

The investigation into task-based approach in EFL classroom

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Abstract: *There is little doubt that implementing appropriate approaches or methods can contribute to successful language teaching. This paper, therefore, focuses on both the investigation of Task-based approach as a solution for problematic issues and analyze possible benefits and potential challenges. Understanding both the positive and negative sides of this approach can facilitate the teacher's practices in the context of English language teaching in Vietnam. Pedagogical implications for the use of task-based approach in EFL classrooms are also presented.*

Keywords: *Approach, Task-based approach, Vietnam*

1. Introduction

It is believed that a deep insight of the teaching context with the purpose of implementing appropriate approaches or methods can contribute to successful language teaching. Therefore, it is critical to examine the characteristics of the world we are living in order to have a deep understanding of it. Firstly, this ever-changing world requires every person to update new knowledge on a daily basis in order to keep pace with others in a changing world. Given this integrated environment, according to Framework for 21st Century Learning, learning and innovation skills including creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, communication and collaboration are crucial to students' achievement in today's world. Secondly, globalization is another common phenomenon that gives people a golden chance to communicate, to connect, and to cooperate. In fact, with the development of technology in the Information Age, globalization makes new knowledge, and new collaboration accessible to every corner of the globe. In addition, intercultural communicative competence (ICC) refers to the understanding of other cultures and how to use that knowledge to communicate with people from other countries. In recent years, English has been deemed to be commonly spoken in Vietnam because of its role in communication with both English native speakers and non-native speakers. Therefore, there has been an increase in the need to develop intercultural competence in teaching English in Vietnam. In other words, textbooks should be designed with the purpose of boosting students' intercultural competence and examining the appropriate methods for teaching culture to meet the requirements of this

ever-changing world.

According to the Vietnam National Foreign Languages Project (VNFLP) of the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET), at the tertiary education level, students are expected to reach B1 Level with the purpose of improving the Vietnamese students' foreign language proficiency (Phuong, 2017). This means language learning is necessary for students' work and further education. In addition, as a communication tool, English enables learners to become global citizens and have more opportunities to access to the competitive world. All things considered, how to improve learners' communicative competence and enable them to become independent learners is one of the top priorities. Based on this teaching context and learners' needs, a task-based approach is considered to be the optimum choice for English language teaching.

The following sections of the present paper are presented in the order of (i) an overview of a task-based learning approach, (ii) some features of a good task, (iii) followed by the advantages and disadvantages, suggests (iv) several pedagogical implications, and ends with (v) the conclusion of major points summarized.

2. Literature review

2.1 Task-based approach

According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), this approach shares the philosophy of Communicative Language Teaching. Larsen-Freeman (2005) states that a task-based approach creates golden opportunities for students to develop their communicative competence by accomplishing tasks in a natural context for language use. In other words, language is a by-product of the communication

process with the purpose of completing tasks. Therefore, students do not make a lot of effort or pressure to learn the target language. It means they acquire language knowledge and language skills unconsciously. More importantly, the teacher does not determine what language students must use for the completion of the task. To some extent, it is called task-based method which refers to the sequences of instructional activities or techniques of a lesson. The lesson can follow some suggested stages including pre-task, task, planning, report, analysis, and practice.

2.2. Features of a good task

In task-based approach, the understanding of the characteristics of a good task plays a seminal role because tasks have a strong influence on the students' learning success. Firstly, tasks focus on meaning, not on form. Thanks to this, students may have a chance to choose any forms to convey their ideas and thinking. This means the task-based approach focuses on language functions over language forms. Secondly, tasks should have some communication issues to solve. In fact, this enables students to be exposed to previously unrehearsed contexts in the real world, which has long-term benefits for their language capacity. Thirdly, tasks have some aspects that are related to real-world activities. Using authentic materials and contexts assists learners to have the ability to utilize their target language to deal with circumstances around them. Finally, there is some priority in task completion. For this characteristic, students could make errors and are not afraid of being interrupted to correct these errors during the fluency stage.

