



TEACHING ENGLISH AND TASK-BASED METHOD

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to evaluate the influence of task based learning strategies on Iranian EFL students writing and reading performance by proposing different frameworks. In order to study the influence of task based activities on Iranian EFL students writing performance, Willis' Task Based Learning model is proposed whereas, for assessment of the relationship between task based strategies and reading, Rooney's (1998) model is applied. Accordingly, 50 EFL students who are studying at Kerman Azad University are selected in order to attend this survey. A combination of qualitative and quantitative survey are used for data collection and data analysis. Results of the present study revealed that using task based strategy has a positive influence on EFL students writing and reading outcomes. In addition, applying task based strategies as a learning method for EFL students helps them to solve some related problems and issues independently during writing and reading tasks. At the same time, task based learning strategies will help students to improve their writing and reading competence.

Keywords: Task-based Instruction, Reading Tasks, Writing Task, Learning Outcomes

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INTRODUCTION

English reading and writing skills are considered as two most important skills in learning and teaching process for both EFL students and teachers (Wolff, 2000). In addition, significant changes have happened to language teaching and learning process within the past 20 years such as using task based strategy for teaching and learning which can be classified as communicative language teaching (CLT) (Chastain, 1988). The main focus of these new methods are to provide appropriate attention to all the four skills of language reading, listening, speaking, and writing by

involving EFL students in teaching and learning process in order to improve learning performances. According to (Yang, 1995; Cook, 2000) task is defined as “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. Task-based language teaching suggests that it is important for teachers to be aware of and be able to manage different types of task demand and provide scaffolding to facilitate language learning. At the same time, EFL students also must be familiar with these strategies, which enable them to have better learning outcomes.

Background of the Study

With the advent of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach in the early 1980's and much emphasis on learners' communicative abilities over the last two decades, the term task-based language teaching (TBLT) came into prevalent use in the field of second language acquisition in terms of developing process-oriented syllabus and designing communicative tasks to promote learners' actual language use (Jeon and Hahn, 2006). Task-based Instruction (TBI) based on the constructivist theory of learning and communicative language teaching methodology has evolved in response to some limitations of the traditional Presentation, Practice, Performance (PPP) approach (Long and Crookes, 1991; Ellis, 2003). Ellis (1999) on the other hand, pointed out that the theoretical base of task-based approach is Input and Interaction Theory. Yet, it is clear that the current interest in tasks stems largely from "the communicative approach" to language teaching (Cheng-jun, 2006). The type of tasks used in instruction may positively influence learners' performance. Anecdotal evidences obtained from the students in EFL students suggested that reading and writing are considered almost the most boring skill by the learners. For instance, the students did not give importance to the reading and writing; they also did not attend the reading or writing classes. In addition, they seemed they did not enjoy these classes. From teachers' perspective, they feel the need to provide our students with various different methods and techniques to overcome reading and writing related problems. Thus, using task in teaching reading and writing skills seems to be a plausible solution to this problem.

Statement of the Problem

Reading and writing are generally thought to be very demanding for students. There are various reasons for this difficulty. First of all, the students do not have any challenges in their first language, so they did not have any reading skills in their mother language. As a result, it is really impossible to gain a reading skill in the target language. Another difficulty may be the students may not like the method used in their reading and writing class. They have found it very boring to read due to traditional methods such as read and answer comprehension questions or using conventional writing strategies. In addition to, when they read or write, they often use dictionary and they waste a lot of time during reading and writing, which causes losing concentration and

