Sequencing And Grading In Task-Based Language Teaching

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Abstract

The conventional English teaching mode is being wiped out in favour of a new one known as task-based language teaching. The TBLT method is being introduced into the English classroom as a new mode. As Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) provides appropriate language skills learners can learn the language in an almost real-life environment. The learning is student-centered, resulting in increased student interaction. It also places a greater emphasis on meaning rather than form in order for learners to be able to speak spontaneously in their everyday encounters. To implement this approach teachers should integrate instructional materials and effectively develop learning tasks that are related to reality in this mode, so that students can learn to communicate while doing the tasks and increase their overall English ability. The main aim of this article is to indicate how the grading and sequencing of tasks within a task-based teaching and learning programme can be done to enhance language acquisition.

Keywords: Grading, Sequencing, Language learning tasks, Scaffolding.

Introduction

In the 1990s, TBLT Language Teaching got a strong theoretical background. Later different task-based approaches emerged, but the basic principles governing the tasks that learners perform in class remained the same. Willis (1996) presented five principles for the implementation of a task-based approach. Nunan (2009), has summarized seven principles that must be followed in the context of task-based language teaching: "Scaffolding", "Task dependency", "Recycling", "Active learning", "Integration", "Reproduction to creation" and "Reflection" (p.35.).

Scaffolding

The first principle, scaffolding, deals with the usefulness of the chosen lessons and materials. Learners must be given the language support they need to

complete the task. Learners are not expected to actively produce language on their own at the start of the learning process. The teacher should scaffold initially and know when to withdraw so that the learner can use language independently. If it is removed before the learners are ready, the whole process may collapse.

Task Dependency

The second principle is task dependency which is about the interconnectivity of tasks. Each task must be connected with the previous task and this sequence has to tell a "pedagogical story" (Nunan 2009, p.35). In this framework, the learners first take on the receptive task and slowly move on to productive tasks. In other words, in a lesson, completion of one task should gradually lead to the other.

Recycling

The third principle corresponds to the learners' recycling of language which facilitates optimal language learning. Through such recycling, learners can experience how the target language items work in closely related and completely different contexts. The learners usually do not achieve the learning goal as soon as they first meet a specific item. They need some time to develop and they also have to achieve it in repeated practice before they achieve it. This recycling allows them to remember and recollect what they have learnt to this point and it presents opportunities to perform certain language functions after a few intervals.

Active Learning

The fourth principle, active learning, is based on, "learning by doing". Since language learning is best guaranteed if the target language is used actively, the teacher should play a more passive role (Nunan, 2009, p.36.). It is believed that learners learn when they actively participate in doing something by them. It is called experiential learning where the tasks present them the experience of doing it. The learners should be allowed to participate in a range of functions to have sufficient practice. This kind of practice eliminates embarrassments and they do the work actively, instead of remaining a mute spectator as in traditional classrooms.

Integration

The fifth principle is that task-based language teaching must ensure that linguistic form, communicative function and semantic meaning are incorporated into the learning process. In doing so, the learners can distinguish the connection between function, form and meaning (Nunan 2009, p.37). The learners' active performance is not adequate for their learning. They should be aware of what they have learnt or be conscious of the language

forms and be able to relate them to communicative functions and their corresponding meaning. They should, in fact, be provided with key factors to know how to integrate their language items and how to use them in getting things done.

Reproduction to Creation

The sixth principle, reproduction to creation, is about the use of creative language which develops from the reproduction of language models. This means that learners first reproduce the language provided by the teacher, a tape or a text, and then hey use similar language items more creatively. Learners usually learn and produce what they are offered as models. In a way, they will succeed in achieving it. But they should not stop there by merely reproducing what they read or listened to. They should be encouraged to create new linguistic forms or items. They are expected to move from the reproduction level to the production of their sentences showing the evidence of assimilation.

Reflection

Nunan (2009) refers to the reflective element in the last principle that "learners should be given opportunities to reflect on what they have learned and how well they are doing." (p. 37). The learners should not stop producing linguistic forms by themselves, but they have to evaluate their learning process. They should reflect on how they have done it and be given opportunities to assess their learning through appropriate feedback.

While advocates of Task-Based Instruction can make varied observations in their emphases and ideas, it has been widely acknowledged that the success of TBLT in teaching English depends on meaning, authentic communication and inductive approach to grammar. Otherwise, the tasks may turn out to be meaningless and repetitive drill-like exercises. In other words, tasks should (i) be associated with the learners' background, (ii) have a goal and (iii) be communicative.

Sequencing and grading of suitable tasks compatible with the level of proficiency and socio-cultural aspects of learners are excessively complicated and challenging task. Language development and learning is an "organic process" (Nunan, 1989). Language items cannot be mastered one at a time in the sequence of successive fashion. Language learning in TBLT is holistic. Thus, it is complex and challenging to grade and sequence the pedagogical tasks to make the second language acquisition successful in TBLT. However, structural, notional, functional, and situational syllabuses do not talk about either sequencing or grading the content of linguistic items (Long, 1985).

