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## USING TASK-BASED LEARNING TO IMPROVE EFL STUDENTS' COMMUNICATION IN ENGLISH

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### Abstract

*As teachers with students of diversities in cultures, it is very essential for us to understand the characteristics of the students in their classes in order to identify and apply appropriate teaching strategies to learning activities in order to help students achieve the objectives of teaching and learning another language. As numerous teaching methodologies are available, therefore as teachers, we should be wise and professional in deciding what approach is best for our learners. For the students, the acceptance of implementing the Task-based learning method may take some time. Perhaps it may be more efficient if we firstly explain the method to them before we start the learning process. The purpose is to have them be responsive to the benefits that they can achieve from this methodology. To introduce Task-based learning will not be always easy as it may not fit immediately to the classroom. Some problems are bound to exist for the first time.*

**Keywords:** Teaching strategies, task-based learning, EFL students.

### INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the implementation of Task-based learning when adopted in the teaching context, toward the stipulation that would result in more students to be able to communicate successfully in English.

To begin with, Aceh is a diverse region occupied by several ethnics and language groups. In education, government bureaus and formal events, Bahasa Indonesia as the national language is used as the media of communication. Additionally, in education, English is treated as a foreign language. Coleman (1996, p. 97) viewed that students' behaviours in Indonesia are generally passive, teacher centred, and "learning festival", where the students participate in teaching process as they would participate in a festival and during the learning process they act like audiences in the puppet show. The behaviours are believed to be adapted from customs of previous teaching and learning methods. Traditionally, the teaching of EFL in most East Asian countries is dominated by a teacher-centred, book-centred, grammar-translation method and an emphasis on rote memory (Liu & Littlewood, 1997). These traditional language teaching approaches have resulted in a number of typical learning styles in East Asian countries, including Indonesia, with introverted learning being one of them. In this matter, most students see knowledge as something to be transmitted by the teacher rather than discovered by the learners. They, therefore, find it normal to engage in modes of learning which are teacher-centred and in which they receive knowledge rather than interpret it.

Possibly, the most popular East Asian learning styles originated from the traditional book-centred and grammar-translation method are analytic and field-independent (Zhenhui, 2001). In most of reading classes, for instance, the students read new words aloud, imitating the teacher. The

teacher explains the entire text sentence by sentence, analysing many of the more difficult grammar structures, rhetoric, and style for the students, who listen, take notes, and answer questions.

The teachers and students interactions in class are also fundamentally related to culture. In the Acehese society, parent-child relationships are based on obedience, filial piety, their compliance with the parents' wishes, and their duties and obligations in honour of the parents are seen as a basic virtue. The behaviour of "full respect" also applies toward other elders and indeed teachers. The adaptation of the matter leads the students in class to speak up only when invited to and teachers are never publicly contradicted or criticized. Therefore, many students fear that speaking up in class may intimidate the teacher's authority and dignity. We also presume that asking too many questions make the students conclude that they are lack of attention or the ability to absorb the information presented by the teacher.

Thus, this kind of classroom atmosphere creates frustration among the teachers nowadays. As the global spread of English has resulted in increasing diversity and development in the field of language teaching, students are expected to not only "know" the basic language skill (listening, speaking, reading and writing) but also to "use" them effectively. To solve this problem, appropriate approaches should be adopted to raise positive interactions among students and teacher in the classroom.

### **Proper Methods in EFL Teaching**

In order to decide the suitable approach for teaching, we as the teachers, should consider the condition and situation of the classroom. According to Larsen-Freeman (2000, p. 181) the choice is easy for some teachers. They are selecting the teaching methodology based on their own experiences with their classes, choosing an approach that suits their values and fundamentals views about teaching and learning process in their own context, therefore selected method must be appropriate for their students. Moreover, Krashen (2002, pp. 211-212) suggested that there are three aspects that can influence the teachers to get the best method, it considering these aspects related to one another. The three aspects are: Theory of Second Language Acquisition, Applied Linguistic Research and Intuition. I would like to focus on the last area, which is Intuition. In this particular aspect, teacher tends to choose the method in teaching foreign language based on the experiences that they had received in their classroom; by observing the classroom situation in daily activities. This aspect is not based on the theories as the other two aspects; it is more in "practice" than in set theories.

