

# TASK-BASED LEARNING FOR ENHANCED MASTERY OF LANGUAGE

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## ABSTRACT

Teachers' observations suggest that task-based learning (TBL) enhances the four language skills at a faster rate and makes teaching and learning more interactive, enjoyable and effective. The objective of this paper is to examine how TBL accelerates improvement because it requires greater involvement of the students in the learning process and students tend to feel a stronger sense of ownership as they are encouraged to take the lead in figuring out the best way to achieve the specific goals of the tasks. TBL makes it possible for students to take responsibility for a major part of the work, while enabling the lecturer to focus on providing relevant explanation and feedback. This paper describes these aspects, drawing on the prior experience of students using task-supported language activities (TSLA) in their secondary school years. The subjects of this paper are students in the Australian Matriculation (AUSMAT) Programme from January and April 2013 intakes who have taken English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD) as a core subject. Their reflective essays provided relevant data as the basis of this research. The responses indicate that noticeable improvement in the students' oral and written skills resulted from the TBL approach.

**Keywords:** *task-based learning (TBL), task-supported language activities (TSLA), improvement at faster rate*

## INTRODUCTION

The mainstream views about language learning is rooted on the principle that language learning will progress successfully when there is a systematic attempt to teach language step-by-step as in approaches based on a structural syllabus where TSLA are given. TBL challenges these views and it is based on the principle that learning will progress most successfully if teaching focuses on creating contexts in which the learner's inherent language learning capacity is given the opportunity to be nurtured through linguistically rich interactions. TBL has been subject to criticism on the basis of its implementation in different instructional settings. In particular, questions have been raised by critiques as to whether TBL is practical in non-English speaking countries, where teachers face practical problems such as limited English language proficiency and the washback effect from tests that they need to prepare the students for (Ellis 2009), which has influenced the way language is taught. This paper does not attempt to address a number of criticisms arising from the theoretical critiques nor in distinguishing between TBL and TSLA to present the former as desirable and the latter as undesirable because a case can be made for both. Rather, this paper intends to share the teachers' experience and observation in employing the TBL approach on students who have experienced the TSLA approach for more than ten years.

TBL emphasizes on achieving a clearly defined outcome where language acts as the basis of achieving the outcome instead of an end in itself. Students have to be resourceful in both linguistic and non-linguistic aspects in order to complete the task. TBL requires a syllabus consisting of specific tasks to be completed, while TSLA utilizes a structural syllabus which typically involves 'PPP' (presentation-

practice-production) in which exercises such as situational grammar exercises are the norm (Ellis 2009). From the teachers' observation in employing the TBL approach, TBL accelerates improvement because it usually allows the learner the autonomy to examine the task in a more critical manner and it may bring about real situations of language use. It is preferred over TSLA that is a teacher-fronted approach where learners are typically directed to communicate in a target setting that may not be appealing as most students tend to lack a sense of ownership in the activities.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

TBL has gained increasing attention from researchers and educators since Candlin and Murphy's (1987) seminal collection of papers. This approach seems to inspire engagement and it could provide a platform for communicating in any of the four skills. In the study by Ellis (2009), TBL can be input-providing tasks that engage students in listening or reading and output-prompting tasks that engage them in speaking or writing. Many tasks integrate more than one skill and usually require two or more skills. An activity is considered a 'task' when it fulfills the following criteria:

- i. the primary focus should be on 'meaning' where students should focus on processing the semantic and pragmatic meaning of the utterances
- ii. there should be a 'gap' where students need to infer meaning and to express an opinion
- iii. students should greatly depend on their own resources to complete the activity
- iv. there is a clearly defined outcome other than the use of language and language only serves as the means of achieving that outcome

TBL is similar to other kinds of language teaching because it also entails both design and methodology. Decisions also need to be made regarding the type of tasks to be given in order to achieve a particular outcome, the content of the tasks that enlists integration of certain language skills and the sequence of the tasks so as to best facilitate the learning experience. TBL emphasizes the role of tasks in creating contexts for natural language use and promotes learner-centeredness. It is important to note that TBL should be seen as something complementary to TSLA. According to Widdowson (2003), TSLA are likely to result in 'encoded usage rather than realization as purposeful use'. On the other hand, TBL seems to be more engaging and enjoyable as students are given the freedom to explore the richness of language in an attempt to achieve a particular task or goal.

