The Impact of Using Task-Based Learning As A Pedagogical Tool to Imporve Advanced Writing Skills of Students in College of Basic Education Kuwait

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ABSTRACT: *This study explored how task-based learning was used in teaching advanced writing at the College of Basic Education in Kuwait. Students were able to submit a research paper based on task-based teaching methods and activities. The task-based learning program supported students in the advanced writing course to achieve the stated goal by incorporating the four language skills into the tasks of the classroom lesson. Moreover, the activities reflected in the task-based teaching method encouraged the students to think about the language they were using in a more holistic manner, synergizing the language skills through focused exercises. Other factors, such as learner motivation, group work, and culture are discussed in the paper.*

KEYWORDS: Teaching English, task-based learning, writing, motivation, culture, adult learners

INTRODUCTION

Task Based literature, as developed within the Literature Review, encompasses the task-based learning (TBL) framework based primarily on the work by Ellis (2003) and Willis and Willis (2007). The framework sub-divides the learning process into phases, called tasks, that are meant to both focus on the learner while allowing a higher degree of creativity in carrying out the assignment.

In terms of learning a foreign language, in this case English at the college level in Kuwait, the TBL framework has clearly-stated objectives: the tasks must have the students use the four language skills in the writing tasks in class (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). The combined use of these skills in completing the tasks reinforces and accelerates learning.

The English language course aim for this study was to have students produce a research paper that they have written. This involved assigning tasks for students to work in class

as a group to produce a writing project rather than working independently. The focus of the writing process was a Kuwaiti-oriented topic; in other words to write about anything related to Kuwait and current events that may have emerged. A task-based classroom, as noted, means that students will continually learn, for as Ellis (2003) states:

> designing a task-based curriculum involves making decisions about what tasks learns will *do* (a question of selection) and, then, the order in which they will perform these tasks (a question of grading). Then, there are decisions to be made regarding the specific methodological procedures for teaching each task (Ellis 2003, p. 31).

Even though Long and Crookes (1992, p.27) imply that the task syllabus for task-based language teaching is best, in my context with my learners I see that the process syllabus better suits their needs. Hedge (2000, p. 360) characterizes the process syllabus as one "which represents 'knowledge' of *how* correctness, appropriacy, and meaningfulness can be simultaneously achieved during communication within events and situations". The task's goal will therefore be on giving learners a chance to express their own ideas and opinions using the language resources they have available to them.

Moreover, the nature of the course I am teaching is to have a pair or group of students write the essay. They work collaboratively and independently outside of the classroom to achieve this. Hedge (2000, p. 362) refers to this as a project where:

> Projects are extended tasks which integrate language skills work by means of a number of activities. These activities combine in working towards an agreed goal and may include the following: planning; the gathering of information through reading, listening, interviewing, and observing group discussion of the information; problem solving oral and written reporting; and display.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ellis (2003) and Willis and Willis, (2007) are prominent figures in TBL and have frameworks in the design of the task-based lesson. A task in simple terms can be defined as an activity. In teaching terms though, a task is not easily defined by scholars. Richards and Rodgers (2001) and Nunan (1989) define a task as "an activity that necessarily involved language". Ellis (2003, p.3) defined tasks as "activities that call for primarily meaning-focused language use." I believe the definition by Prabhu (1987, p.17) is the most accurate definition for my context where he defined a task as "an activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process".

For my students to write the 1,200-word essay, they would go through a process of thought by gathering the information necessary through different resources, such as books, articles, and even using social media as I managed the process by sequencing the tasks into time and deadlines. This makes the learners go through a cognitive process that involves "'reasoning' – making connections between pieces of information, deducing new information, and evaluating information," a process that also fits the definition offered by Ellis (2003, p. 7).

Ellis's (2003) framework for designing a task-based lesson includes 3 phases, that of pre-task, during-task and after-task. His framework, when followed by a syllabus that includes task-based activities, allows for "creativity and variety", which increases the interactivity potential of the task and process for the student (Ellis, 2003, p. 244).

