Task Based Language Teaching To Promote Communicative Competence

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Abstract

Since Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) provides adequate exposure to language, students, are able to learn the language in an almost real life situation. The learning is student centered and leads to more interaction among students. It also focuses more on meaning than on the form of the language so that the students are able to communicate spontaneously in their day-to-day interactions. The objective of this study is to maintain that TBLT is remarkably effective in promoting communicative competence among students of ESL. To elicit data required for this study, 50 undergrads reading in the 3rd year in the Faculty of Arts, University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka were selected at random and divided into two groups, namely, Control Group and Experimental Group. Pretests and the end of classes post-tests based on different syllabuses were held to assess the students' levels of language proficiency. Data was analyzed and results discussed.

Key Words: TBLT, Communicative Competence, Exposure, Tasks

Introduction

This article discusses Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) approach which is used to develop students' communicative competence.

TBLT has been popular since its introduction in the 1980s. Basically it reflects communicative teaching and learning. It refers to a type of language teaching which includes "tasks" as its prime units for designing and implementing second language instruction.

Language activities are intended to provide students with adequate practice for expressing meaning effectively and appropriately as social context requires so that the students' communicative competence could be developed in a natural manner.

It has been observed that a major factor hindering students to achieve communicative competence is the lack of exposure to language. Hence the techniques to be discussed in this article are believed to overcome this problem by providing necessary exposure to students, particularly through real world experience.

Task-based Pedagogy – A Brief Review

In 1976, the British Applied linguist Wilkins (1976, as cited in Nunan, 2006) made a basic distinction between what he called 'Synthetic approaches' to syllabus design and 'analytical approaches'. According to him, all syllabuses fitted one or other of these approaches.

In synthetic approaches, "Different parts of the language are taught separately and step by step so that acquisition is a process of gradual accumulation of parts until the whole structure of language has been built up" (Wilkins,1976,p.2 as cited in Nunan, 2006, p. 2)

Such approaches are based on the traditional way of organizing the syllabus and reflect the idea that the central role of instruction is to simplify the learning challenges for the student. One way to simplify learning is to break the content down into its constituent parts and to introduce each part separately and step by step. A related concept that was popular in the 1960s was that of mastery learning. In mastery learning, the subject matter was broken down and sequenced from easy to difficult and each content item was introduced to the learner in a serial fashion, and a new item was not supposed to be introduced until the correct item had been thoroughly mastered.

The dominant approach to language teaching in Asia and most of the rest of the world has been a synthetic one. Teachers who have learned their own language through a synthetic approach consider it as the normal and logical way of learning language.

In the book titled *Notional Syllabus* written by him, Wilkins (as cited in Nunan, 2006) offered an alternative to synthetic approaches. These approaches are known as analytical approaches as the learners are presented with holistic chunks of language and are required to analyze them or break them down into their constituent parts.

"Prior analysis of the total language system into a set of discrete pieces of language that is a necessary precondition for the adoption of a synthetic approach is largely superfluous. Such approaches are organized in terms of the purposes of which people are learning language and the kinds of language that are necessary to meet these purposes" (Wilkins,1976,p.13 as cited in Nunan, 2006, p. 2).

All syllabus proposals that do not depend on a prior analysis of the language belong to this second category. In addition to task – based syllabuses, they all have one thing in common – they do not rely on prior analysis of the language into its discrete points. Then, Task – based language teaching grew out of this alternative approach to language pedagogy. Since then the concept of task has become an important element in syllabus design, classroom teaching and learner assessment.

Prabhu has been the pioneer to apply TBLT in teaching programmes. He conducted his studies in Bangalore of Southern India in 1979 to put his theories into practice. He believed that students may learn more effectively when they concentrate on tasks rather than on the language they are using.

Definitions of Task

Tasks have been defined in various ways. Nunan (2004) drew a basic distinction between real world or target tasks and pedagogical tasks. Target tasks refer to uses of language in the world beyond the classroom. Pedagogical tasks are those that occur in the classroom.

