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AN APPROACH TO TASK-BASED LEARNING

APRENDIZADO BASEADO EM TAREFAS

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to present the Task-based Learning TBL as a tool in teaching a foreign language, English. Understanding the language teacher needs to know the various methods and approaches that there are, we have taken our time to research, study and implement the TBL in our classes in order to have a return that could delineate the theory effectively. To make use of an educational practice it is necessary to experience it in different situations and in different groups. In this article we exemplify with a lesson the theory involved. We believe that TBL has much to add in our teaching practice.

Keywords: task-based learning; foreign language; educational proposals; methods and approaches.

RESUMO

Este artigo tem por finalidade apresentar o *Task-based Learning* (TBL) como ferramenta de trabalho no ensino de língua estrangeira,

o Inglês. Entendendo que o professor de idiomas precisa conhecer os variados métodos e abordagens existentes, colocamo-nos à disposição para pesquisar, estudar e implementar o TBL em nossas aulas a fim de que pudéssemos ter um retorno da teoria de maneira eficaz. Para se fazer uso de uma prática educacional é preciso experimentá-la em diferentes situações, em grupos distintos. Neste artigo exemplificamos uma das aulas dadas com embasamento da teoria aplicada. Acreditamos que o TBL tem muito a acrescentar em nossa prática docente.

Palavras-chave: *task-based learning*; língua estrangeira; prática educacional; métodos e abordagens.

INTRODUCTION

“Task-based learning is like an adventure – learners surprise you by coming up with all kinds of things...” (WILLIS, 1998)

Task-based Learning is an approach that is based on the idea that students can learn the language by working with tasks. This approach focuses on the functional views of the language rather than on grammar. It is believed that sometimes long grammar explanations are useless when we want our students to communicate. The use of the target language has to happen frequently and freely so that students can practice the language and try to convey meaning. With reference to this it is important to point out the line that links communicative activities and Task-based Learning. What do they have in common? Both of them outline the importance of language as a tool for communication. The communication really happens because learners are given opportunities to use the language freely and meaningfully and to explore the target language when teachers base their lessons on TBL.

A task is defined by Willis (1996, p. 6) as “a goal oriented activity with a clear purpose which involves communication”, agreeing with Nunan (1989, p. 10) that classifies tasks 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 the meaning rather than form”. Last but not least, we understand by Task-based Learning activities which are designed to help students use the language they already have and to formulate hypotheses about new language to be learnt. Students will build up their knowledge of the language by using it and making assumptions. Doing a communication task involves achieving an outcome, creating a final product that can be appreciated by the other students. Examples include compiling a list of reasons, features, or

things that need doing under particular circumstances; comparing two pictures or texts to find the differences; and solving a problem or designing a brochure, and at the end solve the problem of the activity, taking part in it.

“Task-based Learning is not just about getting learners to do one task and then another task and then another (...) for the task to promote constant learning and improvement, we should see it as just one component in a larger framework” (WILLIS, 1996, p. 40).

To understand this framework we should consider the three conditions Willis (1996) explains for language learning: exposure, use and motivation; and to implement Task-based Learning in our classes we should also understand what each phase aims at. Willis (1996, p. 10) states that “although we do not yet know enough to be sure that one method is better than another, most researchers would agree that in order for anyone to learn a language with reasonable efficiency, three conditions must be met: exposure, use and motivation”.

THE PRINCIPLES AND THEIR PHASES IN TBL FRAMEWORK

Students are exposed to the target language with rich and comprehensible input and given the opportunity to use the language meaningfully in motivating environment. Tasks play different roles in a Task-based approach: they are responsible for promoting motivation¹, and for building up meaningful situations in which students are encouraged to use language for real purposes. Besides, learners are free to communicate and experiment the language in different ways using the tasks as a support. TBL involves some radical changes in the way language is seen, learnt and taught. One of the principles

¹ Motivation is provided mainly by the need to achieve the objectives of the task and to report back on it. Success in doing this can increase longer term motivation. Motivation to listen to fluent speakers doing the task is strong too, because in attempting the task, learners will notice gaps in their own language, and will listen carefully to hear how fluent speakers express themselves (Article copyright © 1998 by the author).

behind TBL is that language teaching is not seen as a process in which a succession of bits of the language is taught. On the contrary, language must be seen as an organism. Another principle is that meaning comes before form. Learners carry out a task first and then analyse the language.

To sum up briefly, TBL offers a change in the grammar practice routines through which many learners have failed to learn to communicate effectively. It is a fascinating approach which aims to give learners and teachers the chance of making surprising and rewarding discoveries.

The pre-task phase; the task; the planning and the report phases; and finally the language focus², which is the analysis and the practice of the language in context.

