



THE EFFECT OF TASKS IN ENHANCING THE SPEAKING AND WRITING SKILLS OF THE ESL TERTIARY LEARNERS

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Abstract

This paper deals with Task- Based Approach (TBA) and its impact on the speaking and writing skills of English as the second language (ESL) engineering learners. The approach involves engaging learners in an informal discussion on a problem based topic and incorporating the outcomes of the discussion in writing a paragraph on the same topic. To validate this approach, the paper reports a study in which 50 first year learners from various engineering courses such as civil, mechanical, electrical, electronics and manufacturing were randomly classified into two groups: Experimental group using the Task Based Approach and a control group using the Conventional Approach [an approach, where teacher is the centre of focus rather than the learners (Zohrabi, et. al. 2012)]. Results revealed that there was a significant difference in the performance of the group that experienced the change compared to the control group in terms of speaking and writing tasks. The overall output after the interview with the experimental learners revealed that learners in the group where changes took place were confident enough to speak and write more fluently. This suggests that this task changed the approach of the learners thereby generating interest towards speaking and writing tasks.

Key words: informal discussion; paragraph writing; speaking skills; writing skills; tasks.

Introduction

On observing the experience of English as second language (ESL) teachers using TBA, it could be inferred that learners perform tasks with great interest and enthusiasm. The reason is that learners are free to use their own language rather than the language decided by their teachers (Willis, 1996). Especially, when the task revolves around a problem to solve, demanding the application of both speaking and writing skills, learners encounter the task with great confidence and execute it happily. According to Nordin, N. A et al. (2012) the learners used their writing and speaking skills to complete the task with their group members to create a script and had fun while interacting with others in the midst of completing the tasks assigned to them. To make it possible, an appropriate classroom set up is mandatory with proper guidance from the facilitators. The appropriate classroom setup includes seating arrangements with learners facing each other for group or pair work, placement

of learners to ensure that they sit in an ideal place to avoid distractions, display of posters in the classroom prepared by the learners, inclusion of audio and video to motivate learners to take part in the task.

The Task Based Approach (TBA) provides a flexible framework for language instructors to create a classroom that facilitates second language acquisition (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). TBA is popular as a language teaching approach (East 2020) and furthermore from the previous experience of the researcher, learners' attitude reveals that these tasks could take place effectively in a student-friendly atmosphere which is considered to be the required classroom set up for this study (Bhaskar & Soundiraraj S, 2013). Also, learners learn L1 (Chinese language) through TBA which has proved to be an excellent approach because it combines the classroom instruction with the real world situations (Liu Li, 2014). Given the viability of TBA and its influence on enhancing learners' communication skills and the evidence of development in the learning process, TBA is a good option to apply in the classroom for ESL/English as Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and learning. TBA as in recent approaches like communicative language teaching, cooperative language learning, philosophy-based language teaching, and so on, learners use language to complete the task and come out with a certain language output. In addition, TBA is in accordance with Vygotsky's (1978) view that learning is a social and constructivist activity, and language is a tool for thinking. According to Vygotsky (1978), social interaction is one of the major features of developing language capacity. He states that thought and language are initially separate elements, but they become interdependent during acts of communication as meaning is created through interaction. From this point of view, TBA allows the learners to use the language to interpret, think and share their ideas with their counterparts. In this study, the task is divided into two phases – speaking and writing. The crux of the first and second phase is informal discussion and paragraph writing respectively, based on a problem oriented topic. Hence, informal group discussion is an appropriate social activity providing enough space for the learners to think, interpret and share their points with each other, thereby settling down at a solution. Also, the ideas generated from the informal discussion serve as a tool in the writing phase.

