Implementation of Task-Based Approaches to Language Teaching

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Abstract

It is argued that task-based instruction creates more favorable conditions and facilitates L2 acquisition. For this reason task-based language teaching has recently been the focus of the attention of many L2 language instructors and syllabus designers. The main purpose of this paper is first to discuss the current views and three schools of syllabus design and then review three kinds of task-based syllabi: A) Procedural Syllabus B) Process Syllabus and C) Task-Based Language Teaching. Finally, the results of a classroom research in which two groups have been taught under different approaches will be presented. Preliminary results of statistical analyses revealed that task-based language teaching led to greater fluency and complexity than structural-based language teaching, as reflected in greater number of Words per Pause and greater number of Lexical Density. But the result ran counter to our hypotheses in terms of accuracy. Structural-based language teaching approach led to greater accuracy than task-based language teaching, as reflected in greater number of Error-Free T-Units. Pedagogic implications are discussed.

Key Words: Syllabus Design, Curriculum, Task-based Language Teaching/ Learning, Structure-Based Teaching / Learning, Schools of Syllabus Design.

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1. Introduction

Since there is some confusion over the term '**syllabus**' and '**curriculum**', it would, therefore, be appropriate to begin with terminological comments and their definitions. Candlin (1984: 31) suggests that **curriculum** is concerned with making general statements about language learning, learning purpose, experience, evaluation, and the role and relationships of teachers and learners. **Syllabuses**, on the other hand, are more localized and are based on accounts and records of what actually happens at the classroom level as teachers and learners apply a given curriculum to their own situation (narrower definition). Nunan (1993:8) also agrees with Candlin and proposes:

> 'Curriculum' is concerned with planning, implementation, evaluation, management, and administration of education programmes. 'Syllabus', on the other hand, focuses more narrowly on the selection and grading of content. (Nunan, 1993:8)

2. Current Views on Syllabus/Curriculum

There are three important views in the scope of syllabus design. According to Stern (1984) the first trend is represented by Candlin and Breen, which is called '**Lancaster School'**. It is argued that:

> This school of thought has strongly reacted against the notion of a fixed syllabus which can be planned, pre-ordained, and imposed on teachers and students. For this group, it is not a choice between structure and functional syllabus. The principle of any fixed inventory of language items, such as the Council of Europe syllabus, is unacceptable to them. They regard the syllabus as open and negotiable. (Stern, 1984: 7)

They believe that the curriculum would be negotiated by the teacher and a group of learners.

The second direction represented by Widdowson and Brumfit, is called

'**London School**'. According to this school of thought:

The Lancaster view is extreme and unrealistic. They are challenged by it; they react against it; they certainly do not accept it as their own. They put forward what they would consider an alternative and more realistic approach. (Stern, 1984:8)

Widdowson believes that a syllabus is necessary; it is economical, and thus it is useful. Like Candlin and Breen, he also likes the idea of freedom for the teacher. Widdowson makes a distinction between syllabus and teaching methodology. He suggests that a syllabus should be structural; it is the methodology that can be communicative. Brumfit's position is similar to Widdowson's idea. Brumfit argues that a curriculum is public statement serving all kinds of practical purposes. His concern is not the question of freedom and constraint which has been so dominant in the Lancaster group. He believes that a syllabus must be based on concepts of language, language learning, and language use.

Yalden's formulation is a bridge between the London school viewpoints and is called the **Toronto School**, which is represented by Allen. Again like Brumfit, Yalden identifies the theoretical underpinnings of the syllabus content. Yalden proposes that the learner may have an input to make curriculum. But she is not preoccupied with the learner's role in syllabus development. For her, the syllabus is primarily a teacher's statement about objectives and content.

As mentioned earlier **Toronto School**, which is represented by Allen, is not concerned with question of the learner's role in syllabus development. He accepts the need for a syllabus as unquestioned. The main issue for him is a question of constructing a theoretically sound and practically useful curriculum.

Recently task-based approaches to second language teaching, which focus on the ability to perform a task or activity, and not on the explicit teaching of grammatical rules, have been the focus of concern among language researchers and syllabus designers (see Prabhu, 1987; Robinson, 1995, 2001; Skehan, 2003; Ellis, 2003; Rahimpour, 1997, 1999, 2002c). Historically, task-based approaches to language teaching started in the early seventies and developed throughout seventies (see Widdowson, 1987; Wilkins, 1974, 1976).

