



English Literature and Language Review

ISSN(e): 2412-1703, ISSN(p): 2413-8827

Vol. 3, No. 5, pp: 46-52, 2017

URL: <http://arpgweb.com/?ic=journal&journal=9&info=aims>

The Impact of Task-Based Language Teaching on the Development of Learners' Language Proficiency and Thinking Skills in L2 Classrooms

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Abstract: Task-Based Language Teaching, an analytic approach focusing on form, with a task-based syllabus starting with output and putting emphasis on learning outcomes, may have a positive impact on the development of learners' language proficiency and thinking skills in L2 classrooms. By implementing a TBLT approach which is free from the limitation of synthetic approach focusing on forms and analytic approach focusing on meaning, L2 learners can benefit from its efficiency promoting both in communication competence and linguistic awareness. In addition to the advantage of TBLT approaches, a task-based syllabus, as one of the typical backward design, focusing on output or learning outcomes, are more effective in enhancing learners' language proficiency than that in other syllabuses focusing on input or process. Moreover, learners' thinking skills can be achieved in a task-based syllabus integrating language proficiency with thinking skill tasks.

Keywords: TBLT; Task-based syllabus; Language proficiency; Thinking skills.

1. Introduction

Language teaching has experienced a rather long history, which can be dated back to the sixteenth century when grammar translation was the dominant language teaching approach applied in schools in England where Latin as one of the foreign language was taught (Richards and Rodgers, 2015). Not until the mid and late nineteenth century did the new approaches to foreign language teaching (LT) emerge in L2 classrooms worldwide. The various new approaches are developed on the basis of different second language acquisition theories and practice in L2 classrooms. Consequently, they stimulate a tremendous amount of discussion and still remain quite controversial, with their own proponents and opponents.

One of the main factors contributing to the emergence and controversies may be a significantly rising trend of economic and cultural globalization, especially education globalization. This trend leads to an increasing number of students from all over the world applying for universities in the developed countries, such as Britain, the United States, and Australia etc. For example, the data from Open Doors Report (2016) shows that the international student enrollment number in American universities has dramatically increased from 564,766 in 2006 to 1,043,839 in 2015. Such an enormous population boom in international student enrollment over the last decade has prompted language teachers and researchers to advocate high efficient language teaching approaches in classrooms where they encounter with a stark and irresolvable dilemma that the international students come from diverse cultural, ethnic, racial and language backgrounds.

Furthermore, the problematic issues of language teaching lie in not only the varieties of learners' background but also the varieties of learners' needs. For example, the international learners need to learn to struggle against all kinds of adversity involving economic crisis, income disparities, social inequality, and overpopulation when they study in overseas universities where they are non-native English speakers or called L2 learners. Moreover, the learners, undergraduate applicants, striving to apply for universities, have to achieve a certain degree of English proficiency to meet their language admission requirements which usually refer to TOEFL score of 80 or IELTS score of 6.0.

Besides the language requirements, L2 learners are expected to present thinking skills in their overall attainment, which are probably rather demanding and frustrating tasks for most of them. Unfortunately, some of them fail to fulfill the requirements. One possible explanation for their failures is that they are not taught by proper language teaching approaches which may vary from time to time, classroom to classroom, and teacher to teacher. Although there are various teaching approaches available for language teaching, it can be argued that Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), an analytic approach focusing on form, with a task-based syllabus starting with output and putting emphasis on learning outcomes, may have a positive impact on the development of learners' language proficiency and thinking skills in L2 classrooms.

2. LT Approaches in L2 Classrooms

2.1. Analytic Approaches

The diverse types of approaches mentioned above, sharing very much the same purpose of attempting to boost the language teaching and learning efficiency in the rapidly changing globalized education, play a crucial role in various L2 classrooms where the approaches may have totally different focuses. As Long (2015) points out, an analytic approach focuses on natural, authentic, and meaningful communication or covert linguistic syllabus, rather than overt linguistic syllabus (e.g. tense, subject-verb concord), which means that its learning process begins by emphasizing on genuine target language representations, and then L2 learners are encouraged to analyze the input and induce language utterances and grammar rules, much in the way of L1 learners learn their L1, mainly focusing on meaning.

