



MJAL 4:3 Autumn 2012

ISSN 0974-8741

The Effect of Pedagogical Tasks in EFL Learners' Performance¹, *Ali Sorayaie Azar & ¹Raheleh Taheri Maragheh**The Effect of Pedagogical Tasks in EFL Learners' Performance**¹, * Ali Sorayaie Azar & ¹Raheleh Taheri Maragheh¹English Department, Maragheh Branch- Islamic Azad University, Iran

*Corresponding Authors: Ali Sorayaie Azar (Faculty Member) and Raheleh Taheri Maragheh, English Department, Islamic Azad University- Maragheh Branch, Shahid Derakhshi Blvd, Post Box:345, Maragheh, Iran. E-mail : asorayaie@yahoo.co.uk,

Abstract

Increasing learners' motivation and performance has always been the primary concern of language teachers. The present study adopts a new approach, task-based learning (TBL) which is applied to a traditional classroom situation with the aim of finding solutions to certain problems such as poor learner motivation. In this study, EFL learners' opinions about TBL are investigated through a questionnaire. These learners have been studying for their BA degree in English Language Teaching at the university level, Iran. The findings of the study reveal that implementing a TBL approach in EFL classes creates variety for the students. Moreover it enhances their learning, since TBL tasks encourage student involvement and lead to significant improvements regarding their language performance. The research participants suggest that they do not like teacher-directed lessons where they cannot find enough opportunities to express themselves in the target language.

Key Words: Task, Task-based learning, Students' classroom performance



The Effect of Pedagogical Tasks in EFL Learners' Performance

¹Ali Sorayaie Azar & ¹Raheleh Taheri Maragheh

1. Introduction

Willis (1996) suggests the use of tasks as the main focus in language classrooms, claiming that tasks create a supportive methodological framework. Often, when faced with various problems, language teachers are in search of finding something that could create a difference in their classroom. The problems are generally caused by students' lack of motivation to the lesson.

This study provides information about various techniques of TBL in relation to different tasks and focuses mainly on the advantages of using a TBL approach. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of the implementation of TBL within this given context.

The study has considered the following research questions:

1. What is the influence of TBL on EFL students' classroom performance?
2. What are the students' opinions about TBL?
3. What are the students' opinions about classic classroom situations in which only a limited number of tasks are used?

1.1 Literature review

TBL has increasingly achieved popularity in recent years and has been recommended as a way forward in ELT. Various influential experts, like Prabhu (1987), Nunan (1989), Willis (1996) and their definitions for tasks are presented in a chronological order as follows.

Prabhu stands as the first significant person in the development of TBL. His main contribution has been raising awareness of the ELT world to TBL. Prabhu (1987) defines a task as "an activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process" (p.24). Besides Prabhu, Nunan (1989) uses the word 'task' instead of 'activity'. He defines a task as "a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form" (p.10). He suggests that in all definitions of tasks, one can see communicative language use where the learner focuses on meaning instead of linguistic structure.



The Effect of Pedagogical Tasks in EFL Learners' Performance

¹Ali Sorayaie Azar & ¹Raheleh Taheri Maragheh

Willis (1996) is another figure who contributes to the use of tasks in language classroom. According to Willis (1996) "tasks are always activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome" (p.23). Furthermore, Willis presents a TBL approach where tasks are used as the main focus of the lesson within a supportive framework. She holds that "the aim of tasks is to create a real purpose for language use and to provide a natural context for language study" (p.1). The model suggested by Willis has been the main focus of this study.

The TBL framework consists of three main phrases, provides three basic conditions for language learning. These are pre-task, task-cycle and language focus.

1. Pre-task: introduces the class to the topic and the task activating topic- words and phrases.

2. Task Cycle: offers learners the chance to use whatever language they already know in order to carry out the task and then to improve their language under teacher's guidance while planning their reports on the task. Task Cycle offers learners a holistic experience of language in use. There are three components of a task cycle:

a. Task: Learners use whatever language they can master, working simultaneously, in pairs or small groups to achieve goals of the task.

b. Planning: Comes after the task and before the report, forming the central part of the cycle. The teacher's role here is that of a language adviser. Learners plan their reports effectively and maximize their learning opportunities.

c. Report: is the natural condition of the task cycle. In this stage learners tell the class about their findings. So the report stage gives students a natural stimulus to upgrade and improve their language. It presents a very real linguistic challenge to communicate clearly and accurately in language appropriate to the circumstances.



The Effect of Pedagogical Tasks in EFL Learners' Performance

¹Ali Sorayaie Azar & ¹Raheleh Taheri Maragheh

2. **Language Focus:** allows a closer study of some of the specific features naturally occurring in the language used during the task cycle. Learners examine the language forms in the text and look in detail at the use and the meaning of lexical items they have noticed (Willis, 1986, p.75). Language focus has two components:

a) Analysis: Analysis activities draw attention to the surface forms, realizing the meanings learners have already become familiar with during the task cycle and so help them to systematize their knowledge and broaden their understanding. Instead of the teacher presenting language to learners as new analysis activities, learners reflect on the language already experienced.

b) Practice: Practice activities are based on features of language that have already occurred in previous texts and transcripts or in features that have just been studied in analysis activities.

