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TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING AS A TREND IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING APPROACHES

In the last decade there have been important innovations in theory, research and classroom experience, which are introducing sound changes in foreign language teaching and represent a challenge to the dominant model. We can say that at the moment two major paradigms coexist: the propositional (structural and functional approaches) and the procedural (task-based and process approaches).

Purpose and objectives. This paper aims at presenting background of task-based language teaching, describing main approaches to task-based language teaching and making recommendations for language teachers regarding how to implement task-based pedagogy effectively.

Task-based language teaching is a student-centered approach to second language instruction. It is an offshoot of the communicative approach, wherein activities focus on having students use authentic target language in order to complete meaningful tasks, i.e. situations they might encounter in the real world and other project-based assignments.

In task-based teaching the focus is not on grammar—you have already introduced your students to necessary constructions earlier in the chapter or unit, as well as to the vocabulary they will need to complete the task—but rather on helping students develop linguistic strategies for completing the assigned tasks within the constraints of what they know of the target language. Because the emphasis is on spontaneous, creative language use, whether spoken or written, rather than on absolute accuracy, assessment is based on task outcome.

This method encourages meaningful communication and has the following characteristics:

- Students are encouraged to use language creatively and spontaneously through tasks and problem solving.
- Students focus on a relationship that is comparable to real world activities.
- The conveyance of some sort of meaning is central to this method.
- Assessment is primarily based on task outcome.

In task-based teaching, the center of the learning process moves to the students themselves and allows them to come to the realization that language is a tool to tackle and (re)solve real-world problems.

The process of task-based learning itself teaches important skills. Students learn how to ask questions, how to negotiate meaning and how to interact in and work within groups. Within this group work, they are able to observe different approaches to problem solving as well as to learn how others think and make decisions.

These are all skills that our students will need in order to be successful in the real world, regardless of which language(s) they use there.

In addition, task-based teaching provides students with the linguistic components they will need to accomplish these real-world tasks. These include: how to introduce themselves, how to talk about themselves, their families, their interests, their likes and dislikes, their needs, etc. in the right socio-cultural context.

By moving the focus away from mechanical drills—although such drills do still have their place even today in language teaching, especially when teaching highly inflected languages—task-based teaching focuses on communication and interaction, using appropriate language at the correct time.

The lesson follows certain stages: pre-task, task, planning, report, analysis and practice.

N. S. Prabhu cites three basic types of tasks in task-based teaching in his book “Second Language Pedagogy,”: information gap, reasoning gap and opinion gap.

Information gap activities are those that involve the transfer of information from one person to another, from one form to another or from one place to another. For example, two students might have different schedules, but they want to find time to get together to have tea. They need to get relevant information from each other to determine when they are both free, as well as when the available times coincide with when a tea house is open. This type of activity allows students to request information, ask for clarification and negotiate both meaning, particularly when misunderstandings occur, and appropriate conclusions to the task.

Reasoning gap activities are those in which you ask your students to derive some information from that which you give them. They are required to comprehend and convey information, much as in an information gap activity, but the information that they are asked to convey is not exactly the same that they comprehend. They are asked to use reason and logic to decide what information to convey and what resolution to make for the problem at hand. For example, you might ask your students to make a decision between speed and cost or cost and quality, given a certain situation and various constraints.

Opinion gap activities are those that ask students to convey their own personal preferences, feelings or ideas about a particular situation. On a higher level, you might ask them to take part in a discussion or debate about a political or social issue. On a lower level, you might ask them to complete a story. In these

types of activities, there is no right or wrong answer, and, therefore, there is no objective means by which to judge outcomes, outside of whether what the students do or say addresses the task at hand. You might require them to speak or write for a certain amount (words or time) and you might ask them to use certain constructions. Otherwise, assessment is subjective rather than objective.

With some theoretical background and those practical steps in mind, let's look at example of task-based activity.

1. Road Trip

Have your students ever asked you where you are going to travel over winter break or summer vacation? Why not let them help plan a trip for you?

It is not important whether you take one of these proposed trips or not, but it will help your students feel like they are making an impact on your life, the same way they know that you are impacting their lives.

For this activity, you should have enough maps for each group in your class. Because your students are likely more familiar with their home country than the country whose language they are studying, you should be sure to have local maps—and everyone should work under the assumption that this is going to be a true “road trip,” meaning that you will be driving.

At the beginning of the class, you should ask each group what information they need from you in order to plan the perfect trip. This might include the number of days you wish to travel, your budget and what you like to do while on the road or in your free time. Once your students have this information, set them loose with their maps and give them time to plan!

When they are done, have them present their trip to the entire class. Your class, as a whole, can now vote on which trip you are going to take! Of course, they should be able to explain why they made the choice that they made, especially if they chose a trip other than the one their group created for you.

What about homework? Depending on the level of the students, there are a couple of options. If it is a lower-level class, they could write a short postcard home, telling some key points of one day of the trip. And if it is a more advanced level

class? Then they could write two or three days' journal entries, similar to a postcard, but more detailed and, of course, using more language skills.

We must admit that it is worth using the task-based learning approach because it has some clear advantages:

- The students are free of language control. In all three stages they must use all their language resources rather than just practising one pre-selected item.
- A natural context is developed from the students' experiences with the language that is personalised and relevant to them.
- The students will have a much more varied exposure to language with task-based learning.
- They will be exposed to a whole range of lexical phrases, collocations and patterns as well as language forms.
- The language explored arises from the students' needs. This need dictates what will be covered in the lesson rather than a decision made by the teacher or the coursebook.
- It is a strong communicative approach where students spend a lot of time communicating. Present Practice Produce (PPP) lessons seem very teacher-centred by comparison. Just watch how much time the students spend communicating during a task-based lesson.
- It is enjoyable and motivating.

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