TASK-BASED APPROACH: AN OVERVIEW

Nguyen Dinh Nhu Ha[i],
Nguyen Loc,
Tran Tuyen
Institute of Technical Education,
Vietnam

Abstract:

During recent years, the task-based approach has been considered an effective methodology for teaching English as a foreign language. The term "task-based" appear in most of the learning activities in the classroom. It is clear that English teachers are being more interested in the use of task-based approach for most of English skills. They are making efforts to make lessons become more interesting and meaningful. Besides, the task-based assessment has been paid much attention by English teachers. Therefore, this paper aims at presenting the background of task-based approach, giving definition of learning tasks, illustrating task-based framework and identifying the roles of teachers and learners in task-based approach. In addition, it describes the assessment of task-based approach and making recommendation for language teachers relating to how to conduct task-based lessons effectively.

Keywords: learning task, task-based approach, foreign language learning, assessment

1. Introduction

Task-based approach (TBA) has become an interested issue in the field of teaching foreign language in terms of taking advantage of tasks to enhance learners' use of real language in the early 1980s. In addition, TBA has been used to improve learners' abilities in communication during the past twenty years. Thanks to Prabhu's (1987) research, learning tasks has been deployed as a useful tool to gather data about learners' advancement in learning English. A number of articles and research published (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Branden, 2006; Norris, 2009; Tuyen, 2020) emphasized the importance learning tasks and TBA. Recent studies display three majors principals of TBA relevant to learning at classes: TBA dignifies learner-centered philosophy (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Nunan, 2005), it consists of formal elements of learning such as goal, procedure and outcome (Murphy; 2003; Johnson, 2003; Nunan, 2005), and it is used to support content-

---

[i] Correspondence: email handn.ncs@hcmute.edu.vn, mba.nguyenha@gmail.com

oriented activities rather than forms and meanings of linguistics (Careless, 2001; Crook, 2003; Littlewood, 2004).

Thanks to taking advantages of TBA in teaching, there has become a diversity in teaching methods and theories related to tasks and learning comprehension. Although TBA relies on learning theories, covering cognitive perspective (Long, 1983) and sociocultural perspective (Ohta, 1995; Swain, 2000), it is also an approach to teach foreign language.

The purpose of this paper is to provide theoretical basis of TBA, definitions and types of tasks, roles of teachers and students, explain benefits and challenges of TBA and make recommendations for teachers in terms of implementation of TBA in classroom.

2. Background of task-based approach

Task-based approach or task-based language learning is one of teaching methods which is believed to be efficient in developing learners' communication competence (Harshbarger, 2002; Barnard & Nguyen, 2010). It has an effective impact on language learning in terms of communication and social interaction. The nature of this approach is to help learners master the target language by meaningful task-based activities. Since 1980s, task-based approach has been considered as a powerful method which provide learners authentic tasks. Thanks to these tasks, learners can be more confident to solve tasks in their daily activities (Nunan, 2004; Ellis, 2009). Ellis (2009) further proved that by giving learners real tasks, they can have more chances to experience with the target language which is the main goal of language acquisition. In addition, Willis (1996) stated that learners have more chances to sharpen their problems solving skills by doing task-based cycles of pre-task preparation, task performance and language focus.

Prabu (1987) was a pioneer to use this approach in his classes. Since then, many researchers have been conducting the nature of this approach as well as models of implementing it into real classes. Breen (1987) demonstrated that educators paid more attention to this approach thanks to its usefulness in teaching communication and developing learners' soft skills. In fact, it has an important value in building learner-centered classrooms in which learners have more chances to communicate and enhance their ability in the process of deploying the target language and solving communicative problems in an effective way. With its usefulness, task-based approach has been considered a powerful teaching method which reinforces learners to master spoken and written language (Lin, 2009).

The employment of tasks in language teaching by applying task-based models has been applied by many teachers and educators in the world. As a fact, task-based syllabus or learning materials have been considered by the usefulness of task-based approach. Despite its popularity, many researchers are concentrating on defining learning tasks, performing tasks in classroom practice, defining teachers' and learners' roles and assessing tasks-based activities in practice.

