The Effect of the Task- based Language Teaching Method on the Comprehension Ability of Iranian High-School Students

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Abstract

The Task-Based Approach has obtained popularity in the part of language teaching since the last decade of the 20th Century and significant scholars have joined the discussion and increased the amount of analytical studies on the issue. Teaching the English language is based on a task-based language teaching is an effective way to improve linguistic knowledge and learners' comprehension. Reading and comprehension is one of the essential things to get meaning from the text. The emphasis on reading comprehension skills of foreign languages is one of the most important issues in language teaching. This research has investigated the impact of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) on reading comprehension ability and performances of Iranian students. For this purpose, 60 high school students in the third district of Tehran were selected as the participants. The two groups took a pretest to test reading ability. In the next step, they were divided to experimental and control group. The results showed that by t-test analysis, the experimental group with three reading task types in comparison to the control group with traditional method, showed better performance. Finally, the scores were compared by ANOVA test and the students in creative tasks performed better.

Keywords: *Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT); Task; Reading Tasks; Final Achievement Test; Language Learning; Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)*

Introduction

In fact, the ability to read the written language at a reasonable rate and with good comprehension has been recognized to be as important as oral skills, if not more important (Eskey, 2005). Some researches indicated that the traditional methods including prescribed steps that provide teachers with a clear schedule of what they should do (Rivers, cited in Skehan, 1996), other studies emphasize the importance of task-based approaches to communicative instruction which allow teachers and learners freer to find their own procedures to maximize communicative effectiveness (Gass & Crookes, cited in Skehan, 1996; Prabhu, 1987; Nunan, 1989). Task-based instruction can thus be defined as an approach, which provides learners with a learning context that requires the use of the target language through communicative activities and in which the process of using language carries more importance than mere production of correct language forms. Therefore, TBLT is viewed as one model of Communicative

Language Teaching (CLT) in terms of regarding real and meaningful communication as the primary characteristic of language learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Willis, 1996).

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is a broadly defined approach to language teaching research and practice which uses task as a unit of analysis for research and practice in communicative language teaching. It has been widely applied since the 1990s. It has been situated within experiential 'learning by doing' educational philosophy espoused by Dewey and others (Long, 2015; Samuda & Bygate, 2008). As such, TBLT can be seen as an extension of a so-called 'strong' version of CLT where communication is seen as the major driving force in language learning (Howatt, 1984). In contrast to such a holistic and experiential approach, a weak version of CLT is often supported by some kind of functional and/or formal syllabus, where communicative (production) tasks follow the presentation and practice of forms (Ellis, 2003). Ellis makes a similar distinction between task-based and task-supported language teaching (TSLT), in that TBLT uses task as the only unit of analysis for syllabus design, while TSLT uses task plus another unit, such as linguistic forms, functions, skills, lexis or concepts. TBLT represents a development from CLT in its principled and systematic incorporation of a focus on formal properties of the language, on one hand, and a return to CLT's conceptual foundations in its ability to bring together content, methodology and experience, on the other (Samuda & Bygate, 2008, p. 57).

The strong TBLT approach (Long, 2015) holds that this focus should be reactive and implicit, via corrective feedback during task-based interaction, while other approaches allow for incorporation of explicit learning (either proactive or reactive) of the formal system to varying degrees, either via task-based or more formal structural activities. Willis and Willis (2007) provide a pedagogically-driven task cycle which has been influential in teacher training because of its practical appeal, but which does not provide a strong empirical foundation for its proposals (Samuda & Bygate, 2008). The cycle involves three stages: pre-task, aimed at introducing language useful to the task and activating schematic knowledge; task involving performing the communicative task, then reporting on the performance; and post-task language focus, where there is explicit focus on forms used during the task. Willis and Willis also provide advice on integrating tasks into course books, as well as attempt to link TBLT to the 'can do' statements in the Common European Framework of References for languages (CEFR). The fact that some researchers draw on this model in their principles for implementing TBLT (Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 1998), albeit critically, shows the value of approaches grounded in pedagogical practice. The term 'task', as the core unit of Task-based Language Teaching, is defined in different ways in the literature.

In Iran, English is studied as a foreign language (EFL) and not used as the everyday means of communication for most people. Many Iranian EFL students rarely speak English in their daily lives. However, in order to get access to the newest information, they may need to read materials recorded in English. In other words, to be able to read in English has particular importance to Iranian EFL students. This study was intended to employ a task-based method and observe its effect on the improvement of reading comprehension ability of Iranian High School students, compared to traditional method of teaching reading. This study has also tried to investigate the impact of using TBLT on the performance of Iranian High School students in the Final Achievement Test.

