The Strengths And Weaknesses Of A Task Based Syllabus.

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<u>Introduction.</u>

The theoretical assumptions behind task-based syllabus arose out of the recognition of certain theory of language and theory of learning as follows. In relation to theory of language, it is emphasized that i) Language is primarily a means of making meaning; ii) Multiple models of language are involved in task-based learning; iii) Lexical units are central in language use and language learning; iv) Conversation is the central focus of language and the keystone of language acquisition. With respect to theory of learning, it is believed that i) Tasks provide both the input and output processing necessary for language acquisition; ii) Task activity and achievement are motivational; iii) Learning difficulty can be negotiated and fine-tuned for particular pedagogical purposes (Richards & Rogers 2001:223-234).

In addition, the rationale for task-based syllabuses advanced by SLA researchers is consistent with a variety of advanced development from other fields. First and foremost is cognitive science. It is premised on the theoretical view that the task-based instruction needs to be compatible with cognitive processes or operations involved in L2 acquisition. And the importance of learner engagement is emphasized. Tasks will be cognitively involving and motivating as long as they provide a reasonable challenge (Ellis 2003:209)

In this sense, tasks serve as a suitable unit for specifying learners needs and thus for designing specific purpose courses. What's more psycholinguistic considerations are fully concerned. Task-based syllabus

is 'psycholinguistic' in the sense "that it is based on interactional categories that have been shown to affect the opportunities learners have to comprehend input, obtain feedback, and to modify their own output" (Ellis 2003:215).

Designing of syllabuses involves the collection, sequencing and validation of the curriculum content. There are wide ranges of alternative models of syllabuses that have been proposed, one being a task-based approach syllabus. In a syllabus that is task -based, the content of its teachings are a series of complicated, purposeful and focused tasks that the students need or want in order for them to perform well in the target language that they are learning. The 'tasks' in task-based syllabuses can be defined as the range of activities designed for many purposes including the purpose of language learning and application in real-life situations. In task-based syllabus or learning, language learning is dependent on performance of task, and language teaching can only occur as the need arises during the execution of the assigned task. The basis of task-based syllabus has the goal of training students to be inspired by resources in order to complete a particular process or a piece of work. The acquisition of the target language in task-based syllabuses is motivated by the need of the learner (Willis 2003). For instance, the need to write a formal letter will drive the student into

learning the appropriate language for that purpose. This means that in task-based learning, the students often employ various forms, skills and functions of language in an individual and changeable way, to complete their tasks in task -based learning, the 'task' are referred to as the activities that require the use of the target language by the student for a communicative goal or purpose in order to attain results.

 In these tasks the emphasis is put on exchanging meanings and not creating particular forms of language.

Various authors describe tasks in different ways according to the teaching context. For instance, Nunan (1989) describes a communicative task as a piece of class work that engages students in understanding, manipulating, creating or cooperating in the target language. Nunan(1989) adds that when students are doing this, their attention is primarily focused on the meaning of the target language rather than on its form. In Nunan's definition, the task is said to also have a feel of completeness, and be capable of standing on its own as an open act in its own right. Another definition of 'task' is offered by Bygate, Skehan and Swain(2001), who states that, a task is an activity, which necessitates students to employ language use, with accentuation on the meaning in order to arrive at an object. In task-based learning, the tasks are used for leaning of the target language and they are not special tasks, but are general tasks that the learners actually have to undertake in any case. For instance, some of the tasks used may include writing a job application, conversing with a social worker, acquiring housing information through the telephone.

Creating a Task-based Learning Lesson

Many researchers have formulated different ways of creating a task-based learning curriculum or lesson that is well capable of getting students to concentrate on the assigned task. For instance, according to Jane Willis a comprehensive framework of a task-based lesson can be formulated into several strategic and sequential phases (Willis 2003). First, is the pre-task phase, whereby the teacher presents the expectations from the students during the task, as well as priming the students with major grammatical constructs and vocabulary. The teachers present this in terms of suggestions, while the students are motivated to use only what they are well suited with for them to complete the task. the teacher can also give the learners a task model that they can do by themselves or presenting them with a picture to demonstrate the task (Willis 2003).

The second phase is the task itself, whereby the students perform it, usually in small groups depending on the type of assigned activity. In this phase, the teacher can only play a specific role, which is usually limited to being an observer or a counselor-making the process to be more student-centered. This is followed by planning. Once the task is complete, students develop either an oral or a written report for class presentation. During this phase, the teacher remains much passive and may only take Questions or otherwise just monitors the students. The phase of report presentation to the class allows the teacher to give appropriate feedback in writing or orally, and the rest of the observing students can do the same. Once the report is presented, focus comes back to the teacher during the analysis phase (Willis 2003).