Currently there are three kinds of proposals for task-based teaching syllabuses. 1. The procedural syllabus (Prabhu, 1987: 46); 2.The process syllabus (Breen, 1984: 76; Breen & Candlin, 1980: 90); 3. Task-based language teaching (Long, in press; Long & Crookes,1992). While differing from one another in important ways, all three reject linguistic elements such as words, structures, notions, functions and situations as the unit of analysis and instead they adopt task as the unit of analysis. These approaches are claimed to create more favorable condition for the development of second language ability than does an approach that focuses on the explicit teaching and learning the rules of the language alone. Of course, research into the validity of this assumption is still in early stages (Robinson, 1995, Rahimpour, 1997, 1999, 2002c).

2.1. The Procedural Syllabus

The procedural syllabus is associated with the work of Prabhu, Ramani, and his other associates on the Bangalore/Madras Communicative Teaching Project (CTP) in India from 1974-1984. As Long and Crookes (1992: 34) point out its early influences were similar to those of the Malaysian communicative syllabus. Bangalore project is teaching through communication. This approach is considered 'learning-centered' (as opposed to 'learner-centered', and is based on the principle that learning of form is best carried out when attention is given to meaning. In Prabhu's own words:

Grammar-construction by the learner is an unconscious process which is best facilitated by bringing about in learner preoccupation with meaning, saying and doing. (Prabhu, 1982:2)

The CTP syllabus contains no linguistic specification at all, but instead consists of a series of tasks in the form of problem-solving activities. These activities are meaning-focused and can be divided into three types: opinion-gap activity, information-gap activity and reasoning-gap activity (Prabhu, 1987: 46-47). Indeed opinion-gap, and later, information-gap and reasoning-gap activities were employed in the Bangalore project. Long and Crookes argue that the kinds of task employed

by Prabhu in the Bangalore project are of the kind familiar in the many variants of so- called communicative language teaching (CLT), which is not task-based in the analytic sense. Theoretically, the radical departure from CLT the Bangalore project represented lay, then, not in the tasks themselves, but also in the accompanying pedagogic focus on task completion instead of on the language used in the process (Long and Crookes, 1992: 35).

Central to the procedure syllabus is the belief that knowledge of linguistic structure develops largely subconsciously through the opinion of some internal system of abstract rules and principles on the bases of extensive input from the target language (Long & Crookes, 1992). This comes about when the focus is on the meaning, and this condition is best met when trying to complete tasks. As a result, the procedural syllabus rejects lexical or syntactic structure as the basis for each lesson, and focuses rather on the task (Prabhu, 1984: 275-276). Prabhu's definition of task employed in Bangalore project was abstract and oriented towards cognition, process, and (teacher-fronted) pedagogy.

The CTP and procedural analysis has been critiqued in several places (Brumfit, 1984: 76; White, 1988: 101; Long & Crookes, 1992: 41). Problems with lack of evaluative component and lack of specificity of the notion of task have been noted. Of importance for the discussion of task and syllabus design is the issue of task selection and grading.

2.2. The Process Syllabus

A second task-based approach to course design is called the process syllabus (Breen, 1984, 1987; Breen & Candlin, 1980; Candlin, 1984, 1987; Candlin & Murphy, 1987). The early rational for the process syllabus was mainly educational and philosophical, not primarily a psycholinguistic one. A process syllabus focuses on the whole learning process and seeks to address the overall question of "who does what with whom, or what subject matter, with what resources, when, how, and for what learning purpose(s)" (Breen 1984:56). The concern is with the learner and learning rather than with language or language learning, with the assumption being

that learning is the product of negotiation, which in turn drives learning.

The process approach characterizes syllabus as specification and planning of what is to be learned in terms of ways of knowing, interpreting knowledge, and engaging in knowledge (Candlin, 1984: 30). The emphasis here is on interactive and problem-solving processes in language learning, as opposed to the achievement of narrowly predetermined states of knowledge.

In the process syllabus the learner is closely involved in deciding the task, objectives, content and methodology to be used. This is in contrast to the procedural syllabus, where the tasks are carefully controlled and the learner is given little choice in the tasks, or how to go about them (White and Robinson, 1995: 95).

