Task-based Language Teaching from Teachers' Perspective

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Abstract

This observational study aimed at examining teacher/learner interactions in task based settings and understanding teachers' perceptions about using task-based approach in reading comprehension classes. To achieve this end, two general English classes were observed in Islamic Azad university of Tabriz, Iran. The researcher followed a four part process of record-view-transcribe- and analyze (R-V-T-A). The results show that despite the claim that task-based approach is applied in foreign language classes in Iran, in reality grammar-oriented interventions are rather frequent in these foreign-language classes and that teachers have got unclear understanding about applying task-based approach in their classes. The results of the study may have pedagogical implications for instruction and curriculum development.

Keywords: task-based setting, task-based approach, reading comprehension

Introduction

Many areas of education are undergoing changes in the way teaching and learning is understood. Teacher centred classes and structural- syllabus teaching are giving way to a more student-centred, practical and flexible approaches. In this paradigm shift, the field of second and foreign language teaching is not an exception. One of the areas which came under paradigm shift is the traditional present practice produce method of teaching English. It has been replaced by communicative language teaching. Task-based language teaching is an offshoot of communicative language teaching.

An interest in tasks emerged when researchers turned to tasks as SLA research tools in the mid-1980s. Since the mid 1980s (Prabhu 1987; Nunan 1989; Skehan 1996; Ellis 2006; Willis & Willis 2007), task-based syllabus design and task-based teaching, which have their origins in research on second language acquisition (SLA), have attracted some researchers and curriculum developers in second/foreign language instruction as a result of wide-spread interest in the functional views of language and communicative language teaching. As a result of such views, some practitioners and researchers proposed that task should be the key unit within the syllabus. TBL grows out of the more general notion of communicative language teaching (CLT). It is supported by the process-oriented view of language learning where meaningful communicative tasks enhance l2 learning. Proponents of TBLT argue that the use of grammar-focused teaching activities in many language classrooms does not reflect the cognitive learning processes employed in naturalistic language learning situations outside the classroom. So they believe in better context for the activation of learning processes.

Task-based Language Learning & Teaching

Given that individual learning agendas determine what is "learnt" in the language classroom, it is generally recognized that students need to be fully involved in what happens there. Task-based learning satisfies this need, involving the learners at every level of the educational process as they pass through comprehension, decision-making, implementation, preparation, rehearsal, performance and reflection. If carried out in the target language, these stages have obvious advantages in terms of authenticity and meaning, but task-based work can also be beneficial in encouraging learners to address their learning needs, to assess themselves, and to become self-directed (Finch 1999, p.179).

The underlying principle in TBLT is that having learners perform tasks will help them to develop knowledge and skill in the second language in accordance with the way their own language learning mechanisms work. Tasks function as "devices for creating the conditions required for language acquisition" (Ellis, 2002, p. 226). TBL implies a shift from some traditional teacher roles. For Nunan (1989, cited in Harmer, 2001), teachers cannot always act as a controller if they want students to manipulate, comprehend and interact with a task. For Allwright (1984, cited in Foley, 1991), in order for lessons to take place at all, classroom interaction has to be managed, and by all present, not just by the teacher. Thus, for Allwright, it is not the content of the lesson that is the focal point or basis for learning but the process of classroom interaction that generates opportunities for learning. "Class behavior is owned by the whole group, of which the teacher is but one member" (Kohonen, 1992, cited in Bailey & Nunan, 1996, p. 53).