A major advantage of this type of assigned task list (process) is that students can concentrate on sub-sections of the piece they are writing, essentially focusing on paragraphs. As each paragraph should convey a single thought or premise, the writing becomes a matter of effective communication with a clear goal. In this sense, it is not unlike a conversation about a general topic (speaking to make a connection), and can also be used to train the students in specific communication scenarios (Albelihi, 2022,). The pair and group discussions about the articles being written also reinforce the links between speaking, listening and writing, three of the fundamental language skills. When these three are linked, as noted by Amsori et al. (2023), language use and comprehension can increase by as much as 91% when comparing pre- and post-test results. The process I outlined also relies on reading and some translating work that needs to be done, bringing in the fourth fundamental language skill as well as providing an exercise in understanding cultural contexts.

Learning a foreign language requires learning the cultural context of the use of that language. This creates the three-level division of learning a language used in the course: using English for general purposes, for a specific purpose, and practicing intercultural communication. These are aspects highlighted by Cai and Junlu (2019) that can have a significant impact on learning English as all three need to be used on a consistent basis within structured and unstructured frameworks.

Lastly, the process I developed uses corrections as part of task-based learning, but without undue emphasis on grammar. The goal of the assignment is to provide a workable presentation on a specific topic, and rather than delay the process by constant corrections, the end result is then revised to suggest modifications and improvements. Doing so allows the students a sense of completion and the corrective feedback becomes an incentive and learning platform for future efforts rather than a series of obstacles that can delay or block finishing the process (Shariq, 2020).

The task-based learning method relies on dividing the process into three phases: the pre-task, the task itself, and the post-task, also called the review phase (Ellis, 2003).

Pre-task

The pre-task phase's purpose is to have students perform tasks in ways that will promote acquisition by introducing new language for the learners to use to perform the task and to encourage them to interpret tasks in "more demanding ways" (Ellis 2003, p. 249). One way this can be achieved is by providing them with a model, for example by showing them samples of essays from previous students. This will give them an initial idea of what to expect from the course and what they will eventually be submitting towards the end of the semester. To take the stress off students, they will only observe a model of how the task can be performed without requiring them to undertake a trial performance. In-class discussion will be generated through speaking and reading. This pre-task activity will provide them with "background information [that] serves as a means of defining the topic area of a task" (Ellis 2003, p. 246).

The value of the pre-task phase is in its clarification of objectives and of the reasons for using the language. As noted by Albehili (2022), writing and language learning is improved when more links can be created to connect the task to using the language for a specific purpose, as well as engaging in contextual communication (objective-oriented conversation).

During the Task

Ellis (2003, p. 243) describes the during task phase as centering around the "task itself and affords various instructional options, including whether students are required to operate under time pressure or not". In regards to the aspect of time, when students are given guidance on what to plan, a focus on form and content will be made evident as opposed to giving the students the task work-plan and have them decide how they would like to plan it (Ellis 2003). The nature of the writing course can make managing time better since there are steps to be conducted in chronological order before submitting the final essay, for example first they choose a topic, second write a thesis statement, and third make an outline.

Furthermore, *how* to perform the task is important as it can influence the nature of the language student's produce. Ellis (2003, p. 251) sees it as "how teachers and learners conduct a task will be influenced, to a large extent, by their prior experiences of teaching and learning and their personal definitions of the particular teaching-learning situation". Keeping this in mind will help me make better decisions on conducting the task by understanding the learner for they too have language-learner beliefs that they bring to the classroom.

Prabhu (1992, p. 228) describes the language lesson as a "routinized social event with roles and role relationships established by tradition and custom to teachers and learners in the classroom". Furthermore, Breen (1985) characterized the language classroom as "coral gardens" where subjective views of language, diverse learning purposes, and different beliefs about learning emerge. Understanding the classroom environment, and the learners will help in choosing what tasks are appropriate to use with them.