The teacher reviews what happened during the task regarding the language forms that were used and the difficulties that were encountered by the students. This gives the teacher and the students a perspective on the language forms that require covering. In the practice phase, the students go through and cover materials that the teacher mentioned in the analysis stage. In this stage, the teacher has an opportunity to lay emphasis on key language (Willis 2003).

Strengths and Weaknesses of Task-Based Learning

Task-based syllabus or learning refers to syllabuses that comes with various benefits, hence making it viable for language learning compared to other types of syllabuses. Firstly, task-based syllabus is extensively relevant and applicable because it suites learners of different backgrounds and all ages(Robertson 2006). This syllabus can be used with the very young scholars as well as with the oldest learners. When performing the tasks in this syllabus, the learners are free to use whatsoever language they prefer, thus enabling them to concentrate entirely on the meaning of the message without feeling any kind of insecurity or lack of confidence. This makes learning in this syllabus much closer to everyday situations of communicating Task-based learning brings the real-life learning into the classroom because the tasks employed in the syllabus are real- life activities such as writing application letters and other formal reports. In task-based syllabus, students experience with the target language helps to develop a natural context that can be personalized and relevant to each individual (Ellis 2003). This possibility of customization of task-based syllabus makes the design very user-friendly and applicable for many learners.

In task-based learning, the learners strive a lot to express whatever they want to

utter, and makes them more motivated to acquire the target language, which can be

the new language they are learning, or a language that they have familiarized themselves with, but have not acquired properly. This motivation emanates from the task assigned to the learners and the drive to accomplish these tasks. Language learning using task-based syllabus is very effective because exploration and acquisition of the target language arises from the needs of the students (Ellis 2003). These students needs thus dictate what is to be covered in the particular language lesson, thus ensuring that the decision is not made by the teacher and it is not picked from the course book. It also ensures that the language lesson has relevance with the students circumstances. This also makes students free from the teachers, who are deemed as authority figures, allowing these students to explore the language, they are learning even more (Robertson 2006).

With the task-based learning, the learners get a much more diverse exposure to the target language. For instance, students are exposed to a wider range of juxtapositions, lexical phrases, and language patterns, and language forms. The use of tasks in this syllabus design gives a natural chance for learners to revise and recycle What they have already learnt and it gives the teachers an opportunity to v evaluate progress of the learners (Robertson 2006). This continued practicing with the target language makes the learners perfect their skills in that language. Even from the commencement of the learning process, task-based syllabus gives clear goals regarding the gains that the participants would get from tasks. This means that the tasks in this learning mode have a well-defined set of goals, which state the anticipated capability that the learner will have acquired by the end of the task. The set goals also motivate the learners from the start, as each one of them is eager to

accomplish all the goals (Ellis 2003).

The tasks employed in this type of learning contribute to major progress in the learning process because they encourage the learners to plan and be more determined in the target language that they use, instead of just uttering the first thing that pops into their minds. Task-based syllabus also gives cooperative and collaborative support. This means that work in the classroom is carried out through a cooperative

basis, and that the execution of tasks involves a lot of initiation from the participants from the beginning (Robertson 2006). This provides for a supportive environment from the teachers as well as from the fellow students, especially for the learners that are slow in the language acquisition. In addition, this creates a non-threatening environment for the participants, allowing them to participate personally in the learning effort, knowing that they would be helped out where they fail (Ellis 2003). Task-based syllabus demands for more resources that are beyond the usual textbooks and other related materials found in the classrooms. Task-based syllabus is an unusual mode of learning and many learners may not expect it in a language class. This means that initially some of the students could resist or reject this type of learning terming it as unusual or seeing it as different. One aspect of task-based syllabus is that it is not teacher centered and rather, it demands for individual or group commitment and responsibility from students. This means that in case the students notably lack in those qualities, or for instance if the student is not as social, it may be indeed very difficult to implement a task-based syllabus in such a classroom (Krahne

1987).

At times during task execution, learners may find it difficult to use the target language or get impatient with the learning process and some learners may revert to using L1 (mother language) while others may even quit such classes (Ellis 2003)

Through task-based syllabus, individual learners may acquire excellent strategies of communication such as the use of gestures. However, most of the learners just manage to only use odd phrases and words and wait for other individuals to introduce the more challenging word in the language they need to acquire. This trend makes these individual learners to become mentally inflexible and rigid even before they can advance in learning the grammatical correctness of the target language. Learning through task-based syllabus makes some learners very incoherent because they tend to get absorbed in finding the right words for the task process rather than concentrating on finding out how the words fit within the discourse.