Literature review

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has attracted the attention of second language acquisition (SLA) researchers, curriculum developers, educationalists, teacher trainers and language teachers worldwide (Branden 2006). TBA has become one of the prime approaches in developing the language skills of ESL/EFL learners. Also, a number of studies have proved that it is an essential part of any means of any language teaching method (Careless 2003; Ellis, 2000; 2003; Nunan 2004; Rahimpour 2008; Robinson 2003; Willis 1996). Besides, there is a broad and rapidly expanding literature on task-based language teaching, with many studies focused on post-compulsory schooling age groups, often in ESL contexts (Carless, 2007). This is an indication that task based approach had contributed to ESL context

in developing the language skills both at school and college level, and also it has a lot to contribute in the future. According to Cubillo (2009), Task-Based language learning is a handy approach where meaning is primary and learners while executing a communicative task focus on meaning rather than form. It helps them to build their language learning process at ease and gives them the confidence to use the language at more instances. TBLT as an optimal approach to language teaching and learning provides rationale and methodological principles for the application of mobile technologies (Xue, 2020). Also, Chua and Lin (2020) imply that TBLT can increase learners' learning motivation in long term application

For the past two decades numerous definitions have been conceived for the term 'task'. For example, according to Long (1985), a small 'task' is a part of a bigger work where a person embarks upon either for an incentive or at free of cost. There are a range of tasks that comprise all the real life activities we human beings indulge in. Some of them are booking a ticket, taking an appointment with a doctor, undergoing a driving test, writing a letter, segregating one thing from other things, locating and visiting a friend and helping a person to do his work. On the whole, a 'task' is a part and parcel of our life, where one executes it in his daily life in a number of ways for a number of reasons.

The definition of task adopted for this study follows both Nunan (1989) and Willis (1990). According to Nunan, a 'task' is a classroom work which engages learners to communicate in the given target language with a primary focus on meaning. It has a connection to the real world, and it should be complete enough to ensure that learners perform the task without any doubt. Willis states that a 'task' is something which learners perform in a classroom using the language with an ultimate purpose of achieving an outcome.

Seedhouse (1999) points out that based on the previous researches, the theoretical and pedagogical evidences prove that there is a substantial support for task-based learning. Hismanoglu & Hismanoglu (2011) states that task-based learning helps the learners to produce the language through meaningful tasks in a natural way rather than putting learners to intentional practice of language items in the form of exercises.

Willis (1990), for the most part considers learner's creativity as the lively factor in the learning process. Task-based learning is used to utilize that creative aspect rather than suppress it, and it makes the learning process more resourceful.

Some of the reasons for TBA to establish a stronger place in the ELT research may be due to the following characteristic features mentioned by (Ellis, 2003). This study has made an attempt to incorporate the task for similar qualities.

1. It involves natural usage of the language
2. It is a learner-centered approach rather than teacher-centered one
3. It involves both focus on form and focus on meaning
4. It has a goal and output

Aim of the study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the results of a technique designed to enhance the speaking and writing skills of L2 learners studying in engineering colleges. As engineering learners complete their studies, they are employed in the private sector which involves communication in both speaking and writing. However, there is a tendency for engineering students to prefer either speaking or writing, ignoring the other skill. This study examines a technique to guide them into developing both skills.

Hence, an important skill in teaching is the ability to make learners the focus of our teaching (Richards & Bohlke, 2011). It includes taking the learners' needs and goals into consideration from learning point of view, instilling the seeds of trust and confidence in them while teaching English, addressing learners' varied needs and learning styles, scaffolding and providing feedback after their language learning process to strengthen their confidence level and applying strategies to create a congenial atmosphere for learning. (Dornyei 2001). The main purpose of the study lies upon the previously mentioned ideas. Based on the learners' needs a set of tasks were designed to cater to their production needs, and also it is to find an answer to the general question 'Does TBA help learners in developing the speaking and writing skills of L2 tertiary learners?' and also the following specific research questions: To what extent does informal group discussion help the learners to develop their speaking and writing skills in the experimental group? Also, if there were any significant difference between the experimental and control group in terms of speaking and writing skills?

An overview of an experimental research

Experimental research plays a vital role in assessing the influence of one variable over the other. Experimental method is the most scientific and sophisticated research method. It is called as "observation under controlled conditions". It mostly deals with the determination of the effect of independent variables on the dependent variables. For instance, in this study, the use of TBLT, a student-centered approach is an independent variable while the outcome of the students' performance in terms of speaking and writing is a dependent variable. Overall, this experimental research helps to attain the objective of this study in a comprehensive manner. The following section explains the implementation of TBLT in the classroom and its outcome.