2.1. Definitions of learning tasks

The term learning tasks have been defined by many researchers. Nunan (1989) defined that learning tasks are a form of classroom activities related to students' realization, applying and creativity. Learners use target language to solve activities. Willis (1996) further proved that learning tasks are activities with the main objective of encouraging learners to achieve learning outcome. Skehan (1998) defined features of learning tasks as: (1) the priority of tasks is to give learners meaning; (2) tasks are connected with real-world activities; (3) task completion requires specific steps; (4) the assessment of tasks is to serve learning outcome. Lee (2000) stated that learning tasks are activities taken place in classroom and have clear learning outcomes. Van den Branden (2006) explained that task is an activity which an individual performs to have expected results and has to use one target language to complete. In short, there are some common points in definitions of learning tasks. A learning task is an activity with a specific goal and performed by learners in classrooms with defined target languages. Moreover, learning tasks have a relationship with learners' real world.

2.2. Task-based framework

The task-based view of language teaching relied on the constructivist learning theory and communication language teaching methodology. Therefore, it has the implication that language learning is a developmental process. In addition, it promotes communication and social interaction. Furthermore, learners learn the target language more effectively when they are exposed to well-designed task-based activities. Task-based approach during the nineties (Breen, 1987; Candlin & Murphy, 1987; Nunan, 1989) has developed into a practical framework for communicative classroom in which learners perform tasks through the cycles of pre-task preparation, task performance and language focus (Willis, 1996).

The stages in task-based framework help teachers follow teaching steps effectively thanks to continuous sequences. In each stage, the duties of teachers and learners are well-explained. In a word, the framework of Willis (1996) is the most teacher-friendly model.

Table 1: Willi's framework of task-based approach

Pre-task	Introduction to topics and tasks
Task cycle	Task
	Planning
	Report
Language focus	Analysis
	Practice

Similarly, Ellis (2003) considered important procedures for teaching learning tasks in his book "Task-based language teaching and learning". He illustrated a framework for designing task lessons as follows:

Table 2: Ellis's framework of task-based approach

Pre-task	Framing the activity
	Planning time
	Doing a similar task
During task	Time pressure
	Number of participants
Post-task	Learner report
	Consciousness-raising
	Repeat task

2.3. Purposes of task-based approach

In terms of educational purposes, task-based approach has a number of essential purposes. According to Wills (1996), there are eight purposes as follows:

- to give learners chances to practice the target language they know;
- to give learners chances to experience spontaneous interaction during task performance;
- to give learners chances to notice similar meanings from other participants;
- to give learners chances to negotiate turns to speak;
- to give learners chances to use language purposefully and cooperative;
- to give learners chances to participate in solving tasks with others;
- to give learners chances to experience communication strategies;
- to develop learns' confidence that they need to achieve in communicative activities.

2.4. Strong and weak forms of task-based approach

Ellis (2003) stated that task-based approach is a strong form of communicative language teaching. With the focus on accuracy and fluency, this approach helps to improve communicative approach. In this approach, learners act as language users rather than linguistic analysts of language structures and forms which emerge from difficulties during the completion of tasks (Willis, 1996). This principle is defined as "*People can learn a language not only to use the target language for particular purposes, but also by doing s*o." (Van den Branden, 2012, p.133). Therefore, this approach is considered an effective way to encourage learners to learn a language through the communication and interaction. What is more, the language learners can find it easy to practice vocabulary and therefore unknown words can be recognized through communication (Hulstijn, 1992). After performing learning tasks, learners can have a record of new words to use for different contexts. Experiential learning is another strong form of this approach. It is obvious that intellectual growth happens when learners participate in the process of solving tasks. It is the reason why this approach is calling the learner-centered approach.

However, task-based approach has been critiqued a number of ways. Swan (2005) claimed that this approach neglects the teaching of grammar and limits the roles of teachers. Furthermore, it is also not unsuitable for beginner learners because they need to have basic grammar to communicate. Besides that, it is not useful for foreign leaners who cannot have a lot of chances to communicate in the target language outside the

classroom (Sheen, 2003). Last but not least, it is easy to recognize that learners' needs are neglected by task-based lessons. Learners have different needs to experience the target language. However, learning tasks may interest few learners belonging to genders or cultural backgrounds. For instance, a task-based cooking lesson with the pork ingredient may not be interested by Muslims.

2.5. The roles of teachers and learners in task-based approach

Defining the roles of teachers and learners is essential in task-based approach. According to Ellis (2003), the language teacher who implements task-based language teaching should have following roles:

- Ensure that the difficult levels of task-based activities are suitable with learners' English proficiency;
- Set up clear learning outcomes in order that learners can understand the objectives of task-based lessons;
- Assist learners to perform task-based activities;
- Ensure that learners are always active in performing task-based activities;
- Encourage learners to take risks during task-based activities;
- Make sure that learners focus on target language when performing task-based activities;
- Provide learners chances to practice the target language;
- Ask students to evaluate their performance.