Post-task

The post-task phase involves procedures for following up on the task performance (Ellis, 2003), which can be conducted in numerous ways. Willis (2007) recommends asking students to present a report on how they did the task and on what they discovered. In either in written or oral form, students can reflect on the task and evaluate their performance. The majority of the corrective feedback is then given after the presentation so as to encourage completion of the process. This allows the students to have a personal framework of the task-based learning so that the corrective feedback of the teacher and fellow students can be directly applied in context rather than becoming a series of hurdles that can be difficult to overcome and reduce the motivation of the student to finish the assignment (Shariq, 2020).

The review phase cannot be, or should not be, the main focus of the process. As noted by Shariq (2020), heavy emphasis on feedback to try to correct all details of language use has a negative effect on the average learner. The basic goal of language acquisition is that of being able to express thoughts and feelings in an understandable manner more so than precision in grammar. The path to a better process places a stronger focus on the pre-task and the doing the task phases where learning is more interactive and individualized (Willis and Willis, 2007).

The modified syllabus design will include tasks to aid students in English language learning by implementing the use of the fours language skills throughout (See Table 1), (Knight, 2012, p. 7) also agree that tasks are the unit of language teaching as he has called them "the central curriculum planning tool".

Phase	Reading	Writing	Speaking	Listening
Pre-task	Show them an essay sample.	(None because students do not need to perform)	Discuss the essay p they read in the class and in their pairs/ groups.	Invited a volunteer group from a previous course to discuss the process they underwent to write essay
During task	Read an article (in both L1 and L2) and highlight unknown vocab	Summarize, paraphrase, and quote from various texts such as books, magazines, newspapers, internet articles	1. Clarify their opinions on the article (they read or wrote) with their group and class 2. Compare the translations they made to generate vocabulary.	1. Listen to a businessperson in L1 and take notes. Transcribe into English to see what vocabulary used in translating from Arabic to English. 2. Listen to authentic scripts of people doing business (British/American)
Post-task	A sentence illustrating the error can be written on the board, students can be invited to correct it, the corrected version is written up, and a brief explanation provided.	Write a report on how they did the task and what they discovered	Tell us how they did the task and what they discovered	Students listen to their peers presentation on their essay and can ask questions

Table 1. A sample of using the four language skills in the classroom following TBL framework

Exposure to Worthwhile and Authentic Language

To help the students gain access to their Kuwaiti-related topic, I told them it was permissible to use local newspapers, articles from social media (such as Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat) or even conduct an interview with people in the field. The task was designed to appeal to matters they are interested in personally, or issues in day to day life in Kuwait. These topics are considered to be more relevant to their context and culture. The process also engages the students in a combination of fundamental language skills, such as speaking English using general and specific terms, reading, and of course, writing. Engaging the four basic language skills is thus combined with enhanced motivation (appeal to Kuwait-oriented interests) to create a more immersive and interactive task-based learning assignment.

In order to improve this aspect of teaching in an effective way by engaging learners in real language use, I transformed this task by designing activities that would generate a series of discussions "which require learners to use the language for themselves" (Willis and Willis, 2007, p.137). For example, the use of prediction tasks (Willis and Willis, 2007, p. 137) (see Appendix 1), can be added where students would be provided with a related article/picture (teacher-led) or each group of students can submit an article they will use in their research (student-led) with the following instructions:

1. Work in groups of three
2. Read the following summary of an essay
3. List three important questions which may be answered in this paper
4. Do you know the answers to these questions (Willis and Willis, 2007, p. 137).

This would promote group discussion that could then lead to a general class discussion led by the teacher. Reading, writing and speaking skills are integrated, and an emphasis on listening to each other is evident. Also, this task involves real language use as used in the real world, which is one of the prominent aspects of TBL. Adding this aspect to the suggested process would significantly enhance authentic and worthwhile use of English for the students, especially because speaking and listening is best for increasing acquisition of language (Amsori, 2023).

