

ASTUDY OF TASK –BASED LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION WITH REFERENCE TO WRITING ACHIEVEMENT IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

A considerable number of educationists as well as research studies highlight the effectiveness of Task-Based Instruction (TBI) as an influential instructional strategy in Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). The fact, however, are those tasks differ in nature to high extent and therefore the recognition of the plausible different tasks in terms of their effectiveness and the results. We are likely to reap out of their implications in real classroom situations can be of high importance. This paper, as such, reports on a study which aimed at an ilk of comparison between the potential effects of two kinds of task namely ‘unplanned open tasks’ and ‘unplanned closed tasks’ on writing performance of students of Art’s College, Dabhoi (Gujarat). Out of a total population of hundred, seventy almost homogeneous students were taken as subjects in this study. Having taken the posttest, the means and t-values were determined for the two groups, the control and the experimental groups, and then compared. The results provided evidence that ‘unplanned closed tasks’ had significantly better effects on improving the target group’s students’ writing performance than ‘unplanned open tasks’, The author discusses pedagogical implications and suggests recommendations for further research.

Keywords: *Open task, Close task, Achievement*



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Introduction

Task-Based Instruction (TBI) is to a high extent, in debt to John Dewey’s philosophy of education whose ideas brought a profound revolution in American Education. In his scientific method, which laid the emphasis on ‘intellectual power’ and ‘reflective thought’ of learners, he valued the significance of experience in learning. According to Dewey, learning is a complicated process during which learners should become aware of a problem, develop an idea to solve it, try out a response, experience the consequences, and confirm or modify their previous knowledge (Lewis & Williams, 1994) all of which demands designing sophisticated tasks. Dewey (1940) believed that instead of being passive, students must actively get involved in such a process.

The abundant use of the term ‘task’ in Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Language (TESOL) sphere, however, came to play with the communicative approach and assessment. Johnson (1979) makes the linkage between the two very clear by saying that fluency in the communicative process can only develop within a ‘task-orientated teaching’-

one which provides 'actual meaning' by focusing on task to be mediated through language, and where success or failure is seen to be judged in terms of whether or not these tasks are performed.

Significance of Tasks

A negotiation for meaning is the central focused area of most TESOL classrooms. Negotiations for meaning will only be effective once the instructional environment provides enough motivation and exposure of the target language. And the fact is that students will not get motivated unless they feel engaged, stimulated and challenged in learning situation. It is in such a context that the importance of tasks comes to light. Learners, in point of actual fact, learn language by working with it on tasks. Thus, the nature of task is of critical importance—they should be authentic, realistic, motivating, and communicative and goal oriented. Well-designed tasks have the potential not just to increase the quantity, quality, frequency, and variety of language practice, but also to enhance the possibility for development or use of language in ways that support cognitive development and increased language skills. Additionally, they assure a more active role of the participants in their learning.

Different Types of Tasks

'Pedagogic Tasks' or activities which can be undertaken in the classroom for second language acquisition (SLA), can be of twofold: those which are planned for individual work and those which are designed for group work (Long, 1989:6). The importance of pedagogic tasks lies in the fact that they, like incentives, have the potential to change the pattern of interaction in classes. Therefore, teachers, based on their goals, classes of conditions, and the type of interactions they desire to pattern amongst their students, may design different kind of task structures so as to pursue their pre-established goals. For example, individual task structures can be designed to bring individualistic and/or competitive learning whereas cooperative task structures, which solicit cooperation for their accomplishment, can be harnessed to pose or enhance cooperative learning. The most significant body of research which has attempted to link task to second language (L2) acquisition, however, has been that connected with 'group tasks' which are of paramount significance to actual language acquisition. Group tasks make members to negotiate the meaning of the tasks mutually. This mutual negotiation of meaning in a semi authentic environment makes learners notice and focus upon not only the content, but also the form to complete the tasks.

Jacobs & Jessica (1996) have proposed three types of tasks for groups: 'one-way tasks' vs. 'two-way tasks', 'closed tasks' vs. 'open tasks', and 'planned tasks' vs. 'unplanned tasks'.

One-way Task vs. Two-way Tasks

One-way and two-way tasks involve an information gap, so that information must flow between team members in order for the task to be completed. The difference between the two types of tasks lies in whether each team member needs to send as well as to receive information. While in two-way tasks both participants each of whom has unique information to contribute are required to exchange information for successful task completion, in one-way tasks only one participant who possesses the relevant information provides information to the other in order to complete the task (e.g. Knight, 2005). Jacobs & Jessica (1996) state that two-way tasks better promote negotiation of meaning and bring more modified interaction than one-way tasks.

Closed Tasks vs. Open Tasks

Closed tasks refer to the tasks which have one predetermined correct answer or result or even, as Long (1989) also confirmed, a number of correct answers with the exception that only one is expected to arrive at. Conversely, open tasks refer to the tasks for which there is no predetermined correct answer. And it is not necessary to reach a consensus with this kind of tasks. Long (1989) has argued that 'closed tasks' stimulate more useful interaction for negotiation of meaning between group members than open tasks. This is because in closed tasks group members try to find the best possible answer rather settling for a weaker alternative, he has reasoned.

