disagree □ do not agree □ strongly disagree
6. **You learned new vocabulary.**
   □ strongly agree □ agree □ neither agree or disagree □ do not agree □ strongly disagree
7. **The task enhanced your confidence in speaking about the topic; you had time to express yourself.**
   □ strongly agree □ agree □ neither agree or disagree □ do not agree □ strongly disagree
8. **The task can be useful in real life situations (outside the classroom)**
   □ strongly agree □ agree □ neither agree or disagree □ do not agree □ strongly disagree
9. **The task was well-presented and communicated by the teacher.**
   □ strongly agree □ agree □ neither agree or disagree □ do not agree □ strongly disagree
10. **Please write any other weak or strong points that you feel can make the task more useful to your needs.**
    ……
    ……….

Thank you!

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[1] Adapted from Nunan, D.(2004).*Task-Based Language Teaching.* C.U.P. Cambridge (P: 174 – 175).
[2] Insufficient Evidence Given