



A Comparative Study of Task-based vs. Task-supported Teaching Approaches in an EFL Context

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Abstract

In spite of the numerous merits of task-based language instruction as claimed by its supporters in the last few decades, task-supported teaching approach as an alternative was introduced. Since then, there have been controversial debates over the superiority of each of these two approaches. Thus, in the current research project, the purpose was to consider these two teaching approaches in the scope of English language teaching, with the purpose of exploring the most efficient one in an Iranian EFL context. To this end, 120 sophomore students, majoring in English language translation course at Islamic Azad University, Shar-e-Qods branch were selected among 4 intact reading comprehension II classes. Next, they were divided into two experimental groups. The first experimental group received task-based instruction and for the second experimental group, task-trusted teaching approach was applied. The results of the data analyses turned out that task-trusted teaching approach was superior to task-based teaching in teaching reading to EFL learners.

Keywords: task-based language teaching (TBLT), task-supported language teaching (TSLT), reading comprehension

1. Introduction

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is a process-oriented approach to language teaching that centralizes communicative language teaching at the heart of syllabus design and instructional goals (Littlewood, 2004; Nunan, 2004; Richards, 2005). In this approach the basic aim of second language teaching is to enable learners to use the target language for social functional action or situation communication (Branden, Bygate & Norris, 2009).

Ellis (2003) defines a task as ‘a work plan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed. To this end, it requires them to give primary attention to meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources, although the design of the task may predispose them to choose particular forms. A task is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world. Like other language activities, a task can engage productive or receptive, and oral or written skills, and also various cognitive processes’ (p. 16).

Despite all the advantages claimed by TBLT supporters, there are also some critiques. First, “much communication in TBLT is lexical in nature” (Skehan, 1996, p.41), and “there is a general tendency to minimize linguistic forms” in learners’ interactions (Seedhouse, 1999, p.152). Second, TBLT emphasizes fluency but ignores accuracy by relying on interactions to facilitate L2 acquisition (e.g. Ellis, 2000; Swan, 2005). With communication strategies and strategies of comprehension, learners detect meanings from the target language and ignore or neglect the forms (Skehan, 1996). In addition, Lai & Li (2012) believe various challenges have also been revealed while implementing tasks in language classroom contexts, including: (a) students’ passive learning style and overreliance on the teacher, which weaken the implementation of TBLT in certain sociocultural contexts (Bruton, 2005; Burrows, 2008; Littlewood, 2007); (b) crowded and cramped classrooms, which can create discipline issues if everyone in the class starts to talk at the same time, inevitably bringing “uncontrollable” and “unwelcome” noises (Bruton, 2005; Carless, 2007; Li, 1998); (c) mixed proficiency levels in the classroom, which make quicker students bored and leaves slower students struggling to complete the tasks (Mustafa, 2008); and (d) students’ avoidance of the use of the target language in fulfilling the communicative tasks (Carless, 2004; Littlewood, 2007). Also, Burrows (2008: 19) claims that task-based learning does not provide a sufficient focus on form. Furthermore, Swan (2005) argues that it ‘outlaws’ the grammar syllabus. Thus, he introduces an alternative approach to TBLT named task-supported approach and he believes this approach simply combines task use with traditional pedagogy, and is consistent with a weak version of CLT and even can be superior to TBLT.

In line with all the studies done and researches conducted in the field of TBLT in the last three decades, little has been done to study and compare TBLT with task-supported language teaching.

Consequently, this study aimed at comparing and analyzing these two approaches to figure out the most efficient one in teaching reading comprehension to university students majoring in English language translation.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

In this study, 120 sophomore students, majoring in English language translation course at Islamic Azad University, Shar-e-Qods branch were selected. As a result, there were 4 intact classes with the average number of 30 students in each that attended reading comprehension course. Two of the classes were randomly chosen as the first experimental group and the two other classes as the second experimental group.

2.2 Instruments

To fulfill the purpose of the study, the following instruments were deployed:

2.2.1 A standard OPT (Oxford Placement Test)

A standard OPT (Oxford Placement Test) was run to make a homogeneous sample in order to implement the experimental research method. The Oxford placement test consisted of listening and grammar sections. The listening section entailed 100 items. It took approximately ten minutes to complete the listening test. Test-takers were asked to choose the correct words which they heard in short sentences from two choices. The grammar section consisted of 100 items. Fifty minutes were allotted to the task completion. The test-takers were asked to read the stem with a blank and choose one of the three options for the blank.

The scoring of the test was according to the table provided in the OPT pack. Based on the scoring table, the expected score for intermediate level was considered 120-134. Thus, the participants who scored above within the range were selected as the target participants. It should be mentioned that approximately 8 learners were omitted at this stage due to gaining the score above or below the expected range.