Planned Tasks vs. Unplanned Tasks

According to Jacobs & Jessica planned tasks, as opposed to unplanned tasks, are those in which students have time to prepare the language they are going to use before interacting with other group members. In other words they are provided with more wait time. As Long (1989) put it, compared to 'unplanned tasks', planned tasks' can further increase the quantity and quality of the language that learners generate.

Purpose of the study

'Time limitation' in real situations in our classrooms inspired the researcher to emphasize on 'Unplanned Tasks' in this study. Now the question was that which kind of tasks, closed or

open tasks-in real classroom situations with such time limitation, would better satisfy our ultimate goals? The purpose of this study, as such, was to answer the following question:

Is there a difference between writing performance of students of Art's College who have been taught in an 'unplanned closed tasks' focused context and those who have been taught in an environment with a focus on 'unplanned open tasks'?

Based on the question, the following null hypothesis was formulated as well: There is no difference between writing performance of students of Art's College who have been taught in an 'unplanned closed tasks' focused context and those who have been taught in an environment with a focus on 'unplanned open tasks'.

Method

Population and Sample

From amongst a total population of 102 students of Art's College, Dabhoi (Gujarat), an almost homogeneous group of seventy (48 girls and 22 boys) was selected to serve as the subjects for this study. All of them were between 19-21 years of age.

Tools

Instructional Materials

In this study, students own textbook was used. It consisted of six units each of which was to be taught in two sessions of 90 minutes each. The book focuses upon a range of topics, ranging from mechanics of writing towards developing sophisticated paragraphs.

Testing Materials

Both groups were given 3 different topics in their pre-test and post-tests to write about. The compositions were rated by three different experienced teachers who were teaching at three different universities. The average of their evaluation served as the final score for individuals.

Procedure

A pretest – posttest control group design was applied to serve the purpose of this study. In order to decide on an almost homogeneous group of 70, the pretest was administered to 120 students in the first session. The selected subjects were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups (24 girls and 11 boys in each). During the 15 session semester, both groups had the same instructor, the same curriculum, the same schedule of instruction and method of evaluation, except that whilst 'unplanned open tasks' were exploited in control group, students were exposed to 'unplanned open tasks' in experimental group. In control group, in which the emphasis was on 'unplanned open tasks', after teaching a unit, students

were allocated a limited time to answer the related questions in whatever way they thought might be acceptable. This assignment was immediately followed by a writing task which included paraphrasing the paragraphs of the texts they were provided with in whatever way they desired. That is there was not any emphasis on specific predetermined answers. But in experimental class, which was experiencing ‘unplanned closed tasks’, students were supposed to decide on the best alternatives for each question. In their paraphrasing activity, it was a must for them to focus upon the main idea only. And most important, they had to convey the main idea within up to three sentences.

Analysis and Interpretation

After conducting the pretest, an independent *t* test was used to verify the pretest result for both groups. The value of the calculated *t* was -0.21 which was less than the value of the *t* critical (1.67) at 0.05 level of probability. Therefore, the two groups had little differences which seemed to be suitable for our purpose in this research (see Table 1).

Table 1. The Data Derived from Pretest for Both Groups

Groups	N	X	SD	T.O
Cont.G.	35	17.76	2.95	-0.21*
Exp. G.	35	17.6	2.93	

df=68 *NS

At the end of the study the result of computing the means of the post-test of both groups (see Table 2) indicated that *t*-observed (16.8) far exceeded the value of *t* critical (1.67) at a probability level of $P < .01$ which meant there had been a significant difference between the control and experimental groups’ performance on post-test. Therefore, the null hypothesis was firmly refuted. The result supported the idea that ‘unplanned closed tasks’ had a significant impact on of Art’s College students’ writing performance.

Table 2. The Data Derived from Posttest for Both Groups

Groups	N	X	SD	T.O
Cont.G.	35	21.16	5.46	16.8*
Exp. G.	35	25.5	3.95	

df=68 * $P < .01$

Summary and Discussion

This quantitative study was an attempt to compare unplanned open and unplanned closed tasks in terms of their effectiveness on writing abilities of students of Art’s College. After comparing the achievement of the two groups at the end of the experiment, statistic brought it to light that the experimental class with a focus on unplanned closed tasks highly outperformed the comparison group. It seemed that unplanned closed tasks led to more

complex output. This may be in view of the fact that they rendered students to focus upon the task with more concentration, collect their thoughts, and stretch their inter language resources in order to produce more rich, complex, and accurate language. In summary despite the importance of ‘planned tasks’- as opposed to ‘unplanned tasks, teachers have to appreciate the significance of ‘unplanned tasks’ as well since they better reflect the realities of our classrooms- like that of time limitation. Additionally, teachers ought to take the pivotal role of ‘unplanned closed tasks’ – as opposed to unplanned open tasks’ in the process of learning into account. Further research, however is needed to uncover the unexplored dimension of these tasks on different achievers, for example.

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