According to Long (1985, p. 89), "A task is a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others freely or for some reward. Thus examples of tasks include painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form, buying a pair of shoes , making an airline reservation, borrowing a

library book, taking a driving test, typing a letter, weighing a patient, sorting letters, writing a cheque, finding a street destination and helping someone across a road. In other words, by 'task' is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play and in between" This definition is non-technical and non-linguistic. It describes the sorts of things that the person in the street would say if asked what they were doing.

Here is a definition of a pedagogical task.

> "… an activity or action which is carried out as the result of processing or understanding language. (i.e. as a response). For example, drawing a map while listening to a tape, listening to an instruction while performing a command may be referred to as tasks. Tasks may or may not involve the production of language. A task usually requires the teacher to specify what will be regarded as successful completion of task. The use of a variety of different kinds of tasks in language teaching is said to make language teaching more communicative … since it provides a purpose for a classroom activity which goes beyond the practice of language for its own sake." (Richards, Platt and Webber, 1986, p. 289).

In this definition, the authors take a pedagogical perspective. Tasks are defined in terms of what the learners will do in class rather than in the world outside the classroom.

Rationale of Designing Communicative Tasks

Task design forms a vital part in TBLT. The teacher should possess a clear idea of what kind of tasks, whether focus on form or not and the extent of the difficulty of the tasks in order to facilitate learning of different learners with different learning levels. Thus it is necessary to build up the rationale of designing tasks for a task – based classroom and the following elements are to be considered in order to design effective tasks (WANG, 2006).

Meaningful Tasks

Learning a foreign language means the acquisition of a new system for realizing familiar meanings. In natural second language acquisition settings, one begins with the intention to mean and understand what others mean and after that looks for workings that express these meanings.

Language does not exist in a vacuum. This is the very reason why lists of words and sample patterns taught as single items very rarely become part of the learners' deployable system in classroom settings. Language develops in response to the need to mean and to understand what others mean. Therefore the materials offered to the learners should encourage them to focus on meanings in context first and subsequently seek to consider the wordings that realize the meanings.

The above notions stress that any pedagogical approach which advocates natural acquisition process should therefore lead from meanings to wordings.

When students are engaged in a meaningful task, they are required to exchange information among themselves in small groups and / or with the teacher. This type of group activity produces dual benefits. First the entire class is made actively take part in a task at the same time and students will be able to compare their findings once the task is over; and second, the meaningful task is rehearsed in class for the use in the future in real communicative circumstances outside the classroom.

Following two sets of conversations make clear the similarities and differences between authentic and non-authentic data.

Ranjan :   Who's that boy over there ?
Ravi   :   That's Kumara. Come on, I'll introduce you.
Ranjan :   Okay.
Ravi   :   Kumar, I want to introduce my friend, Ranjan
Kumar :   Hello
Ranjan :   Hello

Ranjan: Who's that boy over there?
Ravi   :   That's Kumara. Come on. Let me introduce you.
Ranjan :   Okay.
Ravi   :   Kumar, I'd like to introduce my friend, Ranjan.

Kumara: Hello.

Ranjan :   Hello.

The two sentences in the above conversations "I will introduce you" and "I want to introduce my friend, Ranjan" are not genuine English statements. They are not genuine English statements. They are replaced by "Let me introduce you" and "I'd like to introduce my friend, Ranjan" respectively.

Those who advocate TBLT have stressed the importance of incorporating authentic data into the classroom while it has been pointed out that authenticity is lost when a piece of language is shifted from the communicative context in which it occurred and taken to the classroom. However, it is to be borne in mind that if learners are exposed only to contrived dialogues and texts, learning the language will be meaningless.

The above discussion endorses the fact that tasks should be related to learners' real experience of daily life. Hence learners need authentic data to make learning meaningful. Tasks can be made authentic via following means.

Through Genuine Task Purposes

Willis (1998) asserted that one of the prime aspects of task authenticity is whether real communication takes place. In order to make tasks authentic, it is necessary to find out a genuine purpose for the language to be learned; unless there is a purpose, real meaningful communication will be impossible. When there is a genuine communicative purpose, students will find the chance to interact naturally. Communicative purpose in turn, will lead to increased fluency and natural acquisition.