The implication for TBL is that if learners are provided with a series of tasks which involve both the comprehension and the production of language with a focus on meaning, language development will be increased. The focus in TBL is on process rather than product, and on how to learn rather than what to learn. Nunan (1991) mentions five features of task-based approach as: an emphasis on learning to communicative through interaction in the target language, introducing authentic texts into the learning situation, providing opportunities for learners to focus not only on language but also on the learning process itself, enhancing learners own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning, and linking classroom language learning with language activation outside the classroom. In addition to the above mentioned criteria for task-based approach, Willis (1994, cited in Cadorath and Harris, 1998) claims that there is a six stage cycle in task-based teaching. The first stage is introduction to both topic and task, where the teacher helps the students to understand the objectives of the task and he/she organizes the collection of ideas or information about the topic. For Bowen (2004) in this stage students take part in activities that either help them to recall words or phrases which will be useful during the performance of the task. The second stage is the task itself. Students work in pairs or groups using whatever language resources they have to express themselves. Teacher encourages them but there is no correction. Emphasis is on fluency and getting things done- the purpose. The third stage is planning. Students spend some time on putting together in written or spoken form a report on what they did and what conclusions they reached. Teacher can help with language here, if it is required, with the emphasis on ability to communicate the results. The fourth stage is reporting where the teacher organizes feedback, with the groups reporting to the class, either orally or in writing their results. Again, there is no overt correction. The fifth stage is language focus and practice where the teacher sets up a language focus task, which draws attention to one or more of the following: a) language which students could have used but they did not use, b) language they used but not as well as they might have used, c) any other language that is related to the topic and task which the teacher considers important and wishes to focus on. This stage can include drills, dialogues or typical activities from the practice stage of Present Produce Practice (PPP). In all cases, the goal is to focus students' attention on key language points. The last stage is the parallel task where the students have a chance to try out the task again, but with different materials, which will necessitate the same kinds of language.

Since the 1980s many course books have been produced which describe themselves as 'Communicative', irrespective of whether or not they are based on communicative principles or not. There is also the danger that the label task-based will be exploited in the same way. The motto of using task-based approach is nearly a dominator in every language school and university in Iran. Due to the researcher's own experience as an English teacher in language institutes and universities of Iran for more than 12 years, the kind of English language teaching (especially reading classes) that can be observed in most Iranian universities and language schools is that the teacher teaches and the students listen, then the student produce the information on a written test and the teacher evaluates. The knowledge is declarative, decontextualized and inert. Knowledge is not personally built or applied. More progressive teaching is seen when teachers model strategies of learning in the context of task completion, and then students try to do the task the same way the teacher did but teachers are often seen to spend

a lot of time in class asking questions for which they and students already know the answers; thus, there is no information gap to fill. In fact, these display questions demonstrate usage rather than use of the target language. Display questions only demonstrate knowledge of forms and structures while neglecting communicative functions. They do not encourage improvisation or creativity. The comprehension questions that are asked after reading require the learner to rummage around in the text for information in a totally indiscriminate way, without concerning what purpose might be served in so doing."Reading is thus represented as an end in itself, an activity that has no relevance to real knowledge and experience and therefore no real meaning" (Widdowson 1979, p. 180). Paulston & Bruder (1976) state that as little time as possible should be spent on going through the written comprehension questions. Class time is much better spent on inference and opinion questions. "Teachers tend to waste a lot of time on comprehension exercises, and it is unproductive"(p. 167). As Widdowson (1978) states, we must progress from learning about the language, (Language usage) to considering how language works in a communicative sense, (Language use). Richards, Platt and Platt (1992, cited in Liao, 2001) claim that classroom activities will be mechanical and artificial without information gaps.

Since reading ability is often regarded as the most needed skill for learners in academic settings (Alderson, 1984), the learners' inability to read l2 materials might hinder the academic and professional development of those whose professions and academic programs require accessing and obtaining information in the English language. The main purpose of the study is to see what is really going on in reading classes in Iran. Another aim is to understand teachers' perception and understanding of using task-based approach in their reading classes. As such the following research questions are raised:

1) How is reading taught in General English classes?

2) How much time is spent for display questions?

3) What is teachers' perception about task-based approach for reading classes?

4) Are principals of task-based approach applied in General English classes?

2. Method

2.1 Design of the study

To answer the above formulated questions, the present study employed a qualitative method based on in class observations, accompanied by field notes and recordings, followed by interviews and emails.

