Analysis of Task-based Teaching

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Abstract: This essay is about a detailed analysis of task-based teaching method, including its definitions, merits and demerits, various models of tasl-based teaching especially ESA, hoping to help teachers to have a deeper understanding of task-based teaching in their contexts.

Keywords: Task-based teaching; Definitions

Nowadays, the argument regarding second language teaching methods has shifted from finding the ideal method to the necessity of the existence of any teaching methods. In practice, Prabhu (1990) believes that there is no best method in that it is hardly possible for teachers to adopt the same method universally. For learners, Kumaravadivelu (2006) concurs that we should move away from methods-based pedagogy to help teachers develop their own theory out of their practice to meet the diverse needs and identities of learners. For teachers, teaching by principles instead of following a certain method could sharpen their teaching skills by understanding flexibility and adjusting their teaching according to variables in classroom management. Furthermore, the concept of method itself might reflect the inequality of the world (Pennycook, 1989). Indeed, the present teaching practice is trying to blend ideas and elements from multiple teaching methods (Harmer, 2007).

However, Harmer (2007) further illustrates that classes tend to be messy if no coherence or philosophy to support them at all. To ensure successful language learning, some scholars suggest principle based pedagogy instead of fixed methods i.e. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), which essentially highlights the importance of the communicative task rather than language (Harmer, 2007). TBLT could allow different learning outcomes to be achieved by diverse methodological means (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Furthermore, it enables teachers to study and adjust their methods from classroom directly (Nunan, 2006). Indeed, planning around tasks is preferable by teachers as Swaffar et al. (1982) observed.

Many scholars indicate benefits of TBLT. Firstly, it could be adapted in multiple contexts. TBLT is designed on the basis of learners' needs, therefore, it has to be contextualized, as McDonough (2015) proposed localized TBLT. It implies that TBLT might be effective in some non-western situations regardless of sociocultural barriers via the use of authentic tasks (Ellis, 2003). Many research conducted in distinct social contexts and classroom settings yield positive results. For example, in Saudi Arabia, Hakim (2015) concludes that TBLT could facilitate local language learning for the sake of communication by interaction in collaborative tasks. In China, TBLT is preferred by learners and teachers and constantly advance teaching skills development and students' capacity (Shaoqian and Baoshu, 2013). In Korea, Kim, Jung, and Tracy-Ventura (2017) found attitudes of learners towards TBLT become more and more positive. Although the outcome is contrary to some other findings that TBLT is unpractical in non-Anglo-American areas, the crux might be how to localize TBLT.

Nevertheless, Kumaravadivelu (2006) argues that the adaption of the term "context" in TBLT mainly regarding linguistic elements, while broader factors such as uniqueness are not taken into consideration. To be specific, in Chinese context, issues in high schools such as crowded classes with unbalanced levels of students, lack of professional training and knowledge for practitioners, legacy of traditional methods, product-oriented assessment (the college entrance exam), insufficient education funds might cast negative implementation of TBLT (Shaoqian and Baoshu, 2013).

Secondly, developing learner autonomy is another potential advantage of TBLT for learners. The content of tasks is devised on the ground of students' real-world needs (Willis and Willis, 2007) since needs analysis of students serves as the foundation of tasks design (Long, 2005). As a result, students would be more motivated to learn because they could utilize what they learn from tasks in reality (Dörnyei, 2002). Furthermore, TBLT could foster learning strategies on the ground that language and the learning process itself is paid attention (Nunan, 2006). Theoretically, Oxford (2006) argues that students would grasp learning strategies as a task-analyser on the process of task completion. Empirically, many researchers found that students become more independent after application of TBLT.

Nonetheless, TBLT might also hamper learners' mastery of language to some degree. Lower level learners might suffer from TBLT in virtue of their misinterpretation and incomprehension of the teacher due to the teacher's preference for speaking the target language. It might lead to the anxiety of learners if they could not keep pace with the teacher, which in turn, serves as an "affective filter" to demotivate learners (Dörnyei and Ushioda; 2011). Lower level learners also tend to use native language when performing tasks owing to their scanty language proficiency, which might hinder the achievement of communicative language learning (Littlewood, 2007). To make it more complicated, it is harder to plan a class for mixed level learners partly due to their unequal engagement which

might result in frustration of lower level learners and boredom of higher level learners (Carless, 2002).

Thirdly, not only does learner autonomy be cultivated, teachers tend to be more self-directed as well (Nunan, 2006). As a mediator of language learning, teachers play a major role in determining tasks, exercises, materials and timelines of a classroom; as a change agent during performance of TBLT, they are inclined to adjust tasks according to students' needs, requirements of the context and their own beliefs; as a researcher, teachers, bearing in mind TBLT as a principled pedagogy, could be self-reflective by collecting and analysing data, study and evaluate the authentic classroom directly to construct their own methods (Van, 2016). However, it is surprising that some teachers are uncertain about definition and criteria of a task according to findings of Erlam (2016), especially the difference between tasks and exercises.

The stress of TBLT is on the task rather than the language as states before (Harmer, 2007). Given that there are many definitions about task, what they seem to have in common is the chief concern for meaning in real-world communication, which is also a salient difference between tasks and form-focused exercises (Ellis, 2003).

Based on this point, different frameworks have been proposed to actualize TBLT. One of them is Harmer's ESA. Rather than just providing some steps to follow, Harmer (2007, p.51) suggests features of teaching sequences i.e. "Engage", "Study", "Activate". As long as a lesson begins with engage and ends with activating, teachers can adjust the order of these three components according to students' level, response and aims of lessons (ibid.). It corresponds some key principles in TBTL such as active learning, individual and contextual differences as well as avoiding predictability via flexible variants (ibid.). Moreover, classroom is also a social environment. Since the 'task' becomes the tool for teaching, learners are really exposed to social activities including collaboration, critical thinking, and problem-solving. As Kumaravadivelu (2003) explains, sociocultural factors have to be considered in a classroom. Also, Harmer (2007) states that students could study more efficiently if their minds and hearts are involved. Moreover, some psycholinguistic evidence also shows people who are engaged in learning could excrete more grey matter in the hippocampus (in charge of memory) and a reduction of grey matter in the amygdala (in charge of anxiety) (Conrad, 2011). By asking them such questions, learners at least start to think about English and speak English to response them, thereby their attention might be drawn.

On the other hand, in spite of these merits, some scholars also point out some potential pitfalls of TBLT. Irrespective of effectiveness of TBLT is questioned from the aspects of context adaptability, learner levels, teacher understanding and performance of tasks, the merits of TBLT outweigh the demerits.

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