On looking back at these definitions, we can say that using tasks in teaching is a popular method and the implications of using these tasks in a classroom context is observable after conducting research. Many people have studied the implementation of TBL and tasks within their classrooms and have advised using tasks in language classrooms suggesting that the students' motivation rises through assigned tasks. On looking at the positive results that the use of tasks may bring about in the EFL classroom, it can be said that using a variety of tasks in classes gives positive results.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The research approach of this study is action research. Recently action research has gained popularity in ELT. Over time, traditional teacher education, which did not emphasize student-centered classrooms, started to lose its value and something was felt to be missing. This was because in the past, teacher education did not value learning through action and unfortunately education was carried out by researchers out of the class.



The Effect of Pedagogical Tasks in EFL Learners' Performance

¹Ali Sorayaie Azar & ¹Raheleh Taheri Maragheh

Gibbs (1995) notes that educational development is to do with the intention of improving the instructor's classroom practice. He also adds that carrying out an action research project contributes much to a lecturer's understanding of her students' and their achievement as a result of changing his/her conceptions of teaching and he states that this change is "a change essential for sustained pedagogical development" (p.18). Gibbs also (1995) notes that changes that come by action research have the capacity to be long lasting.

This study consists in an action research project in which a new approach, in our case TBL, is applied to an existing classroom system aiming to improve certain classroom problems as a result of the new approach implemented. While carrying out this action research and to monitor the outcomes and evaluate them questionnaires were used. As it is well-known, action research takes place when a single teacher, works with her own class as she feels the need to improve her teaching/learning experiences (Cohen and Manion, 1980). Using diaries throughout the study can support action research.

2.2 Context

This research was carried out at Maragheh Islamic Azad University, Iran, where the medium of instruction is not English and the students' first language is Azari Turkish. There were 55 students within two groups. The students' ages vary between 17 and 23.

2.3 Instrumentation

Diaries were used to generate data. Teachers use questionnaires to have reliable data so they can derive conclusions from such data. Munn and Drever (1990) think that when the participants respond to the same questions in the same way, the answers become more reliable. Nunan (1989) states that through using questionnaires, one can inquire into any aspect within teaching/learning process. Also teachers find the chance to learn about classroom practices they use in class by analyzing these questionnaires.



The Effect of Pedagogical Tasks in EFL Learners' Performance

¹Ali Sorayaie Azar & ¹Raheleh Taheri Maragheh

2.4 Data Analysis

2.4.1 Analysis of Questionnaire

The analysis of the questionnaire which consisted of three steps explained below in detail. The following values are given to each letter: 5-SA, 4-A, 3-U, 2-D, 1-SD from question 1-10 because the adjectives used in these questions were positive. However as the adjectives used in these questions 11-26 were negative, opposite values are given to these questions as follows: 1-SA, 2-A, 3-U, 4-D, 5-SD. The first treatment was to find the descriptive statistics of all questions in order to see the means calculated for each question that refer to a single task.

Secondly, the means of the first 10 questions referring to pre-task stage and the means of the rest of the 16 questions referring to task stage are found and compared in order to make generalizations about the findings between the two sets of questions, as pre-task and as task.

Thirdly, a t-test was run to see whether the difference between two sets of questions had statistical significance. The fourth and last step was to select the direct quotations common for each task and to draw interpretations from the data obtained for each task. Then generalizations were made for each task's comments both in terms of variety and learning.

As Willis (1996) suggests, students feel the need for various interaction patterns that focus on themselves rather than on the teacher. Furthermore, she claims that TBL is capable of fulfilling such needs. For almost every task, students had valuable comments reflecting their satisfaction from the tasks used that day.

Willis (1996) points out that, carefully chosen tasks make learners participate in complete interactions and this raises motivation. While carrying out a task, students feel the need to concentrate on the topic and accordingly learn. For example, in order to draw a scene from a story, they read the paragraphs in detail. Or, in order to prepare exam questions for their friend, students feel the need to concentrate on every word to choose the most difficult one. As Willis (1996) points out, "in order to complete the goals in all these tasks, students are reacting to the content and processing the text for meaning" (p.30).



The Effect of Pedagogical Tasks in EFL Learners' Performance

¹Ali Sorayaie Azar & ¹Raheleh Taheri Maragheh

3. Results

The findings of the study indicate that tasks have been beneficial for vocabulary learning. Vocabulary learned while watching a film or while listening to a song becomes more effective and permanent. Presentations especially contributed significantly to students' learning. During these presentations, they were not only improving their spoken English but their knowledge of social topics and relevant vocabulary as well. Students were highly satisfied with this communication task. As it has been argued by Lightbown and Spada (1993), communicative need is a factor that defines motivation in second language.

The findings indicate that all students realized a change within their classroom after TBL was implemented. The change was felt when the teacher started to use a variety of tasks like presentations and music. Furthermore, students realized the change through different tasks and positive classroom atmosphere.

