

## Task-Based Language Teaching: A Current EFL Approach

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### ABSTRACT

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is one of the widely discussed teaching approaches at present. Teaching a lesson using tasks needs careful consideration of the age and interests of the learners. This paper provides an overview, characteristics and advantages of TBLT; highlights teacher and student roles; and explores teachers' perceptions of task-based language teaching. For this, I purposively selected two English language teachers teaching at secondary levels as the participants of my study. This study applies ethnographic research method and explores the participants' perceptions of using language tasks in their classrooms. The findings suggest that though English language teachers hold positive attitudes on task-based language teaching as a current EFL approach, they are not well aware of the methods of using this approach in their classrooms.

### INTRODUCTION

When I was a student at secondary school, our English teachers always made us memorize the subject matter from the notebooks in the class. I, along with most of my classmates, could memorize and recite the texts and materials assigned, but we were unable to produce even very simple English sentences outside the classroom. Even at the campus level, I would use most of my study time in memorizing the notes given by the teachers. A significant number of students, including myself, could not develop the expected level of communicative abilities even after studying the English language even after studying it from grade four to a bachelor's degree. However, when I studied communicative approaches and methods in the master of education English (M. Ed.), I developed my curiosity in applying task-based language teaching in my English language classes.

Fifteen years ago, when I started teaching English in an institutional school, I experienced teachers explaining the lessons in simple English sentences and dictating answers to the students like my teachers used to do with us. Moreover, they would translate lessons in their students' first language as all of them were from homogenous language background i.e. Nepali and asked them to memorize and recite those answers. But now, just teaching a lesson is not sufficient; rather the teachers need to update themselves

with appropriate teaching approaches and methods along with developing knowledge of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).

My experience is that language teaching in the 21st century has become one of the most challenging professions. The use of teacher-centred teaching methods, which only focus on teaching content knowledge through translation or drills, has been challenged by more communicative approaches and methods like task-based language teaching. N. S. Prabhu first performed TBLT through his Bangalore research report published in 1982. TBLT is a learner-centred approach to teaching.

Richards and Schmidt (2010) state this learner-centred approach keeps learners to the centre of all aspects of language teaching, including planning, teaching and evaluation. Emphasizing the importance of TBLT, Ellis (2003) opines that this approach seeks the converse- texts that are learner-centred, discursive practices encouraging learners to actively engage in shaping and controlling the discourse; and social practices that help them in allowing and resolving social trouble. Here, the learners participate and use language to complete these tasks. They help each other in learning; monitoring each other's tasks and suggesting fellow learners improve; and interpret messages with their full linguistic knowledge and prior experiences.

The task is in the centre of the class activity where learners need to process their thoughts while learning a second or foreign language. Prabhu (1987) defines a language task as an activity that requires learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought and which allows teachers to control and regulate the process. The teacher does not predetermine the lesson, rather s/he prepares the students to engage in communicative tasks using most of their time talking, discussing, negotiating, and helping each other learn a language through meaningful communication. Similarly, Nunan (1989) defines a communicative task as a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language focusing their attention on meaning rather than form. The teacher selects the tasks from the texts which help to enhance the learners' curiosity and involvement in learning a language.

While students are at the centre in this approach, the teacher plays the role of an advisor, monitor, or facilitator of his or her students' tasks. He/she selects appropriate language tasks based on their age and interest; however, the difficulty level of these tasks increases as the students become more competent. First, the teacher gives clear instructions to the students about task topic; helps them with difficult words, phrases and sentences, and then he takes them to take the real task. The active involvement of the students and their interaction with pairs, in groups, and even working individually on the tasks enhance their communicative skills.

In this study, I make use of observation and interviews to explore English language teachers' perceptions towards task-based language teaching as an approach to improving students' communicative skills. I observed two English language teachers' classes. After taking the participants' consent, I interviewed them using open-ended questions; recorded their interviews; transcribed and analyzed the information to draw the findings of the study.