We can clearly recognize the exposure to the language when we introduce the topic and when students report language. Vocabulary and expressions can also be increased, and students can be exposed to a recording or written text of the same tasks for comparison as well as analysis. Learners get exposure at the pre-task stage, and a chance to recall things they know. The task cycle gives them speaking and writing exposure with opportunities for students to learn from each other. The task cycle also gives students opportunities to use whatever language they have, both in private, where mistakes, hesitations, and approximate renderings do not matter so long as the meaning is clear, and in public, where there is a built-in desire to strive for accuracy of form and meaning, so as not to lose face.

The use is noticed when students carry out the task: when they

² A *focus on form* is beneficial in two phases in the framework. The planning stage between the private task and the public report promotes close attention to language form. As learners strive for accuracy, they try to organise their reports clearly and check words and patterns they are not sure of. In the final component, language analysis activities also provide a focus on form through consciousness-raising processes. Learners notice and reflect on language features, recycle the task language, go back over the text or recording and investigate new items, and practise pronouncing useful phrases (Article copyright © 1998 by the author).

plan and organise their reports and also when they practice the grammatical and functional points focused. Students have a clear goal and a purpose related to a real-life like activity so motivation is a high point because the teacher can set these achievable goals and highlight students' successes at each stage of the task. It is also possible to sustain motivation because at each stage students have rich exposure to the language and at the same time the task allows time for reflection and there is evidence of learning opportunity. In the language focus students compare, work individually, in pairs or in groups to understand different features of the language. There can be also work on grammar and focus on functions. Practice activities can include choral repetition, memory challenge games, sentence completion, matching, filling the gaps and also dictionary reference work. Each stage gives students a sense of achievement because they can take control of it gradually.

Task-based Learning, according to Willis (1996, p. 7):

- increases exposure,
- expands students' repertoire of useful phrases and words,
- gets students to use the language,
- gets students to say what they feel, think or what they want to say,
- gives students the chance to analyse the language and use it privately and in public,
- recreates natural learning conditions in class,
- uses the holistic approaches.

It is important to really complete the task by respecting the cycle. Tasks should be proposed again with different goals, however, using

the same functions or same activities with different partners. The process allows time for acquisition because students can incorporate the language by using it in different context, analysing and improving it by following a model.

We are going to present a summary about TBL, based on Willis' work (1998): the first part is about the roles of the teacher and learners during a TBL lesson.

Task-Based Learning Framework:

COMPONENTS OF A TBL FRAMEWORK

PRE-TASK PHASE

INTRODUCTION TO TOPIC AND TASK

Teacher explores the topic with the class, highlights useful words and phrases, and helps learners understand task instructions and prepare. Learners may hear a recording of others doing a similar task, or read part of a text as a lead in to a task.

TASK CYCLE

Task: students do the task, in pairs or small groups. Teacher monitors from a distance, encouraging all attempts at communication, not correcting. Since this situation has a private feel, students feel free to experiment, slips or mistakes are not important at this phase.

Planning: students prepare to report the whole class orally or in writing: how they did the task, what they decided or discovered. Since the report stage is public, students will naturally want to be accurate, so the teacher stands by to give language advice.

Report: some groups present their reports to the class, or exchange written reports, and compare results.

Learners may now hear a recording of others doing a similar task and compare how they all did it. Or they may read a text similar in some way to the one they have written themselves, or related in topic to the task they have done.

LANGUAGE FOCUS

Analysis: students examine and discuss specific features of the text or transcript of the recording. They can enter new words, phrases and patterns in vocabulary books.

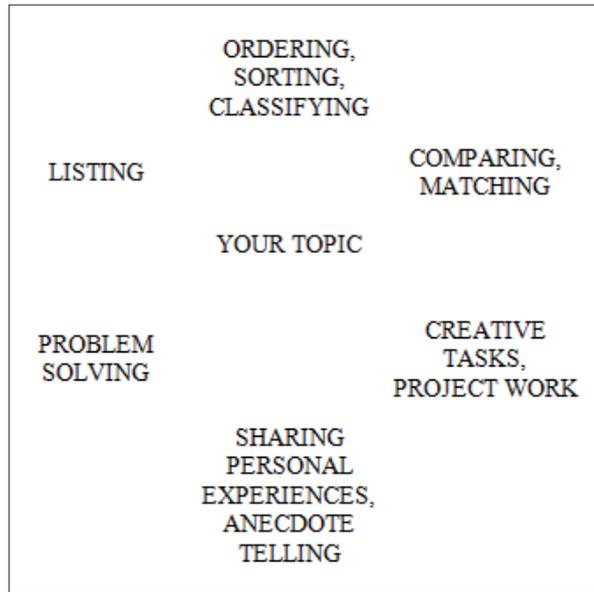
Practice: teacher conducts practice of new words, phrases and patterns occurring in the data, either during or after the Analysis. The aim of analysis activities is to encourage learners to investigate language for themselves, and to form and test their own hypotheses about how language works. In the task-based cycle, the language data comes from the texts or transcripts of recordings used in the task cycle, or from samples of language they have read or heard in earlier lessons. Having already processed these texts and recordings for meaning, students will get far more out of their study of language form.

