A Study on the TBLT Approach to Improve ESL Learners' Reading Skill: Jane Willis's Perspectives

A. K. M. Iqbal Bahar
Lecturer in English Language and Communication
International Medical College (Nursing Unit), Gazipur, Bangladesh
Email: irajiqbal.english@gmail.com

Md. Mijanur Rahman Bhuiyan
Lecturer, Department of English
Asian University of Bangladesh, Dhaka, Bangladesh
Email: mijan196@gmail.com

Abstract

Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is indeed an approach where learning revolves around the accomplishment of meaningful tasks (Zakime, 2018). However, the aim of this paper is to review TBLT, an offshoot of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), along with its implications for improving reading skill of students. In doing so, it discusses two notable features of TBLT: communicative language use, and 'learner-centered approach' to language teaching as opposed to more traditional 'teacher-dominated approaches'. Overall, it is a holistic approach. From theoretical perspective, psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic aspects TBLT are discussed briefly. The study found its primary framework from Willis' (1996) idea of TBLT that has been segmented into Pre-task, Task cycle, and Language focus. This framework is mainly delineated in terms of teaching reading skill. Finally, relevant findings of some studies on teaching reading based on TBLT are revealed.

Keywords: *Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT), reading skill, task, form*

1. Introduction

Proficiency in English language is a necessary requirement for higher studies. Especially reading skill is one of the pre-requisites of higher studies, as most of the books of higher education are written in English. Therefore, reading skill is crucial for both language and educational development. This paper attempts to examine the role of Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) in improving reading skill of students. In doing so, it tries to build a basis for further studies investigating TBLT theoretically. Moreover, this paper looks forward to help the language teachers, especially English teachers, to make them think about a different way of teaching language rather than the traditional ones in their classrooms.

Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) has become a prominent language teaching approach for more than three decades. TBLT can be defined as an approach in which communicative and meaningful tasks play a fundamental role. In fact, TBLT, an offshoot of CLT (Kumaravadivelu, 2006: 66), highlights the use of language for authentic communication

in classroom context providing a learning environment. In other words, here learners learn the language as through the process of using it. It also emphasized the motivation - motivation for learning, motivation to process and exposure what they are receiving, and motivation to use the target language as frequent as possible, in order to benefit from the exposure and use. And for this reason, communicative language use has become a fundamental aspect of the framework of TBLT (Willis, 1996).

2. Objectives

The major objective of this study is to represent the significance of TBLT with reference to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach. The paper is indeed a thorough overview for measuring the intensity of the need of TBLT for improving ESL (English as a Second Language) learners' reading skill.

3. Literature Review

There is a strong relation between second language acquisition and tasks. Prabhu (1987) defines task as an activity in his 05 years of Bangalore Project. This activity requires a specific outcome where the learners had to arrive to the outcome from given information and through some process of thought, and teachers are also allowed to control and regulate that process (p.24). Branden (2016) defined TBLT as a "learner-centered approach to language teaching," where the learners regulate the tasks in their own way after following the instructions. Here, the teacher mostly plays role of a facilitator as opposed to more traditional, "teacher-dominated" approaches. For developing communicative capability, both attention to form and meaning are important to learn language (Bygate, Skehan & Swain, 2001). Therefore, task helps learners to learn the language as it provides opportunities for not only using the language but also focusing on form as well to foster subconscious grammar acquisition (Ellis, 2009). Therefore, Task-based Language Teaching is a holistic approach to language learning, where the learners can share their knowledge of language in groups and maximize their learning through different tasks which will eventually make them both fluent and accurate in the target language. The theoretical supports to TBLT, psycholinguistic perspectives and sociolinguistic perspectives are also considered to develop the study. The psycholinguistic approach provides important information for planning TBLT. Again, the socio-cultural approach focuses on the room for improvements that teachers and learners need to engage in during task-based activity for promoting communicative competence and second language acquisition. So, both the theories have insights that are valuable for TBLT.

3.1. Theoretical Supports to TBLT

Task-based Language Teaching can be described from two perspectives: Psycholinguistic perspective and sociolinguistic perspective (Ellis, 2000).