Through Real World Targets

Long and Crookes (1992) argued that pedagogic tasks must be related to real − world target tasks. Examples given by them include buying a train ticket, renting an apartment, reporting a chemistry experiment, taking lecture notes and so on. Classroom − based pedagogic

tasks may not be similar to the target tasks. However they can be regarded as authentic if they have a clear relationship with real – world needs.

Through Classroom Interactions

A classroom is a typical environment in which students and teachers work toward for a common goal. Classroom interactions make pedagogic tasks to be authentic. Teachers should have the ability to look for the potential authenticity of the learning environment in classroom. Learning tasks, the materials to be selected and worked on and the actual needs and interests of all people who have gathered in the classroom provide adequate authentic potential for communication.

Learners' Engagement

Whether the task is relevant to the learners is another important aspect to be considered. When students are engaged in the task corresponding to their day- to- day real life experiences, the selected task becomes more authentic. While some tasks may be authentic to some learners, they may not be so to others. Therefore by engaging students in the tasks, tasks can be made authentic to a good extent. In this manner students' experience within the class could be made quite similar to their experience outside the classroom. When students are outside the classroom, they will be able to use the target language for communication in a casual manner as they use their mother tongue.

The Method Adopted in the Present Research

Fifty undergraduates in the third year in the Faculty of Arts of the University of Jaffna were selected for the study. They were divided into two target groups of students. Group- A is considered as the Control Group and Group- B, the Experimental Group.

Materials

Two different syllabuses were utilized for teaching English as a Second Language. For Group- A, instructions on language skills excluding the use of tasks were imparted. Group- B was exposed to a syllabus that comprised tasks.
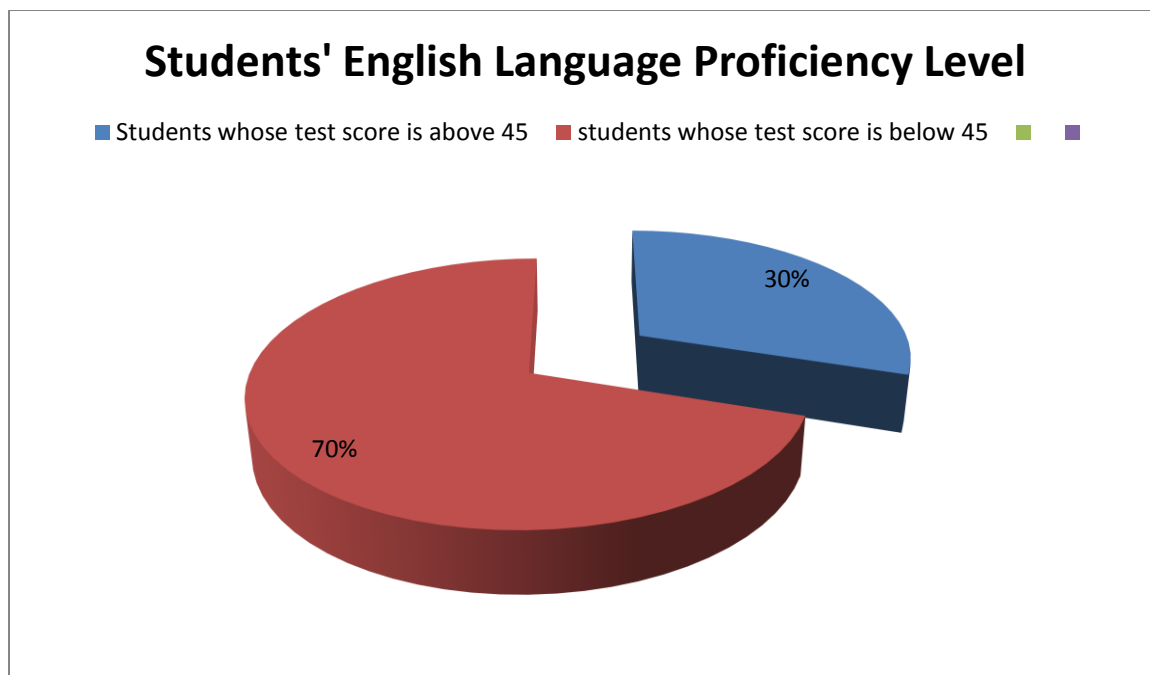
Procedure