Analysis activities can be followed by quick bursts of oral or written practice, or dictionary reference work³. Finally, students need time to note down useful words, phrases, and patterns into a language notebook. Regular revision of these will help vocabulary acquisition.

Sometime after completing this sequence, learners may benefit from doing a similar task with a different partner.

An example of a typology for TBL Task Design:

³ See Willis & Willis, 1996 for specific ideas on this topic.



PPP⁴ X TBL

It is easy to understand that Task-based Learning is not a PPP upside down as some teachers believe it to be. In a task-based lesson student is the centre of the lesson all the time and the teacher works as a monitor most of the times. Language is not presented by teachers; however the students are given clear instructions to complete the tasks and to discover some features of the language. We will give an example of a task-based lesson below.

THE TASK-BASED LESSON

GROUP PROFILE

A late elementary group of ten students ranging from the age of eleven to thirteen years old who have been studying English for two years.

⁴ PPP – Present, practice and produce (another approach in language learning).

AIM

The aim of the lesson is to encourage students to talk about plans and arrangements for the week.

PRE-TASK

First, start the lesson by reading a paragraph about the activities you usually do during the week. Then, elicit words related to the activities the students usually do during the week and write them on the board as a mind map⁵. Tell students that next week was going to be different for you because you were planning to do other activities and read a paragraph about your plans for the next week. After that give students time to write their plans for the following week on their notebooks.

TASK CYCLE

In pairs, students talk about their plans for the following week. Tell them to write a paragraph about their friend's week and be prepared to report it later for the whole class. Give them time to rehearse and later let them volunteer to report.

REPORT

The students come to the front of the classroom to report their friend's week and as they read ask the listeners to tick the activities they are also doing the following week. Finally, in pairs, they talk about the activities.

LANGUAGE FOCUS

Ask the students to open their books on the unit about the topic

⁵ A mind map is a diagram used to represent words, ideas, tasks, or other items linked to and arranged around a central key word or idea. Mind maps are used to generate, visualize, structure, and classify ideas, and as an aid to studying and organizing information, solving problems, making decisions, and writing.

covered. They read individually the text about a trip to Australia. Ask them to underline the people's plans and arrangements for the trip. They can circle useful sentences or expressions on the text. Afterwards, ask them to compare the language they used with the one on the text and give them time to change anything. Finally tell them to hand in their paragraphs.

EVALUATION OF THE TASK CYCLE

Students talk about their plans and arrangements in a free way. The interaction is productive because it seems that they really want to know about their friends' plans. Students become aware that at the first stage (pre task) they will talk privately and at the later stage (report) they will have to talk to an audience (their classmates). When they are preparing to report they do not only focus on fluency but also on accuracy, clarity and organisation.

EVALUATION OF THE TBL LESSON

DIFFICULTIES FACED

The lesson presented was very demanding on me because I had to be aware of the aims and the process all the time to provide coherent answers when asked anything by students. If I had answered something without thinking carefully about the question, I would have spoiled the tasks, because there were times when students had to think on their own to predict or find out the language they had to use.

POSITIVE OUTCOMES AND SOME REFLECTIONS

I have learnt a lot by reading and putting Task-based Learning into practice. I had heard about it many times, however, I now realise that I knew very little about it. All the tasks I proposed in my lesson

worked perfectly well and I felt really satisfied with the process: students were engaged and motivated to fulfil the tasks. Some felt confident to carry out the task and to report their work but others did not, so I let them volunteer. One thing I would change if I taught this lesson again is that I would provide my students with the text I read at the beginning of the lesson and not the one about Australia. I think that it would be even more meaningful for them because of the context: plans and arrangements for the week and not for a trip.

Now I am more willing to read more and try more tasks, respecting the cycle in Task-based Learning.

CONCLUSION

I would like to consider the importance of trying to understand the principles behind a task-based lesson and state that by trying to implement task-based approach in my lessons I have been learning a lot. I have noticed that I am more aware of use, exposure and motivation.

In my teaching experience I had always given much importance to my presentation and it was hard to believe that there were other ways of conducting a lesson.

Incorporating a Task-based approach into our teaching means modifying our way of seeing things. The teacher is not the centre of the activities; however, he/she has an important role during the process of organising students' work. The materials should be carefully thought of for Task-based Learning classes and teachers should find a way of evaluating students' performance while doing the tasks.

I see the implementation of Task-based Learning relevant because I do believe in its principles: building from what students already know, and improving language gradually, by discovering and trying out new forms, structures and expressions.

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