Candlin (1987) asserts that good communicative tasks can be graded and sequenced as below:

- derive input from authentic sources
- involve learners in problem solving activities in which they are required to negotiate meaning
- incorporate tasks which relate to learners‟ real life communicative needs
- allow learners to rehearse real-world language tasks in the class
- require learners and teachers to adopt a range of roles and use language in a variety of setting in and out of the classroom
- expose language as system to learners
- encourage learners to develop skills in learning how to learn
- integrate the four macro skills
- involve learners in creative language use

Nunan (2004) argues that both the grading and sequencing are cognitively demanding tasks which are very challenging and complicated. Syllabus designers should require profound expertise in grading and sequencing the tasks. The classroom tasks should be selected, graded, and sequenced on the basis of needs analysis, level of proficiency, and interests of the learners to meet their real world tasks (Nunan, 1989; Ellis, 2003).

Grading tasks are affected by learner- factors, activity factors, and input factors. Learner-factors, such as prior knowledge, confidence, motivation, learning pace, cultural awareness, observed ability in language skills, and linguistic knowledge play a significant role to grade the tasks. Likewise, activity factors also affect whether the tasks will determine complexity of the tasks, such as relevance, amount of context provided prior to task, amount of help available to learners, degree of grammatical accuracy, contextual appropriacy, and time available to the learners. Similarly, input factors also play an important role to determine the task complexity, so the input factors should be taken into consideration in the course of grading tasks. The input factors are grammatical complexity, length of the task, propositional density, comprehensibility of the task, and type of genre used in the tasks. So the syllabus designers should watch out for input factors, activity factors, and learner- factors meticulously while grading the communicative tasks in TBLT. The communicative tasks should be sequenced from comprehension based activities to production and interaction based activities, so that learners can develop receptive and productive skills in TBLT. The task continuity, the organisation of activity, and the chain of tasks can be taken into account while sequencing the tasks (Nunan, 1989). Pedagogical task should not be sequenced on the basis of linguistic contents. Nevertheless, they are to be graded and sequenced in terms of the task complexity and task difficulty. Furthermore, he states that cognitively demanding from simple to complex

tasks facilitate learners to promote accuracy and complexity in speaking and writing skills.

Task Procedure

Like task inputs and goals, the methods of using the input are listed as important components. The tasks cannot be activated without the procedures. Widdowson (1978) has stated that

What is wanted is a methodology which will…. provide for communicative competence by functional investment. Such a methodology would engage the learners in problem-solving tasks as purposeful activities but without the rehearsal requirement that they should be realistic or authentic as natural social behaviour (p.71)

Widdowson has defended the curriculum that has activation tasks with activation instead of rehearsal ones. The methods are used to assess the procedures and their relation to the usage of skills or enabling the skills. By getting used to the task procedures, learners will grasp all phonological, lexical and grammatical forms using manipulation and practical usage of all skills for interaction.

While using tasks, it generally requires sequencing so that the most advanced tasks can also be managed by the learners without much difficulty. The learners would not be disinterested. The tasks should, therefore, be classified according to the same type to which they belong and they should be arranged in order. According to Prabhu (1987), the tasks should be ordered "by a common sense judgment of increasing complexity, the later tasks being either inclusive of the earlier ones or involving a larger amount of information or an extension of the kinds of reasoning done earlier" (p.39).

Usually, at each level of complexity, there should be more than one lesson with some variation from one to the next containing a great transition. Depending on the learner's performance in each task, any task sequence planned is subjected to revision. In a series of tasks, it is essential to be familiar with the steps in which they are to be ordered. According to David Nunan (2004), it contains six steps. They are;

Step 1: Schema Building – tasks that introduce the topic, sets the context for a task and introduces key vocabulary.

Step 2: Controlled Practice – Providing a controlled practice with the vocabulary, structures and functions of the target language.

Step 3: Authentic Listening Practice – Exposing the learners to authentic native speakers' conversation and giving an efficient listening practice

Step 4: Focus on linguistic elements –Provide a focus on linguistic elements or forms through one or more sequence of tasks

Step5: Provide free practice –The learners are engaged in free practice instead of working within the limitations.

Step 6: Introduce the pedagogical task – Implementing the pedagogical task as a whole. (Pp.31-33)

The framework for task-based learning, stated by Willis (1996), Prabhu (1987) and Nunan (1985), comprises three main stages for language learning that can be stated as follows; pre-task, task-cycle (task) and post-task stages (language focus). Willis (1996) has specified that these phrases are planned very prudently to produce the most reasonable conditions for language acquisition, and accordingly offers valuable learning opportunities to match different types of learners.