2.3. Advantages of using task-based approach

Possible advantages can be seen in my own teaching context. In terms of the required curriculum, Vietnam National Foreign Languages Project (VNFLP) of the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) sets a goal in which, learners, at the tertiary education level, are expected to "use a foreign language independently" (MoET, 2008). Based on the analysis of characteristics of a good task, task-based approach makes it possible for students to develop communicative competence. Therefore, if teachers adopt this approach appropriately, it might help students to learn a language independently and acquire knowledge unconsciously. Regarding teaching materials, this approach can maximize students' meaningful learning because teachers

would design tasks which are suitable for students in terms of their level of proficiency and their interests. An appropriate task will enable students to connect with their existing knowledge and concentrate on preferred information which is more meaningful than rote learning. In addition, students' current level of proficiency is also improved when applying this approach. In fact, completing a task requires students to integrate all language skills and brainstorm all the time. This process also enhances students' critical thinking and autonomy. Also, learners know how to collaborate with their peers to achieve the task which forms their communication and collaboration skills. Considering the objectives of the lesson, task-based approach allows teachers to teach students not only necessary language forms or vocabulary, but also skills for task completion. For example, students can be asked to complete a task about *Environmental problems: effects and solutions*. Several structures for effects and solutions are expected to use in their task. To some extent, the teacher cannot predict all structures students may use but this approach allows the teacher to teach target structures in the lesson plan. Also, when students suggest measures to alleviate the effects of environmental issues, they will negotiate with each other and design ways to solve the tasks themselves, which improve their problem-solving skills and creativity. To be specific, problem-solving skills and creativity can be sharpened during the process of completing the task. Moreover, learning the language from doing the tasks, students have to communicate and learn from other peers which may prevent students from pressure and enhance collaboration as well as communication skills.

2.4. Disadvantages of using task-based approach

On the other hand, there are some potential difficulties teachers should acknowledge when adopting this approach. Firstly, the necessity of a good task plays an integral role in students' achievement. Therefore, how to plan a good task and predict possible language or errors in the instructional process is challenging. Apparently, teachers cannot expect to have clear step-by-step instructions in their lesson plan because of unpredictable elements. Besides, teachers need to invest a huge amount of time for lesson plan procedures (pre-task, task cycle and language focus) and instruction preparation. Secondly, task-based approach is considered to be challenging with some lower-achieving students. To accomplish a task, students need to integrate

the necessary skills and their existing knowledge. The bulk of EFL students in the teaching context of Vietnam, however, has an average level of proficiency and prefers traditional approach with teachers' lectures and rote learning. Finally, the insights into this approach and well-trained teachers are considered as contributors to the approach's success. Teachers need to understand how to design a meaningful and authentic task. Also, teachers should be able to predict the language students may use in order to complete the task. Also, time investment for both lesson plan and instruction are essential factors contributing to a successful teaching process.

3. Pedagogical implications

It is important to understand that every coin has two sides and this approach should be viewed from different angles. Therefore, to the best of my knowledge, the idea that maximizing its benefits and minimizing its drawbacks can lead to the best use of task-based approach. Given necessary skills for 21st century learning, this approach can enable students to cultivate their collaboration and communication, problem-solving skills, and innovation. Therefore, I strongly believe that these skills should be linked to every teacher's objectives when they design the lesson plan or the task. Every teacher must master the approach or method that they use and acknowledge possible advantages so that they can bring valuable knowledge and skills to their learners.

Regarding potential problems when applying task-based approach, one of the most noticeable issues in this teaching context is the low level of students' proficiency. As being analyzed above, students need to integrate many skills and have adequate language knowledge for completing a task. To solve this problem, it is required to facilitate their learning difficulties with teachers' help and guidance and one solution offered is teachers' scaffolding. 'Scaffolding' enables students to become independent readers under the teachers' help, guidance and monitoring (Wood et al., 1976). For instance, teachers or task designers can make decisions on which task comes first based on its level of difficulty. As a result, students can feel comfortable at the beginning since teachers provide them with facilitative conditions for learning. Besides instructional scaffolding, scaffolding from peers is considered to be an indispensable part because students spend much time working with their peers to complete the task. Help

and support from their partners or group members can facilitate their difficulty in the task completion. In the long run, when students can be able to get familiar with the process of doing task and improve their language proficiency, teachers then can remove scaffolding gradually from the teaching process. In other words, more practices in the classroom should be involved until teachers can remove scaffolding from instruction. Finally, meaningful learning can occur only when students know how to reflect on what they have done in classroom. Reflection on particular topics of their interest of theme give learners an opportunity to make the connection between their existing knowledge and new knowledge, which enables students to obtain long-term retention. Also, this can provide students the opportunity to get a deeper understanding of the topic they are learning in the classroom.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the insights into both positive and negative aspects of such an approach should be included in the language teaching process in order to optimize the effect of task-based approach. One of the prominent benefits of this approach is promoting learner autonomy which is essential for students in the integrated environment. However, there are some challenges that teachers should not ignore including planning and designing meaningful task as well as considering the students' language proficiency if EFL teachers desire to adopt this approach successfully.

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