Specifically, Willis (1996) suggested that the language teachers should perform three main roles: *(1) observer; (2) language consultant; (3) leaders during the task-based activities*. Relevant to the first role, the teacher has an active role in observing learners when they are in task-based lessons. It means that the language teacher can point out learners' mistakes, help them to focus on tasks and so on. Related to the second role, the language teacher is considered as an important consultant. The teacher can help students to use proper language, structures and be more confident to raise their ideas. As for the third role, it can be emphasized that the teacher plays an important role in controlling classroom activities. The teacher makes sure that learners perform the right topic and show their participation.

The language learners who implement task-based activities in classroom should be active and willing to take risks. In addition, they should try to find out more chances to sharpen their language skills. Richard & Rogers (2001) said that the language learners should have three major roles: *(1) participant; (2) monitor; (3) risk-taker*. Regarding the first role, the learners are active participants in most of pairs or groups. They share their ideas and contribute their efforts to finish tasks with good results. The second role of learners is monitor. To ensure the success of task-based activities, the learners are responsible for monitoring other members' contribution as well. Besides that, the language learners need to monitor the process of task-based lesson. Relevant to the third role, the leaners need to push themselves to generate ideas that they may not have linguistic resources. It is a fact that authentic tasks may take place in any circumstance. Therefore, being a risk-taker can give the language learner opportunities to challenge themselves.

3. Assessment of task-based approach

The assessment of task-based approach is called a formative assessment because it requires teachers to pay much attention to students' process of performing tasks as well as progress during the task-based lessons (Bachman, 2002; Norris et al., 1998). Unlike traditional methods of assessment which focus on paper-based tests, the task-based approach is used to evaluate learners' competence and ability to solve different kinds of tasks. In addition, the assessment of learning tasks is not only the re-enactment of actual activities through lectures, but also the assessment of learners' reflective capacity in each problem.

Long and Norris (2000) accepted that the assessment of task-based approach is really essential to analyse and evaluate performed tasks by students. In terms of education, the nature of this assessment is considered a meaningful method to predict whether learners can apply task-based activities into their real world.

According to Ellis (2003), there are four characteristics of task-based assessment:
1) This assessment is one of training process with the purpose of improving teaching and learning activities.
2) It bases on learners' ability of solving tasks. It provides information of learners' ability of using the target language to solve tasks.
3) It is a direct and objective form assessment of learners' ability to match the target language with particular tasks.
4) It is a practical form of assessment because the assessment involves the use of language in learners' daily lives.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

Task-based approach has become a useful approach for ESL and EFL teachers although some researchers and educators are still looking for its effectiveness and powerfulness. Realistically, the aim of teaching is not to assist learners in achieving expected learning outcomes but also gives them meaningful techniques to solve problems in life. The teachers' roles in task-based approach are establishers who guide learners to solve learning activities and instruct them to cope with problems in their lives. Besides that, the learners who are subjects of learning process must be always active and confident in solving in-class tasks and out-class problems. In general, the task-based approach brings many benefits to both teachers and learners. It is the best method to reinforce the learning process in EFL classrooms.

There are many benefits of task-based approach to EFL teaching. Firstly, it is obvious that the distance between classroom and rea life is not available. Thanks to the application of this approach, learners find it easy to imagine real-life issues and solve them in effective ways. Secondly, learners become more confident to solve learning tasks. They have a lot of chances to practice and experience various tasks. As a result, they are equipped with necessary skills of solving problems. Last but not least, the application of this approach helps learners become successful in learning foreign language. It is clear

that learners have precious chances during the task completion of using the target language for solving well-design tasks. Therefore, the language learning becomes easier and more effective.

There are also some implications for teachers who want to apply this approach into teaching practice. Ellis (2009) emphasized some reminds for the effective implementation of task-based approach, as follows:

- Designing and choosing tasks must be suitable for learners' English proficiency levels.
- The repetition of tasks is necessary because learners have more chances to experience the target language and be familiar with the steps of solving tasks.
- The teachers must have a comprehension of what a task is.
- Both teachers and learners must be aware of the purposes of learning tasks and performing tasks in a logical way.
- The teachers who are responsible for teaching task-based lessons must take part in designing tasks.