For example, the Natural Approach (Terrell, 1977), a typical analytic approach, only focuses on the use of language for communicative purposes, not on grammar drills, grammar analysis, and grammar rules. Terrell (1977) claims that this approach can effectively prompt L2 Learners to acquire their communicative capacities through entirely exposing them to communication activities without any grammar correction in class time. Furthermore, its syllabuses are designed to develop L2 learners' oral and written language communication abilities including personal oral communication competence (e.g. booking a hotel), personal written communication competence (e.g. writing a thank-you letter), academic oral learning competence (e.g. presenting an assignment), and academic written learning competence (e.g. note-taking) (Krashen and Terrell, 1983).

Such an approach is, indeed, a focus on meaningful communication rather than intensive grammar drills and rote memorization of grammar rules in L2 classroom. It seems to confirm the common sense that language acquisition really happens when L2 learners subconsciously absorb target language through meaningful practice classroom activities out of the real world, not conscious or explicit grammar learning. This approach had a noticeable impact on bilingual education in the state of California in the 1980s and intrigued a great number of teachers and researchers at that time (Richards and Rodgers, 2015). However, its theoretical rationale that L2 learners can not acquire target language through conscious learning or explicit grammar analysis and its practical application that no predetermined syllabuses or learning outcomes have been widely debated today.

For example, by comparing the effectiveness of syllabus design from 49 L2 learners' learning result, Norris and Ortega (2000) suggest that covert linguistic syllabus or focusing on meaning is, in deed, less effective than overt linguistic syllabus. It is empirical evidence that L2 acquisition may also occur through conscious learning, thus denying Terrell's claim or analytic approach. In addition, merely applying the analytic approach in L2 classroom is based on the assumption that adult L2 learners' implicit learning competence is as powerful as children'. However, large-scale research of 195 L2 learners ranging from 1-47 years old, conducted by Abrahamsson and Hylenstam (2009), indicates that highly native-like proficiency of L2 acquisition can never be achieved by adult learners. Therefore, it can be argued that a purely analytic approach may have little impact on the improvement of L2 acquisition due to its downsides of theoretical rationale and practice in classrooms.

2.2. Synthetic Approaches

Unlike analytic approaches focus on meaning, synthetic approaches, however, start with L2 learners exposure to explicit or overt linguistic syllabus, such as words, phrases, clauses, sentence patterns, etc., then followed by pre-set intensive practice and sham communicative language use in classrooms, regarded as focus on forms (Long, 2015). Its learning process is typically identified as Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP), which means that at the presentation stage, L2 learners are demonstrated with predetermined learning materials (e.g. model sentences, dialogues, and reading passages etc.); then at the practice stage, they are instructed to fulfill intensive practice activities (e.g. sentence drills, dialogues, and written exercise); and finally, at the practice stage, they are encouraged to apply the learned language in pseudo-communicative situations in classrooms (McLaughlin, 1987).

This approach is typically concerned with applying a grammatical, linguistic, or structural-based syllabus to L2 classrooms where language teaching is on the basis of explicit instruction or overt linguistic syllabus, rather than authentic meaningful communicative language use. For instance, the Audio-lingual Method, a typical synthetic approach, focuses a linguistic syllabus including phonological, morphological, and syntactic items which possibly stems from disparities between L1 and L2 that learners need to overcome (Richards and Rodgers, 2015). In addition, it also features with massive practice of dialogues and drills, such as repetition, memorization, and correction etc. (Frey, 1968). As it focuses on L2 learners' linguistic knowledge or explicit learning, it has a positive effect on the improvement of their scores when they take paper exams. Thus, for its obvious advantages, it became the most popular approach in the 1960s worldwide.

Admittedly, its effectiveness of improving L2 learners' linguistic knowledge can not be denied. For example, the level of L2 learners' linguistic attainments in reading, vocabulary, and grammar has significantly risen when they are exposed to explicit linguistic syllabus (Hamilton, 1966). However, some critics argue that most L2 learners are proved to be the lack of the competence transferring the attainments acquired through the synthetic approach to authentic communicative situations outside the classrooms. For instance, in a quantitative study of 40 Iranian learners, Tehrani et al. (2013) claim that the learners' communicative capacity improves less significantly in the synthetic approach than compared in that of the analytic approach. Therefore, it can be concluded that the synthetic

approach contributes positively to improve L2 learners' linguistic attainment, while negatively to enhance their communication competence to some extent.