Procedures for running the TBA classroom

This is a study based on experimental research, where the task component designed was an outcome of the teacher's previous experience with the students in the class.

Participants and materials

At first, learners are divided into groups with each group consisting of five members. Next, the TBA classroom session begins with the facilitator giving a problem based topic to the learners. After receiving the topic, the learners start the informal group discussion under the supervision of the facilitator. At the time of discussion, learners are free to discuss the topic using their flow of thoughts and ideas. Also, they are instructed to take hints in the due course of the discussion so that they can incorporate them into the writing phase. During the discussion, the facilitator also takes personal notes to give additional inputs to the learners regarding the topic. At the end of the discussion, the learners are instructed to write a paragraph based on the problem oriented topic. These paragraphs are verified by the facilitator after the class for each session and returned to the learners with feedback before the next class hour. Each class session lasts for one hour with the following tentative time allocation: informal discussion - 30 minutes, paragraph writing – 30 minutes.

The study was conducted in a Technical University located in Chennai, India. Fifty first year engineering students took part in the study. Twenty-five learners agreed to be a part of the trial group and the remaining 25 learners were part of the control group. As the learners were in the first semester of their course, they had group discussion and paragraph writing as a part of their syllabus which focused on speaking and writing skills. The former was used to assess their speaking and the latter was used to assess their writing skills. These two assessments, while conducted in the classrooms, received poor response from the learners. It is, therefore, important that we understand contradictory intentions and interpretations of classroom participants if we are serious about facilitating desired learning outcomes in the classroom (Kumaravadivelu 1999). As a result, the researcher posited two reasons for the poor response. Firstly, most of the learners were hesitant to take part in the group discussion, as it was a new concept for them, and they were not used to speaking in groups. The second reason was the fact that in the previous writing sessions, most of the learners produced little content in their writing sessions. As a result, it was an indication that learners were in need of increased content to write a paragraph and also to improve their writing skills. To address these problems using classroom based research, tasks were designed to suit the mindset of the learners.

Data collection procedures

The task was centered on a problem based topic and, the task cycle was divided into three stages: pre-task, while-task and post-task as given in Table 1 (Skehan, 2003).

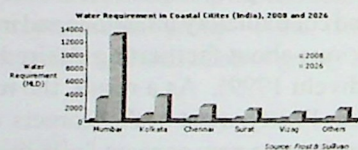
Table 1
Integrated Task Based Approach

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| Objective: To discuss and write a paragraph for about 150 words on the following problem solving topic: ❖ Lack of adequate water supply in Chennai city. |
| Overview: The task involves exchange of ideas (speaking) within a group of learners on a given topic followed by writing. |
| Title: Lack of adequate water supply in Chennai city. |
| Pre-Task |
| ➤ Pictures are shown to the learners depicting water problem in Chennai. |
| ➤ Outline for discussion: The water problem in the city, reasons for the problem, effective solutions. |
| ➤ Learners are provided with the structure of the problem solving essay. |
| ➤ Simultaneously the teacher gives adequate input on how to write essay. |
| ➤ A sample write up on problem solving essay is also provided. |
| While-Task |
| Speaking |
| Learners, after looking at the pictures given to them and getting a fair amount of input from the teacher, discuss with each other about the problem they have been given. |
| Both the learners jot hints at the time of discussion. |
| Writing |
| After the successful completion of the speaking part, both the learners write an essay on the given topic with the help of the ideas generated from the speaking part. |
| Post-Task |
| Focus on: logical development of ideas, vocabulary and sentence structure. |

Pictures used in the study



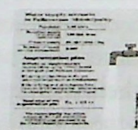
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The experimental group underwent the three task stages to execute the given task. As mentioned above, the first phase of the task was to discuss the topic in an informal discussion and the second phase was to write a paragraph based on the points generated out of the discussion. In each session, the experimental group was given different topics to discuss and take notes on during the discussion and after the first phase, they were asked to sit individually and write a paragraph based on the topic.

