

**TALK TO ME – AN OUTCRY FROM ARABIA by Anne Sheela Peter****TALK TO ME – AN OUTCRY FROM ARABIA**

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ABSTRACT

Students from the Middle East [Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Oman] are at a loss when they come to India (Bangalore) to study English as they find little or no opportunity at all to practice conversational skills outside the English classroom. Drawn from interviews of students at Value Point Academy- an institute for English Language Learning in Bangalore- this article focuses on the practical problems that these students face regarding the dire lack of real-world, 'real' conversations and advocates a task-based approach in the classroom to overcome this need. Although an entirely Task Based Language Teaching methodology cannot replace the existing curriculum, an adaptation of some of the activities used in the approach has facilitated a greater use of the much needed conversation skills.

Introduction

From the 1970s India has seen an influx of international students seeking admission into universities mainly in the metropolitan cities. India is a desirable destination for students who seek higher education for three main reasons. One is that the cost of education is relatively low, the second is that the duration taken to complete the courses is less when compared to their western counterparts and most importantly the quality of education provided is good. Although universities are found all over the country, that is, almost one in every district, the reason they choose to study in the metropolises like Bangalore, Chennai, Mumbai and Delhi is that the ambience and atmosphere is favorable for assimilation into the new culture.

Although this seems to be an accepted notion that cities provide a conducive environment for learning English, the reality that students face seems to be quite different. Outside their English classroom they hardly seem to find an opportune time or space to put into practice previously taught structures and to refine their language output.

Students' observations



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As can be seen in the very words of the students themselves:

“Studying in India is great but English it’s not good because accent it’s not good and people don’t speak in English.”

“I enjoy staying here I met a lot of friends. But acully (actually) the accent of Indian people is not helping us to learn.”

“There is a problem which I’m still facing it till now, I’m not able to speak in English because many of people either don’t know English or know Arabic and this makes me unable to speak English most of the time.”

Lack of opportunities for real-life conversation

Also their interaction with localites (what little they have) has most often been unpleasant, which does not assist in creating a learning platform for conversational English.

“..... Also the hostess they don’t give us any kind of trust and this irritates me all the time.”

“.....Another thing is every time people who helped me tried to trick me for more money. If I had a good face, they tried with more crutial ways. Every 3-4 days, I got problem from rikshaws, hacked metres, fake routes, tricking as ‘rikshaw’s engine got some problem.’ Also when rains start, they increase the price.”



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One student seems to have come across a gentleman who rescued him from the clutches of a similar auto rikshaw driver, but he says....

“However, in India is hardly ever to find somebody like that man. Most of the time, I’m sure everybody the(y) trying to cheat me. The policemen are arrogant I think because one of my friend has one awful experience with them.”

When conversation regarding essential services draws up against such walls, chances are that learning outside the classroom too will draw up a blank. It is then left to the teacher to create or simulate real life situations within the classroom to aid the use of conversational English.

Efficacy of Task-Based Language Teaching

As adult learners, the task-based approach has found favour among students of ESL as the approach provides them with opportunities to practice the skills that will help them get along in real-life situations. Adapting the methodology of TBLT seemed to be an ideal start to providing students with conversational practice as the main principles of a communicative approach propounds that

- Activities that involve real communication are essential for language learning
- Activities in which language is used for carrying out meaningful tasks promote learning
- Language that is meaningful to the learner supports the learning process

(Richards & Rodgers: 223)

The theory of TBLT



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The TBLT is an approach based on the use of real-world tasks as the core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching. Although it was not possible to adopt the entire method- for it would require a curriculum change- the approach was adapted and several activities were created that were similar to the tasks that are prescribed in the TBLT approach. The underlying theory of language, however, remained the same- namely:

TBLT stresses the importance of meaning above language display. Skehan notes that in task-based instruction (TBI) “meaning is primary.... the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome” and that task- based instruction is not concerned with language display” Skehan (1998:98)

The second assumption of TBLT is that it involves multiple models of language i.e., structural, functional and interactional. Tasks are graded according to their linguistic complexity, namely less to more complex, functional classification is that which deals with task types, namely— didactic and social. The interactional dimension distinguishes between the interactional activity and communicative goal. Therefore, we understand that TBLT is not linked to any single model of language but utilises all three model of language theory.

The third assumption of TBLT is that lexical units are central in language use and language learning.

Traditionally it was thought that structures played a more important role than vocabulary. But many linguists and psycholinguists have postulated that native language speech processing is most often lexical in nature. Skehan (1996b: 22) comments:

This means that speech processing is based on the production and reception of whole phrase units larger than the word which do not require any internal processing when they are ‘reeled off’..... Fluency concerns the learner’s capacity to produce language in real time without undue pausing for hesitation.