Richards and Rodgers (2001, p. 26) believe that the aim of a method is based on its instructional process and through some stages in the teaching and learning process, such as interaction between teachers and the learners, and also the material in the classroom. One method is different from another; it is designed based on what skills the learners should achieve in the teaching and learning activities in the classroom. Therefore, teaching activities that focus on grammatical accuracy may be different from teaching communicative skills.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

We find Task-based learning/TBL is exceptionally suitable for communication activities in our classroom as students are able to communicate freely in the target language while doing various tasks. Willis (1996, p. 54) states that the major point found in this method is students learn more effectively when their minds are focused on the task, rather than on the language they are using. During the tasks process, they are urged to draw on the language to exchange meanings and they are free to use any other language form in the target language for a real purpose. Perhaps the games they play in the task are not real in actual life, but the target language they are using is real. Other aspects discussed in class, such as solving a problem or sharing information or experiences are considered relevant and authentic tasks that replicate the features of the target language use outside of the classroom context.

The definition of tasks in the task-based learning is an activity that the learners do in the classroom. While completing the activity, the learners will have some interactions among them by using the target language. Nunan (1989, cited in Ellis, 2003) defines a communicative task as an activity that takes place in the classroom and the students have some understanding, interaction, and ability to produce in the target language. Basically, this activity is centred on meaning rather

than form; therefore the task should have a sense of completeness, or as a communicative activity. While the aim of the task itself is to build a natural context in the classroom, how the learners will be exposed to many sources of the target language as they prepare for the task, write they report after the task and the study itself arise naturally along these processes (Willis, 1996, p. 1).

One of the main reason we select Task-based learning as the approach to teach English is for the students to get more exposure from the use of English in a wider range of contexts communicatively, not only from the classroom context within limited materials. As Willis (1996, p. 1) points out that people need to learn plenty of sources from the real language use. Therefore, we, as the teacher, should decide the implementation of instructional strategies for teaching a foreign language to enhance students' different communicative language skills based on their aims of study.

The approach also manages to provide a positive effect on motivating the self-confidence of our students in using the target language while conducting the tasks in the classroom. In relation to this, Willis and Willis (2007, p. 2) writes that through Task-based learning approach, learners' confidence will be increased by allowing them to use target language freely, without feeling any fear of making mistakes. They can communicate with any words that they have in mind, and we as the teacher can help them by shaping their words so it becomes more accurate.

### **Implementing Task-Based Learning in the Teaching and Learning Process**

Frost (2004) explains that language teachers use Task-based learning as an alternative. Teacher does not pre-determine what language will be studied in the lesson, it is based on the completion of central task, and it is determined along the process while the students completed the task. Additionally, there are certain stages that should be followed in Task-based learning:

Pre-task → Task → Planning → Report → Analysis → Practice

Following the above stages in the English Communicative class, below are the descriptions of the stages that are implemented in my English Communicative classroom.

#### ***Pre-task***

In this first stage, we explore a topic with the student and find some useful language that helps the students to do the task. For example, the task is about describing hobbies. The students watch a DVD or tape recording on various hobbies. Students examine what the people do in the preview. They take it as an example and may do similar task.

#### ***Task***

The students do the task in pairs or in groups while we monitor their activities around the classroom. We ask a few questions and offer some enlightenment to motivate the students to be more dynamic.

#### ***Planning***

In this stage, students prepare to report to their groups or to the whole class orally or in writing about the task. We keep monitoring the students and are constantly available to advise them in the language use when they require us to.

#### ***Report***

Students present their report orally or read the written report to the whole class while we give some feedback and comparison on the results. The students watch or listen to the DVD or tape recording again as an evaluation for the task they have done.

#### ***Analysis***

We ask the students to examine and point out the language problems found during their task, analyse the problem encountered and discuss the matter.

### **Practice**

As a final point, students practice the new words, phrases, expressions, and patterns of the target language that we have selected during the task and report sessions. Furthermore, the English Communication class consists of only a small number of students. This situation makes it easier for me to supervise them. In Task-based learning, teacher acts as the facilitator. It is very important to move around the students to avoid them from using their first language in the conversation as well as to ensure their comprehension.

In this method, the integrated skills are also taught, such as reading, writing, speaking and listening. In doing the tasks, it is best if the students work together in pairs or groups. Willis (1996, p. 52) believes that two productive skills are generally involved in a task, namely speaking and note taking, as well as receptive skills, namely listening and reading. By using the language that the learners have learnt from the previous sources or lessons, they begin the task by carrying out various communicative skills. Learners make a report on what they have done on the task, and compare it with other students while they listen to/watch the recordings of other people doing the same task that is related to their task. At this stage, the teacher reviews the problems encountered during the task, such as the language forms that the students are using, problems that students have, and maybe matters that need to be discussed more or that are not brought up. Throughout the practice stage, the teacher emphasizes key language for the students to observe and carry out, and wraps up the issues mentioned in the previous stage.