This means that the learners may opt to only learn the language for their own convenience. In addition, using task-based learning puts more concern on using lexical chunks instead of learning the grammar of the target language (Wills 1996). This means that in task-based syllabus, there is a major risk for students to acquire language fluency instead of accuracy of the target language. Such a student can never become a teacher of language because their utterances are fluent, but grammatically incorrect (Ellis 2003).

Learners of task-based syllabus experience some pressure regarding the time spent in acquiring the target language fully. This pressure then forces the learners into only learning to use words in the target language that they can readily access, or those

necessary for the assigned tasks, rather than attempting to learn the target language wholly in a way that they can use it at any time or in any circumstance within the real world. Besides not concentrating on the language accuracy, task-based syllabus approach does not offer the learners any incentive for them to expand their existing system of language (Skehan 1996). This is because, most of the learning is in terms of tasks, and there are not many other learning tools, which can help in expounding the variety of the learner's vocabulary. Evaluating learning through task-based syllabus can be difficult because its nature prevents it from being assessable using the more restricted and conventional tests (Krahne 1987).

Theories and Modules That influenced Task-based Syllabus.

Two theories and modules influence the design, implementation and effectiveness of task-based syllabus. These theories are the theory of language and the theory of learning (Grenfell & Harris 1999).

Theory of Language

Various suppositions regarding the nature of language have motivated many of the current approaches of task-based syllabus and learning. The first assumption is that language is chiefly a way of making meaning. In task-based learning, emphasis is placed on the key role of meaning i using a language. According to Skehan, task-based syllabus meaning is mainly the valuation of a task, in regard to the outcome. Skehan adds that task-based syllabus does not pertain to language display (Skehan 1998). The second assumption on the theory of language is that, various language models guide task-based syllabus. Supporters of this model employ functional,

structural, and interactive language models. Hence, task-based syllabus is not related to a single language model but instead, it draws on all the three language theory models (Grenfell and Harris 1999).

The language theory deems that vocabulary units are paramount in language learning and language use: in task-based learning, vocabulary includes considering the lexical phrases, stems of sentences, assembled collocations and routines, and not just words being the significant lexical analysis units (Skehan 1998). Lastly, the theory of language assumes that conversation is the key language focus and the basis for acquiring a language. That is why, collaboration and cooperation and group work are paramount in task-based learning. In task-based learning, communication and speaking with other people are regarded as the basis for acquiring a second language, thus most tasks proposed in task-based learning involve a lot of consideration (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Theory of learning

The second theory that influences task-based syllabus is the theory of learning. This shows that task-based syllabus also has the general assumptions regarding the language learning nature that inspires teaching nature that inspires teaching communicative language. This theory states that some principles of learning take a central role in task-based syllabus. These poles include proving the necessary input and output processing for language acquisition. Task-based syllabus draws on second language acquisition research on concession and communication, and suggests that the task is the key point for stimulating the practice of input-output and negotiating meaning (Takac 2008).

The theory of learning also states that activity and accomplishment are inspirational and that the tasks improve motivation of the learner and thus promotes learning. These tasks are good learning basis because they require learners to use accurate language, have distinct attributes and closure, they comprise of physical activity, they call for collaboration, corporation, and at a time they require past experience of the learner, and they encourage and tolerate various communications.

The learning theory states that modification, perfection and negotiation can be done for specific instructive purposes in case there is difficulty in learning a language. In addition, specific tasks can be planned to ease the use of language aspects and facilitate learning of certain aspects of language. This is because specific tasks provide a means for introduction of appropriate samples of the target language, and can be used to guide learners towards particular language aspects (Richards & Rogers 2001).

Teaching Situations Best Suited For Task-Based Syllabus.

Task-based syllabus is suitable for different but particular classroom activities. The syllabus design can be implemented for a single semester or in a full academic curriculum. This syllabus can also be used to teach multilevel and with learners of mixed capabilities. For instance, according to Harshbarger, Tafoya & Via (1986), there was a task conducted in a small-group discussion with Japanese English learners for academic purposes, which illustrated the implementation of the syllabus through a single task with numerous teachers and in several instructive courses. Jeon and Hahn (2006) showed task-based application in the context of Korean

secondary schools and the perceptions of EFL teachers. The overall conclusion was that majority of the learners had a high degree of comprehending the learning concept of task-based syllabus irrespective of the teaching level. As demonstrated by Lindstromberg and Boers (2008), task-based learning can be used in English as a foreign language (EFL) class. Here Lindstromberg and Boers (2008) explain how tasks such as dictogloss can be applied in different contexts in Japan. The authors Show that the syllabus design can be applied in a private language school, a private junior-senior high school or in a public junior high school.