2.3. TBLT Approaches

The above-mentioned discussions of both a purely meaning-focused analytic approach and a purely form-focused synthetic approach have demonstrated the strengths and limitations on the impact of the enhancement of language teaching effectiveness in L2 classrooms. It also can be argued that the combination of the two approaches' strengths (e.g. analytic approaches focus on forms or synthetic approaches focus on meaning) may have a more positive impact on the improvement of the language teaching effectiveness in L2 classrooms. For example, [Doughty and Williams \(1998\)](#) suggest that an analytic approach focusing on forms may play a positive role in the improvement of L2 learners' linguistic awareness and communication skills at the same time. Hence, the appropriate application of an analytic approach with a focus on form in L2 classrooms should boost the L2 acquisition efficiency both in grammatical competence inside the classrooms and genuine communicative capacities outside the classrooms.

Unlike the Natural Approach focusing on meaning and the Audio-lingual Method focusing on forms, TBLT is, in effect, characterized as a multi-faced approach constituting more than one single types of methodology and syllabuses ([Leaver and Willis \(2004\)](#), cited in [Richards and Rodgers \(2015\)](#)). It means that TBLT approach can be creatively used to integrate the strengths of focus on meaning with the merits of focus on forms. Furthermore, the syllabus in TBLT typically features the tasks consisting of real-world tasks that can be designed to meet L2 learners' communication needs outside the classrooms and pedagogical tasks that are developed on the basis of theory and research on L2 acquisition to provide L2 learners with meaningful interaction and linguistic knowledge inside the classrooms ([Nunan, 1989](#)).

In addition, the task-based syllabus is identified as a symbiotic relationship between covert and overt linguistic input, meaningful communication, and authentic classroom activities. Through the task-based syllabus with explicit and implicit learning, L2 learners, especially adult learners, not as powerful as young learners' acquisition competence, may enhance their communication competence, as well as linguistic awareness to some extent. For example, the results implementing of an integration of explicit and implicit syllabus for a college English course in a Chinese university show that its impact on the effectiveness and efficiency of L2 learners' overall English competence improvement is positive and significant ([Zheng, 2013](#)).

Moreover, the application combining real-world tasks with explicit linguistic knowledge in a task-based syllabus can possibly arise L2 learners' interests to communicate with others by using the target language and to be aware of grammatical problems inside or outside the classrooms. For instance, exposed to authentic communication activities and overt grammatical knowledge in an action-research program conducted by [Campo and Carolina \(2016\)](#), the language competence of 34 L2 learners is found to be successful in the improvement of fluent communication and accurate grammar. Thus, it is possible to conclude that TBLT approaches, featuring task-based syllabuses, free from the limitations of analytic approaches focus on meaning and synthetic approaches focus on forms, can have a positive impact on the improvement of L2 learners' communication skills, linguistic awareness, thinking skills, and learning outcomes ([Lai and Lin, 2015](#)).

3. Syllabus Design in L2 Classrooms

3.1. Forward Design

The robust research findings noted above reveal that the TBLT approaches focus on meaning and forms has a significant influence on the development L2 learners' overall attainment. However, it is not an easy task for L2 teachers to design an appropriate syllabus to meet learners' various needs. Basically, they need to make three decisions: input, process, and output. The first stage, input (what to teach), refers to the types of content including linguistic knowledge (e.g. phonology, lexicology, syntax, and pragmatics etc.) and non-linguistic knowledge (e.g. problem-solving, contrast and compare, and cause-effect etc.) which are chosen by teacher before class; The second stage, process (how to teach it), means the types of methodology (e.g. teaching activities, teaching procedures, and teaching techniques) which are selected by teacher in class. The third stage, output (to assess what was achieved), can be illustrated as learning outcomes (e.g. TOEFL or IELTS score, academic competence, and thinking skills etc.) which are expected by teachers ([Richards and Rodgers, 2015](#)).

Starting with different stage may have different impact on the interpretation of language acquisition theory and practice in L2 classrooms. For example, curriculum design, beginning with input, followed by process, and finally output in a linear model, is a typical forward design ([Wiggins and McTighe, 2006](#)). As [Clark \(1987\)](#) argues that forward design has a powerful effect on the audio-lingual approach, the topic-based approach, and the notional-functional approach which aim at improving L2 learners' language learning efficiency by employing different methodology and syllabus design. The starting point of forward design is syllabus design with a number of various models, incorporating the structural model, the notion-functional model, the lexical model, the topical or situational model, the content model, and the procedural model ([Richards and Rodgers, 2015](#)).

