TASK-BASED ASSESSMENT IN THE ALBANIAN CONTEXT"

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Abstract

Task-based assessment is timely, because issues of critical thinking and lifelong learning have come to the fore in discussions of the national educational reform. TBA is of increasing interest to teachers and educators, because of its emphasis on active, transferable learning, its potential for motivating students to develop problem-solving skills and in becoming effective collaborators. TBA has been widely explored and studied by many researchers in the field of English language teaching. However, there are few or no official studies that specifically deal with task-based assessment and its implementation in the Albanian context. In addition, due to insufficient data, these studies fail in providing a well-documented account of the present situation in Albania with regard to Task- based assessment model and its utilization in EFL classrooms. *This paper aims to lay out firstly a general overview of this model of learning, and secondly it explores some attempts of how to situate it within the Albanian context.* It's a long and challenging undertaking, but we (teachers) should move forward and try these new experiences out, however demanding they appear.

Keywords: Task-based Assessment (TBA), problem-solving skills, lifelong learning, critical thinking, educational reform

Introduction

The focus on tasks in language teaching came as a result of a deeper understanding of why and how language learners study a foreign language. Until the late 1960s it was presumed that knowing a language could mean, memorizing the rules and structures of the language. The aim was on teaching structures and students were assessed on how well they could perform their understanding of the structures and how well they could demonstrate them.

The 1970s, brought a change in focus, thus shifting away from *form* to *meaning*. Step by step it was realized that the major reason for learning any language, which is, to convey meaning, should be reflected *in what*

happens in the classroom. The '*communicative activity'* which, as Skehan (2003: 3) points out, was substituted by the term '*task'* in the 1980s. What is a *"task"?* Skehan (2003: 3) : ***"A task is an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective".*** That had its impact on teaching, syllabus design and textbooks. The focus was to bring real-life tasks into the classroom, by transforming them into pedagogical tasks. A pedagogical task is a classroom activity "…where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative goal in order to achieve an outcome" (Willis and Willis, 2001: 173). Real-world tasks might easily be transformed into pedagogical tasks: (e.g. as a simulation, a role play, or problem-solving task.)

Principles of task-based assessment
        Task-based assessment must display some basic principles. In this kind of assessment :
   ➢ students should be involved in communicative performance.
   ➢ the teaching process and assessment should go hand in hand. This means that any teaching task can be used for assessment goals, and vice-versa.
   ➢ the tasks should relate to specific learning objectives and be authentic.
   ➢ give feedback to learners (*their strengths and weaknesses*) so that they know how well they are accomplishing their learning objectives.
   ➢ focus on improving learning outcomes.
   ➢ students are encouraged to self-assess their performance on assessment tasks.

Benefits of task-based language assessment
        Task-based language assessment can be described as:
        authentic
        motivating
        student-centred and
        flexible
   • The tasks look authentic because the materials used are authentic and the tasks resemble the ones the students may face in the near future. In other words, *for example* in an ESP course of business English, students are asked to work on case study scenarios about *"Meetings in English",* by making a thorough coverage of all stages from planning meetings to follow–up action, or by strongly focusing on the language of meetings, or networking skills, or skills needed before and after the meeting..etc.

- It is motivating because the whole assessment procedure is closely linked to the students field of study.
- It is student-centred because *a) the evaluation is totally based on the language skills and materials needed in the students field of study. b) the output created during the assessment is totally student controlled, though the resources and assessment materials have been provided by the teachers.*
- It is flexible, beacuse the task-based approach suits many kinds of assessment situations, from achievement to proficiency testing. It can be used in continuous assessment or *end-of-course* examinations and focus on one or more skills.
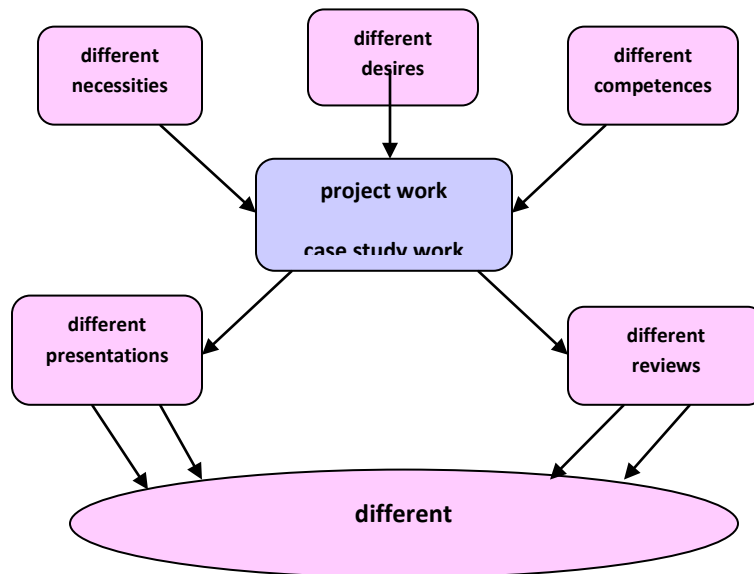
Task-based approaches not only stimulate language competence in all four skills but they also help develop *the skills necessary for success in working life*, not just in studying languages. These skills include:

- group work skills
- problem solving skills
- presentation skills
- discussion skills
- negotiation skills
- making compromises
- intercultural competence in an international setting
- study skills/ transfersble skills

Ideally, in a university context, every task-based assessment situation, should also be a learning situation, both for the student and for the teacher.

The structure of task-based language assessment

The structure of a task-based language assessment, in a university context might look like the following scheme: *(adopted from the Gult Project Team, http://gult.ecml.at. 2008-2011)*

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different          different          different
necessities         desires          competences

                 project work

                case study work

different                              different
presentations                           reviews

                   different
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Teachers and Students' reactions to TBA

➢ *Students* appear to be emotionless due to pair and group work.

➢ They are concentrated on the task because of its relevance to the outcome.

➢ They feel totally involved in the task because of its authenticity and real-world relevance.

➢ Every student has the possibility to contribute in the assessment situation, which makes them eager to give their best.

➢ There appears to be less stress, beacuse of the group work and of the authenticity of the task.

➢ They are amazed from the variety of possible solutions.

➢ They admit that interesting discussions are heard during the assessment.

➢ *Teachers* feel more concentrated during the whole process of task-based assessment.

➢ They have more active roles in the discussion, by encouraging their students to be involved.

➢ The atmosphere is more relaxed. Teachers sometimes tend to forget they have to make an assessment especially during simulations or discussions.

➢ Teachers are really surprised to discover how competent these students are in managing linguistic situations themselves.

➢ Teachers assess their students oral presentations on these criteria:
      linguistic accuracy

fluency
presentation style
content
collaboration with others
self-assessment endeavour.

Challenges and Concerns

The   limitations of task-based assessment   generally fall into two categories:

authenticity concerns and real-life concerns.

There exist the difficulty of developing a truly authentic task. Although authentic materials may be used, students are asked to interact with them in ways that are reflective of real-world context, but not exactly the outside world. So authenticity is perhaps unattainable.

Real-life concerns

The real-life concerns are associated to the execution of of task-based assessment at some levels: *personal, institutional and even national.*

Teachers, are concerned at a personal level about the increasing workload that this kind of assessment requires. Thus for teachers this mean*, more correction hours* and *more preparation workload in assessment execution.* Also,teachers need to agree in advance on assessment criteria, especially when proficiency is being assessed, as there are no correct or wrong answers to the tasks in task-based assessment.

Task-based assessments, *at the institutional level,* might require more resources such as access to the Internet, or more photocopies, and more compensation for the instructors/teachers.

Concerns at the national level, raised path because of the suitability of task-based assessment with the existing culture of language teaching. Often, task-based assessments oppose to the long established traditions and views of education. Any nation evaluation culture is difficult to change, it takes a lot of time. So, depending on the local /national context, tradition and facilities, access to various resources on task-based assessment may also be different.

The Albanian Context

The current English curriculum adopts a *communicative view* to ELT, focusing on the importance of *relevant communication* for learning English more effectively. A major innovation in the current FLT curriculum is connected   with assessment. This   curriculum puts forward the use of performance and task-based assessment in English classes. This is achieved through the practice of "portfolio assessment." Portfolios seem to be more

authentic and realistic, and they are also claimed to be in harmony with the principles of communicative language teaching. Portfolio assessment focuses on documenting the student's progress. It also emphasizes what student knows and what they can do rather than on what they do not know or can't do. Unlike traditional and standardized tests, students are evaluated on what they integrate and perform rather than on what they are able to remember and produce.