2.2 Participants

The participants of the study were two English instructors teaching General courses at Islamic Azad University, Tabriz branch, Iran. Both instructors were female who had been teaching English at university for more than 5 years. One of the instructors was 33 years old and single, the other one was 37 and married. They were both Iranian and were proficient users of English holding a Master's degree in TEFL and were teaching at the same university. In addition, both of them shared similar educational and socio-economical backgrounds having their MA from Tabriz Azad University.

2.3 Data Collection

- ❖ Observation
  - ➢ Two General English Classes
    - ▪ Class A) 48 students
    - ▪ Class B) 45 students
- ❖ Recording
- ❖ Interview
- ❖ Email

Three instruments used in the present study were observation and interview, and email. The focus of the present study was on two EFL classrooms including two general English classes. The first general English class namely as class (A) included 48 students in engineering department. Another general English class namely as class (B) included 45 students at the same department. Both classes were mixed classes including male and female students with mechanical engineering, civil engineering, computer engineering, mathematics, and physics majors. , These EFL classrooms were selected in order to understand teacher/learner interactions in task based settings and understanding teachers' perceptions about using task-based approach in their classes. Each class was

carefully observed and audio‑taped for about 90 minutes by the researcher herself together with taking field notes for both classes. The interview included open‑ended questions regarding the participants′ perception of using task-based approach as well as their questioning skills for both above mentioned classes.

2.4 Procedure

The following steps were followed to obtain the necessary information to accomplish the purpose of the study during the research process: First two General English Classes in Tabriz Azad University were selected and audio taped. Permission for working on instructors' audio taped classes was asked prior to analyzing the data. It should be mentioned that there is no instruction and guideline for instructors on how to teach but three different books are suggested by the supervisor of the English Department and each instructor is free to choose one from those three books. After asking for permission the data were analyzed. The researcher followed a four part process of record-view-transcribe- and analyze (R-V-T-A). Due to the limitation of time the researcher focused on the time allocated to teach reading and the time spend for reading questions asked after reading passages. Then the instructors were interviewed. A semi-structured interview was used. All the interviews were audio taped and analyzed. To be sure that there was no misunderstanding in data interpretation, any question raised during data transcribing and interpretation was asked via the teachers' email address.

3. Data Analysis & Results of the Study

Example 1: Time 90 minutes

Calling the rolls and warm up: 10 minutes

Reading the passage by the instructor: 10 minutes

Time given to students to read it individually and translate the passage: 15 minutes

Reading the passage by volunteer students and translating it line by line: 28 minutes

Questions and answers and follow up activities: 26 minutes

Example 2: Time 90 minutes

Calling the rolls and warm up: 12 minutes

Reading the passage by one of the volunteer students: 8 minutes

Time given to students to read it individually and translate the passage: 15 minutes

Reading the passage by the instructor and translating it line by line: 22 minutes

Questions and answers and follow up activities: 33 minutes

3.1 Grammar Translation –based Instruction

From the obtained data, it can be seen that most of the class time is spent for reading the passage by the instructor and translating it line by line (grammar translation method).   In addition most of the interaction is teacher-student based. There is very less student-student interaction.

3.2 Too Many Display Questions

From whole 54 minutes which were devoted to questions and answers a total of 62 questions were identified. From those 62 questions 43 were display questions (69.35%) and 19 (30.65%) were referential questions which existed in the books.

As it was mentioned before a semi-structured interview was used including 28 questions (Appendix A). But the proposed interview questions mainly fell within 6 categories: a) teachers' perceptions about using task-based approach for their reading classes, b) the time allocated for reading questions after reading passage, c) the type of questions mostly asked (display & referential questions), d) the problems they encounter in their reading classes, e) the value they give to collaborative learning in their reading classes, f) the procedures they follow in teaching reading. Based on these 6 categories, the following themes were identified.

3.3 Unclear Understanding about Task-based Approach

Example1: "Using authentic tasks to engage students in the process of L2 learning, a kind of communicative approach, Task cycle? No sorry I don't know what it is. Maybe you mean pre reading and while reading activities, I try to apply it in my classes."

Example 2: "Well, a kind of communicative approach or we can say eclectic approach, new and innovative method of teaching, the emphasis is on both form and meaning. Well task cycle can be teacher-student interaction, or student to student interaction, I'm not sure."