### Language Tasks

A language task is a meaningful piece of classroom work that a teacher uses it to engage the learners to interact, manipulate, comprehend, and produce some result in the second or target language. Tasks are the key components of task-based language teaching. Ellis (2003) states a language task engages learners in productive or receptive, and oral or written skills along with other cognitive processes. Language tasks, if implemented effectively, enhance students' communicative abilities.

Language tasks are purposeful, and they are developed from the students' real-life experiences. These tasks may include making travel plans or itineraries, or preparing a recipe of their favorite meals, and making discussions regarding their agreement or disagreement on them, and learning language collaboratively. The teachers may also develop tasks from their textbooks which include drawing, naming parts of a picture, numbering or showing trends in charts, and so on.

Emphasizing the use of tasks in language learning, Lambert (2019) asserts, "The use of tasks in L2 instruction is predicated on the notion that language learning is

an incidental process that takes place in line with learners' communicative needs while they are focused on achieving communicative outcomes (p. 3). The real-world pedagogical tasks may include completing various forms, expressing feelings through literary genres, arguing and defending a position, interviewing, writing essays, letters, writing and discussing travel plans, and others which help to foster the learners' communicative ability. One of the earliest curricular applications of TBLT to appear in the literature is Prabhu's Bangalore project.

A language teacher uses various tasks in his or her class based on the level and interest of the learners. Prabhu (1987) mentions three different task components in his project: information-gap activity, reasoning-gap activity, and opinion-gap activity. The difficulty level of these activities increases as the learners' familiarity and confidence in the target language increases. The information-gap activity involves a transfer of information from one situation to another. For example, the learners are assigned a task to work with an incomplete picture or table with the information available in a given piece of text. Reasoning-gap activities engage learners in finding some new ideas applying the processes like logic, practical reasoning, or observation. Prabhu (1987) states an example of this activity as learners learning out a teacher's timetable based on some given class timetables. Similarly, identifying and articulating the learners' personal experiences, feelings, or attitudes in response to a given situation is sought in opinion-gap activities.

Debates or speeches on some socio-cultural or environmental issues can be arranged as tasks in which students engage to include factual information logically to justify their opinions. These tasks are of comparatively higher level difficulty to the learners. However, other tasks include questions and answers, dialogues, matching items, filling the gaps or any activity that involves students' active participation in learning a second or foreign language with some purpose.

For the effective implementation of TBLT as an approach, Nunan (1989) proposes pedagogical tasks that include jigsaw tasks, information-gap tasks, problem-solving tasks, decision-making tasks, and opinion exchange tasks. Jigsaw tasks engage students in combining different pieces of information to form a story or any other complete bit of information. Similarly, information-gap tasks employ learners in negotiating meaning from two or more different sets of information.

In the same way, in problem-solving tasks, the students use language to arrive at a single solution to a problem from a given set of information. However, for decision-making tasks, students work to find out several solutions to a problem and choose one through negotiation and discussion. Finally, in opinion exchange tasks, the learners discuss and exchange their ideas even though they may not reach an agreement. These tasks help students develop their communicative skills in a foreign or second language.

### Classroom Procedure

The classroom procedure may differ from one teacher to another because of the availability of the resources, learn-

ing level, needs, interests and the number of students in the class, and individual ability and training of the teachers themselves. However, Willis (1996) proposes three phases for teachers to plan for around a task: the pre-task phase, the task cycle, and the language focus. Only a creative can prepare, implement and evaluate the students' works on language tasks efficiently.

In the pre-task phase, as Willis (1996) states, the teacher introduces the topic relating it to their prior knowledge, helps them learn new vocabulary and the structures; instructs the process and task outcome of the next phase, and exposes them with some complete sample tasks. The teacher familiarizes the students with the tasks and prepares them to solve them. Similarly, during the task phase, the students discuss and negotiate the meaning. They work individually, in pairs, or in the groups to prepare the report, while the teacher facilitates their learning. They use their prior knowledge and personal opinions to complete the task. Larsen-Freeman & Anderson (2011) provide an example of an opinion task in which the teacher might assign them a social problem, such as unemployment, and ask them to come up with a series of possible solutions. They are encouraged to focus on fluency rather than accuracy of the target language in this phase. Here, the teacher helps his or her students enhance their creativity and imagination. The students engage in communicative and meaningful activities to prepare a report. When the students demonstrate the outcome of their tasks to the entire class, the teacher evaluates and provides feedback so that, in the post-task phase, they will do the tasks both on form and content more meaningfully.