3.2. Structural Syllabuses

Admittedly, as one of the typical forward design, structural syllabuses feature explicit linguistic input which may have a positive influence on cultivating learners' good grammatical habits (Wiggins and McTighe, 2006). Furthermore, such explicit and well-organized grammatical syllabuses are beneficial to L2 learners' better understanding grammar points which will be assessed in numerous tests and teachers more easily delivering knowledge information based on preset textbooks or materials probably from headmasters. In addition, textbooks or materials based on structural or grammatical syllabuses are more likely advocated by authors who can write or edit them more effortlessly compared to other syllabuses such as task-based syllabuses focusing on developing L2 learners' thinking skills, as well as by publishers who can earn a large number of profits by their sales (Long, 2015).

However, it also can be argued that structural or grammatical syllabuses are less efficient ways of cultivating L2 learners' communicative competence and thinking skills due to its inconsistency with theory and practice of second language acquisition (Ellis, 1993). Moreover, textbooks focusing on structural or grammatical syllabus based on the assumptions of the same learners' needs are usually written or edited by non-native authors who may lack of target language proficiency or cultural background, which can lead to misunderstanding of communication in the real world to some extent (Long, 2015). Even worse, structural syllabuses focusing on grammatical knowledge rather than thinking skills (e.g. problem-solving, contrast and compare, and reasoning etc.) might cause learners getting bored and finally losing learning interests and motivation in the long term run. Seeking for the best profit, textbook publishers usually ignore the learners' need diversity and seldom update the content of syllabuses or update them very slowly, which may contribute to poor efficiency in L2 learners' language development as well (Wiggins and McTighe, 2006).

4. Task-based Syllabuses in L2 Classroom

4.1. Backward Design

Unlike structural syllabuses starting with explicit input, task-based syllabuses begin by focusing on the target-tasks learners' output, which are identified as a typical backward design (Richards and Rodgers, 2015). For Wiggins and McTighe (2006), backward design is to begin with a clear statement of learning outputs or desired results, then followed by determining unobjectionable learning evidence, and finally to layout learning instruction and experiences. It obviously disclaims structural syllabus starting with input focusing on explicit grammatical knowledge and advocates syllabuses beginning with output focusing on learners' learning outcomes. As Leung (2012) points out, learning outcomes, identified as the use of standards of learning targets (e.g. benchmarks, thinking skills, communication competency etc.), should be achieved in different domains of subjects by L2 learners.

Backward design focusing on learning outcomes and using standards have a wider range influence on language teaching and learning. The most influential example focusing on learning outcomes and using standards, perhaps, is the Common European Framework of Reference developed by the Council of Europe (2001), which explicitly states six levels of language proficiency that L2 learners should achieve. Like Katz and Snow (2012) suggest, the main merit of learning outcomes or outputs is that they describe explicitly desired results for all participants including learners, teachers, parents, and educational organizations. They also claim that focus on output has a widespread impact on the cultivation of L2 learners' language competency both in English speaking countries and in an increasing number of other countries.

4.2. Task-based Syllabuses

As a typical backward design, task-based syllabuses have been widely employed as approaches to structuring L2 learners' linguistic awareness, communication, interaction, and thinking skills, all of which are proved to promote the development of second language acquisition (Van den Branden, 2006). Furthermore, Van den Branden (2006) argues that traditional structural syllabuses focusing on grammar do not mirror the cognition of learning process and thinking skills applied in authentic language environment outside the classrooms. On the contrary, task-based syllabuses possibly can engage L2 learners in real and meaningful tasks (e.g. problem-solving, reasoning, and classifying etc.) which should be employed in their future careers (ibid.). Thus, it can be inferred that task-based syllabuses are more effective in cultivating L2 learners' language proficiency and thinking skills.

For example, Leaver and Kaplan (2004) report that L2 learners possibly can benefit from a task-based syllabus employed in classrooms including maintaining longer in-built motivation, providing more opportunities for grammatical error correction and interesting repetition, promoting meta-cognition, and enhancing language proficiency (cited in Richards and Rodgers (2015)). Another similar study conducted by Bao and Du (2015) reveal that implementation of a task-based syllabus can profit L2 beginners in the aspects of language proficiency. In more specific language proficiency, like reading comprehension, Shabani and Ghasemi (2014) indicate that L2 learners' TOEFL reading test performance in an experiment group employed task-based syllabus are better than those in a controlled group employed other syllabuses.