3.4 Lack of Necessary Questioning Skill

Example 1: "Ok, it depends, yes-no, WH questions…….. depending on the context, but in reading classes follow-up activities in the book you know questions about technical words in the passage, grammar questions, reading questions and so on, well you know I used more display questions because the students are very weak and cannot answer referential questions, I mean because their speaking ability is low they can't do it."

Example 2: "Questions about meaning of unknown words, questions which are included in the activities, yes-no and others. Yes that is true that I used more display questions in the class. The reason is that ok…..most of the questions in the book are display ones".

3.5 Inadequate Supervision at University for General English Courses

Example 1: "Well you know there are lots of problems. Large size of classes, irrelevance of book to students' majors, another problem is lack of time, and lack of harmony among instructors on how to teach and what to teach. You know, well students are very weak in English in general courses. That has always been a question for me how they could pass at high school, you know they take this course because they have to, and they only want to pass."

Example 2: "Heterogeneity of majors, lots of students in the class, you see lack of interest among students for English classes, and before I forget …..Students are very different, I mean most of them are very weak in English and you have to translate everything for them, Well, that's why I do so……."

4. Discussion

This study focused on what is going on general English Reading classes in Iran, especially on teachers' teaching method and questioning behavior, the kind of questions they ask and the time allocated for pair work and group work activities. It is worth mentioning that classroom process is such a complex one that it is simplistic to think that an observer can fully understand what is really going on in the classroom by observing and analyzing a number of lessons. Through observation and interview it was found that most of the class time was spent for teaching reading in the form of grammar-translation method, by merely reading the text by the instructor and translating it line by line. For Widdowson (1984) teaching can be considered as a kind of product, i.e., a collection of formal or functional units to be stored away in the mind as knowledge. Learning can be considered as a kind of process, i.e., a set of strategies for making sense. He believes that the commonly used approach in language classrooms is that the teacher busily tries to change the learner's process into a product and the learner busily tries to change the teacher's product into a process. For Widdowson it is a goal-oriented approach towards learning. "The process-oriented approach focuses on the presentation of language by reference to the means of learning and allows the ends to be achieved by the learner by exercising the ability he/she has acquired" (p. 182).

As Allwright (1984, cited in Foley, 1991) mentions in order for lessons to take place at all, classroom interaction has to be managed, and by all present, not just by the teacher. Thus, for Allwright, it is not the content of the lesson that is the focal point or basis for learning but the process of classroom interaction that generates opportunities for learning. "Class behavior is owned by the whole group, of which the teacher is but one member" (Kohonen, 1992, cited in Bailey & Nunan, 1996, p. 53). After teaching the reading parts, most of the class time was spent on asking some questions whose answers already exist in the text. From whole asked questions, 69.35% of them were display questions. For Widdowson (1979), the comprehension questions that are asked after reading require the learner to rummage around in the text for information in a totally indiscriminate way, without concerning what purpose might be served in so doing. "Reading is thus represented as an end in itself, an activity that has no relevance to real knowledge and experience and therefore no real meaning" (p. 180). Paulston & Bruder (1976) have the same idea with Widdowson that as little time as possible should be spent on going through the written comprehension questions. Class time is much better spent on inference and opinion questions. "Teachers tend to waste a lot of time on comprehension exercises, and it is unproductive"(p. 167). As Talebinezhad (1999) states, real language does not consist only of questions from one party and answers from another one. Real language circles around referents or world knowledge in order to create massages and therefore is not form-based but meaning based. Therefore questions in the language classrooms should be referential or meaning based and not only focus on form.