3.2. Psycholinguistic Perspective

From Psycholinguistic point of view, tasks are seen as devices that provide learners with the data they need for learning. The manipulation of data is seen as the potential use of language, and opportunities for learning to happen. Therefore, this approach views acquisition as the outcome of processing input and output (Ellis, 2000).

3.3. Sociolinguistic Perspective

According to Sociolinguistic perspective, learners co-construct the activity according to their own socio-cultural views while doing a task. So, it is quite hard to make reliable predictions based on the kinds of language use and opportunities raised in the lesson (Ellis, 2000).

4.   Background Information and Methodology: Framework of Jane Willis

The study was inspired from the framework of Willis (1996) and considered the basics of TBLT to be progressed. However, the authors dealt with the imperative aspects of TBLT with reference to Willis's (1996) viewpoints. TBLT seems to have gained popularity since 1996 with the publication of Jane Willis' *A Framework for Task-Based Learning*. According to him (Willis, 1996), *task* is a goal-oriented activity with a specific outcome, where language is used in a meaningful way to complete the tasks rather than producing specific forms. The structure of a task-based lesson is as follows:
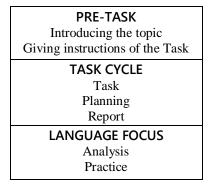
PRE-TASK
Introducing the topic
Giving instructions of the Task
TASK CYCLE
Task
Planning
Report
LANGUAGE FOCUS
Analysis
Practice

Figure 1: A brief structure of a lesson of TBLT

A brief description of a lesson of TBLT is as follows:

→***Pre-task:*** This serves as an introduction to the topic and task.

→***The Task Cycle:*** This cycle has three essential phases.

a. Task: A task is a goal-oriented activity in which learners achieve a real outcome. According to Willis, tasks are of six types (Willis, 1996):

1. Listing
2. Ordering and sorting
3. Comparing
4. Problem solving
5. Sharing personal experiences
6. Creative tasks

b. Planning: In this stage, the students make a draft and then redraft, check, improve, and make the draft ready for the audience (Willis, 1996). After completing the task, students prepare report on the outcome. Here, the emphasis moves on to organization and accuracy. The teachers' role here is to advise students on language and help them to correct any errors they make during this phase.

c. Report: In this stage, several or all the groups present their report briefly to the whole class. Other students listen in order to compare findings or conduct a survey. Here, the teacher might rephrase but should not correct the language.

→***Language Focus:*** It has again two parts.

a.   *Analysis:* Learners focus is shifted to form and they ask questions about language features.

b.   *Practice:* Teacher conducts activities based on the analysis or examples from the text and transcript (Willis, 1996). The framework for a lesson of Task Based

Language Teaching is more precisely described in the following figure as illustrated by Willis (1996).

PRE-TASK

The teacher
-*introduces and defines the topic*
-*uses activities to help students recall/learn useful words and phrases*
-*ensures students understand task instructions*
-*may play a recording of others doing the same or a similar task*

The students
-*note down useful words and phrases from the pre-task activities and/ or the recording*
-*may spend a few minutes preparing for the task individually*

THE TASK CYCLE

Task	*Planning*	*Report*
The students -*do the task in pairs/ small groups. It may be based on a reading/ listening text* The teacher -*acts as monitor and encourages the students*	The students -*prepare to report to the class how they did the task and what they discovered/ decided* -*rehearse what they will say or draft a written version for the class to read* The teacher -*ensures the purpose of the report is clear* -*acts as language advisor* -*helps students rehearse oral reports or organize written ones*	The students -*prepare their spoken reports to the class, or circulate/ display their written report* The teacher -*acts as chairperson, selecting who will speak next, or ensuring all students read most of the written reports* -*may give brief feedback on content and form* -*may play a recording of others doing the same or a similar task*

LANGUAGE FOCUS

Analysis	*Practice*
The students -*do consciousness-raising activities to identify and process specific language* -*note features from the task text and/ or transcript* -*may ask about other features they have noticed* The teacher -*reviews each analysis activity with the class brings other useful words, phrases and patterns to students' attention* -*may pick up on language items from the report stage*	The teacher -*conducts practice activities after analysis activities where necessary, to build confidence* The students -*practise words, phrases and patterns from the analysis activities* -*practice other features occurring in the task text or report stage* -*enter useful language items in their language notebooks*

Figure 2: The framework for Task-based Language Teaching (Willis, 1996, p. 38).