2.2.2 Pretest

A pre-test was conducted to study the homogeneity of the participant learners in terms of their reading comprehension skill. To prepare a test which was utilized as both pre-test and post-test, three sample texts were randomly selected from *Active Skills for Reading: Book 3* by Neil J. Anderson. This book was chosen as their course book.

Then, to calculate the readability levels of the texts, Flesch Reading Ease readability scale (Microsoft word 1983-94) was deployed. Since the readability levels of the passages were found to be different, the mean readability was calculated which was 65.4. In the next step, appropriate passages for constructing pre-test and post-test were selected. To do so, not only having similar readability level was considered but also the same subject matter and the same style of writing was accounted. Thus, more than 10 passages were selected from authentic books written by native English speakers. From among them four were finally chosen. Each text followed by five multiple choice questions. As a result, totally four texts with 20 multiple choice questions were selected. The items in this test were piloted with the same target group and two items were discarded due to having poor facility and discrimination indexes. Items with the discrimination index of 0.40 and lower and with the facility index of 0.37 to 0.63 were considered valuable.

In addition, to ensure the reliability coefficient of the test, through the application of Kr-21 formula, the estimated reliability was 0.87. Furthermore, to determine the validity of the test the Pearson product moment correlation formula was conducted. As a result, the estimated validity was 0.80.

2.2.3 Post-test

In order to assess the efficacy of the two reading comprehension instructions applied in this study, the same pre-test was given to the same participants as a post-test.

2.2.4 Instructional materials

Active Skills for Reading: Book 3 by Neil J. Anderson was chosen as their course book. This book consists of 12 units and each unit has two chapters. Each chapter includes a reading text with pre-reading and post-reading activities. For this study, 6 units of this book were selected to be covered within 12 class sessions.

2.3 Research Design

The design adopted to run this study was two experimental groups post-test only. It enjoyed a quasi-experimental design entailing the following characteristics: two experimental groups of sophomore students majoring in English language translation course and no control group.

The first experimental group received task-based instruction as a treatment and the second experimental group was provided with a task-supported teaching approach. In addition, two tests as pre-test and post-test were administered in both groups.

2.4 Procedure

In the present study, initially, 120 sophomore students, majoring in English language translation course at Islamic Azad University, Shar-e-Qods branch were selected among 4 intact reading comprehension II classes. Then, an OPT test was given to them with the purpose of reaching a homogeneous sample.

In the next step, the participants in this study were randomly divided into two groups of experimental 1 and experimental 2. Then, in order to have a homogenous group in terms of reading skill, a pre-test was conducted to both groups. Then the reading scores of two groups were calculated and compared by a t-test to make sure that the two intact groups were homogeneous regarding their reading comprehension skill.

Next, for both groups, *Active Skills for Reading: Book 3* by Neil J. Anderson was chosen as their course book. The first experimental group was instructed based on task-based teaching and for the second experimental group task-supported teaching approach was supplied. The dedicated time for each class was three hours per week and there were 12 class sessions.

In order to assess the efficacy of the two approaches employed in this study, a post- test was used. Then, a t- test was conducted to reveal the significance of the difference between the two groups' mean scores.

Since the same test was used as both pre-test and post-test, a twelve-week time interval between two administrations of the tests was found ideal which was neither too long nor too short.

2.4.1 Treatments

Both types of treatments applied for both groups in this study were run three hours per week and there were 12 class sessions and the 4 reading instructors took part in this study were M.A. and Ph.D. holders in TEFL with the average of 5 year-teaching experience in the field. They were requested by the researchers to follow the following instructions for teaching reading comprehension II.

2.4.1.1 Task-based instruction

The two instructors who were asked to apply task-based teaching to the first experimental group followed the exact stages appeared in the *Active Skills for Reading: Book 3* as the book is designed based on task-based teaching, in a way that each unit comprises two chapters that each one starts with some pre-task activities, a reading text, and some post-task activities, respectively. As a result, each session started with accomplishing pre-reading tasks assigned in the book for a due unit. The learners were asked to do the tasks in pairs then and their answers were checked as a class. Then, they read the text silently and did the post-reading tasks assigned in their book. There was no extra activity prior to the book. In case of coming up with any problem, the learners could consult a dictionary, a classmate or their instructor to resort it. The instructor in each class monitored the pairs and dealt with the questions. And both pre and post reading tasks were applied to teach the new materials.

2.4.1.2 Task- supported instruction

The two other instructors who deployed task-supported approach to teach the second experimental group, commenced each session with a short warm-up, pertaining to the topic of the chapter prior to the book, and then, the learners had a silent reading which was followed by a group work, .i.e. the learners read the text in groups, checked the meaning of unknown words, and helped each other with paraphrasing and summarizing the text. Then, the text was read as a the class by the students and the sentences were paraphrased by the instructor dealing with learners' pronunciation, vocabulary, and sentence structure problems, and then summarized by the learners. Finally, the post-tasks activities were done as a means of practicing and reviewing the already introduced materials.

