

## DEVELOPING LEARNERS' COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING

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English language teaching (ELT) has significantly changed over the last decades and priority has been given to communicative language teaching. Therefore, the goal of ELT is to improve learners' ability to communicate in various real-life situations. In order to achieve this, learners should engage in similar communicative situations in the classroom, which can be realized by using tasks in ELT. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is a communicative approach in language teaching in which tasks provide a starting point for real-life communicative activities, and it promotes actual language use. Accordingly, in this paper I will discuss the benefits of using TBLT for the development of learners' communicative competence as well as give an example of its actual use in the classroom.

*Key words: communicative competence, tasks, task-based language teaching, English language teaching*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The era of globalization and intercultural communication has put greater demands on English language teaching (ELT) as learners are required to adequately communicate in real-life situations. Byrne (1976) argues that learners should be able to communicate both with accuracy and with fluency

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in order to use the language for a variety of communicative purposes. Hence, the role of the teacher is not to inform learners about the language but to create authentic communicative situations in the classroom in order to provide a motivating environment for learning. As a result, the underlying theory of a present-practice-produce (PPP) approach has been discredited and a contrasting approach to language learning has emerged, in which strong emphasis is placed on learners' communicative abilities (Brumfit and Johnson, 1979; Ellis, 1985; Skehan, 1996b; Willis and Willis, 1996). Thus, the term 'task-based language teaching' (TBLT) was coined by SLA researchers and language educators in contrast to the teacher dominated, form-oriented classroom (Long and Norris, 2000), and it has become 'a generalized "umbrella" term used to describe learning sequences which aim to improve learners' ability to communicate' (Harmer, 2007:70; as cited in Littlewood, 2014).

Hiep (2007:196; as cited in Littlewood, 2014) 'holds that learning is likely to happen when classroom practices are made real and meaningful to learners' and 'sets the goal of language learning to be the teaching of language learners to be able to use the language effectively for their real communicative needs.' Hence, according to Nunan (1991), in TBLT an attempt is made to link classroom language learning with language activation outside the classroom. For this purpose, authentic texts are introduced into the learning situation and the learner's personal experiences are regarded as important contributing elements to classroom learning. What is more, learners learn to communicate through interaction in the target language by focusing not only on the language but also on the learning process itself.

Pica (2005) suggests that, on the one hand, learners have broadened their roles and extended their responsibilities by taking an active role in their learning; on the other hand, the teacher should be supportive and encouraging and strive to meet their learners' needs. Consequently, the role of the teacher is very important in TBLT: not only should the teacher motivate learners to actively engage with the task, but they should also support them in order to persist even when they lack sufficient linguistic or cognitive resources to accomplish the task (Van Avermaet *et al.*, 2006). Also, Van Gorp and Bogaert (2006) point out that both from affective and linguistic points of view, the teacher's interactional support may be highly valuable for fostering the learner's language acquisition. In addition, through interaction with other task participants learners can overcome problems and further develop their language proficiency. Moreover, working in pairs or groups learners are highly dependent on each other, which creates a motivating environment for learning.

## 2. WHAT IS A TASK?

TBLT is viewed as the latest methodological realization of communicative language teaching (CLT) in which communicative tasks serve both as major components of the methodology and as units around which a course may be organized. In general, TBLT promotes actual language use by creating real-life communicative activities using communicative tasks as a focus for planning, learning and teaching (Littlewood, 2007; Littlewood, 2014; Nunan, 2004). Consequently, in the classroom learners are given functional tasks that invite them to focus primarily on meaning exchange and to use the target language for real-world, non-linguistic purposes (Long, 1985; Prabhu, 1987).

Apparently, in TBLT the emphasis is put on the use of tasks which provide a starting point for different communicative activities in the classroom. However, when defining a task a distinction should be made between real-world or target tasks and pedagogical tasks. While the former refer to uses of language in the real world, the latter occur in the classroom (Nunan, 2004). According to Long (1985:89; as cited in Nunan, 2004), a target task is 'a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward... In other words, by "task" is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play and in between.' However, tasks become pedagogical when they are transformed from the real world to the classroom. Richards, Platt and Webber (1986:289; as cited in Nunan, 2004) define a pedagogical task as 'an activity or action which is carried out as the result of processing or understanding language.' Similarly, Willis (1996:173) suggests that a task is 'a classroom activity... where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome.' Moreover, according to Ellis (2003:16; as cited in Nunan, 2004), 'a task requires learners to give primary attention to meaning and make use of their own linguistic resources, although the design of the task may predispose them to choose particular forms. A task is intended to result in language use that bears resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world.' Finally, Nunan (2004:4) implies that 'a pedagogical task is a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interactions in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey the meaning rather than to manipulate the form.'

