

Exploring Higher Secondary Students' Perceptions for the Implementation of Task-Based Language Teaching in the English Classroom in Assam

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Abstract

There is no gainsaying that the traditional methodologies used for the teaching of English in India in general and Assam in particular are basically teacher-centred ones, which fail to enable learners to become communicatively competent. This situation obviously calls for an overhauling of the English language pedagogy in India, with a view to adopting a methodology which is learner-centred and has been found to be effective in enabling the learners in developing communicative competence. In this context, the authors of this article carried out a research to find out the feasibility or otherwise of implementing task-based language teaching methodology, a contemporary offshoot of the much-hallowed learner-centred communicative language teaching, in the English language classroom at the higher secondary in Assam. This article reports the findings with regard to the perceptions of higher secondary students regarding the appropriateness of task-based language teaching in the context mentioned above.

Key words: Task-based language teaching, teacher-centred, learner-centred, communicative competence, communicative language teaching

Introduction

As in the rest of India, English is today generally viewed as the language of opportunity and upward mobility in Assam as well. Assam shares all or many of the English Language Teaching (ELT) practices followed elsewhere in India at all levels of education. The current paradigm of teaching-learning of the English language in Assam is largely based

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on the Grammar-Translation Method. This method views language as a structured system of grammatical patterns with an aim to develop in students the ability for producing correct sentences (Nunan, 1988). Whereas there has been a surge of research and development in ELT across the world in the areas of language acquisition and teaching methodology, ELT in Assam could not benefit from these developments, and the obsolete Grammar-Translation Method is still in vogue. There is a requirement, emerging as a consequence of the international and the national role of English and the developments in ELT methodology, to make ELT more relevant and meaningful for the students by taking into account their needs. The educational institutions where ELT forms an important part of the curriculum need to explore the possibility of adopting an effective ELT approach responsive to the language learning needs of their students.

The Context of the Study

As the general aim of teaching English as a second language should be to enable the learners to use the language in real life situations, and not just to give them knowledge about the language, it is imperative that ELT adopts a language teaching methodology that would make the learner communicatively competent. One such methodology is Task-based language teaching (TBLT). Tasks form the focus of TBLT. In a task-based course, the emphasis is on meaningful, holistic language practice, in which learners need to listen, read, speak, or write in order to complete a challenge. The rationale for TBLT as a teaching methodology is found in theories of language acquisition that emphasise the central role in language learning of meaningful language use allied with opportunities to notice the ways in which meanings are created through the target language (Long, 1996; Skehan, 1996). According to such theories, opportunities for communication and noticing the relationships between forms and functions provide the conditions under which communicative competence in a second language can most effectively be developed.

However, the attempt to implement TBLT has not been without problems in many Asian countries, as many research studies have shown. It has been found to be in conflict with the local learning cultures. Hu (2002) has indicated that grammar- and vocabulary knowledge-focused national examinations are the most influential factors preventing teaching innovation in China. A frequently mentioned concern is the large class size, which has been

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noted as a barrier to change in Korean (Jeon & Hahn, 2006; Li, 1998), Hong Kong (Carless, 2002), and mainland Chinese (Zhang, 2007) schools. Clark *et al.* (1999) identified vague understanding of TBLT as a main factor that limited the ability of Hong Kong teachers to implement the new curriculum. On the other hand, there is also evidence that once exposed to TBLT, Asian learners can adjust their preferences for learning. Hsu (2007) found that Taiwanese students who had been exposed to TBLT preferred group to individual work.

In Assam there has hardly been any serious effort towards bringing about any change in the current inefficacious paradigm of teaching English which heavily relies on the traditional Grammar-Translation method. It can be inferred that most of the concerns, as expressed in the above-mentioned research studies, with regard to implementing an innovation in teaching methodology can be raised in the context of ELT in Assam, as the pedagogical condition in Assam in particular and in India in general is, by and large, similar to the ones in many of the Asian countries.

Keeping in mind the limitations of the Grammar-Translation Method in making learners communicatively competent, and the merits of TBLT as well as the concerns expressed in implementing it, a research was undertaken by the authors for exploring the perceptions of students at the higher secondary level with a view to understanding the constraints in and opportunities of implementing TBLT in Assam for the teaching of English.

The authors of this article focused their study on the Higher Secondary level, as they assumed that it would be more viable to implement TBLT initially at that level. The justification for this assumption is that with the students having already acquired some sort of ability to use the English language at the primary and the secondary levels, it would be easier to get them to perform classroom tasks that TBLT requires. Once TBLT is successfully implemented at the Higher Secondary level, the same framework, with relevant modification, can be inducted into the other levels of English education in the state.