On the other hand, the control group was given the same topics and was asked to visit the library to collect data about the topic and write the paragraph in the writing phase.

The classes took place four days a week (two days for the trial group and two days for control group); 16 sessions were conducted with 8 sessions each for both trial and control group. Both the classes were taught by the same teacher as there was no other teacher available because of scheduling problems. The participants in each group received pre- and post-tests in both speaking and writing. The speaking performances of the participants in both the groups in pre- and post-test were audio recorded with their consent for subsequent rating. Their pre- and post-writing paragraphs were also collected. The parameters for assessing the speaking and writing skills were adopted from the 'speaking and writing scale: analytic descriptors of spoken and written language' from the Common European Framework (Council of Europe, 2001).

Table 1

| Group | Test (Writing) | N | Mean | SD | p | df | t |
|--------------------|-------------------|----|-------|------|--------|----|--------|
| Experimental group | Pre-test | 25 | 13.48 | 1.33 | 0.3780 | 48 | 0.8898 |
| | Post-test | 25 | 17.56 | 0.14 | | | |
| Control group | Pre-test | 25 | 13.16 | 1.21 | | | |
| | Post-test | 25 | 14.76 | 1.09 | | | |

The two-tailed P value for the Pre-test in writing is 0.3780 while for the post-test is 0.0001.

Table 2

| Group | Test (Speaking) | N | Mean | SD | p | df | t |
|--------------------|--------------------|----|-------|------|--------|----|--------|
| Experimental group | Pre-test | 25 | 13.04 | 1.24 | 0.4824 | 48 | 0.7079 |
| | Post-test | 25 | 17.56 | 0.77 | | | |
| Control group | Pre-test | 25 | 12.80 | 1.15 | | | |
| | Post-test | 25 | 14.80 | 1.00 | | | |

The two-tailed P- value for the Pre-test in speaking is 0.4824 while for the post-test is 0.0001.

Results and discussion

The comparison of speaking and writing performances of the participants in both the groups was made using the pre- and post-test scores. Tables 1 and 2 present the results for speaking and writing of learners in both groups.

As is seen in Tables 1 and 2, the results indicate that over time, the performance of learners in the experimental group was significantly better. The unpaired t-test (two-tailed) for the pre-test in terms of speaking and reading skills shows that there was no significant difference between the performance of the learners in both the control and experimental group. It was found that difference between the groups for writing $p = 0.3780$, $t = 0.8898$, $df = 48$ and speaking $p = 0.4824$, $t = 0.7079$, $df = 48$ was not statistically significant.

Unlike, the unpaired t-test (two-tailed) for the post-test in terms of speaking and reading skills shows that there was a significant difference between the performance of the learners in both the control and experimental group. It was found that the difference between the groups for writing $p = 0.0001$, $t = 10.7481$, $df = 48$ and speaking $p = 0.0001$, $t = 10.9441$, $df = 48$ was statistically significant.

The pre-test and post-test results indicate that learners in the experimental group gained in writing in terms of grammar, vocabulary, content, coherence and sentence structure. Likewise, in speaking, learners gained in content, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, coherence, and body language. Also, these were considered as the parameters to assess the learners' performance in both speaking and writing skills respectively. The difference in outcome between the two groups could be due to the implementation of TBA. The influence of TBA can't be proven as a cause for all the differences since other variables that influence the results. The variables are the time factor, prior knowledge about the subject, classroom atmosphere, the team which they were placed to perform the task, the teacher's role in imparting the task.

Based on the teacher's observations, it seemed that learners belonging to the trial group were more inspired to take part in the discussions. The learners were deeply involved in the discussion (e.g., water scarcity in Chennai City) and tried to suggest an appropriate solution. They prolonged the discussion beyond the given time and even continued outside the class.