The main goal is to gather evidence about how students are processing, and progressing when faced with real-world tasks in a particular area. The suggested *assessment tools* are taken mostly from the European Language Portfolio.

Our students motivations for learning English vary, but mostly, are based around improving their future job prospects, further education abroad and international communication. From my personal experience, my colleagues' viewpoints and from students suggestions and interviews, it is made evident, that our students enjoy the task based approach in English language learning. It fits to their interests and it is motivating.

The new educational reform, being in ongoing change towards progress, has also brought obligatory changes in the *assessment process.* Teachers workload is harder but students' evaluation is seen in continuous process. Their grades do not reflect only their performance in the final achievement test, but a whole year work. *The dossier* kept by teachers and students themselves provides real evidence for the institution authorities and for the parents.

ESP courses at different university levels, do have access to various resources on task-based assessment. From the chart below we can see the different variables of task-based assessmet in these courses.
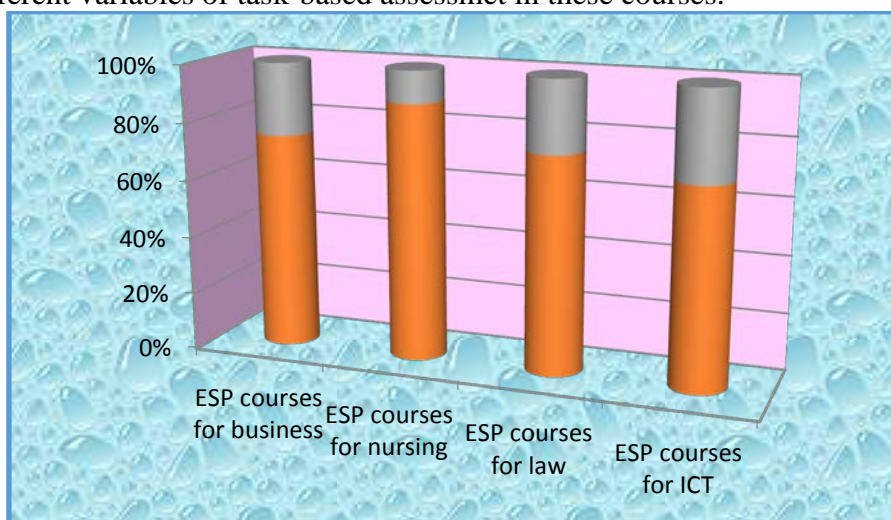

Chart nr 1.

As it can be read from the chart ESP courses for nursing students, score higher. Then comes the business and English of law, that score equally. This experience is widely spread even in other courses and other levels. The whole cultural assessment mentality is re dimensioned towards task-based, communicative, life-long learning approach.

What is striking about the new curriculum and educational reform is that it provides a detailed rationale behind the decisions taken, with regard to various issues such as selection of teaching materials, curriculum design issues, assessment and evaluation, the role of teacher in language classrooms, and what is more important it has established by law that all university graduates should undertake an English Exam {either *IELTS, TOEFL, CAMBRIDGE (FCE // PET),or TOEIC}* before graduation. This is demanding and means greater responsibilities for *teachers and students.* We *teachers and students* should cope with the challenges of this new booming environment. The reality in our educational system proves that. The change that brings progress is risky, it has costs but it serves to generations in turn. Future education should promote the creation of a critical group of learners, with greater reflective skills and higher level of reflective practice.

Conclusion

The most effective way to implement TBA is to provide in-service teachers with opportunities to retrain themselves in task-based teaching approach.. When teachers better understand the principles of TBA, as well as explore how it works in English language classrooms, they can meet the demands more effectively and feel motivated to overcome the potential constraints in the use of task-based assessment. It is crucial that teachers not be lectured about TBA in teacher training programs, they should be demonstrated how it actually works. Moreover, in these programs, teachers should be provided with opportunities to gain some '*hands-on'* experience, along with confidence in using task-based assessment. Albanian universities have to be in accordance with European universities, to unify the language used in tests and criteria, the most important tool now being the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

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