

A Critical Evaluation of Task-Based Language Teaching

Yan Weiwei

(PLA University of Science and Technology, Institute of Science, Nanjing, China, 210000)

ywwwspace@sina.com

Abstract

This essay attempts to make a critical analysis and evaluation of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). The aims, assumptions, theoretical accounts, advantages and disadvantages of TBLT are discussed in turn.

Keywords: TBLT, Aims, Framework, Advantages, Disadvantages

Task-based language teaching is “an approach based on the use of tasks as the core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching (Richards and Rodgers, 2001:223)”. It is generally agreed to be a language pedagogical approach which provides learners with “functional tasks” that require a focus mainly on “meaning exchange” and a language use for “real-world, non-linguistic purposes” (Van den Branden, 2006:1).

1. Aims

Like communicative approaches, the specific needs of language learners are what TBLT approach aims to meet (Richards and Rodgers, 2001:230). The choices of tasks should be made only when a scrupulous analysis of learners’ real needs is done (Long and Crookes, 1993, cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2001:230). Van Avermaet and Gysen (2006:18) states that task-based approach regards learners’ needs as the “starting point” of task design and recognizes that it is unnecessary to teach learners the same thing because the specific objectives of individual learners vary. Therefore, when designing TBLT syllabus, researchers and teachers should plan and arrange classroom tasks in a way that can match the demands that learners in real life are confronted with (Long 1985, cited in Robinson 2005:1).

Crooke (1986, cited in Ellis, 2003:2) suggests that both researchers and teachers expect to “elicit” linguistic output from learners by employing tasks in TBLT practice, which constitutes the focal point in the current research of second language teaching. Compared with the activities that are solely focused on form, task-based instructions creates a superior communicative setting to promote learners’ language learning process by getting them involved in the completion of tasks, whether individually or collaboratively (Richards and Rodgers, 2001:223). This approximately authentic learning situation gives learners a sense of freshness and pushes them harder to acquire language, resulting in a longer memory of the knowledge that they have pick up in the process of task completion.

Klapper (2004:118) proposes that the aim of task-based teaching approaches is to encourage learners to “pick up or acquire” linguistic knowledge by supplying them with abundant language exposure and by eliciting their language use. It is noticeable that a focus on form is stressed in TBLT to help learners develop their sensibility to new or frequently-used linguistic features. Skehan (1996, cited in Klapper, 2006:119) regards “accuracy, complexity and fluency” as the central aims in language teaching. He attempts to lay emphasis on “complexity” of language use, i.e., by attending to form after learners have completed their tasks in order to draw their attention to it. Unsurprisingly, learners are likely to find it difficult, particularly at the beginning stage of language learning. Therefore, achieving

the pedagogical aim in terms of accuracy, fluency, and complexity in language use poses a big challenge for TBLT.

2. Framework

No single method of task-based instruction is universally applied in actual teaching practice. Instead, a variety of different models of teaching have been suggested by second language teaching researchers. All of them share a basic framework of 3 phases, i.e., “pre-task phase”, “during-task phase”, and “post-task phase” (Ellis, 2003:243). In “pre-task phase”, both teachers and learners are engaged in activities that make preparation for their tasks completion, such as word study and background introduction. Tasks are performed by learners under the specific directions of teachers in “during-task phase”. Learners are engaged in follow-up activities in “post-task phase”, such as further discussions of the task and composition. As Ellis (*ibid*) points out, of all the three phases in TBLT, the second phase is the only obligatory one. The TBLT model proposed by Long and Crooke (1992, cited in Knight, 2001:162) encourages a “focus on form”. It should be noted that to “focus on form” does not mean to base TBLT approach totally upon form instruction. Rather, it only acknowledges that “acquisition can be accelerated if learners’ attention is drawn to specific linguistic features of the target language (*ibid*)”.

3. Advantages and Disadvantages

The advantages of task-based language teaching are noteworthy. First, as Ellis (2003:30) points out, it serves both as a syllabus and as a methodology by playing a twofold role of “a statement of what to teach” and “a statement of how to teach”. Hence a TBLT curriculum naturally integrates the processes involving “the specification of what and how” (Nunan, 1989:1). For this reason, little confusion arises when TBLT approach is employed. Second, task-based language teaching lays appropriate emphasis upon both meaning and form. Meaning-making holds a focal position in the acquisition, the pedagogy and the assessment of the target language (Ellis, 2003:319). Thus the process of language teaching is supposed to facilitate meaningful interactions between learners. At the same time, due attention should be paid to linguistic form. Otherwise, learners’ proficiency is unlikely to improve and fossilization is likely to occur (*ibid*). Third, TBLT approach can be seen as a kind of “innovation” (Ellis, 2003:320) because it creates a new pedagogical idea. For any individual teacher or learner, it constitutes an opportunity as well as a challenge which will bring a totally new teaching or learning experience.

However, the disadvantages of task-based language teaching are easily identifiable. First, it may not be applicable because in particular cultures the teacher-learner relationship is defined by “their relative statuses” (Ellis, 2003:321). Second, task-based approach presupposes that teachers surely have a good enough command of the second language so that they can join the learners in performing the task with ease. But when teachers lack confidence in their own language proficiency, they may feel it extremely difficult to participate and implement these tasks. Third, it is really hard for traditional-type teachers to totally or partially give up the teaching practice they are used to. Finally, communicative tasks tend to result in an “uneven development” in speaking ability (Bruton, 2005, cited in Klapper, 2006:120) while the other three basic language skills may be less attended to..

4. Conclusion

TBLT approach proponents embrace a view that task-based approach is more effective than other approaches. However, this opinion is possibly not a fact but a wishful assumption at present (Richards and Rodgers, 2001:241). Some aspects still remain unexplored, such as psychological processes in tasks, task sequencing, form learning, and task performance evaluation. Currently, researchers’ studies

on TBLT are mainly concerned with task classification, tasks grading, task performance evaluation, syllabus design, etc. Some of their proposals are still “speculative and experimental” in nature (Klapper, 2006:121). Despite the issues TBLT is now faced with, it is a highly recommendable and operable pedagogical approach. It formulates a basic framework for classroom language teaching with its clearly-defined procedure. Thus it is a blessing for second language teachers because they can easily pick up this framework and apply. For teachers accustomed to traditional methodologies, it can be employed in an integrated way. To conclude, further research on TBLT should be carried out in classroom practice, with an aim to make task-based language teaching more feasible and to foster language acquisition more effective.

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