5.   Findings and Discussion

5.1. Teaching Reading

Recent researchers of language teaching methodologies have argued that integrating tasks in language classes increases student involvement. And because of growing involvement of students' task can facilitate language teaching and learning. Reading being a receptive skill is quite hard to teach as the help of productive skills like writing or speaking is needed to measure its outcome. Researchers have indicated that reading skills are strengthened when the prior knowledge is activated (Urquhart, A. H., & Weir, C. J.,1998). Moreover, a pre-reading discussion is suggested as it provides the learners with an opportunity to see what they know about the topic that is about to be taught and what other peers know about it as well. It facilitates as "anticipated guides which contains a series of provocative statements with an intention to challenge the students' knowledge and beliefs about the content of the passage (Dubin & Bycina, 1991, p.202).

Another important issue is vocabulary learning. Vocabulary plays a significant role in the reading process, and so it is very important to include vocabulary in teaching reading. However, basic vocabulary should be taught explicitly and the students should be able to guess the meaning of the less frequent vocabulary from the context (Levine & Reves, 1990).

Using prediction is also important. The teacher can ask the students to make prediction about the topic that they are about to learn in the classroom. It motivates them and stimulate their interest for reading.

Different types of teaching aids can facilitate learning. Video clips and pictures related to the text can be shown to the students before reading the text to help them anticipating and increase their curiosity (Chalak, 2015, p.120).

5.2. Developing TBLT in teaching Reading

The implementation of TBLT in reading comprehension deals with consideration of the stages of a lesson that has a task as its principal component. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), sequencing is a major issue in a task-based syllabus. Various designs have been proposed as Ellis (2003, p. 224) notes "there is no single way of doing TBLT". However, they all have in common three principal phases, which provide a framework for designing task-based lessons. However, in this paper the model of Willis (1996, p. 38) is adopted as shown in Figure-2.

Figure-2 shows the framework for the implementation of TBLT for a reading comprehension class proposed by Willis (1996, p. 38). Thus, the first phase is the 'pre-task' and concerns the various activities that teachers and students can undertake before they start the task, such as the introduction to the topic and the type of task that will be performed by the students (Willis, 1996, p. 56). According to Gorp and Bogaert in Branden (2006, p. 98), introduction to tasks usually integrates three functions, the first one is motivating the leaners to perform the task. The second one is preparing the learners to perform the task by discussing pre-supposed or useful knowledge of the words. And the last one is organizing the performance phase by providing clear instructions about the purpose of the task and how it can be performed.

Once the teachers have introduced the topic and the task, toward the end of the introduction of the task, the teacher can begin to ask the students to start reading individually. When they have finished reading, the teacher once again checks whether everyone has understood the instructions and knows what is expected from them.

The second phase, the 'task cycle' phase, centers on the task itself and affords various instructional options, including the task itself, the planning to report the result of the task, and the report (Willis, 1996, p. 36). This phase is specifically designed to generate authentic interaction, discussion, and negotiation between language learners. In line with the basic philosophy underlying TBLT, the teacher interventions during the task-performance phase should not result in a limitation of learner activity and initiative. The teacher's role is not, in the first place, to solve the students' problem, but rather should take the form of interactional support in which the teacher mediates between task demands and the learner's current abilities.

The final phase is 'post-task' and involves procedures for following up on the task performance as the task may ask for a specific outcome (Willis, 1996, p. 60). Furthermore, he added that in this case, the teacher and the students should be aware of the fact that the absolute correctness and uniformity of the product is less important in many task-based activities than the mental and interactional energy invested in the process of task performance. Tasks are designed to create an environment in which learners are allowed to experiment with language, use language functionally and to make mistakes in doing so. Finding the correct solution may be a bonus, but learners do not necessarily have to find it in order to learn language. Through constructing joint dialogues, through negotiating meaning, through discussing different options, they may pick up new linguistic forms from each other. The post-task phases offer many opportunities for focus on form as well.