### **Advantages and Disadvantages of Task-based learning**

Some obstacles are found while implementing Task-based learning into my teaching context such as the lack of time for conducting the task within its stages, and the ability of the students to fully complete the task in the target language. As the students in my class are not international students, it is easy for them to frequently code-switch into Bahasa Indonesia to complete the task. The motivation of the students is also a concern as learners who are used to a more traditional approach based on a grammatical syllabus may find it difficult to come to terms with the apparent of promptly executing communicative skills in the target language within the given time limit to produce solving strategies for the given task. Confusion can arise among students in the matter of language features such as semantic concepts (notions), a word or a part of a word (as *in -ly, -ed*, etc.) and categories of meaning (by *-ing*, by (time)).

According to Willis and Willis (2007, p. 200) there are several problems that the teachers face in implementing the TBL method in their classroom:

- Lack of time in designing and preparing the task for the classroom since few text books have the appropriate tasks for Task based learning method.
- Lack of time in doing the task with its stages in the classroom, so the teacher should set the time efficiently for the course.
- Confusion about the tasks and the task-based learning; whether or not by doing the tasks in this approach, students are capable of learning the target language.
- Previous learning experience, the differences from the previous methodology that creates a different situation of learning process for the students.
- Lacks of learners' motivation; during completing the tasks students are using minimal target language. Learners only focus on completing the task.
- Task-based learning is not suitable for the beginners; the learners have to supplement with grammar and enough vocabulary.
- Learners will use L1 language in planning and doing the tasks and projects.
- Lack of perceived progress; learners will find some difficulties in stating what they have learnt from completing the tasks.
- Fear of losing control of class during the learning process.
- Exams; how to prepare the students to pass the examination with task-based learning whereas this approach is not focused on the form of the language, but its meaning.

The transition to change from other approaches to task-based learning method requires some time for teachers and students as well. Willis (1996, p. 136) also points out that the changing roles for the teachers from the previous methods to task-based learning method can be a dilemma.

Before, the classroom interaction used to be teacher oriented, now with the task-based learning approach arising, teachers must be equipped with professionalism in selecting, sequencing tasks, setting up optimum condition, recognizing quality learning opportunities, deciding how and when to intervene, and the time for the learners to move on to the next stage.

For the students, the acceptance of implementing the Task-based learning method may take some time. Perhaps it may be more efficient if we firstly explain the method to them before we start the learning process. The purpose is to have them be responsive to the benefits that they can achieve from this methodology. Willis (1996, p. 137) further claims that to introduce task-based learning will not be always easy as it may not fit immediately to the classroom. However, the students who have experienced task based learning from many places around world stated that:

- Soon after the beginning of a task based course, they gain confidence in speaking and interacting.
- Many of them enjoy the challenge of doing the tasks.
- Not only about the topic, but they are also able to talk about the language itself for other topics.
- Being able to perform natural spontaneous speech easily and handle the advance reading text appropriately
- They turn into independent learners in the classroom,

Teachers and trainers who have also experienced task-based learning said that:

- Task based learning is a better approach than PPP for mixed-level classes.
- Learners use their own ideas or experiences in the lessons.
- At the end of the class, the learners grasp the lessons more than what the teachers expect.

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, task-based learning method is an ideal approach for the English Communication class. This method is very effective to gradually change the characteristics of Indonesian students from passive to active learners in the classroom. While completing the task in the class, students are able to speak in the target language freely, will not be afraid of making mistakes anymore, become more confident, motivated and more familiar with the language. Additionally, the most important matter is that the students shall be able to communicate in the target language inside and outside of the classroom due to the wide range of exposures from practices of various communicative language skills. Willis (2008) suggests that Task-based learning is changing the condition from grammar practice routines into an approach that encourages the learners to experiment with the target language without feeling any fear of failure, public correction, and participate actively in their own learning process, inside and outside the classroom.

For the teacher, this approach offers them security and control. Richards (1987, cited in Nunan, 2000) claims that almost all of the language teachers are trying to find the best method for their classes, and it has been happening since a long time ago. They support the improvements in language teaching, the quality of methods, and the emerging of new approaches that are hoped to be progressively more efficient in the field of language teaching. Finally, we believe that language teaching methodologies will keep developing from time to time, and as a result, we as teachers should be open and expeditious towards any methods that will give positive impacts on the students.

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