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Conversation- key to language acquisition

Finally and most importantly,

“Conversation” is the central focus of language and the keystone of language acquisition. This being the premise on which this paper is focused, all the tasks that have been adapted for classroom use extensively exploit the opportunity to create conversation. The learner uses his available linguistic and communicative resources to speak and make meaning with others through the spoken language.

Definition of Task

Speaking of tasks, how does one define a ‘task’? In layman’s language – a task is something that needs to get done and it could be anything that a person does in his day to day life, like paying a bill, watering the garden, booking a flight and so on. Where pedagogical tasks are concerned innumerable definitions dot the ELT skyline. One can consider the definition of David Nunan (2004: 4) as being quite comprehensive:

“ a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting 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 meaning rather than to manipulate form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning , a middle and an end.”

Application of TBLT

Keeping the structure of the task in mind and the specific problems that the Arabic students face, the following tasks were designed which helped them overcome some difficulties that they faced.



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Since this group of students has been in India for less than a year, they are still in a stage of culture shock and it does not really encourage them to go out and socialise or participate in any of the cultural activities available in the city. One of the tasks that were given to them was to come up with their weekend entertainment plan.

The teacher played the central role of preparing learner for the task so they they didn't go into the new activity "cold". An introductory discussion of what they usually do during their weekends in their own country threw up interesting answers. The teacher then steered the discussion to what they might want to do while they were in India.

Students were divided into groups of three each and each group was given the weekend newspaper from which they had to decide which cultural event they would want to attend. Not only did this task lead them to converse and negotiate with their group members it also gave rise to a lot of discussion about various cultural aspects of India they were not familiar with. It was at this point that the teacher stepped in to help with her descriptive input of cultural events. An exposure to such a wealth of information helped them understand that India is a land that is much more than just streets filled with 'cows and dogs'. They brought the task to a close by explaining to the class why they chose a particular cultural event to go to.

Another task, or rather activity, that helped them put into perspective the practical problem of dealing with auto rickshaw drivers is to conduct a press conference where students took on the roles of the drivers and journalists. Not only did they practice asking and answering questions, they were also able to empathise with the lot of the auto rickshaw drivers who face numerous challenges in their lives. The pre-task activity done was to model a press conference with the help of some students in the class. The students were also provided with information about the life of an average auto driver which helped them formulate answers in defence of his actions.

Negotiating with house owners and deciding if they wanted to rent a particular house or apartment was another task that helped students use language meaningfully and it also provided



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them with insights into handling situations with house owners. The entire group was divided equally into house owners and house seekers and each owner was given specifications of his house with the rent he could charge. The house seekers were given requirements they were looking for in a house. Each pair sat together to work out their script and finally presented it to the class.

These tasks provided both the input and output processing necessary for language acquisition. Some researchers like Krashen feel that comprehensible input is sufficient for successful language acquisition but others like Swain have shown that even after years of exposure to only comprehensible input, learners were unable to achieve the language ability of native speakers. This could happen only if there was an opportunity for productive use of language. Both input and output of meaningful language are believed to be key processes of language learning.

Some researchers are of the opinion that “negotiation of meaning” is the necessary element of second language acquisition. “It is meaning negotiation which focuses a learner’s attention on some part of an [the learner’s] utterance (pronunciation, grammar, lexicon, etc.) which requires modification. That is, negotiation can be viewed as the trigger for acquisition” (Plough and Gass 1993: 36)

Tasks, therefore, help processes of negotiation, modification, rephrasing and experimentation which are the core components of second language learning.

This helps us understand the critical importance of conversation in language acquisition. The TBLT methodology draws on SLA research on negotiation and interaction and proposes that the task is the pivot point for stimulation of input-output practice, negotiation of meaning and transactionally focused conversation.

Limitations



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The limitation of the tasks that were carried out in the ESL class was that students were still interacting with peers and therefore it did not simulate the real-world in which they needed to practice their language skills. The difficulties that they faced of understanding the accent and overcoming the distrust of the local people they interact with was not addressed. This limitation, however may be overcome if the class consisted of Indian as well as international students.

Conclusion

One really cannot question the pedagogical value of the TBLT method of teaching and it is common knowledge that teachers over several generations have used task based activities in their classrooms to aid English language learning. This article, however, aimed to show the efficacy of this method with special emphasis on the need for real-world conversation practice for students in India who strongly feel the lack of it outside their English classroom.

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