Finally, the teacher transits to the language focus comprised of the analysis and practice. In the analysis, the teacher does a post-task with an explicit focus on form, particularly those forms that students found difficult during the task-phase. He or she does this by bringing words, phrases, and forms to learners' attention. During the practice phase, s/he leads students to practice forms reviewed during the analysis that include memory challenges, dictations, drills, etc. S/he can also have them repeat the task as a form of practice if they do not develop full confidence. S/he encourages them to improve language accuracy by reviewing useful words, phrases, and sentences from their tasks completed. Then they practice the activities again on their own to build confidence. The post-task phase offers students an opportunity to reflect on their performance and to perform the task again for developing in-depth understanding and confidence in the language tasks they involve.

### Teacher Role

Talking about the role of a teacher in a language class, Izadinia (2009) asserts, "Years ago, teachers were considered unquestioned authorities who were only responsible for delivering knowledge to students, and students, in turn, were doomed to listening meekly" (p. 7), but today, teacher's role has tremendously undergone through various changes. The role of the language teacher in task-based teaching is to facilitate the learners' learning by getting them to engage them with a variety of meaningful tasks.

The teacher first analyzes his or her students' needs, abilities, and interests, and then chooses the tasks. Richards & Rodgers (2002) suggest three additional roles of a teacher—"selecting and sequencing of tasks, preparing learners for tasks, and consciousness-raising". He or she selects appropriate tasks that best fit the learners' needs and sequence them according to their difficulty level. Then s/he engages them in some pre-tasks which include the introduction of the topic, useful vocabulary, and instructions. The tasks are meaningful and relevant so that the students see the reason for doing it and can see how the task relates to possible situations in their lives outside the classroom (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Finally, the teacher engages the students with the task that they exploit the text to come up with the desired outcomes. In the meantime, he or she monitors their performance and intervenes when necessary.

### Learner Role

Since TBLT employs a learner-centred teaching approach, the role of learners in the planning and implementation of the curriculum and its evaluation is crucial. The central role of the learners in task-based language teaching is to complete the task appropriately. Other roles include group participation, monitoring, and risk-taker and innovator (Richards & Rodgers, 2002). The students either complete the task alone or actively participate in pairs, groups or the whole class activity to learn language through meaningful communication. In addition to active participation, the students help and monitor each other's work during task completion. They create and interpret messages even though they lack full confidence. The learners require developing the skills to guess from linguistic and contextual clues, asking for clarification, and consulting with other learners (Richards & Rodgers, 2002) to accomplish the task in a foreign or second language.

### Advantages

Despite having some disadvantages which may include some students' negligence towards active participation, and dominance of the fast learners over slow learners during the task completion, TBLT offers various advantages. Lambert (2019) states that TBLT is a process that takes place in line with learners' internal syllabuses, resources, and experience. Language tasks offer students opportunities to active interaction in the subject matter in pairs or groups to discuss an authentic agenda, negotiate and come up with the best possible solutions to the problems. This helps them develop communicative skills along with enhancing understanding content knowledge.

TBLT compels even the shy students to work and learn from each other in pairs and groups without any hesitation so that they can improve their independence in learning. Ganta (2012) states that TBLT offers opportunities to students to interact spontaneously with peers in the target language and helps them help them remove hesitation and fear. Also, the students learn to take responsibility for their tasks since the teacher is not available all the time, however, s/he will be helping them if they do not find the way. This helps

them take the risk as well in learning. Finally, this approach enhances collaborative learning in students in that they learn to accomplish tasks helping each other, correcting each other's errors, and improving their communication skills along with the completion of the task accomplishment.