A Pre-Test was conducted among the two groups to assess the language skills that were to be taught to them. These groups were imparted instruction for a complete semester. After the end of the programme, these groups were given Post-Tests based on their different syllabuses.
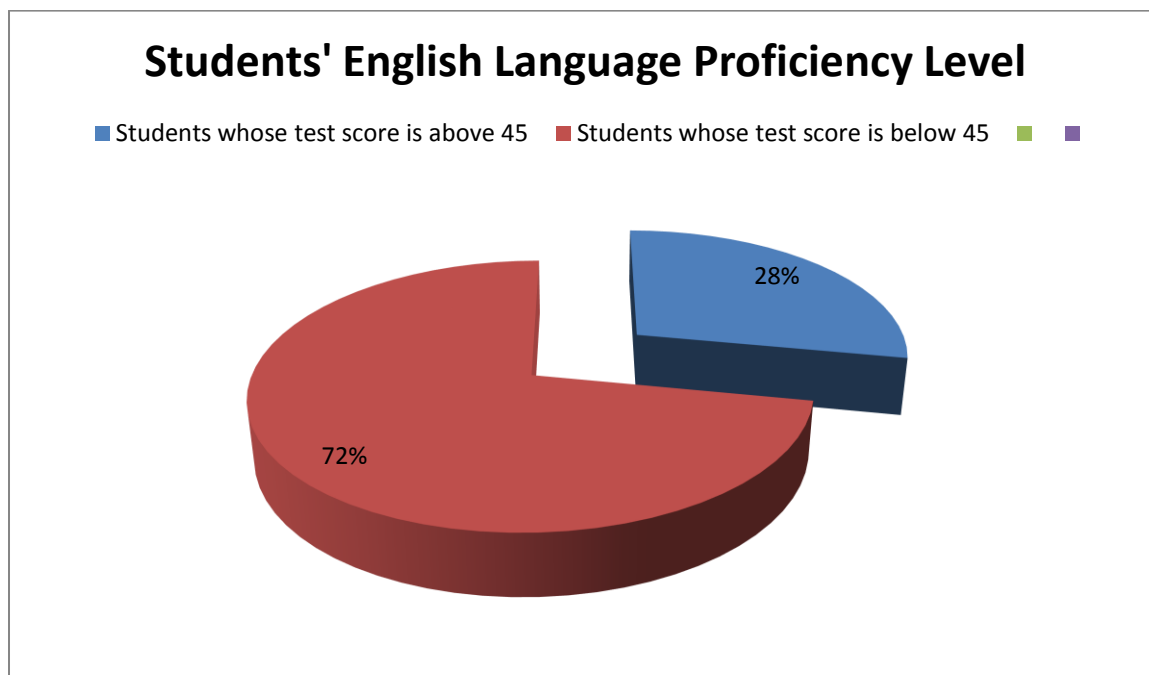
Results and Data Analysis

The students' performances in the tests administered to the two groups represent the outcome of the current research.