Pre –Task: The objective of the pre-task cycle is to increase the awareness of tasks in ways that improve learning. This stage is seen as an introduction to the topic and task. It can be the study of useful words and phrases, brainstorming activities or listening to native speakers who do the tasks. Willis (1996) has said that the goal of tasks is to provide a real intention for language use and to create a natural context for language study. Skehan (1998) has pointed out that a teacher has two options in the pre-task cycle: To concentrate on the common meaning of the task or to focus on linguistic possibilities. These two variables can be taken into account by one of these ways: (i) Motivate learners to perform tasks during task-stage, (ii) Ask learners to sustain a framework for performing the task, (iii) Encourage learners to do non-task activities to familiarise themselves with the performance of the task and (iv) Plan the main task performance.

The pre-task is a situation in which the teacher provides instructions to make the learners comprehend the nature of the activity as to what has to be done and how it is to be done. In the pre-task, the teacher familiarizes the class with the topic and the task activating topic-related words and phrases. The pre-task is, therefore, preparation of the task with the support of the teacher. During the pre-task cycle, the teacher introduces and describes the topic to the class, illustrates useful topic-related words and phrases, and makes certain that the learners understand task instructions. The learners may hear a recording of a similar task being done, note down useful words and phrases from the recording or other pre-task activities, and prepare for the task for a few minutes. This initial stage provides useful exposure to assist the learners to recollect appropriate words and phrases and to be familiar with new ones.

The immediate motivation of learners in the TBLT classroom lies in the intellectual- cum-practical pleasure and enjoyment of doing the tasks and solving problems. The learners already have the desire to do well to gain their

peers' approval and recognition. They would, of course, be motivated to perform the tasks and their success lies not in a hundred percentage learning, but in engaging themselves in activities. Correction of repetitive tasks would lead to frustration and a negative outlook. The tasks should, therefore, be reasonable enough to accommodate all levels of learners. They should not be too easy or too hard. A perfect task should be complex but it must have a reachable or achievable goal for learners.

Task Cycle: The Task Cycle consists of three components, such as task, planning and report. It presents learners the possibility to use whatever language they already know to perform the task, and then to develop that language, under the guidance of the teacher, while preparing their reports of the task. At the task stage, learners begin performing a communication task, using the background language they have already learned. Since the task is a goal-oriented activity, it allows the learners to achieve a real outcome. The learners make a plan on how to tell the other groups about what they did and how it went. Then they report on the task orally or in written form and compare notes on what has happened.

Willis (1996) categorises six types of tasks. They are Listing, Ordering and sorting, Comparing, Problem solving, sharing personal experiences and Creative tasks. For each task, a definite purpose is committed that must be accomplished within a specific period. The teacher stands back and acts as a monitor, but encourages the learners' communicative efforts in the target language, and briefly comments on the context. Since the learners realise that they can achieve the goals without the teachers' direct assistance, their confidence and motivation will increase. Furthermore, based on the 'output' principle, the use of language is likely to motivate 'intake' of the acquisition of new forms, (Willis 1996). This stage, which prioritizes spontaneous, exploratory discussion and confidence building, is essential for the learners to acquire language.

According to linguists, there are three components of a task cycle such as the task, planning and report. Following the task stage, there is a planning stage, in which the learners report to the entire class either orally or in writing on how they did the task and what they decided or learned. They draft and rehearse the report. The teacher acts as a language adviser and gives feedback and assists the learners to correct their language. He/she ensures that the purpose of the report is obvious and supports the learners to practice oral reports or organize written reports for a public presentation in the next stage. Since the learners may have difficulties in using language forms and features, a focus on form is natural and teacher's guidance and correction are probably

be of mort use at the planning stage. This stage also emphasizes clarity, organisation and accuracy.

At the report stage, the teacher selects certain groups to present their oral or written reports on the task to the entire class. The teacher simply acts as a chairperson, briefly comments on the content and form, and at the end summarises it. The learners, at this report stage, listen to others performing the same task and compare the ways they did the task themselves. This cycle gives a natural incentive to improve their language. It persuades them to think about the form and meaning; accuracy and fluency when they report in the target language. It also gives them a supportive exposure to what other learners have done in the same task.

Moreover, at the Task Cycle stage, exposure to language use can be provided at different stages based on the various types of tasks. It can be offered either before or during the task cycle where the learners listen to recordings of others performing the same/similar task, or read a text appropriate to the task topic, and relate this to their own experience of doing the task.

Language Focus: Language Focus, the last cycle of the framework, promotes the learners to focus their attention on forms that they have already processed for meaning all through the task cycle. It has two components: analysis and practice. At the analysis stage, the teacher makes the learners notice linguistic features of the report stage through consciousness-raising activities. The learners then carry out activities to identify and process specific language features from the task text or transcript. The teacher finally reviews the analysis with the class. The learners' language knowledge is developed through the identification and generalization process and the relevant language features become part of their internalised language system. Next to the analysis cycle, the final stage of the framework is the practice stage. In this last stage, the teacher conducts practice activities, based on the language analysis, to build learners' confidence and assist them to systematise their knowledge and widen their understanding, so that, they can continue to learn outside the classroom and even after their language course.

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