A language task provides a context where the learners use language in pairs or groups for the negotiation and comprehension of the meaning of language activity. The teacher advises and helps with the learners' difficulties so that they can develop their communication skills. The teacher sets tasks in such a way that he or she first engages the learners in familiar activities and gradually move to more difficult ones that prompt learners to use more ambiguous and complex language. As TBLT is one of the most modern and student-centred approaches to teaching a second or foreign language, it provides ample exposure to students to use language for expressing their views, feelings, emotions, ideas, and experiences which improve their language skills.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

I have drawn the following insights based on my study and prolonged engagement with the research participants based on the analysis and interpretation of the information derived through observation and interview. I drew the major insights under two sub-headings: teachers' perceptions towards students' engagement in tasks, and their perception of tasks implementation.

### Teachers' Perception towards Students' Engagement in Tasks

This study explores that teachers hold a positive attitude towards task-based instruction as a communicative approach to teaching English. They agree that students prefer working with their peers in pairs or groups to just listening to their teacher's lecture in the class. They believe that working with peers enables them to feel more comfortable in using language more naturally than with their teachers. Moreover, the teachers perceive that students feel the freedom of the word choice during the discussion of their subject matter in peer groups which enables them to learn a language more naturally. In the following excerpt from an interview, one teacher commented:

Example 1:

*"Even my shy students talk and discuss with their classmates in groups and pairs while solving tasks like 'preparing a plan for a picnic' or 'preparing for a class presentation' which I use to teach English language, so they are gradually developing competence in English vocabulary and language structures."*

The above discussion is similar to the findings of Kafipour et al. (2018) that tasks improved the Iranian EFL learners' ability in language use, vocabulary, content, and organization. The participant teachers agreed that the proper implementation of language tasks helps their learners develop communicative skills. However, I observed that the teachers are not well aware of pre-tasks activities. Both the partici-

pants of the study implemented the tasks without doing any pre-task activities in their classes.

### Perception on Task implementation

The study examined the strategies of teachers who implemented task-based instruction in their English classes. From the class observation as well as the interviews, I explored that they do not have proper idea in using TBLT. They directly engaged students in task-phase before engaging them in the pre-task activities. The participants stressed the importance of language tasks to foster communicative skills in students; however, they were themselves unclear about the proper implementation process of these tasks according to the diverse learning abilities of their students.

It appears that the teachers have some practical problems in using TBLT in larger classes since they reported that they faced discipline problems with the students. Thus, from my experience and sharing of participants, it is obvious that TBLT can be useful in small classes. The participants also faced that students may sometimes divert to other activities breaching the disciplinary codes of the class. Moreover, they claimed that bright students overshadow the slow learners while working in groups, and only the group leader gets more opportunities to develop better communicative skills in comparison to other participants in the group.

Again, in the following interview excerpt with another teacher, he said:

Example II:

*"It is really good to teach English using tasks in small classes than in larger classes as I can monitor and guide their activities frequently during the tasks." He further stated, "Preparing language tasks is really tough to teachers like me who cannot use computer and internet effectively. Actually, I take help from my son for downloading materials from the internet."*

The above discussion indicates that proper implementation requires teachers to be able to use ICTs as well. Therefore, tasks-based language teaching demands teachers' ability to implement tasks effectively to enhance their students' communicative skills.

## CONCLUSION

Task-based language teachers have recognized the importance of students' engagement in learning. This article has drawn on teachers' perceptions of the use of language tasks in teaching and improving their students' communicative abilities. They are exposed to different meaningful task components to enhance their overall language abilities. Students feel more comfortable to use language with their peers than with their teachers. When teachers design task materials based on their students' age, interests and level so that task-based teaching becomes more meaningful and naturalistic. Learners are engaged in tasks that are related to their life skills and experiences. Through language tasks, the students learn both the subject matter and communication skills. The success of the proper implementation lies in the skills of a teacher and the readiness of the students. The teachers also

need to update themselves with the knowledge of ICTS to implement the TBLT effectively. TBLT can be more effective in small classes because students get more time for interaction to develop better communicative skills. Thus, the active involvement of the students and the regular facilitation of the teacher can bring desired outcomes through the effective use of task-based language teaching.

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