Furthermore, to incorporate listening skills in "classrooms tasks [that] mirror the real world" (Willis and Willis, 2007, p. 136) various activities can be used. For example, students can be asked to listen to a person in their L1 (L1 is the learners first language, in this context it is Arabic) and ask them to make notes. Then they would transcribe these notes into English to see what vocabulary they use in translating from Arabic to English. This listening task promotes meaning and vocabulary that is useful in the real world, as well as developing intercultural competence (Cai and Junlu, 2019). Other listening tasks that promote discourse are important because it shows the learners how language is used in the outside world. Another listening activity example is listening to a script and writing down the transitions they hear (first, second, to begin with…etc.) which are necessary to help shape their language effectively. The value of this exercise is that it requires paying close attention to the substance of the language creating a more useful learning experience in terms of cultural and linguistic context (Cai and Junlu, 2019).

Pair/Group

When students were placed in pairs or groups to write their essay, I did not go beyond that to exploit their skills in the classroom. I simply put them in groups to write the paper in their free time according to the syllabus that I followed. As Willis and Willis (2007, p.269) states:

> It is not enough to simply put students into groups to complete a task. What counts is the quality of the interaction, and whether this enables students to engage effectively with the task and to support each other's language learning. A key to using group/pair work in task-based language pedagogy, then, lies in ensuring students are able to work together effectively.

Knowing this, my aim was to have them work in pairs/groups in class instead of independently at home to give them the opportunity to use the English language and practice it through in-class task-based activities. To enhance reading and writing, they summarized, paraphrased and quoted from articles they were going to use as references in their essay. What the experience provides is a form of framed conversational practice where the pair or group have the advantage of knowing what the subject matter is, and can thus focus on using the language expressively. This can mean using an expanded vocabulary as well as testing different ways to phrase their ideas for greater clarity (Shariq, 2020).

Motivation

Throughout my teaching experience, I noticed that students are more successful when they are undergoing tasks relevant to their context and culture. In a survey made by Malallah (2010) to students at Kuwait University learning English, two-thirds said they did not want to study the language because it requires too much work and effort. Furthermore, her findings indicated that "students are learning English with minimal interest and with the major incentive being the need for a credit at the end of the semester" (Malallah, 2010, p.21).

Realizing that they are adult learners taking the course that is obligatory and might have little motivation will help me in understanding their needs and making adjustments to tasks. Since tasks should motivate learners to engage in language use, instead of having the students write an essay on a general topic, I turned in into Kuwait specific one. This would make them familiar to "content for which the students have relevant prior knowledge" (Hedge, 2000, p. 362). The context also allows for students to feel more comfortable exploring the acquired language because the listener already understands the context. The end result is a broader sense of freedom to explore the use of the language and potentially make new connections between vocabulary and grammar that follow the acquired language's rules rather than those of the native language (Shariq, 2020).

One aspect of my teaching that I perceived as a success lies in telling my students that in writing their paper, they will not be penalized in producing poor grammar, rather the content will have more weight when grading them. Ellis (2003, p. 247) and Shariq (2020, p. 235-236) agree and recommend that teachers choose tasks that "focus on vocabulary rather than grammar, perhaps because vocabulary is seen as more helpful for the successful performance of a task than grammar". Willis and Willis (2007, p.

137) also point out that "TBT [Task Based Teaching] is designed to produce learners who can use their English in the real world outside the classroom, even if that language is grammatically inaccurate".

DISCUSSIONS

The advanced writing course aims at teaching students learn how to write a research paper. This includes higher skills needed for writing specific types of essays such as informative, argumentative, as well as comparison and contrast. Proofreading, editing as well as avoiding plagiarism are also being taught.

In the beginning, I focused more on the writing process and in choosing the topics on their own. Believing that giving the students the freedom to write about topics of their choice and interest would motivate them to enjoy the writing process and to write in complete sincerity. Unfortunately, at the end of the course, I mostly got plagiarized papers from the internet. The students were simply not motivated, nor enjoyed, the course.