Reflective writing is a core feature of TBL in the AUSMAT programme. In the study by Farrell (2012), reflective essays serve as a compass for students to stop, look and discover where they are at the moment and provide a direction as to where they want to go in the future. As Dewey (1933) pointed out, reflective inquiry is not just mulling things over that interest us, which unfortunately seems to be a wide interpretation of reflective thinking today. He viewed reflective thinking as an active, driven and careful consideration of any belief so that people can engage in intelligent thought and action rather than routine thought and action.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research employed the qualitative method where the students are required to provide answers to several questions in the form of reflective essays after completing each task. By reflecting, students look back at the task in order to show what they have learned. They need to explain what happened, how they felt about the task, what they have learned and whether they could have handled things differently in the future. Apart from that, they are required to reflect and assess their own progress and compare their TBL experience with their previous TSLA experience.

In the AUSMAT programme, students are exposed to tasks such as debates, oral presentations, group discussions, tutorials, reflective writing and investigative report writing to name a few. The students would be expected to proceed with the tasks independently, by working either individually or with their group members and the lecturers' role would be to provide the necessary feedback and monitoring to ensure that the tasks are completed satisfactorily.

The students were also asked to provide feedback on the activities that were typically conducted in TSLA based English classes during their secondary school (Forms Four & Five) and the type of activities which they would actually prefer, in order to have more effective learning. This would serve as an indication of the students' evaluation of the learning activities they have previously undertaken with the current approach they have been introduced to in EALD.

## **SCOPE OF INVESTIGATION**

The total population for this study is 62 respondents in the Australian Matriculation (AUSMAT) Programme who have taken English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD) as a core subject. The AUSMAT Programme takes between eight to ten months to complete and is divided into two semesters. In each semester, students are required to produce four tasks, comprising investigations, reports and oral presentations which evaluate students on the core skills of listening and speaking, as well as reading and writing, thereby making it a TBL approach programme. At the end of the programme, students are required to sit for an extensive final examination which comprises a practical (oral) examination and a written examination that include sections on listening, reading & viewing, and extended writing. As students needed to master these skills in a relatively short period of time, the TBL approach was chosen for its effectiveness in assisting students to better master the language. Students' reflective essays written after each task completed in the subject EALD were used to suggest that TBL produced noticeable improvement at a seemingly faster rate.

## **RESULTS**

### **Comparison of Activities Conducted Using TSLA and TBL Approaches**

The students were asked to identify three most common activities that were conducted in their secondary English classes. Out of the 62 respondents, 76 percent indicated that grammar activities were the most common, followed by essay writing at 71 percent and reading comprehension exercises at 61 percent. For roughly only 12 percent of the students, group discussions were part of their English language learning experience. Activities such as debates were not conducted at all, while listening activities and presentations were only experienced by about 5 percent of the respondents. These activities which students ranked as being most commonly conducted were done on a weekly basis most of the time.

In contrast, when asked to choose three activities which they thought would be most beneficial to have in an English class, 60 percent of the students ranked giving presentations as beneficial, and 53 percent chose essay writing. Listening activities and group discussions tied at 42 percent each. Another 27 percent chose debates, 24 percent were in favour of reading comprehension exercises, while vocabulary and spelling activities, as well as grammar activities trailed at around 18 percent each. None of the respondents felt cloze passage exercises were beneficial.

Hence, when comparing the activities that the respondents had actually done previously in their secondary school years with what they deemed beneficial, the only option which fulfilled the expectations

of the students was essay writing. Grammar activities, which were a staple of most English classes, fell far below the mark as over 80 percent of the respondents did not rate it as beneficial.