Although slightly different from each other, all these definitions have the same thing in common: it is emphasized that learners' attention is focused on meaning rather than form. However, this does not mean that form is

neglected; on the contrary, learners are free to use a range of linguistic structures to achieve task outcomes, but the forms are not specified in advance. The role of grammar is to enable learners to express different communicative meanings. If tasks are designed to motivate learners' emerging language skills, learners move from reproductive language use to creative language use. When they begin to use language creatively, they are maximally engaged in language acquisition because they are required to draw on their emerging language skills and resources in an integrated way (Nunan, 2004).

### **3. THE DESIGN OF A TASK-BASED LESSON**

According to Nunan (2004), the starting point for task design should be the goals and objectives which are set out in the syllabus or the curriculum guidelines although they may be modified if they are not written in a form that can be directly translated into communicative tasks. The next step is selecting or creating input for learners to work with. For instance, textbooks may contain different exercises and a goal should only be added in order to transform them into tasks. Nevertheless, the use of authentic input is a central characteristic of TBLT; therefore, poems, short stories, newspaper articles, radio broadcasts, TV shows, video clips, etc. can be used in the classroom in order to create input for different communicative tasks.

However, the teacher should be able to determine what kind of activity is a task. For this purpose, Willis and Willis (2007:12-14) offer the following criteria in the form of questions indicating that the more confidently you can affirmatively answer each of these questions, the more task-like the activity is:

1. Will the activity engage learners' interests?
2. Is there a primary focus on meaning?
3. Is there a goal or an outcome?
4. Is success judged in terms of outcome?
5. Is completion a priority?
6. Does the activity relate to real world activities?

Various designs of a task-based lesson have been proposed (e.g. Estaire and Zanon, 1994; Lee, 2000; Prabhu, 1996; Willis, 1996). Still, they all consist of 3 principal phases: the pre-task phase, the during-task phase and the post-task phase, providing a clear structure for a lesson and allowing for creativity in the choice of options in each phase (Ellis, 2006).

Firstly, the goal of the pre-task phase is to prepare learners to perform tasks in ways that will promote acquisition. Willis (1996) points out that the teacher introduces the topic and gives learners clear instructions on what they will have to do at the task stage. Also, the teacher might help learners to recall

some vocabulary that might be useful for the completion of the task. As Skehan (1996a) suggests, emphasis can be put either on the general cognitive demands of the task (e.g. performing a similar task or observing a model of how to perform a task) or on linguistic factors (e.g. brainstorming or strategic planning).

Secondly, the during-task phase focuses on the task itself, and Willis (1996) refers to it as the task cycle consisting of 3 stages: the task(s), planning and the report of outcome. During the first stage learners usually work in pairs or groups, which enables negotiation for meaning, thus providing learners with opportunities to learn from each other. Afterwards, they prepare a short oral or written report to the class and practice it previously in their groups in order to focus on the language and improve it. Then, they either report back to the class orally or read the written report.

Finally, in the post-task phase learners may be provided with an opportunity for a repeat performance of the task or/and be encouraged to reflect on how the task was performed. Also, they should focus on form(s), in particular on the form(s) that proved problematic while performing the task (Skehan, 1996a). This can be done first by analysing the relevant parts of the text and then by practicing particular language areas that need to be improved (Willis, 1996) as learning is incomplete if grammatical imperfections remain even though many language skills can be learned through a focus on meaning (Pica, 2005).

### **3.1. An example of a task-based lesson: Writing an article**

The following task is suitable for upper-intermediate or advanced learners, and the outcome of the task is to write an article that will provide tourist information about a learner's hometown. The lesson is primarily based on further developing learners' writing skills; nonetheless, reading, listening and speaking skills are also improved as well as learners enrich their vocabulary and practice certain grammatical structures.

#### **3.1.1. The pre-task phase**

Working individually, learners silently read the text containing some tourist information about Dublin. While reading the text, they identify the topic of each paragraph in order to focus on the structure of the article. Then, they underline the words/phrases that contribute to presenting the city to tourists in an attractive way. Learners compare the underlined words/phrases working in pairs, and finally the teacher writes the list of the useful expressions on the board, e.g. *a thrusting, dynamic place; utterly beguiling; stunning new street*

*architecture; a state-of-the-art tramway system; powerful literary culture; glorious collections, etc.* Afterwards, the teacher may also ask learners to brainstorm more words/phrases related to the topic. As a matter of fact, the teacher uses an authentic text in order to provide learners with language input for the task. Not only does the text serve as a model for writing, but it is also a source of vocabulary for learners. However, it is important that the pre-task phase does not last longer than the during-task phase as its aim is primarily to provide language input for the task.