motivation. A lot of dictionary use may interfere with them and they often stay out of meaning. Regarding these problems, this study aims to examine the probable effects of task-based reading and writing activities on the learners' outcomes in Azad University of Kerman English Classes.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the present study can be discussed from two perspectives, theoretical and practical. In terms of theoretical, as task based strategies are used for teaching of writing and reading therefore the main focus is on reading and writing process and final performance of EFL students. However, although much effort has been made to explore the theoretical accounts of task-based language pedagogy (Willis, 1996; Skehan, 1998; Bygate *et al.*, 2000) and of the teaching of writing and reading (Horowitz, 1986; Walshe, 1987; Wolff, 2000), the investigation of the task-based teaching of these two skills, is left rather much untouched. Thus, testing whether task-based approach is feasible, in enhancing EFL students reading and writing performance, is supposed to be considered as a tentative contribution to pedagogical theories pertinent to the task-based teaching of EFL students. In terms of practical significance it can be stated that, currently task based learning strategies are applied in many universities and colleges worldwide. However, teachers and students still have serious concerns toward the practical influence of these learning strategies on EFL writing and reading strategies. At the same time, reading and writing as two important skills for EFL students have received much attention from EFL instructors (see, for example, (Willis, 1996; Skehan, 1998; Bygate *et al.*, 2000). Therefore, the results of the present study shed more lights on the influence of task based strategies on EFL writing and reading leaning performance. Moreover, both students and English teachers will be informed that this approach will be supposed to greatly facilitate the teaching of EFL writing and reading skills due to its controllable and flexible procedures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Task-based language teaching can make language learning in classrooms "closer to the natural route and may reach a higher rate of language acquisition because it provides learners with a clear communicative goal, interaction is needed to reach the goal, and comprehensive input can occur, and then language acquisition is facilitated" (Wang, 2006). The first person who has applied TBLT to teaching programs and practice is Prabhu (Wang, 2006). Therefore; Prabhu is thought to be the originator of TBLT. Prabhu (1987) believed that students may learn more effectively when their minds are focused on the task, rather than on the language, they are using. Prabhu (1987) defined task as 'an activity which require learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allows teachers to control and regulate that process' (Van den Branden and others, 2006). According to this definition, reading a train timetable and deciding which train one should take to get to a certain destination on a given day is an appropriate classroom task (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Besides Prabhu, Nunan (1989) acknowledged the

special nature of classroom- based interaction defining a task as "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". Lee (2000) defined task as; (1) a classroom activity or exercise that has an objective obtainable only by the interaction among participants, a mechanism for structuring and sequencing interaction, and a focus on meaning exchange; (2) a language learning endeavor that requires learners to comprehend, manipulate, and /or produce the target language as they perform some set of work plans (Van den Branden and others, 2006). TBLT is an approach to teaching a second / foreign language that seeks to engage learners' interactional authentic language use by having them perform a series of tasks. It aims to both enable learners to acquire new linguistic knowledge and systematize their existing knowledge (Ellis, 2003). He offered an alternative for language teachers. In a task-based lesson, the teacher does not pre-determine what language will be studied, the lesson is based around the completion of a central task and the language studied is determined by what happens as the students complete it (Frost, 2004). Task-based learning is advantageous to the learner as it is more learner-centered. Although the teacher may present language in the pre-task, the students are free to use what they want. This allows them to use all the language they know and are learning, rather than a single construct. Furthermore, as the tasks are supposed to be familiar to the students, students are more likely to be engaged, which may further motivate them in their language learning.

METHODOLOGY

The participants of the study were the preparatory EFL class students at Azad University of Kerman. The students were given various reading tasks (i.e. as listing, ordering and sorting, matching, comparing, problem solving, and creative tasks). Each task required students to deal with a specific reading and writing skill. After the tasks were used, the participants were given the feedback forms by which they were asked to comment on each of the tasks used. On the forms, the students also stated what they learnt or did not learn. Besides, they wrote about whether or not they thought the tasks were enjoyable. Moreover, for each of the tasks some randomly selected participants were asked to keep diaries. Diaries were used since "it is useful to keep a record of their research progress because a research diary is a personal rather than a formal document, you can be as individual and creative with it as you like" (Mardigian Library, 2002). In addition, 15 of totally 50 participants were selected randomly for the interviews. They were asked about their views on the tasks, and also the problems they encountered. Besides, they were asked what they learned by the help of tasks. Finally, the participants' views from the feedback forms, diaries and face-to-face interviews were analyzed by means of content analysis.

RESULT AND CONCLUSION

One of the major inquiries of this study was to find out how students responded to task-based reading activities. Feedback forms and diaries served this purpose. Analysis of feedback-forms, diaries and interviews revealed that the tasks used in the treatment were responded to positively; there be few negative responses. These results may suggest that task-based teaching tend to create high participation, enhanced student creativity and provide meaningful learning, which is one of the main aspects of task-based instruction. Moreover, after being exposed to the task-based reading activity tasks, students' interest and curiosity (toward the reading courses enhanced. These finding echoes in Willis and Willis (2007) argument that the task-like activities should engage learners' interest because they claim that without genuine interest, there can be no focus on meaning or outcome. The most crucial effect of task-based teaching throughout this specific study was that the students found the activities enjoyable and fruitful. These two effects can be said to increase EFL learners' ambition for language learning. In addition, by being ambitious EFL learners can also easily enhance positive learning outcome in their classes that is what Skehan (1998) states "judging success in terms of outcome", is one component of the task-like activity. Overall analysis of the feedback forms and diaries reveals that tasks used in the treatment received dominantly positive, partially negative responses. The reason for this can be that although students liked the tasks however, filling the feedback forms might have been distracting and regarded as an extra burden for them. It can be stated that the reason why some of the students negatively commented on the tasks was that there were some external factors such as personal problems. In addition, some of EFL learners did not enjoy the teacher's mood/attitude. Another negative aspect according to participants' respond is that 'drawing' since they needed to draw pictures especially in two tasks. Some students found drawing difficult. A small number of students could not gain confidence; therefore we may make sense that this negative effect prevented some students from doing tasks. Finally, just a few EFL learners saw the contents not enjoyable. The analysis of the interview data revealed that task-based learning contributes to real life use of target language. Therefore, EFL learners learn the language as well as experiencing it. In addition, task-based learning leads to easiness of EFL elements especially reading tasks in our study. Task-based learning clearly prepares pedagogical background for EFL learners by simplifying language input and making this input comprehensible. What is more is the fact that task- based teaching results in noticing and awareness in targeted language items. EFL learners can easily focus on such items by means of a task- based approach. The qualitative data gathered through the interviews indicated that students were interested in the tasks and the TBL treatment classes. According to the interview analysis, filling feedback forms at the end of the classes including task-based method have made students get bored. Apart from filling feedback forms, the students complained that the lessons took very long. Generally, the interview data gives a positive result concerning task based methodology. These minor negative points are only related to some physical conditions such as length of hours etc. One of the other concerns of this study was whether students believed that they improved their reading