Acknowledgement

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

About the Authors

Nguyen Dinh Nhu Ha is a PhD candidate at Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology and Education. He is a lecturer of English at Mien Dong University of Technology, Vietnam. His research interests include language teaching method, educational technology, and English for specific purposes.
Nguyen Loc is a professor in education. He is currently the principal of Ba Ria -Vung Tau University, Vietnam.
Tran Tuyen is a doctor in education. He is currently the lecturer at Institute of Technological Education, Vietnam.

References

Bachman, L. (2002). Some reflections on task-based language performance assessment. *Language Testing, 19*(4), 453-476.
Barnard, R., & Nguyen, G. V. (2010). Task-based language teaching (TBLT): A Vietnamese case study using narrative frame to elicit teachers' beliefs. *Language Education in Asia, 1*(1), 77-86.

Breen, M. (1987). Learner contributions to task design. In C. Candlin and D. Murphy (Eds.), *Language learning tasks* (pp. 23-46). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Cameron, L. (2001). *Teaching languages to young learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Candlin, C. & Murphy, D. (1987). *Language learning tasks.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Crook, C. (2003). Citied in Early learning in the knowledge society: Report on a European Conference, 22-3 May, Brussels. *International Business Machine.*

Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ellis, R. (2009). Task-based language teaching: Sorting out the misunderstandings. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, *19*(3), 221–246.

Harshbarger, L. (2002). What works in the ELT classroom? Using robust reasoning to find out. *English Teaching Forum, 40*(4), 18-25.

Hulstijn, J. H. (1992). Retention of inferred and given word meanings: Experiments in incidental vocabulary learning in P. J. Arnaud and H. Béjoint (eds.): *Vocabulary and Applied Linguistics.* London: Macmillan.

Johnson, K. (2003). *Designing language teaching tasks*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. Carless, D. (2001). Implementing task-based learning with young learners. *ELT Journal, 56*(4), 389-396.

Lee, J. (2000). *Tasks and communicating in language classrooms*. Boston, MA: McGraw Hill.

Lin, Z. (2009). Task-based Approach in Foreign Language Teaching in China: A Seminar Paper Research Presented to the Graduate Faculty, University of Wisconsin-Platteville. Available online at https://minds.wisconsin.edu/handle/1793/34571, accessed July 30, 2021.

Littlewood, W. (20-04). The task-based approach: Some Questions and Suggestions. *ELT Journal 58(4)*, 319-326.

Long, M. H. (1983). Does second language instruction make a difference? A review of research. *TESOL Quarterly*, *17*(3), 359–382.

Murphy, J. (2003). Task-based learning: the interaction between tasks and learners. *ELT Journal, 57*(4), 352-360.

Norris, J. M. (2009). Task-based teaching and testing. In M. H. Long & C. J. Doughty (Eds.), *Handbook of language teaching* (pp. 578–594). Oxford: Blackwell.

Norris, J. M., Brown, J. D., Hudson, T. &Yoshioka, J. (1998). *Designing second language performance assessments.* Honolulu: Second Language Teaching and Curriculum Center, University of Hawaii at Manoa.

Nunan, D. (1989). *Designing tasks for the communicative classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nunan, D. (2004). *Task-based language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nunan, D. (2005). Important tasks of English education: Asia-wide and beyond [Electronic version]. *Asian EFL Journal Vol. 7*, Issue 3.

Ohta, A. S. (1995). Applying sociocultural theory to an analysis of learner discourse: Learner-learner collaborative interaction in the Zone of Proximal Development. *Applied Linguistics*, *6*(2), 93-121.

Prabhu, N. S. (1987). *Second language pedagogy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Richards, J. & Rodgers, T. (2001). *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sheen, R. (2003). Focus-on-form: A myth in the making. *ELT Journal*, *57*, 225-333.

Skehan, P. (1998). Task-based instruction. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 18*, 268-286.

Swain, M., & Lapkin, S. (2000). Task-based second language learning: The uses of the first language. *Language Teaching Research*, *4*, 251–274.

Swan, M. (2005). Legislating by hypothesis: The case of task-based instruction. *Applied Linguistics, 26*, 376-401.

Van den Branden, K. (2006). *Task-based language education: From theory to practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Van den Branden, K. (2012). Task-based language education. In A. Burns & J. C. Richards (Eds.), *The Cambridge guide to pedagogy and practice in second language teaching* (pp. 132–139). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Willis, J. (1996). *A framework for task-based learning*. Harlow, Essex, U.K.: Longman/Addison-Wesley.