Limbu and Waller explain how task-based learning can be implemented as an innovative academic annual curriculum to encourage cooperation, build a community sense, and develop critical-thinking skills in learners. This can be accomplished using content-based investigative tasks within the syllabus. In addition, this can be made more efficient through application of an ethnographic methodology in the syllabus (Limbu & Waller n.d.). Researchers have shown ways through which, task-based syllabus design can be used to create an intercultural competence in communication as well as an increased sense of cultural awareness. In such situations where task-based syllabus is used the learners are adequately prepared to engage themselves in real-world language and culture. The learners also get to pursue meaningful and relevant goals, in addition to developing communication strategies and skills (Reimann 2005).

According to Rosenkjar(2006), the task-based syllabus can be used in a literature-based lesson to demonstrate the manner in which tasks incorporate focus on form while putting focus on meaning. As demonstrated by Herrin, task-based

syllabus designs are   very suitable for multilevel students, especially the templates

that can efficaciously involve students in reading, speaking, listening and writing.

In the implementation of task-based syllabus, the design can be used to focus on

communication, information exchange and comprehending the meaning instead

of practicing the form (Herrin n.d).

Reasons For Choosing Task-based syllabus.

The basis of task-based syllabus for learners is in the belief that learning takes place

through action, in the sense of exploring different topics besides participating in

purposeful tasks. The activities of a task-based syllabus are done in a learning

environment that is stress-free and supportive for learners. In task-based syllabus,

topics of leaning are linked to the classroom tasks, creating a very efficient

mechanism for educators to plan and implement the language learning instruction.

There are many reasons as to why educators and learners should opt to use

task-based syllabus for teaching and learning. Firstly, in task-based syllabus design,

the learners acquire knowledge via hands-on experience and require that learners in

the classroom be active rather than passive. This ensures that the learners engage

themselves in relevant activities that are a part of language, and work on purposeful

tasks and using the target language to carry out those tasks. Another reason as to why

task-based syllabus may be preferable to others is the fact that this syllabus design

encourages cooperation and collaboration through group work. In such group

situations, some learners know more that others do. Through the collaboration

and cooperation exhibited in task-based syllabus, learners who do not know much can lear from learners who know more by interacting with one another.

In task-based learning, teachers do a lot of interaction with learners, This makes the learners freer to ask questions as well as challenges the learners to further their current level of expression. This provides contextual support for the learner, which is commonly referred to as instructional scaffolding. The process of acquisition is a process of discovery, whereby learners discover how language works. This implies that learners require chances where they can use and experiment with the target language, and task-based learning caters for that. In addition, task-based learning makes the learners feel free to make language errors in order for them to streamline the language system of their emerging language. This is very helpful compared to other syllabuses that give teachers an authoritative role, which sometimes intimidates the learners.

Task-based syllabus bears in mind that different learners have different motivations to study and that teaching a language cannot completely depend upon their own interest. That is why task-based learning incorporates interesting learning tasks in its design which, when the learners complete, their motivation for studying is aroused. The fact that task-based syllabus uses real-life tasks in teaching language acquisition makes it more applicable to the learners once they are through learning the new language. This means that besides acquiring the target language, the learners also learn important real-life undertakings such as writing application letters for jobs and even school admissions. Employing task-based syllabus helps in developing the comprehensive capability and quality of the learners, which is more importantthan

developing the capability of the learners to use the language or to learn communication.

Conclusion

Task-based syllabus refers to a set of instructional materials or planning, which is based on the goals that have been instituted for a program of learning language. Task-based syllabus is good for learning of teaching communicative functions. A task-based syllabus is based on specially designed tasks in order to facilitate acquisition of a second language. One in every task or activity used in task-based learning is a basic unit of the syllabus design. The tasks used in this syllabus were proposed by theorists of second language acquisition as the basis for planning the syllabus. As a syllabus design, task-based syllabus is efficient in most scenarios, but has its shortcomings as well. Students who want to grasp the basics of a language, especially by learning the most basic tasks such as writing job application letters can go for this syllabus because it is very suitable in such circumstances. In today's world, task-based approach has more benefits because some of the drawbacks have been eradicated by the employment of information technology in the syllabus. Even in accomplishing the syllabus tasks, the computing technology has eased the work.

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