Research Design

Since the study attempted to explore the perceptions of a representative group of higher secondary-level students of English to find out the feasibility or otherwise of the

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implementation of TBLT, it employed a quantitative data collection technique in the form of the administration of a questionnaire for collecting data from them with regard to their English language learning needs, their opinions and views on the current ELT classroom practices, etc.

The first phase of the research involved selection of representative educational institutions for the purpose of sample selection. For this, ten districts of Assam, namely, Dhubri, Bongaigaon, Kamrup, Nagaon, Sonitpur, Lakhimpur, Tinsukia, Jorhat, Karbi Anglong and Cachar, were selected, giving representation to different parts of the state. From each district two institutions and from each institution a group of twenty students were selected using systemic random sampling and purposive random selection techniques respectively. A specially designed questionnaire containing multiple choice, likert type, and preference-scale questions was administered to the participants for their responses. The questionnaire incorporated questions on English learning needs of the students, their expectations from the English language curriculum, their reaction to suggested innovations in teaching-learning methods and classroom practices, etc.

The data collected by means of the questionnaire were analysed using a simple statistical tool. The responses to the questions in the questionnaire were accumulated option-wise or preference-wise, as was the case. The total number of responses against each of the options or preferences provided for a question was converted into percentage in order to understand the weight received by each option. The responses were then tabulated and represented. A schematic representation in the form of tables was produced for the data, which were then interpreted with a view to arriving at the findings of the study.

Data Analysis

The total number of students selected as part of the sample was 200, with as many questionnaires handed over to them. However, only 180 filled-in questionnaires were returned by the students. The number of question items in the students' questionnaire was 11. The following is the presentation of the data in a tabular form followed by analysis:

Question Item 1

Why do you need to learn English?

Needs	Preference					
	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th	6 th
To be able to study English Literature	3.3%	3.3%	3.3%	25.6%	22.3%	42.2%
To speak to people speaking a language different from yours	8.9%	0	31.1%	25.6%	25.6%	8.9%
To speak to your friends and family	0	0.6%	0	23.3%	39.4%	36.7%
To pass examinations	22.8%	14.4%	31.1%	16.7%	6.1%	8.9%
For higher education	25.6%	50.6%	14.4%	5.5%	3.3%	0.6%
For a successful professional career	39.4%	31.1%	20%	3.3%	3.3%	2.8%

Table 1 Students' Needs for English

The data on students' needs for English reveal that most of the students perceive a successful professional career and higher education as the main needs for learning English. While 39.4% students learn English mainly (first preference) for having a successful professional career, 25.6% students learn it for the reason that it will be mainly (first preference) necessary for higher studies. However, 22.8% say that they primarily (first preference) learn it for passing examinations. Higher education is given second preference by 50.6%, followed by professional career which is given second preference by 31.2% students and passing examination is chosen as the second preference by 14.4%. Other reasons for learning English are given much less preference with 'to study English literature' receiving the least preference from 42.2% students.

Question Item 2

In future you will be using English for?

Domain	Preference				
	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th
Higher studies	33.9%	49.4%	16.7%	0	0
Socialising	0	17.2%	26.7%	56.1%	0%
At home	0	0	0	0	100%
In future job/career related work	66.1%	16.1%	17.8	0	0
Others (Using computer, Mobile	0	17.2%	38.9%	43.9%	0

Table 2 Students' Future Domain of Use of English

The main future domain of use of English as perceived by majority of the students (66.1%) is job/career related works, which is given first preference by these students. 33.9% students perceive higher studies as the main (first preference) future domain of use of English. Though some students also say that using computer (surfing internet), mobile etc. is another future domain of use of English, they do not consider it to be the main domain, as no student gives it first preference. 'Higher studies' is given second preference by a large number (49.4%) of students. 'Use at home' receives the least preference from all the students as a future domain of use of English.

Question Item 3

Skills/aspects you wish to develop more?