The result of the Pre-Tests reveals that the level of basic language skills of the groups remains almost the same, with very little variation that can be ignored. The result of the Control Group is represented by Pie Chart - A and the result of Experimental Group is demonstrated in Pie Chart – B.
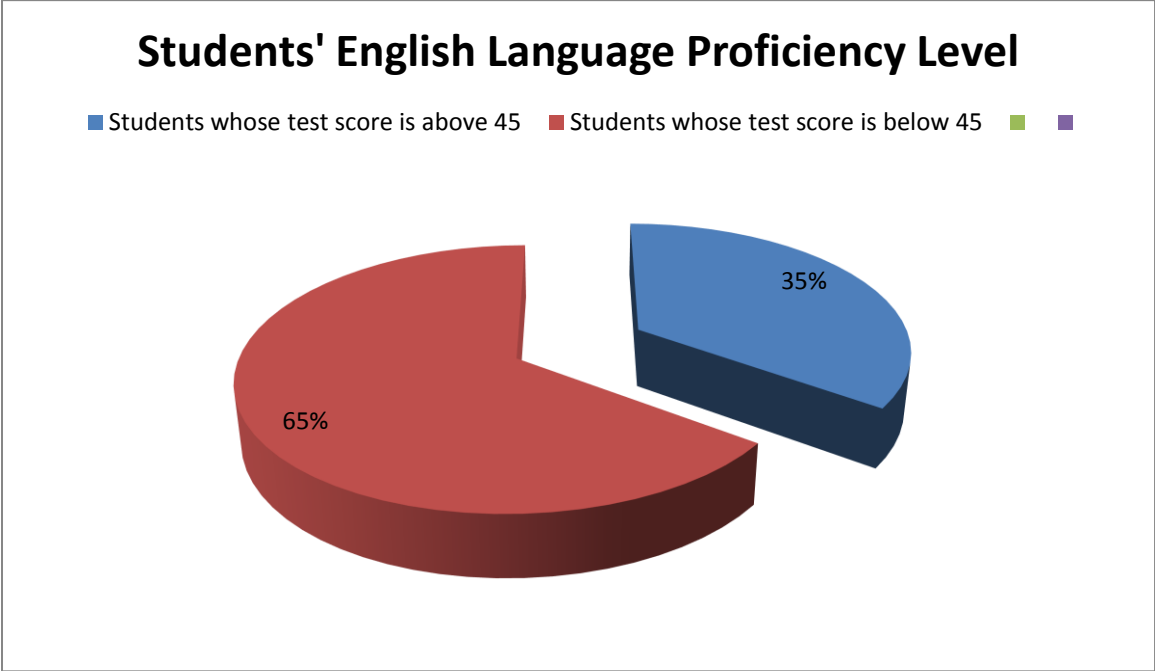

Students' English Language Proficiency Level

■ Students whose test score is above 45 ■ students whose test score is below 45 ■ ■

30%

70%

Pie Chart – A

Students' English Language Proficiency Level

■ Students whose test score is above 45   ■ Students whose test score is below 45   ■   ■
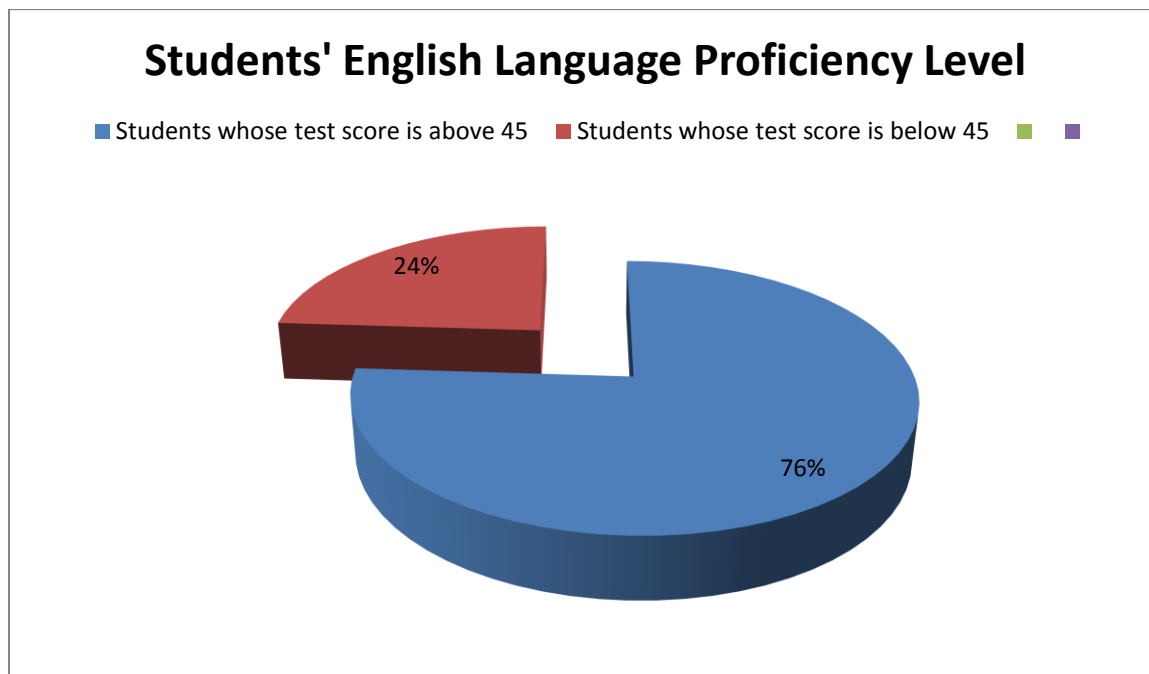
28%