3. Results

The basic descriptive statistics were performed for both pre and posttests. The results are presented in the following table:

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the pretest and posttest reading scores

	TBT pretest	TST pretest	TBT posttest	TST posttest
N	56	56	56	56
Mean	12.84	13.05	14.59	17.04
Std. Error of Mean	.269	.283	.319	.294
Std. Deviation	2.016	2.118	2.388	2.199
Variance	4.065	4.488	5.701	4.835
Skewness	.435	.415	.168	-.164
Std. Error of Skewness	.319	.319	.319	.319
Skewness ratios	1.36	1.30	.526	-.514

To make sure about the homogeneity of the two groups regarding the dependent variable, i.e. reading skill, the pre-treatment mean scores were compared. To legitimize a t- test, the normality condition had to be checked first. As it is

depicted in table 1, both sets of pretest scores were normally distributed as the skewness ratios were both within the normality range of ± 1.96 . Therefore, a t- test was legitimate to run.

Table 2. Group Statistics of the pretest scores

pretest	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
TBT	56	12.84	2.016	.269
TST	56	13.05	2.118	.283

As the table 2 shows, TTT group obtained a higher mean score in comparison with TBT group. In order to see whether this difference is significant, an independent sample t-test was run.

Table 3. Independent Samples Test on the pretest scores

pretest	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.(2tailed)	Mean differences
Equal variances assumed	.323	.571	-.548	110	.585	-.214
Equal variances not assumed			-.548	109.731	.585	-.214

As table 3 shows, the variances of the two sets of scores revealed the homogeneity of the groups in terms of reading ability. ($F=3.23$, $p=.571 > .05$) Next, to test the null hypothesis, a t- test was run between the two groups' posttest mean scores. To do so, firstly the normality condition was checked. As shown in table 4.1, both sets of posttest scores were normally distributed as the skewness ratios were both within the normality range of ± 1.96 . Therefore, a t- test was run.

Table 4. Group Statistics of the posttest scores

posttest	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
TBT	56	14.59	2.388	.319
TST	56	17.04	2.199	.294

As the table 4 reveals, TTT group gained a higher mean score in comparison with TBT group. In order to see whether this difference is significant, an independent sample t-test was run.

Table 5. Independent Samples Test on the posttest scores

Posttest	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.(2tailed)	Mean differences
Equal variances assumed	.181	.671	-5.640	110	.000	-2.446
Equal variances not assumed			-5.640	109.262	.000	-2.446

As depicted in table 5, the variances of the two sets of scores appeared to be homogeneous ($F=.181$, $p=.671 > .05$) but the significant value under t- test turned out to be .000 which was smaller than .05, therefore, it can be induced that the two groups were significantly different in their posttest performance. As a result, the null hypothesis stating that there is not a significant difference between the effect of task-based teaching and task-supported teaching on EFL learners' reading comprehension was rejected.

4. Discussion & Conclusion

Though there is global interest in the value of TBLT to foster worthwhile language learning, there is also diversity in the educational scope, practical applications and research associated with the name. Certainly, TBLT remains a contested domain of inquiry and practice, although much of the debate surrounding TBLT results from incomplete understandings of precisely what this educational approach comprises (Norris, 2009). In addition, in the recent years a new approach has been introduced as a complementary to TBLT and even as it is claimed a more applicable one, named task- supported language teaching. Consequently, in line with other researches conducted so far in this regard, this study aimed at investigating the effects of these two teaching approaches on Iranian university students' reading

comprehension. The results of statistical analyses turned out that task-supported teaching approach was superior to task-based teaching in reading comprehension teaching context. The results confirm Swan's (2005) claim in finding more advantageous with task-supported teaching approach in comparison with task-based teaching. Although Ellis (2009) enumerates the merits of a task-based approach, many scholars do not find this approach without its flaws.

As Dickinson (2010) mentions some of the more well-known general criticisms of TBLT are:

- It is unsuitable for low-level learners (Bruton, 2002; Swan, 2005). It results in impoverished language use that is of little acquisitional value (Seedhouse, 1999).
- It lacks both theoretical and empirical support (Bruton, 2002; Sheen, 2003; Swan, 2005).
- It lacks sufficient focus on form (Burrows, 2008; Sheen, 2003; Swan, 2005).

To support these criticisms, Swan (2005) argues that TBLT 'outlaws' the grammar syllabus. Thus, he introduces an alternative which is a task-supported approach that simply combines task use with traditional pedagogy, and is consistent with a weak version of CLT and he believes it can be superior to TBLT. And, consequently, the findings of this study is incongruent with Swan's alternative approach, i.e. task-supported teaching.

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