Literature Review

In general, tasks have been classified in various ways, according to: the types of tasks present in course books (e.g., listing, comparing, problem solving); genres (recipes; medical consultations); types of cognitive processes required (information gap, opinion gap); and according to hypothesized potential for language learning (Ellis, 2003). Tasks which engender different types of interaction (e.g., whether one learner provides others with information or it is equally distributed) and/or communication goal (e.g., whether there are one or more possible outcomes), can provide a range of opportunities for negotiation of meaning and/or form, both of which are hypothesized to foster language development. Task-based instruction can be defined as an approach in which communicative, meaningful tasks play the central role

in language learning, and in which the process of using language in communication carries more importance than mere production of correct language forms. Therefore, TBI is viewed as one model of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in terms of regarding real and meaningful communication as the primary feature of language learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Willis, 1996). Authentic language use, the real use of real language in classroom content, fosters a learning environment in which learners have their own say; they gain communicative practice within their own sense of the defined goals in TBI. In other words, learners are to learn the language as they use it. Because of this, communicative language use comes into focus as an essential aspect of a task-based framework (Willis, 2007). In addition to developing communicative capability, attention to form is fundamental for language learning. Even though TBI emphasizes the primacy of meaning, a focus on form has a parallel importance in the language learning process (Bygate, Skehan & Swain, 2001). In the task-based framework, it is desirable that learners can achieve accurate as well as fluent use of language (Willis, 2007). In addition to real language use, which is a common feature in both CLT and TBI, other critical dimensions define TBI: "input and output processing, negotiation of meaning and transactionally focused conversations" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). TBI provides effective language learning contexts in the form of tasks (Willis, 2007). Among the significant contexts for language learning, exposure to meaningful language input is seen as primary (Krashen, cited in Ellis, 2003; Willis, 1996). However, Swain (1985) indicates that productive output is as significant as meaningful input, and TBI requires a product-an output-at the end of a task (cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Communication in task-based instruction places an equal importance on the processing of comprehensible input and production of comprehensible output. In task-based learning, learners also have the opportunity to negotiate meaning in order to identify and solve a problem that occurs in their communication (Ellis, 2003; Foster, 1998; Plough & Gass, cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

Nunan (1991) summarizes five characteristics of TBLT:

1. An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language

2. The introduction of authentic texts the learning situation

3. The provision of opportunities for learners to focus not only on language but also on the learning process

4. An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning

5. An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activation outside the classroom

Results and Discussion

This research was conducted with two groups of High-School students. The first group was the control group and the other was the experimental group. While the control group followed their current syllabus, the experimental group had 1 hour of their four-hour English classes per week (30 minutes in each session) based on task-based instruction with task-based exercises prepared by the researcher. Since the present study mainly focused on the reading performance of the experimental and the control groups before and after the treatment, the main statistical procedures involved were Independent-samples t-test, which compared the averages of the two groups in the reading pretest, posttest, and Final Achievement Test and Matched-pairs t-test, which compared the pretest and posttest scores of the experimental group. The pre- test and post-test were chosen from Spectrum Test Practice, Grade 1 (2010, pp.31-56). The second part of the study, which was concerned with the performance of the experimental group in three task types, required the calculation of a Repeated-Measures One-way ANOVA to investigate possible differences among the scores obtained on three task types. Also, to make sure that the prepared texts used for the present study were suitable and readable for High School students, the text difficulty of all

passages was calculated through the Gunning's Fog Index (FOG) Readability Formula and then was compared with the readability index of reading passages in their course book. Tables 1 and Table 2 show the obtained results.

Table 1 Gunning's Fog Readability Test Results of Prepared Task-based Texts

Text	No. of sentences	No. f words	No. of complex words	Percent of complex words	Average words per sentence	Average syllables per word	Fog Score	Reading Level
Text 1	24	228	5	2.19%	9.50	1.26	4.7	Easy to read
Text 2	20	88	0	0.00%	4.40	1.14	1.8	Very easy to read
Text 3	28	159	3	1.89%	5.68	1.18	3	Easy to read
Text 4	19	151	7	4.64%	10.79	1.20	6.2	Fairly easy to read
Text 5	9	124	5	4.03%	13.78	1.29	6.8	Fairly easy to read
Text 6	12	153	10	6.54%	12.75	1.29	5.4	Easy to read
Text 7	8	75	2	2.67%	9.38	1.24	4.3	Easy to read
Text 8	9	81	3	3.70%	9.00	1.40	4.6	Easy to read