72%

Pie Chart - B

The duration of the study was for a complete semester in which the control group was given instruction in language skills through a language specific syllabus devoid of the use of tasks. The experimental group was taught to promote their language skills through exposure to tasks.

At the end of the semester when the instructions were complete, the two groups were administered Post-Tests based on the contents of the syllabuses designed separately for them. The result of the Control group is shown in Pie Chart – C and the result of Experimental group is shown in Pie Chart – D.

Students' English Language Proficiency Level

■ Students whose test score is above 45   ■ Students whose test score is below 45   ■   ■

35%

65%

Pie Chart – C

Students' English Language Proficiency Level

■ Students whose test score is above 45   ■ Students whose test score is below 45   ■   ■

24%

76%

Pie Chart – D

Pie Charts C and D reflect the findings of the Post – Tests administered to the Control group and the Experimental group. The Experimental group has shown higher achievement in language skills than the Control group. These findings clearly indicate that there is vast improvement in language proficiency among the students of the Experimental group as they were highly motivated by their involvement in tasks.

Discussion

Some Common Issues

Some common learning issues in task oriented class were observed by the researcher and they are briefly discussed.

Feeling of Shyness

When students were asked to speak in English in the classroom, they often feel shy particularly when the class consists of students of both genders. They seemed to be worried about making mistakes and fear criticism by their peers.

Vacuum in Expression

Students, in general, feel the vacuum, when required to communicate something among their peers. They complain that they do not have any ideas to express. They add that their thinking process gets inhibited particularly in front of others.

Use of Mother Tongue

Students inevitably and sometimes unconsciously opt to use their mother tongue as they feel secure in using the mother tongue.

Low Level of Vocabulary

Often, students struggle as they are severely handicapped in finding suitable vocabulary in communicating. Particularly they lack the ability in choosing words according to contexts.

Fluency Vs Accuracy

It seems to be a common phenomenon that when students attempt to maintain fluency they lose grip of accuracy and vice versa.

Strategies to Overcome Issues

Group Work

Group work induces cooperation and confidence among students. They feel morally supported by each other and they get rid of shyness, nervousness and fear during individual talk. The class can be divided into groups and a topic can be discussed. One representative of each group can summarize ideas to other groups.

Adoption of Simple Language

Texts for practice to develop language skills should be readable, suitable to the level of students and represent real life experiences so that they can stimulate students and keep up their interest.

There should be adequate focus on incorporating vocabulary, the meaning of which may be guessed by students from the context. This kind of practice will motivate students to develop their word power, as it occurs in language acquisition.

Simultaneous Attention on Structure and Meaning

Students should be properly guided and trained by the teacher to be balanced in using the language grammatically and fluently simultaneously. Practice may range from short utterances to lengthy discourse, by students.

Conclusion

Task Based Language Teaching creates motivation and avoids monotony among learners. What students experience within the classroom would be similar to what they experience outside the classroom. As they step out of the class room they face men and the surroundings with confidence and a sense of familiarity. In TBLT classes, grammar is taught implicitly to enable students to use the language with accuracy as well as fluently. Further, tasks provide students with thorough exposure to the target language.

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