It is significant to note that activities conducted using the TBL approach, namely debates, presentations and group discussions, among others, were ranked highly by the students as being advantageous in their learning of English. These activities directly contributed to the students' improved mastery of the language, particularly in the oral aspect, fitting with the nature of these tasks. How students viewed the tasks would no doubt impact their learning process, and hence tasks which are viewed as beneficial in assisting students to master the language would certainly be valued.

The students' responses when asked to compare TBL with TSLA are summarized below.

**Question 1: Describe how your written and oral language skills have (or have not) improved faster using the TBL approach by giving relevant examples.**

Majority (85 percent) of the students responded that TBL approach helped to improve written and oral language skills faster than TSLA. This was not surprising, as the activities conducted in the TBL approach matched more closely with what students felt were beneficial in their learning of the language, as opposed to what they had experienced in the TSLA setting. Of the remaining eight students, six felt that their oral skills improved significantly using the TBL approach but their written skills either did not improve, or improved at a slower rate when compared with the oral skills. One student, in contrast, rated his improvement in the written aspect as being faster than that of his oral capabilities. Only one student stated that he did not improve in both skills as TBL required him to apply the knowledge he already has, as opposed to providing him with better written or oral language skills.

**Question 2: Compare your TBL learning experience with your previous TSLA experience. Which approach was more interactive, enjoyable and effective?**

Overall, most students responded positively to this question and indicated that they enjoyed the TBL experience although some found it challenging or stressful at times. Several stated that TSLA was a little boring as it required minimal participation from the students. Only two students indicated that TSLA was more enjoyable than TBL as they were able to play some language games or relax during class. As for effectiveness, 95 percent agreed that TBL is an effective way to improve language skills. Only one respondent felt that TSLA and TBL are equally effective, while another two students rated TSLA to be more effective.

**Question 3: Which approach worked best to promote involvement, inculcate responsibility and a sense of ownership? Explain.**

All 62 students responded that TBL worked best to promote involvement, inculcate responsibility and a sense of ownership compared to TSLA. Without exception, each of the respondents held the opinion that TBL mandated their complete commitment to the tasks given, and as they would be required to provide their own view when responding to the task it inevitably created a sense of ownership and pride over their work.

**Question 4: Which approach would you prefer? Explain.**

An overwhelming majority (92 percent) of the students preferred the TBL approach as they valued it for the qualities already expanded on in the previous questions. Only two students suggested that both TBL and TSLA approaches be combined for the highest effectiveness, while another two preferred the TSLA approach as they were more comfortable with being given more guidance.

## **Researcher's observations**

The teachers' observation shows that there was resistance from students when TBL was initially introduced. Some students felt that they were at a loss because there was no right or wrong answer to a particular task. They were rather skeptical about their own opinions and expression of thoughts and constantly checked with the teachers for the 'right answer'. They expected to be spoon-fed and this is likely due to the fact that they were accustomed and familiar with the 'traditional' teaching or the TSLA approach that they have undergone for more than a decade. Hence, with TBL, the teachers have to constantly encourage students form their own opinions and advise them to substantiate any statements made by them with relevant evidence such as examples, analogies and statistics. A lot of coaching, motivation and encouragement had to take place at the initial stage in order to instill confidence in the students. However, after completing the tasks, the majority of students came to prefer the TBL approach for numerous reasons.

TBL increases the opportunities for student-initiated output as opposed to TSLA where teacher-directed output is the norm. TBL also builds a sense of camaraderie and encourages more teamwork among the students, instead of focusing on individual efforts only. In TSLA settings, students may unconsciously be more self-centered. Another advantage that TBL has over TSLA is that it fosters creative and critical thinking skills which are not usually emphasized in the latter. TBL is a suitable alternative, or possible progression, especially when students have already mastered the rudimentary skills and are ready for more complex challenges.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In the present study, the researchers have observed the effectiveness of TBL for students who have taken the EALD subject in the AUSMAT Programme. The study tried to compare the students' TBL experience with their previous TSLA experience. The findings of this study is parallel to the teachers' observations that TBL seems to accelerate improvement and makes learning more interactive, enjoyable and effective. This research attempts to make some contributions towards a better understanding of TBL and help to enhance the students' learning experience in the effort to encourage students to master the English language.

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