Before TBL was implemented students had negative feelings about their classroom experiences such as complaining about being book-bound. After the implementation of TBL all students agreed that English lessons started to be enjoyable after the number of tasks used in class increased and students found more chance to speak. Also majority of the students agreed that they benefited from the course after TBL was implemented. Willis (1981) refers a good friendly interaction between a teacher and the learners as rapport (p.188). She also states that when there is rapport, it becomes enjoyable for students and the teacher to study together. After implementing TBL, the way lessons continued completely changed. Students' participation in the lesson increased as a result of the increase in the number and variety of tasks used in class. In order to carry out the task, students were concentrating on the lesson. They did not find enough time to feel bored. According to Willis' (1996) view, "tasks remove teacher domination" (p.18). The role of the teacher was nothing more than a guide.



The Effect of Pedagogical Tasks in EFL Learners' Performance

¹Ali Sorayaie Azar & ¹Raheleh Taheri Maragheh

The findings from the questionnaire clearly revealed that students were not satisfied with the pre-task stage, at the beginning of the semester when there was not a variety of tasks. However, the findings belonging to the task lessons, the TBL period, show that students were doubly satisfied with their lessons after the middle of the semester.

From the questionnaire findings, the three type of tasks which were most liked by the students were:

1. Watching a film and writing about it.
2. Finding the most guilty character after reading a passage.
3. Completing a cloze test while listening to a song.

The findings of the pre-task stage show that although students were not really satisfied with the tasks used in this period, there were especially two tasks highly disliked by students. The means of only these two tasks were under 2. These tasks were:

1. Working alone while doing exercises of the book.
2. Following the pages in the book and doing their exercises in order.

4. Discussion

The present study examined the influence of TBL approach on students' classroom performance and motivation in EFL classrooms. Although the main focus was of this work on students' performance and motivation. . The analysis of data collected revealed that both students and the classroom teacher were highly satisfied with TBL approach mainly in terms of adding variety to the classroom activities and increasing learning in class.

The findings revealed that TBL was helpful in students' motivation and learning. It encouraged students' practice opportunities of the target language receptivity in the lessons as a result of presenting various tasks. . In the light of students' reflections for the tasks used during the study, which were very teachers talking too much. We can therefore conclude that, TTT (teacher talking



The Effect of Pedagogical Tasks in EFL Learners' Performance

¹Ali Sorayaie Azar & ¹Raheleh Taheri Maragheh

time de-motivates learners. Students do not like being passive in class. Students stated that their teacher did not create sufficient language practice opportunities for them. In short, students do not like teacher-centered classrooms and they do not like teacher domination. When the teacher changed her style of teaching, the students felt a change in their classroom. Although the students were not familiar with the concept of TBL which defined this change, they stated that their teacher presented them various tasks that create opportunities for practice.

The students' thoughts about TBL were quiet positive. They indicated that more emphasis was shown on interaction in class. This interaction was encouraged not individually but within group work as well. The students stated that their teacher presented various tasks in class and they made use of practice opportunities. . They also indicated that an enjoyable classroom atmosphere developed as a result of the tasks and the nature of this enjoyable classroom learning situation affected their learning.

Students are not happy with lessons without tasks as they are not provided with a genuine and enjoyable challenge. Although the students like task-based lessons, the variety and the kinds of tasks are also important. Even if a teacher gives tasks to her students, if the tasks are almost the same and if they are uninteresting and not creative, such as answering reference questions or finding the main ideas of paragraphs individually all the time, the students do not feel satisfied.

Carrying out an action research project provides valuable benefit for the teacher. Identifying a classroom problem, acting on it and finding a solution makes the researcher feel relaxed and confident. In a way, the researcher renews herself due to the action she has implemented. So, action research is suggested here as a way forward in ELT. Davies (1993) talks about the importance of implementing an action and observing what follows suggesting that the only way to encourage more independent learning in the classroom was to let go of the reins.



The Effect of Pedagogical Tasks in EFL Learners' Performance

¹Ali Sorayaie Azar & ¹Raheleh Taheri Maragheh

References

- Allwright, D., & Bailey, K. B. (1991). *Focus on the language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Carroll, M. (1994). Journal writing as a learning and research tool in the adult classroom. *TESOL Journal*, 4(1), 19-22
- Cook, V. (1996). *Second language learning and teaching*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Davies, R. (1993). *Chronicles: Doing action research: The stories of three teachers. Reconstructing teacher education*. London: The Falmer Press.
- Lightbown, P. M., & Spada, N. (1993). *How languages are learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McDonough, Jo. (1994). A teacher looks at teacher's diaries. *ELT Journal*, 42(1), 14-20.
- Nunan, D. (1989). *Understanding language classrooms*. London: Prentice-Hall International.
- Nunan, D. (1989). *Designing tasks for the communicative classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Prabhu, N .S. (1987). *Second language pedagogy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wallace, J. M. (1991). *Training language teachers*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- Waters, A. (1988). Teacher-trainin g course design: A case study. *ELT Journal*, 42(1), 14-20.
- Willis, J. (1981). *Teaching English through English*. London: Longman
- Willis, J. (1996). *A framework for task-based learning*. Harlow: Longman.