Skill	Preference					
	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th	6 th
Listening	0	20.6%	0	12.8%	22.2%	44.4%
Speaking	57.2%	211.1%	11.1%	11.1%	9.4%	0
reading	0	11.1%	23.9%	11.1%	11.1%	42.8%
writing	20.6%	11.1%	33.3%	33.3%	0	1.7%
Grammar	11.1%	22.2%	31.7%	11.1%	23.9%	0

Vocabulary	11.1%	23.9%	0	20.6%	33.3%	11.1%
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Table 3 Students' Preferred Language Skills/Aspects

Responses from the students to the question what skills they would like to develop more while learning English show that most of them want to develop speaking skill and writing skill. 57.2 % students say that they want to develop speaking skill more than any other skill, while 20.6 % of them say that writing is the most important skill for them to develop. Developing lexical or grammatical competence is the most preferred aspect for 11.1% students each. Reading and listening are the least preferred skills with 42.8% and 44.4% students respectively giving these two skills the last preference.

Question Item 4

English language teaching should focus on?

Skill	Preference			
	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th
Developing speaking skill	74.4%	14.4%	11.1%	0
Developing writing skill	12.8%	63.3%	23.8%	0
Developing Reading skill	11.1%	11.1%	54%	23.8%
Developing listening skill	1.7%	11.1%	11.1%	76.1%

Table 4 Students' Preferred Focus with regard to English Language Teaching

A large majority of the students (74.4%) opine that English language teaching should primarily (first preference) focus on developing speaking skill than on any other skill. 12.8% and 11.1% of the students believe that primary (first preference) focus of English language teaching should be on developing writing skill and reading skill respectively. Only 1.7% of the students is of the opinion that developing listening skill should be the primary (first preference) focus of teaching English. 'Developing writing skill' receives the second preference by 63.3%, followed by 'developing speaking skill' which is given second

preference by 14.4% students as the focus of English language teaching. Developing listening skill is the least preferred focus of English language teaching as 76.1% students give it the last preference.

Question Item 5

Whether the current English syllabus and classroom teaching are helping in improving your English language competence any further

Yes	23.9%
No	63.3%
Not sure	12.8%

Table 5 Students' Opinion on the effectiveness of the Syllabus and Teaching

Significant revelation on the effectiveness of the current English syllabus and the classroom teaching comes from the students' responses elicited under this question. A large majority (63.3%) of the students believe that the current syllabus and the classroom teaching are not helping them in improving their English language competence. Only 23.9% think that their competence with regard to English is improving, while 12.8% students are not sure about the effectiveness of the syllabus and classroom teaching.

Question Item 6

The role you like your teacher to have?

As a person in control of everything in the class	25%
As someone who does not control everything but helps and guides you in learning	72.2%
Not Sure	2.8%

Table 6 Students' Preferred Role of the Teacher

When it comes to their opinion on the role of the teacher in the class, the students are heavily in favour of a class which is not entirely controlled and dominated by the teacher.

72.2% students would like have a classroom where the teacher does not control everything but helps and guides them in the learning process. However, 25% say they would prefer a

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classroom completely controlled by the teacher. 2.8% students are not sure about the kind of role the teacher should play in the classroom.

Question Item 7

The nature of the English class you like?

Teacher just teaching, students listening and no activities by the students	28.3%
Students are actively participating and are involved in a lot of learning activities like role play/games leading to learning/group and pair work tasks	66.1%
Not sure	5.6%

Table 7 Students’ Preferred Nature of the English Class

Majority of the students (66.1%) want an English class where students take active part in classroom activities like role play, group work, pair work etc. 28.3% students express a different opinion wanting a class of the nature where students are not involved in any classroom activities with the teacher teaching and the students just listening. The rest (5.6%) are not sure about the nature of the class they like.

Question Item 8

Will you like to do learning activities/tasks in the class?

Yes	53.9%
No	35.6%
Not sure	10.5%

Table 8 Students’ Willingness for Learning Activities/Tasks in the Class

A large number of students (53.9%) express their willingness to do learning activities or classroom tasks, while 35.5% say they would not like to do any learning activities/tasks in the classroom. 10.5% students are not sure whether they want to do classroom tasks or not.

Question Item 9

You like learning

By memory	27.8%
By problem solving (learning by doing)	40%
By both	32.2%

Table 9 Students' Preferred Mode of Learning

A considerably large number of the students (40.%) express their preference for learning by engaging in problem solving, while 27.8% want to learn by memory alone. 23.9% students say they prefer to learn by both memorizing and engaging in problem solving.

Question Item 10

Will you find your English language course more interesting if it engages you in classroom activities/tasks?