5.3. Supporting studies for Teaching Reading in TBLT Framework

A great deal of research has been done in the area of TBLT and reading comprehension. Many researchers have investigated the effect of TBLT on different language skills including reading comprehension, however, the results more or less favorably agree to the use of TBLT in teaching reading in all cases. Poorahmadi (2012) worked with Iranian EFL students and found that TBLT was effective in improving their reading comprehension ability. Chalak (2015) did an experimental research on using TBLT to see its impact on reading skills. The students of Experimental Group provided a positive result comparing to the Controlled Group in the post reading tests. In another study, TBLT provides opportunities for teachers to predict learners' potentiality of their future performance in their professional, academic spheres where better performance is appreciated (Basturkmen 2006, p. 124-126). In another relevant study conducted by Hokmi (2005), the effects of teaching reading comprehension in ESP courses within the framework of task-based language teaching (TBLT) were investigated. The results of this study suggest that reading for message has a positive effect on students reading ability.

6. Conclusion

The above discussion evidently advocates the implementation of TBLT for teaching reading effectively in ESL/EFL classrooms. This paper investigates the basis for evaluating the effects of Task-based Language Teaching in improving the reading skills of ESL learners. Also, it can be used in constructing the classroom observation checklist and questionnaire for the teachers and students to conduct survey and evaluation for the proper implementation of TBLT.

References

Basturkmen, H. (2006). *Ideas and Options in English for Specific Purposes*. New Jersey: L. Erbaum Associates.

Bygate, M., Skehan, P. & Swain, M. (2013). Researching Pedagogic Tasks: Second Language Learning, Teaching, and Testing. *Applied Linguistics and Language Study*. New York, USA: Routledge.

Branden, V. (2016). The Role of Teachers in Task-Based Language Education. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 36*, 164-181. Retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0267190515000070

Chalak, A. (2015). The effect of task-based instruction on reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners. *Applied Research in English, 4*(1): 19-30.

Dubin, F. & Bycina, D. (1991). Academic Reading and the ESL/EFL Teacher. In M. Celce-Murcia (Ed.). *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language* (2nd ed., pp. 195-215). New York: Newbury House.

Ellis. R. (2003). Task-based language learning and teaching. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ellis, R. (2000). Task-based research and language pedagogy. *Language Teaching Research*, Special Issue (Tasks in Language Pedagogy), *4*(3): 193-220.

Ellis, R. (2009). Task-Based Language Teaching: Sorting out the Misunderstandings. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, *19*(3): 221–246.

Hokmi, M. (2005). Iranian ESP Students' Reading Comprehension in Task-based Language Teaching Approach. *Roshd FLT, 19*: 64-58.

Kumaravadivelu, B. (2006). Language learning tasks: teacher intention and learner interpretation. *ELT Journal,45*, 98-107. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/45.2.98

Levine, A. & Reves, T. (1990). Does the Method of Vocabulary Presentation Make a Difference? *TESL Canada Journal, 8*(1): 37, doi:10.18806/tesl.v8i1.577

Poorahmadi, M. (2012). Investigating the Efficiency of Task-Based Instruction in Improving Reading Comprehension Ability. *The Journal of Language and Translation*, *3*(1): 29-36.

Prabhu, N. S. (1987). *Interactive Language Teaching*. Cambridge: CUP.

Richard, J. C. & Theodore S. R. (2001). *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* (2nd Ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Willis, D. (1996). *A framework for task-based learning.* London: Longman.

Urquhart, A. H. & Weir, C. J. (1998). *Reading in a second language: Process, product and practice*. London and New York: Longman.

Zakime, A. (January 20, 2018). What is Task based learning? Retrieved from https://www.whatiselt.com/single-post/2018/01/19/What-is-Task-based-learning