After the sessions, the learners in the trial group met the facilitator and discussed the points and ideas raised about the topics in the earlier class. Whereas, the control group sent a small mail regarding the points that came out during the discussion in the earlier session, although it might have been more valuable to have also interviewed them. When the learners in the trial group were asked about their experience in performing the task and the motivational factors that helped them to execute the task, they pointed to the distinctive features of the task. In particular, they emphasized the following points:

1. The tasks were thought-provoking, creating scope for discussion, enabling them to use appropriate and precise language to elaborate on their ideas.
2. The tasks helped them to develop as good team members and generate a sort of responsibility to find out the appropriate solution through discussion.
3. In the post-test, learners were focused on incorporating appropriate ideas in the paragraph when compared to the pre-test which was vaguely written.
4. They were so engaged in the task that they never felt that were using English when completing the task.

Based on the analysis of the pre- and post- test results and the interviews of the experimental group it can be inferred that they were motivated to perform the task. They took part in the informal group discussion and also able to easily write the paragraph on the given topic. Whereas, the control group was quiet most of the time unless they were personally asked to contribute their ideas for the development of the discussion. This might be because the experimental group had gotten more practice by taking part in the discussion and paragraph writing.

Some input for teachers

ESL teachers can use TBA in their classrooms for a better outcome from learners in terms of speaking and writing skills. They can give topics for discussion and writing from daily life rather than topics that students cannot relate to, given that a task-based speaking class is not similar to that of a more traditional class, but has a unique output. In this approach, the tasks are chosen in such a way that learners don't face any problems comprehending them. Therefore, even a task like the one in Appendix A can be used with the learners for discussion. In addition to this topic, a range of topics can be included for the task dealing with films, lifestyle, politics, educational models, society and so on. As Seedhouse (1999) states "tasks should be particularly good at training learners to use the L2 for practical purposes, and this will prepare them well for accomplishing some tasks in the world outside the classroom"(p.155).

The role of a teacher in TBA is that of a facilitator and moderator. The teacher helps the learners in case of any clarification or doubts before discussion and writing. For example, the teacher can go around the classroom to check if all the learners are comfortable performing the tasks. The teacher can also help the learners in discussions on by pre-teaching how to initiate a discussion, how to agree or disagree with an opinion, how to conclude the discussion and so on. Whenever required the teacher can provide appropriate examples for the learners to make sure that the task is developing as expected. It is through this sort of modeling the learners can be trained to take part in discussion and writing without any fear or uncertainty. One advantage of this approach is the adaptability it has. It can be incorporated into the teaching-learning process at any point in time to develop any sort of skill. The teacher can develop appropriate tasks based on the learners' interests and implement them in the class which can lead to an improvement in the learners' language skills.

Conclusion

In accordance, with changing trends this small study was initiated to investigate whether a task if designed appropriately, could combine both speaking and writing skills and to examine if such a task could encourage learners to use the target language without any hesitation and fear. Thus, the study has attempted to present TBA as one of the approaches to ESL/EFL teaching and learning. In this experimental study, TBA is also focused on two objectives: first, it helps in fostering the production of language skills in terms of speaking and writing. Second, it enhances learners' logical reasoning through discussion so that they can decide on their own rather than blindly accepting a point of view. The findings of the study support that speaking and writing skills of L2 learners can be improved by designing tasks suitable to learners and also by providing a suitable classroom set up. The study suggests that a teaching-learning process can progress only when both the stakeholders function together in the development of the language. Some of the limitations associated with the study are concerned with time constraints and scheduling problems. Owing to a little time availability, the study was conducted only for 16 sessions, the possibility of providing extra time for the learners to prepare for the task was also very little. Besides, the control group learners were not provided with an instructor during the study due to the tight schedule. The study is restricted to first-year engineering students, whereas there was an ample possibility to extend the study to third-year students. If the research had been conducted for a semester, the results would have been even more effective providing scope for larger findings. At present, the further scope lies in conducting a comparative study in terms of analyzing the first year and third-year students' speaking and writing skills through TBA by applying a similar kind of tasks.

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