

The Role of Task-Based Learning Activities to Improve Writing Skills of Non-Native Speakers at the Tertiary Level

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Abstract

Writing is one of the most important skills that needs to be cultivated. It is not such an easy task especially for non-native speakers at the tertiary level. There are many reasons behind this shortcoming. Learners need to be strong in grammatical structures, spellings, vocabulary besides they should get the real-life situations to be addressed. This is actually a herculean task to be achieved through our traditional and conventional type of learning and teaching methods. Writing is always placed in the last when the skills are named in order. Learners should be efficient in other three skills to get the proficiency in writing skills. While considering these factors, the teaching method was regarded the most difficult problem to be addressed since teaching requires the implementation of a specific technique or approach which involved a number of stages that guided the students in producing a good composition. To cultivate and improve communication skills of the tertiary level non-native speakers specially to develop the essential terms of writing such as content, organization, vocabulary and grammar also to nurture certain specific mechanics of writing such as spelling, punctuation and capitalization. Sholilah (2011) an ELT researcher, demonstrated that the TBLT activities help learners to improve their composition skills using good vocabulary, appropriate grammatical structure and organising ideas.

Keywords: Writing skills, Task-Based learning, TBLT activities, organising ideas

Introduction

Task- Based Language Learning has its base in Communicative Language Teaching. Both has the same objective, interactive teaching and help learners to achieve good communication skills in target language. It is very apt to quote Willis (1996) an ELT specialist's words, "A task is an activity that helps learners to develop communication skills through good interaction". (p.23)

TBLT actually helps the learners to focus their goal and motivate them to achieve their goal. It also creates opportunities to learners to develop and contribute in communication. According to Ellis (2003) a linguistic specialist, "TBL is essentially helps to develop social communication to learners and also help to comprehend the meaning, communicative strategies and its effectiveness". (p.65)

Teachers overjoyed while accepting task-based language learning and tend to use this approach for various reasons. Through these tasks, especially some tasks are very useful in real-life situations and help learners to develop interactive skills without much efforts.

Review of Literature

Prabhu (1987) a twentieth century linguistic researcher, defined, “a task is an activity which helps the learners to get information through some stages and also allows teachers to handle and control that process”. (p.24). Nunan (1989) an ELT specialist stated that a 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”. (p.10)

In TBLT, very familiar tasks are given to learners to go through the real day-to-day life situations and deal with them efficiently. The tasks are designed such as writing a letter to the editor, conducting an interview, filling up an application form and seeking information from a travel agency through telephonic conversation.

There is a close resemblance to be noted down with grammar and TBLT like CLT and grammar. Initially these approaches do not seek the importance of grammar but later these approaches encouraged teaching grammar to improve the communication skills of learners. Willis (1996) a linguistic researcher believed that the goal of tasks is to provide a real intention for language use and to create a natural context for language study.

Ellis (2003) a well-known researcher in the field of ELT viewed the pre-task stage where using videos to help the learners to observe literally the people performing the task which makes the learners to get a clear model of what will be expected from them. The learners are asked to use the given time to get prepared for the tasks. Prabhu (1987) a popular curriculum designer of ELT experimented that in Task-stage, the learners perform the activity by themselves. They try to do the activity either in pair work or group work or the entire class would be asked to participate and the teacher should monitor the class while the learners are doing the tasks. According to language experts there are three elements of a task cycle such as; the task (activity), planning (where learners plan their reports efficiently and maximize their learning opportunities) and report. The post-task stage is the stage after the main tasks are completed. This is an important stage and needs to be observed closely and analysed. The learners’ opinions, feedbacks, comments are collected and taken into account for analysis. This data helps the teacher to further to design the future tasks efficiently.

Background Of TBLT

Prabhu (1987) a South-Indian ELT specialist, first established Task-Based learning (TBL) in Bangalore, Southern India. According to him, the learners should focus on the task rather than on the language to learn efficiently. Ellis (2003) a great ELT scholar proposed six salient features of a task is given below:

1. A task can be considered as a work plan

2. In a task, the main focus is on the meaning
3. A task includes everyday processes of language use
4. A task can compromise any of the four language skills
5. A task involves cognitive processes
6. A task has a clear defined communicative result

A task can help to fill up the grammar gaps and it was accepted by the language specialists in 1990s. It was always discussed by them that ‘meaning’ and ‘form’ as two distinct perspectives which seek the attention of the learners during the learning process. Further stated that the non-native tertiary level learners get very limited opportunities to focus on different aspects of learning at the same time, because they may tend to concentrate on one aspect more and they may easily get distracted by various aspects.

Tasks

Students are told by the teacher about the tasks which they are going to perform in a specific period of time. They are also informed that after the tasks they may be asked to give their comments and feedbacks to the teacher. They are allowed to register their opinions either positive or negative. Before giving the tasks the students are given clear instructions and also they had viewed videos to understand TBLT activities.