Table 2 Gunning's Fog Readability Test Results of Participants' Textbook

Text	No. of sentences	No. of words	No. of complex words	Percent of complex words	Average words per sentence	Average syllables per word	Fog Score	Reading Level
1	12	74	4	5.41%	6.17	1.28	4.6	Easy to read
2	13	86	6	6.98%	6.62	1.29	5.4	Easy to read
3	19	110	9	8.18%	5.79	1.31	4.9	Easy to read
4	9	77	7	9.09%	8.56	1.43	5.5	Easy to read
7	16	119	12	10.08%	7.44	1.34	6.3	Easy to read
8	13	112	6	5.36%	8.62	1.28	5.2	Easy to read
9	12	96	3	3.13%	8.00	1.30		Easy to read

The results showed that five of 8 Task-based texts were almost at the same level of difficulty as texts in participants' text book. Three of Task-based texts were easier than textbook texts. The researcher included them intentionally to start the treatment with easier texts and encourage the participants to do the tasks with interest. Figure 1 shows that the readability levels of the two sets of texts are approximately close to each other except aforementioned easy texts.

Pre-Test and Post-Test Results

In this research, 60 students took part in the pretest and posttest. The findings of the pretest were used to set the baseline for comparison and to help interpret the findings, particularly if any improvement or difference occurred at the end of the experiment. The pretest was carried out during the first-class session of June, the academic year of 2018. To be specific, each question was allocated one point, which means the maximum score for the RCT as pretest was 30. Descriptive analysis of data was employed to get an overview of the participants' performance on the pretest. Table 3 shows that the average score of the 30 participants of the experimental group on the pretest was 18.16 with 1.41 as the standard deviation. On the other hand, the mean score of the 30 participants of the control group was 18.16 with 1.41 as the standard deviation. The highest score in both groups was 20 and the lowest 16.

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics for the Participants' Performance on the Pre-test

Group	N	Min.	Max.	Sum	Mean	SD
Control	30	16	20	454	18.16	1.41
Experimental	30	16	20	453	18.12	1.56

Then, the results of t-test were compared to see if different methods of instruction had made any significant difference in the performance of the students in two groups. Statistical methods were also used for the comparison of the means between groups for the posttest. Tables 4 shows the results of the descriptive analysis of the participants' performance on the posttest, which include the mean scores and standard deviations.

Table 4 Descriptive Statistics for the Participants' Performance on the Post-test

Group	N	Min.	Max.	Sum	Mean	SD
Control	30	17	29	583	23.32	3.47
Experimental	30	23	30	700	28.00	1.91

According to Table 4, the average score of the participants in control group was 23.32, and the standard deviation was 3.47, while the experimental group had average score of 28.00 with the standard deviation of 1.91. Results also indicated that the experimental group which received treatment performed better (Mean=28.00).

According to Table 5, it was found that the difference between the pretest and posttest scores of experimental group was significant (t = 68.07, P<0.05). The probability of accepting the null hypothesis was that the p value must be greater than 0.05, the level of significance set before. In this case, the p value (.00) was smaller than 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis that the mean of the pretest and posttest scores of the experimental group were equal, was rejected. Hence, it can be concluded that there is a significant

difference between posttest and pretest, which suggests that the reading performance of the experimental group improved after the treatment. In other words, the experimental group improved on the posttest.

Table 5 Matched-pairs t-test of the Experimental Group in the Pretest and Posttest

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig (2-tailed)
	Mean	SD	Std.Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
pre-exp. post-exp.	-9.88	.725	.145	10.17	9.58	68.07	24	

Conclusion

This study was intended to employ a task-based method and observe its effect on the improvement of reading comprehension ability of Iranian High School students, compared to traditional methods of teaching reading. This study has also tried to investigate the impact of using TBLT on the performance of High School students in the Final Achievement Test. The results of this study proved TBLT as an effective, practical and innovative teaching method, at least in teaching reading to EFL Junior High School learners. This study was comprised of stages such as 'ready to go' (warming-up), reading, and doing some real-life tasks. In the application of TBLT, students liked the task-based texts; their involvement in class activities dramatically increased because they loved the topics and their communicative abilities and skills improved. In this study, Task-based reading activities had the advantage of enabling the learners to see their progress since their own hands shaped the 'end-product'. In addition, Task-based approach has closed the distance between class and real life and has changed the malpractice in which teachers completely separated traditional foreign language teaching from real life. Task-based approach helps learners spontaneously acquire language skills and trains learners' ability to solve problems in real life. To explore the effects of TBI treatment on the experimental group, the data gathered through their pre- and post-test scores was analyzed by a matched-pairs t-test. The results indicated that mean posttest score was 9.88 higher than that on the pretest and the difference between the pretest and posttest scores of experimental group was significant (t =-68.07, P <0.05). The results shown in Table 3.5, suggested that the reading performance of the experimental group improved after the treatment. In other words, the experimental group improved on the posttest.

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