The process syllabus has been criticized for lacking an evaluative component in which to assess the claims made by the proponents. Questions have also been raised concerning the high degree or autonomy required of the learner in negotiating task content. This expectation makes great demands on the learner's linguistic competence, and the teacher's competence in facilitating this negotiation (White, 1988:101). Cultural barriers to the implementation of such a syllabus may also exist, as teacher-learner negotiation may threaten to an unacceptable degree the traditional role relationships in the language classroom in some cultures (Long & Crookes, 1993).

2.3. Task-Based Language Teaching

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) focuses on the ability to perform a task or activity without explicit teaching of grammatical structure. As discussed earlier, such an approach creates more favorable conditions for the development of second language (see Robinson, 1995, 2001; Robinson et al, 1996; Rahimpour, 1995a, 1995b, 1997,1999, 2001a. 2001b, 2002a, 2000b, 2002c, 2002d).

A third approach to analytic syllabus design is called task-based language teaching (TBLT) (for more information see Crookes, 1986; Crookes & Long, 1987; Long, 1985, 1989, Long & Crookes 1987). Task-based language teaching bases argument for an analytic, chiefly type B syllabus. The task in TBLT is considered

central to all of instructional design process, from the identification of learner needs to the measurement of student achievement. A distinction is made between *target tasks*, which are tasks as they occur in everyday life, and *pedagogic tasks*, which are derived from the target task sequenced to form the task-based syllabus. It is the pedagogic tasks that teachers and students actually work on in the classroom (Long, 1989: 89).

The pedagogic tasks are graded and sequenced by the degree of difficulty (from simple to complex). Task complexity is not the reflection of traditional linguistic grading criteria; rather it results from task factors themselves. These might include the number of steps involved, the number of solutions to the problem, the number of parties involved and the saliency of their distinguishing features, the location of task in displaced time and space, the amount and kind of language required, the number of sources competing for attention, and other linguistic, cognitive or social factors (Long & Crookes, 1992: 45, 1993: 12).

As an analytic approach it differs from the syntactic syllabus in the same way as the procedural and process syllabi, notably in the assumption that the learner learns best when using language to communicate about something. TBLT also differs from the two other analytic syllabi in several ways. It differs from the procedural syllabus in that it stresses the importance of carrying out a needs analysis prior to instruction. Identifying possible sources of task complexity indeed is a necessary prerequisite for making principled decisions concerning the grading and sequencing of tasks, upon which much of the value of the TBLT will rest. Grading and sequencing of pedagogic tasks is indeed a major challenge for the task-based syllabus designers.

3. Structure-based *vs* Task-based Syllabus

Structural-Based Language Teaching (SBLT) focuses on the explicit teaching and learning of grammatical rules of the language alone (see Wilkins, 1974: 119, 1976: 2).

As discussed earlier, the syllabus can be classified according to the unit of analysis used in the design (Long & Crookes, 1992: 41). The unit of analysis chosen

defines the focus on instruction and intended learning outcomes. Structural-based approaches to syllabus design have centered on such units of analysis as words, grammatical structures, notions and functions. Such syllabi have been termed synthetic (Wilkins, 1974:119, 1976: 2). The main characteristic of this approach is the presentation of target language elements-traditionally grammar-as discrete elements. It is then the learner's task to synthesize the different bits of information about the L2 (grammar) into meaningful utterances. The other approach to syllabus design is termed analytic. An analytic syllabus presents the target language whole chunk at a time, in which the learner is provided with a variety of forms that express a given content or meaning. It is then the job of the learner to analyze the relations between structure and the corresponding communicative content (Pienemann, 1985:25).

Regarding the present study the following two approaches were employed in the experiment to investigate their impact on students' oral performance in terms of fluency, complexity and accuracy.

The theories and views reviewed in the above literature generated the following research question and research hypotheses for this study:

4. Research Question

What are the effects of task-based and structural-based teaching approaches on the L2 learners' oral discourse in terms of fluency, complexity and accuracy?

5. Research Hypotheses:

1. Task-based language teaching will lead to greater fluency than structural-based language teaching.

2. Task-based language teaching will lead to greater complexity than structural-based language teaching.

3. Task-based language teaching will lead to greater accuracy than structural-based language teaching.

6. This Study

6.1. Participants

Two groups of male and female English majors (10 participants in each group) at the intermediate level were chosen randomly as the subjects of this study.