First Task

The first task is a whole class activity. Students are given an interesting activity to improve their formal writing skills. They are given a newspaper extract to write a letter to the editor in two hundred to three hundred words. Before giving this activity they are taught to write topic sentence and how to organise their ideas and points using leads. The newspaper extract is given below. The students are given very clear instructions to arrange their points.

Paragraph 1: Introduction: State your reason for writing and your point of view.

Paragraph 2: Summarize the arguments you disagree

Paragraph 3: Discredit the arguments you disagree and put forward the arguments you agree with.

Paragraph 4: Conclusion: restate your opinion.

EVERY YEAR MILLIONS of people die from cigarette-related illnesses. Despite awareness of the health risks, many people are unable to control their addiction. It's time we banned all cigarette advertisements, extended no-smoking policies to all public areas, and forced cigarette companies to contribute to a crippling healthcare bill.

Do you agree with this editorial?
We'd like to hear your point of view.
Write a letter to the editor at:

YOU AND YOUR HEALTH
56 Hoole Place, Edinburgh EB3 9QT, Scotland.

with.
with

Second Task

The second task is also an interesting one. It is a pair work activity. The teacher asked the students to

VACATION EXPRESS

Please complete the entire application. Remember to tick the job you are applying for.
Mail this application to Vacation Express, PO Box 99, Lichten, LI2 8FH UK.

NAME: (First) _____
(Last) _____

SEX: MALE/FEMALE

DATE OF BIRTH: _____ (Month/Day/Year)

ADDRESS: _____
Post Code: _____ City: _____
Country: _____

TELEPHONE: (please include country/city code)
Home _____ Work _____
Mobile _____

E-MAIL: _____

DO YOU HAVE A VALID DRIVER'S LICENCE? YES/NO

LANGUAGES SPOKEN: _____

PRESENT OCCUPATION/STUDIES: _____

WHICH OF THESE WORK AREAS MOST INTERESTS YOU?
Hotel / Restaurant Child Care Tour Guide
Sports Instructor Activity Leader

DESCRIBE ANY SPECIAL QUALIFICATIONS OR WORK EXPERIENCE YOU HAVE.

HOW DID YOU HEAR ABOUT VACATION EXPRESS?
Newspaper Website Personal Recommendation Other

I certify that the statements on this application are true and complete to the best of my knowledge.

SIGNATURE OF APPLICANT: _____

DATE: _____



find the partner to do the activity successfully. Doing such activities help them to develop not only communication skills but also personal relationship with other classmates. The task is a filling up an application form and Students are asked to complete the application form. It is a pair work activity. Student A is given an email letter and student B is given an application form. Student B is asked to fill up the application form based on the information given in the email.

So, student A is asked to answer the questions for student B to help filling the application form. This activity actually helps them to improve their discussing ability, framing questions to get the information required and answering clearly to the questions asked. While doing the writing task student B gets his spelling corrected by his partner Student A, who is having the email letter. To extend this activity further, the students are asked to write a reply to the given email.

Analysis

After the tasks 1 and 2, the students are given some time to respond about the tasks,

and, they are responded positively about the tasks. Their opinions, comments and feedback are taken into further discussion. According to their opinion, task 1 (writing a letter to the editor), made them to face the real-life situation in a very formal way. This task actually helped them to register their voice

and tend to organise their arguments logically toward a public issue. It also enriched their vocabulary. The clear instructions made them to follow the steps to arrange their thoughts soundly to address the issue very clearly. The Task 1 was a whole class activity, so it enabled them to interact to each and every one and they shared their ideas and discussed difference of opinions in a very logical manner. The given task was a successful goal achieved task.

The task 2 helped them to frame questions to get the required information and also helped them to answering the questions in a given format. The extended activity of the task 2 made them to respond clearly to the written communication.

Both the tasks help the learners to participate well in classroom communication activities. The task-based learning activities motivate the learners, principally the non-native speakers at the tertiary level, because it creates a real-life situation to develop communication skills, and these activities are better than the traditional and conventional type of learning.

Conclusion

The emphasis of TBLT is on the finishing of tasks encourage and engage learners to use the target language in real-life situations in which learners acquire excellent communication and social interaction skills. The notion of this approach is to help learners to learn the target language by being exposed to meaningful task-based activities. They do tasks in pairs or, in small groups or the whole class after which they provide a report and submit their findings to the class in written or spoken form. The learners' suggestions, feedback, comments and opinions are considered to design the future tasks. Learning a language is actually made effortless and fun filled when teachers adopt such activities. Thus, it is universally accepted TBLT is a boon to language learning and teaching process.

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