The concept of being a reflective practioner; one who participates in thoughtful, systematic consideration of one's practice to improve student and teacher experiences (Fendler, 2003) comes to mind at this moment. As a reflective practioner, I am involved with my students and employ my beliefs, experiences, personality, and reflections on teaching by understanding my student's background, our culture and the context we are in. I therefore made the decision to shift the classroom into a TBL one.

The first change to the course was shifting the task to writing an argumentative essay instead of given the freedom to choose a style on their own. I underwent such change due to past experience when my students used to write informative papers that added little value to what they had to say. I was able to identify this problem with time and found that the solution was for them to argue instead of inform. To put in their own thoughts rather than getting information off the Internet. While writing an argument would challenge them into deeply thinking about what exactly they would like to explore and why.

The second task modification was changing the topic they wish to write about from general to Kuwaiti related topic. As Kumaravadivelu (2001) notes "language pedagogy to be relevant must be sensitive to a particular group of teachers teaching a particular group of learners pursuing a particular set of goals within a particular institutional context embedded in a particular socio-cultural milieu". Giving them Kuwaiti related topics was to motivate them (Dörneyi, 2001) to write something meaningful and relevant to their context and which resulted in higher student performance and elimination of plagiarism as well as learning new skills such as how to find online articles. Kumaravadivelu's (2001) construct of particularity, practicality and possibility is evident here in the sense of understanding my own practice. The context wasn not

general, rather specific to their level; that of College Students living and studying in Kuwait.

The third modification was scheduling meetings in the classroom with a group of students to develop what I am teaching in the classroom into communicative interaction. The teaching nature of this course was typical instruction in the sense that I taught them how to fulfill the steps of writing a research paper. I was in the front of the classroom instructing with not much room for them speak and hence there was little interaction from my students. Kumaravadivelu's (2001) construct of practicality of understanding the learner, interacting and getting feedback as a teacher meant to me that I am not longer practicing classroom teaching, rather impacting it by turning it into a practical learning situation in my office. There we got a chance to discuss their progress, concerns, and questions.

Finally, the final evaluation was to have the students deliver the research paper they had written and present it to the classroom in the form of an in-class presentation. This step was taken so the entire class can benefit from each other and learn something new. Rather than just have the teacher read and give grades, everybody is now involved in the learning process.

Indeed there is not best method when it comes to teaching (Prabhu, 1990). I didn't look for the best method according to what I studied and learned; rather I blended different methods according to different people, learners, courses and most importantly context. After making all these changes to the course, I saw motivated students excited to walk into the classroom. And since their topics were relevant to their classmates, I enjoyed seeing nods, smiles and interest in listening to what their peers had to say and their thoughts of the argument they presented.

CONCLUSION

Before reading the literature on tasks, I thought the methods I used with my students were ideal in the sense that I made the subject they were to write about relevant to them and that that was enough for them to be motivated. After reading literature on TBL and teaching, it shed light on the endless possibilities on further modifications to be done to this course, for the learners and for the teacher as well.

Also, context and culture informed my teaching by integrating them into their task for it to become valuable. Looking for the best method was not at times what I wanted to employ while teaching, rather it was my engaged sense of plausibility wanting to become involved with my students. My beliefs, my experiences, my agency, and culture was the voice in the back of my head telling me to teach according to the learners. All of this is part of an ongoing process that will hopefully aid English language learning.

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Appendix 1: Prediction Task Example

"Is Kuwait's Padel Obsession Finally Over?" (2023)

Kuwait's obsession with padel reached meme-worthy levels, with courts popping up everywhere - even replacing car lots in the city despite there being a scarcity of parking. But, I noticed most of the courts are usually empty when I drive by them and just yesterday I saw one being taken down.

As someone who doesn't care about padel, I get the impression the padel craze has died down and so a lot more courts will be closing down. I know one court closing doesn't represent the padel scene as a whole, but I can't imagine all these courts being profitable, there are just too many of them. Is padel finally dead?

Task:

1. Work in groups of three.
2. Read the above paragraph.
3. List three important questions which may be answered.
4. Do you know the answers to these questions?
5. Do you play padel?
6. Do you have Instagram?