6.2. Material

Two different teaching approaches of task-based and structural-based were employed as teaching methods during the study and at the end of the training, picture stories/ cartoon strips were used for data collection and testing purposes

6.3. Procedure

Both groups were taught for one term. One group was taught by a task-based teaching approach in which instruction focused on the ability to perform a task or activity without explicit teaching of grammatical structure. The second group was taught by structural-based teaching approach in which the instruction focused on the explicit teaching and learning of the grammatical rules of the language alone. At the end of the training, both groups were examined. Participants were provided picture stories/cartoon strips and were asked to view the picture for a couple of minutes. They were then required to relate the story. Their narratives were recorded and then transcribed and coded for scoring by the researcher. Participants' oral performance in terms of fluency (Words per Pause), complexity (Lexical Density) and accuracy (Error-Free T-Units) were thus evaluated.

7. Dependent Variables Measurement

Participants' oral performance in terms of fluency, accuracy and complexity are measured in different ways by the researchers. The measures taken in this study have been described and utilized elsewhere in the relevant literature. Dependent variables in this study were measured on the bases of the criteria discussed in earlier studies by the researchers (see Nation, 1990, Lennon, 1990 and Long, 1991 for a

detailed study of measures of fluency, accuracy and complexity).

7.1. Fluency Measure (Words per Pause)

In this research to measure the fluency, the total number of words in the narrations were divided by the total number of pauses per narration to yield the number of words per pause.

7. 2. Accuracy Measure (Error- Free T-units)

T-Units: The narratives were analyzed with respect to the number of T-units they contained. All the main clauses plus subordinate clauses attached to or embedded in them were counted as T-units (See Long, 1991 for more details).

Error-Free T-Units: Only those T-Units that contained no grammatical, syntactic, or lexical, spelling errors were counted as Error Free-T-Units

7. 3. Complexity Measure (Lexical Density)

The number of lexical, or 'open class', words in a text (full verbs, nouns. Adjectives and adverbs ending in –ly,) divided by total words multiplied by 100.

8. Results and Statistical Analyses

Participants' performances in terms of fluency, complexity and accuracy were transcribed, coded and scored. A t-test was employed as the statistical analyses. The results of the statistical analyses supported the first two hypotheses that task-based language teaching will lead to greater fluency and complexity. But the third hypothesis that task-based language teaching will lead to greater accuracy was not supported and the result ran against our prediction (see Tables1 & 2)**.**

Table 1. Means & Standard Deviations for TBLT and SBLT Approaches

| Measures	TBLT		SBLT	
	$\overline{X}$	SD	$\overline{X}$	SD
Fluency	16.44	1.03	12.98	0.60
Complexity	48.43	4.47	38.49	2.73
Accuracy	1.69	0.32	3.60	0.56

As table 1 shows task-based approach led to more fluency and participants produced more words per pause in this approach ($\overline{X}$ = 16.44), than structural-based approach in which participants produced less words per pause ($\overline{X}$ = 12.98) and consequently were less fluent .

Table 2. Results of Statistical t-Test

| Variables	Df	*Observed value*	Critical value
Fluency	18	*17.87	2.87
Complexity	18	*36.23	2.87
Accuracy	18	29.42	2.87

* P < .05

As illustrated in Table 2 the first hypothesis that task-based language teaching leads to greater fluency than structural-based was confirmed by the result of the statistical analysis .This significant difference is illustrated in Figure 1:
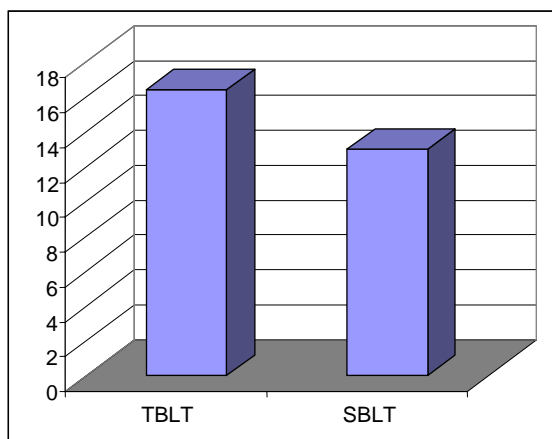
Figure 1. Fluency Measure by Task-based & Structural -based Teaching Approaches

Again as table 1 shows task-based approach led to more complexity as reflected in greater number of lexical density ($\overline{X} = 48.43$), than structural-based approach in which participants produced less lexical density ($\overline{X} = 38.49$) .The second hypothesis that Task-based language teaching will lead to greater complexity than structural-based language teaching was thus supported by the results of t-test analysis (see table 2) and significant difference was found between TBLT and SBLT approaches.