skill when taught through tasks. The most prominent result is vocabulary improvement by means of task-based teaching. This improvement was achieved by discovering the language in which students took active part. In language acquisition process they improved their reading skills by performing kinesthetic tasks such as drawing what they read, turning the text they read into role-play preparing a survey and implementing it to the outdoor people, making a salad after reading a recipe. These findings also mean; doing a communication task involves achieving an outcome, creating a final product that can be appreciated by others (Willis and Willis, 2007) that are components of TBL. Another crucial effect of task learning is that EFL learners become aware of metacognitive strategies so they discover the limits of their capacities by doing the tasks or finding out to study and / or to learn on their own. In addition, they improved their meta-cognitive learning strategies, skimming and scanning strategies. Task-based learning also leads students to extensive use of language that comprehends chatting with a foreign person on the net, sending and receiving a message in English, or having a part-time job. In their feedback forms, we can easily see their practical use of language. Moreover students strengthened their EFL knowledge and gained reading comprehension throughout the reading tasks. Apart from these, there are some negative aspects gained from feedback forms and diaries. The most important one is that the students could not learn adequately because of negative classroom environment like uproar in the class while doing the task and poor classroom management. One more complaint about task learning is long class hours that students did not like and got bored. Another aspect of task-based learning is that, some of the students had difficulty framing sentences. In addition to, one participant complaint about vocabulary retention that was the other negative aspect. All in all, the analyses of three instruments (feedback forms, diaries, and interviews) of the study proved that there were more students who responded positively to the tasks designed in TBL treatment.

As the results illustrate, there is a remarkable coincidence that the majority of subjects believe that they have made much progress with how to deal with issues concerned with such aspects as 'content or idea', 'rhetorical organization', 'sentence structure and vocabulary', 'fluency' and 'logic'. In particular, after they have had such a task-based writing course, subjects who confirmed that they have made giant strides in expressing their ideas with written language. Quantitative results of this research, which are regarded as the strongest and the most direct evidence of EFL learners' writing competence improvement reveal that there is a significant difference between the posttest mean score of the experimental class and that of the control class, or more specifically, the posttest mean score of the experimental class is significantly higher than that of the control class, while subjects in two groups were basically at the same level of English writing competence before the experiment was conducted; within one group, there is also a significant increase of the posttest mean score of the experimental class in comparison to its pretest mean score, whereas there is no significant difference in regards to mean scores of the control class between the pretest and the posttest. To put concretely, the total number of words used by an average subject of the experimental class in his or her writing piece for the posttest is more than control group. Despite

the average total number of words of the experimental class in the posttest is the largest of the three objects need to be compared, its average total number of different words is the largest and thus its recurrence rate of words is the smallest. Besides that, in terms of ‘the average length of words’ and ‘the average length of sentences’, the performance of subjects of the experimental class in the posttest can be considered to be better than their performance in the pretest and what subjects of the control class have performed in the posttest. Accordingly, it can be inferred that most students in the experimental group were able to exploit more diversified words, more ‘big’ words, and more sentences with complicated structures to compose their writing pieces in the posttest than they did in the pretest, or the peers in the control group did in the posttest. In other words, as far as subjects in the experimental class are concerned, their significant improvement in English writing competence is supposed to be brought forth by the adoption of the task-based approach to the teaching of EFL writing, or more specifically, the application of Jane Willis framework for task-based learning to EFL writing classrooms.

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