By interviewing the instructors it was found that they had some knowledge about task-based approach but it seemed that they were unaware of applying its basics to their own classes. When asked about task cycle, they were not sure what it is and how it should be applied in their classes. When asked about lack of pair work and group work on their classes they blamed large size of the classes which they claimed inhibited them from having more interaction with their students. Another problem that they both agreed upon was lack of fixed guidelines at

university to let them decide what method to use and how to use. Another point which they stated was the unsuitability of the book with students' majors. As it was mentioned before, the motto of task-based approach has dominated every institute and university in Iran. But in reality none of its principles was used in the observed classes. Although lots of problems might hinder using communicative approaches at universities, it is simplistic to assume that due to the problems old methods of teaching which have given their way to innovative and new methods should be used. It can be assumed that instructors' can make their classes more meaningful and process-oriented by having more student-student interaction, pair-work and group-work, and incorporating a piece of fun into their classes. If we can make language in the classroom meaningful therefore memorable, students can process language which is being learned or recycled more naturally. This is what task-based learning exactly offers the students an opportunity to do (Mckinnon and Rigby, 2004). In task-based learning task is the primary focus of classroom activity and language is the instrument which the students use to complete it. Instead of reading the passages themselves and translating it line by line, they can group the student in the class and assign different roles for them, at that time students take the responsibility for their own learning and won't depend on the teacher as the mere source of knowledge.

5. Conclusion

Since the emergence of communicative approaches there have been a lot of views on the nature of language teaching and learning. Nowadays, teaching is not seen as a product but as a process. So activities in which students are involved in real communication and which promote learning are considered very important. TBLT has proved itself useful in meeting learners' needs and in providing lots of interaction opportunities in EFL classes. In TBLT classes the responsibility of teacher shifts from "knowledge provider" to use Widdowson's words to," facilitator of students' learning" or to put it in other words to function as an authoritative rather than an authoritarian.

For lots of reasons reading is the most important activity in any language class. Because it is not only a source of information and a pleasurable activity, but also a means of consolidating and extending one's knowledge of the world. Because of its great importance as a cognitive process reading needs careful attention in language classes. Because it is a communicative act between the reader and writer it requires an interactive and process-oriented methodology. The most well-know advice from learning specialists is that "the most effective and efficient learning is meaningful learning", Chastain, 1988, p. 45). So the principal task for teachers is neither repetition nor recycling, but that of helping the students discover strategies for organizing their knowledge into meaningful hierarchies. Now that we are concerned with the value of interaction and the importance of task-based approach in EFL classes, we should try to apply these principles in our own classes. So for improving students' reading comprehension we should create such an atmosphere in our classes that students enjoy their classes and learn the responsibility for their own learning. So it is hoped that some steps be taken in universities and language institutes to make the reading classes more process oriented ,student-centered, and meaningful. Last but not least, it is hoped this research may encourage further research in the area of reading and the related problems in reading classes by other interested researchers.

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Appendix

1. What is interview to you?
2. Have you ever been interviewed?
3. How do you feel to be interviewed?
4. How long have you been teaching English?
5. How old are you?
6. Are you single or married?
7. Where (in which places), have you taught English?
8. How long have you been teaching English at universities?
9. What books are being taught for general English courses there?
10. Are there TTC (teacher training classes) there at the beginning of each semester to teach guidelines on how to teach?
11. Do you have to follow the guidelines?/or you teach the way you prefer?
12. How do you teach reading parts?
13. Please define the steps you use in your reading classes.
14. Do you find your teaching methodology effective for teaching reading? If not, why?
15. Have you ever noticed students' reluctance in reading classes? If yes what can be the cause or source of this problem?
16. What is your perception of task-based approach?
17. Do you think it is a good approach to teach reading comprehension?
18. What is task-cycle?
19. What is collaborative or cooperative learning to you? / Do you apply it in your reading classes?
20. How much time do you spend for teaching reading and the follow up activities?
21. How often do you ask referential & display questions in your classes?
22. Do you agree that display questions outweigh referential questions in your reading classes?
23. Why do you translate the text line by line to students?
24. Do you blame the administrators or syllabus designers at universities and institutions for the problems you come across in your reading classes?
25. Do you think that there should be a revision in curriculum in Iran's universities and institutions?
26. What can be the conclusions about this interview?
27. What are your suggestions to overcome the problems in the reading classes?
28. Do you have any further idea or recommendation?