4.3. Thinking Skills in Task-Based Syllabuses

Although the obvious advantages of implementing a task-based syllabus and its compatibility with theory of second language acquisition, it also can be argued that there are many challenges in teaching practice in L2

classrooms, especially in the cultivation of L2 learners' thinking skills. For example, task-based syllabuses based on the standards of the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001) usually put more emphasis on promotion of L2 learners' language proficiency like communication rather than thinking skills which may be ignored by both teachers and learners. Another example found in the TESOL PreK-12 English Language Proficiency Standards Framework (TESOL, 2006), its learning outcomes or standards emphasize learners' communication proficiency (e.g. information communication, idea interaction, and concept interpretation etc.) rather than thinking skills which will be needed for future academic success in different subjects.

Furthermore, the integration of language and think skills in a pedagogical task is a rather demanding mission due to its efficiency related to other non-task factors such as learners' needs, teachers' language proficiency, teachers' think skills level, and class size etc. In order to tackle these problems, Willis (1996) develops six types of pedagogical tasks which include thinking skills like "listing, ordering and sorting, comparing, problem-solving, sharing personal experiences, and creative tasks" (cited in Richards and Rodgers (2015)). For example, learners' ordering and sorting skills can be developed through the implementation Jigsaw tasks in which different pieces of information are combined into a whole.

As one more example provided by Willis and Willis (2007), learners problem-solving skills can be achieved by employing problem-solving tasks in the following six phases: "preparation and priming, task and report phase, writing phase 1, writing phase 2, focus on form, and grading". In the first phase, preparation and priming phase, the possible causes of the problem and the impact of the problem are explored by teachers or shared by learners' personal experience or opinion; in the second phase, task and report phase, two or three solutions are listed and compared, then one chosen proposal is presented to the whole class, and finally action plan is justified and reasons are explained.

In the third phase, writing phase 1, the draft form of their proposal is written up with the consideration of class feedback after presentation in the whole class; in the forth phase, writing phase 2, writing is edited by peers in the next lesson, a final version is drawn up, and it is read by others; in the fifth phase, focus on form phase, writing material sources are re-used for a more overt linguistic errors; in the sixth phase, grading phase, some criteria are designed to assess the breadth, depth, complexity, and familiarity of the problem-solving tasks. Through this process, learners' problem-solving skills can be cultivated and fostered to some extent (ibid.).

Moreover, the effectiveness of task-based approaches on the promotion of learners' thinking skills has been scientifically proven in recent studies. As Roy (2014) indicates, the result of 28 learners performance in class experiment shows application of task-based syllabuses involving thinking skill tasks can significantly promote L2 learners' analytic skills and critical thinking skills. Furthermore, Flowerdew (2005) argues that a task-based syllabus in academic writing should address the development of learners' thinking skills which will be needed in their workplace. Therefore, it can be concluded that a task-based syllabus is an effective approach in terms of the development L2 learners' thinking skills.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), an analytic approach focusing on form, with a task-based syllabus starting with output and putting emphasis on learning outcomes, may have a positive impact on the development of learners' language proficiency and thinking skills in L2 classrooms. By implementing a TBLT approach which is free from the limitation of synthetic approach focusing on forms and analytic approach focusing on meaning, L2 learners can benefit from its efficiency promoting both in communication competence and linguistic awareness. In addition to the advantage of TBLT approaches, a task-based syllabus, as one of the typical backward design, focusing on output or learning outcomes, are more effective in enhancing learners' language proficiency than that in other syllabuses focusing on input or process. Moreover, learners' thinking skills can be achieved in a task-based syllabus integrating language proficiency with thinking skill tasks.

Although TBLT is neither a long-awaited elixir nor a one-size-fits-all approach, it has a widespread influence on language teaching and learning in L2 classrooms due to its consistence with theories and practice of second language acquisition. The effectiveness of TBLT approach has been scientifically proven in the research findings mentioned above. However, in practice, there are still some challenges needed to be studied and solved in the future, including the diversity of learners' needs, the complexity of tasks, the role of tests, the use of textbooks or materials, the proficiency of teachers, the motivation of learners, the background of L1, and the size of the class etc.

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