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
34.4%	12.8%	22.8%	25%	5%

Table 10 Students' Opinion on Incorporating Classroom Tasks in the English Course

A large number of students (47.2%) either strongly agree or agree to the view that the English course would become more interesting if the students are engaged in classroom activities/tasks. 30% of the students, however, do not think that way. They either strongly disagree or disagree to the view of incorporating tasks in the English course would make it interesting. A considerably large section (22.8%) of the students neither agrees nor disagrees.

Question Item 11

English language examinations should be such that students are not required to memorise answers, but to complete certain tasks using the language (both written and spoken)

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
20.6%	16.7%	28.3%	21.1%	13.3%

Table 11 Students' Opinion on Task-Based Assessment

To the suggestion that English language examinations should be Task-Based, 37.3% students either strongly agree or agree. 34.4% students have shown they have not favoured the idea by disagreeing or strongly disagreeing to it. A considerably large section neither agrees nor disagrees.

Findings

The following findings have been arrived at from the analysis of the data collected for the present study:

1. The present domains of English language use for the students are primarily studying and passing examinations, while the future domains are largely higher studies and future professional life. Thus it can be inferred that the students' learning English is considered instrumental in making good progress in higher studies and in getting a good job in future and making good progress in professional career. Using the internet and operating mobile phones and mobile applications are identified as the chief among the other marginally important domains of English language use. Particularly, one of the main future domains, i.e., professional life, indicates that students have to be able to communicate effectively in English, which will be necessitated by the demands of their job-related works on them. Therefore, communicative competence is a primary requirement of the learners. This calls for a teaching-learning methodology which can effectively develop communicative competence in the learners. The traditional methodology being largely employed in the classroom teaching at present does not develop communicative competence in the learners as the competence of

majority of the learners in all the four language skills is below average. Thus it is found that a methodology based on TBLT, which aims at making the learners communicatively competent, is the need of the target learners' situation.

2. The students are found to believe that they need to learn all the four language skills. However, speaking is considered the most preferred skill as compared to listening, reading and writing. Writing, reading and listening received 2nd, 3rd, and 4th preferences respectively. Apart from the language skills the students also need to have grammatical and lexical competence in some degree. This finding further points to the fact that the present methodology employed in classroom teaching is not adequate to address the learners' needs as it is found not to specifically emphasise learning of the four language skills by the students. Only a methodology that dwells on developing the learners' competence in all the four language skills, though in varying degrees, would suit the objectives of the teaching-learning process. TBLT is one such methodology which, through its requirement of the learners' engagement with classroom tasks of different kinds, seeks to develop their competence in all the language skills, apart from focusing on lexical and grammatical competence, though at an appropriate stage. Thus, it is found that TBLT can be the methodology that would be appropriate in the context under study.

3. The students are found to favour a classroom environment which is supportive to their active participation in classroom activities like pair- and group-work, games, role play for completion of classroom tasks. They show preference for learning language by engaging in classroom activities and thereby using the language and negotiating meaning, instead of resorting to memorisation. They prefer learning by problem solving to rote learning. This finding is a clear indication that implementing TBLT is feasible in the present context. It is well known that the main focus of TBLT is the completion of classroom tasks, which are expected to provide the learners with opportunities to notice ways in which meaning is created and thereby to give the learners ample scope to learn a language through its use. Therefore, TBLT would suit the students' preference as far as learning style is concerned.

4. It is found that the students want a change in role relationship and their status in the classroom. They want the teacher to surrender some of the control he/she usually holds over

the class. They expect a class where they are at the centre and the role of the teacher is that of a facilitator and guide. This leads to another important finding as far as feasibility and viability of adopting TBLT in the specific context of the present research is concerned. TBLT basically adopts a learner-centred approach with the teacher facilitating the teaching-learning process. The students' advocacy of a change in role relationship indicates that the teacher-dominated teaching methodologies are out of favour and that they need to be replaced by learner-centred methodologies like TBLT.

5. The students are found to favour a change in the current assessment system which encourages rote learning. While the current system of examination can be a constraint in the actual implementation of TBLT, the fact that the students are in favour of a change in the nature of examination is, in itself, an opportunity.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, it can be said that the perceptions of the students who participated in the study are broadly in sync with the requirements for the implementation of TBLT at the higher secondary level in Assam for the teaching of English. The most significant aspect of the findings is that the students are in favor of bringing in innovations in the English language classroom. However, one cannot possibly overlook the several constraints emerging out of the traditional pedagogical practices which are likely to hinder the implementation of an innovative methodology like TBLT. Yet, TBLT can be considered as a methodology, the feasibility of which has been strongly affirmed by the students in their responses to the questions in the questionnaire.

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