### 3.1.2. *The during-task phase*

Learners do the task, which is to write an article in order to present their hometown to tourists, still working in pairs. First, they make a paragraph plan following the structure of the model, i.e. they provide some general information about their hometown, its people as well as the most famous attractions and things-to-do. The teacher sets both a word limit and a time span for the activity, and the role of the teacher is to walk around the classroom and help learners if they lack sufficient knowledge to complete the task. Simultaneously, the teacher may note down any language points to be highlighted later.

Subsequently, having written the article, learners read it in order to correct the mistakes. This gives them an opportunity for self-correction before they present their work to their colleagues. In this way they became aware of the language points that need to be improved in the process of language learning. Afterwards, each pair is matched to another one, so that they could read their articles to each other. Working in groups of four, they decide which article would be more successful in attracting tourists to their hometown. Moreover, they justify their choice by giving arguments. Then, the teacher matches two groups of four together and the whole procedure is repeated. Eventually, each group of eight chooses the best article within the group, and the chosen articles are read open-class. Finally, learners are asked to vote for the best article, which gives purpose to their listening and makes them focused on the task.

All in all, in this phase learners primarily further develop their writing skills; nevertheless, other language skills are not neglected as learners develop their reading, speaking and listening skills in the process of accomplishing the task. Also, they develop their critical thinking as they have to evaluate each other's articles negotiating and giving arguments for their choice. Since learners collaborate with each other working in different groupings, the

activity is very dynamic and communicative, which will be highly motivating for learners and they are expected to be willing to participate.

### 3.1.3. *The post-task phase*

In the post-task phase the teacher has an opportunity to highlight any language points that learners are not confident with. For example, relative clauses are frequently used in articles, so the teacher may want to focus their learners' attention to this linguistic structure. Therefore, the teacher should collect all the articles and read them at home, so that in the next class learners can analyse this linguistic structure on the basis of the examples extracted from their articles. It is also important that the teacher highlights the mistakes which were made by learners. Finally, learners may not only be asked to correct the mistakes but they can also be given additional exercises.

## 4. CONCLUSION

On the whole, TBLT puts emphasis on communicative language teaching as learners should be able to use the target language in the real world. With this in mind, the teacher should create various communicative situations in the classroom which correspond to real-life situations, and this can be realised by using tasks in ELT. In order to achieve a goal set by the task, learners engage in various communicative situations and the focus is put on meaning rather than form. Still, form is not neglected since learners can use whatever language form(s) they like. Also, grammatical mistakes should be highlighted in the learning process as successful learning will not happen if they remain part of the learner's language. Consequently, there is a place for form-focused activities in TBLT and without them learning is incomplete. Also, in TBLT the classroom is not dominated by the teacher, and learners collaborate with each other, thus being involved in communication to a large extent. As result, the learning environment becomes very motivating and life-like and learners are willing to participate in various communicative activities created by the teacher. In this way, they are being prepared for successful communication in real-life situations.

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<http://www.roughguides.com/destinations/europe/ireland/dublin/> (6.5.2015)

## RAZVIJANJE KOMUNIKACIJSKE KOMPETENCIJE UČENIKA PRI POUČAVANJU NA TEMELJU ZADATAKA

Nastava engleskoga jezika znatno se promijenila posljednjih desetljeća utoliko što se velika važnost pridaje komunikacijskomu poučavanju jezika. Budući da je osnovni cilj nastave engleskoga jezika osposobiti učenike za komunikaciju u različitim životnim situacijama, nastavnik treba kreirati slične komunikacijske situacije u učionici, a to se može postići uporabom zadataka u nastavi. Poučavanje na temelju zadataka komunikacijski je pristup u poučavanju engleskoga jezika u kojemu su zadatci polazište za stvaranje komunikacijskih situacija koje su slične onima iz života izvan učionice te je naglašena važnost stvarne upotrebe jezika. U skladu s tim, u ovom ću se članku osvrnuti na prednosti poučavanja na temelju zadataka s ciljem razvijanja komunikacijske kompetencije učenika. Također ću prikazati i primjer uporabe toga pristupa u nastavi engleskoga jezika.

*Ključne riječi: komunikacijska kompetencija, zadatci, poučavanje na temelju zadataka, nastava engleskoga jezika.*