This difference is illustrated in Figure 2:
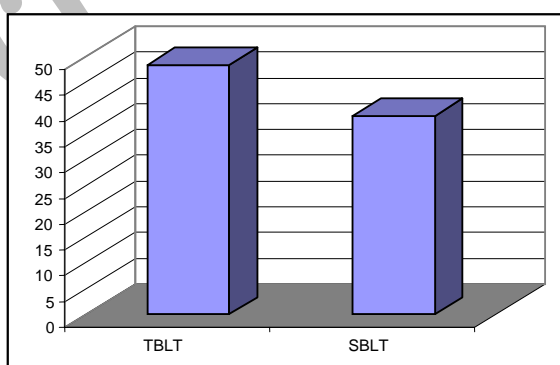
Figure 2.Complexity Measure by Task-based & Structural-based teaching Approaches

But as table 1 shows task-based approach led to less accuracy as reflected in less number of Error-free T-units ($\overline{X} = 1.69$), than structural-based approach in which participants produced more Error-free T-units ($\overline{X} = 3.60$). Our third hypothesis that task-based language teaching will lead to greater accuracy than structural-based was not confirmed and the result of statistical analysis (See table 2) indeed ran against our prediction and revealed that structural-based language teaching led to more accuracy than task-based language teaching approach.

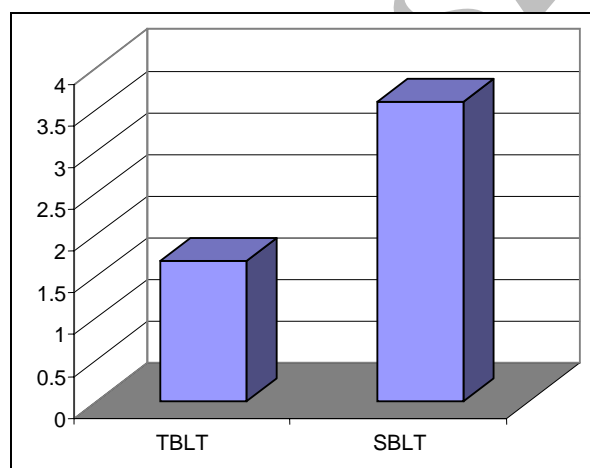This opposite difference is illustrated in Figure 3:

Figure 3. Accuracy Measure by Task-based & Structural -based Teaching Approaches

8. Discussion

Significant differences were found between the task-based and structural-based language teaching approaches in terms of fluency and complexity. This could be attributed to the nature of the task-based language teaching which focuses on the meaning rather than form. The greater fluency in task-based approach can also be attributed to the lesser cognitive load which this approach places on the learners. The lack of accuracy in task-based language teaching might be also attributed to the nature of this approach which focuses on the ability to perform a task or activity

without explicit teaching of grammatical structure. Indeed task-based approach is meaning focused rather than form focused and consequently led to more fluency and complexity. But the structural-based approach which focuses on the explicit teaching of grammatical rules of the language alone and is indeed a form focused teaching led to more accuracy. In addition to the form-focused nature of structural based language teaching, the accuracy results can also be attributed to the cognitive load of the approach which facilitated greater attention, which in turn led to greater accuracy.

9. Conclusion & Implications

The purpose of this study has been to investigate the impact of two different teaching approaches to teaching on L2 learner's performance. This study is of immediate relevance for task-based language teaching and learning, and in particular for the syllabus designers. It was argued that the task-based approach creates more favorable condition for the development of second language. Therefore it can be concluded that task-based language teaching facilitates better learning and promotes learner's performance in oral skill.

The findings may be of particular relevance for task-based language learning and teaching, to the areas of ESP, ESL, TESOL, TOFEL and in particular for the syllabus designers and material developers. The findings also provide a basis for pedagogic decisions about grading and sequencing tasks.

In sum, despite the importance and attraction of task-based approaches to L2 pedagogy, agreeing on a clear and uncontroversial definition of task, and deciding on a definite and operationalizable criteria for distinguishing the complexity of second language tasks have been problematic. A major challenge for those concerned with the task-based syllabus is establishing a systematic means to grade and sequence tasks (Robinson, 1995). Meanwhile more data based research is needed to confirm the validity of this approach.

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