Action in the English Classroom:

― Task and Problem Based Approaches ―

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0. Introduction

It is not the business of the school to transport youth from an environment of activity into one of cramped study . . . but to transport them from an environment of relatively chance activities . . . into one of activities selected with reference to guidance of learning.

～ John Dewey, Democracy and Education, p. 320

The communicative language approach is a philosophy of additional language teaching that puts communicative competence foremost among classroom learning objectives (Brandl, 2007, p. 5). It grew out of a response to the audiolingual and behaviorist based language teaching methods of the mid-twentieth century. These older methods valued accuracy above all else and were focused on error avoidance and rote memorization. In classrooms where these methods were employed, learners typically failed to develop communicative ease and fluency. As any language learner can testify, the path to fluency is fraught with errors, which are opportunities for learning, and requires linguistic risk and experimentation.

In response to the failure of audiolingual and related methods to produce confident communicators in the target language, a number of alternative methods emerged in the 1970s and 1980s (Brandl, 2007, p. 5). These alternatives incorporated advances in linguistic research and a shift in educational attitudes away from teacher centered approaches toward those focused more on learners and their individual differences. This learner centered view was deeply influenced by a constructivist mindset, which arose from the work of Piaget and Vygotsky, and the action oriented philosophy of John Dewey, among others. The work of these educators supports a view of the learner, not as a blank slate to be inscribed with knowledge imparted by wise elders, but as an integral part of a co-created learning environment. While many of the experimental alternatives in additional language teaching did not continue intact, the constructivist mindset persists and those experiments contributed to the current focus on communication as the primary function of language and thus, of language teaching. Complementary to this focus is the notion of communication-related competencies (linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic) as the aim of classroom language instruction.

1. The Communicative Approach

Brandl (2007) explains that communicative language teaching is not a method of prescribed content or techniques (p. 6). Instead, it is a philosophy that guides curricular decisions and the choice of classroom activities. Thus, it functions more as a guiding principle than as a particular method, flexible in its

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application in a variety of contexts. The foundation of the communicative approach is the use of authentic, learner-centered activities that foster interpersonal communication and, often, interconnect spoken and written modalities. Brandl (2007, pp. 7-13) and Hismanoglu and Hismanoglu (2011, pp. 48-49) further identify several principles that typically underlie the communicative approach:

   · *The syllabus is organized around tasks rather than around grammar rules or dialogues.*
   · *The curriculum focuses on learning by doing; it is learner centered rather than teacher centered.*
   · *The learning environment is rich with authentic language opportunities, inputs, and material.*
   · *Activities and materials are understandable and elaborated.*
   · *Cooperative and collaborative learning are emphasized.*
   · *Grammar forms are made explicit through meaningful communicative tasks; the focus is on meaning in context rather than on language in isolation.*
   · *Effective corrective feedback is integral to the learning process.*
   · *The affective components of learning are recognized and respected.*

It may be tempting to view these principles and the entire concept of communicative language instruction as if they were representative of some kind of consensus. This is not the case. Brandl (2007) views task-based instruction as integral to the communicative approach, while others see task-based instruction as an outgrowth of the communicative orientation. An argument could be made that the communicative approach describes a focus on language production in order to communicate effectively, while the task-based orientation describes a strategy for planning and organizing the curriculum around tasks in the service of the communicative goals. So, while task-based instruction is a component of the communicative approach, all communicative language teaching may not necessarily be organized around tasks. In fact, a quick internet search for communicative language activities returns many results for activities intended for use in a grammar based curriculum. For example, a grammar lesson about asking and answering questions may be followed by an interview task. While the interview task may be considered a communicative activity, its purpose in this case is to reinforce the grammar lesson.

The planning and implementation of a task-based approach requires a change of perspective away from grammar rules as the organizational foundation of the curriculum. However, since many teachers themselves were taught using grammar rules as the basis of instruction, and since many of them were likewise trained as teachers using that method, it is easy (and may seem almost "natural") to rely on grammar rules as an organizing principle. This may be particularly true when working with learners at the novice stage as designing appropriate tasks for these learners may present vocabulary and structural challenges.

This author suspects that many communicative language instructors and designers use a combination of grammar and task-based instruction for organizing the curriculum. Ideally, if the goal is to move toward an entirely task-based curriculum, the overall design should evolve away from the grammar based model of instruction and toward more authentic tasks and problems as learner expertise grows.

2. Task-based Instruction: The Basics

After examining the work of others in an attempt to identify what kinds of activities may be considered tasks, Brandl (2007) concludes that tasks for the language classroom share the following features (p. 8):

   · *they are meaningful;*

・ *they are authentic;*

・ *they utilize "real language;" and*

・ *they involve an objective or goal, which may include an end product.*

In addition, tasks may be identified as primarily pedagogical or as real world activities (Brandl, 2007, p. 9). Pedagogical tasks typically support learners in their pursuit of the goals of the communicative assignment.

Although certain features—meaningful, authentic tasks as a curricular foundation, for example—are nearly universally applied in a task-based curriculum, the method of application varies widely. For instance, Oxford (2006, pp. 110-114) describes five different approaches to task sequencing. While one approach places the communicative task near the beginning of the sequence, extracting pedagogical lessons from the learners' experiences while engaged in the task itself, another approach places the pedagogical lesson before the main communicative task, the task offering a way to apply and elaborate on the pedagogical lesson. The pedagogical lesson may have a linguistic basis or it may be task-based.

Such details may be decided based on any number of factors, including the proficiency levels of the learners and the pedagogical orientation of the instructor or curriculum designer. There may also be philosophical underpinnings to these choices. For example, Moore (2018) highlights a philosophical difference between Long and Ellis (two major proponents of the task-based approach) in which Long promotes incorporation of corrective feedback into the task process, whereas Ellis argues for explicit language tasks, designed to encourage awareness of grammatical forms, as a crucial feature of the curriculum design (see also Oxford, 2006, pp. 111-112). In other words, Ellis advocates a hybrid structural/task-based approach, while Long's philosophy and practice support an entirely task-based curriculum design (Long, 2016, p. 6).

An understanding of how to identify and organize tasks is vital to the implementation of the communicative approach. The following section offers suggestions for tasks and options for sequencing. As situations vary widely, these are meant only as starting points for thinking and experimentation.

3. Planning for Tasks in the Classroom: Pre- and Post-task Activities

In choosing tasks, it is wise to analyze the particulars of the situation in which each task will be performed as well as the pedagogic and communicative aims of the task. The planner must take into consideration the proficiency levels of the learners, the amount of time that will be allotted for completion of the task, the desired outcomes (including products or processes for assessment purposes), and how a specific task fits into the larger trajectory of the overall curriculum.

Ellis (2006) summarizes the three basic phases of a task-based lesson as the pre-task phase, during task phase, and post-task phase (pp. 19-20). He clarifies that, in the strictest terms, only the during task phase is required for a lesson to qualify as task-based. However, in practice, most tasks will require some preparation and learners will benefit from post-task activities that can help anchor the lesson to previous learning and develop awareness of some of the metacognitive processes involved in using the target language in the production of the task.

Ellis (2006) identifies several options for pre-task activities, including providing a model of the task, the performance by learners of a similar task, allowing time for strategic planning by learners in preparation for the task, and non-task preparation activities. There is some concern that preparatory activities of a

linguistic nature, such as grammar or vocabulary oriented activities, may actually limit learners' potential growth as these activities may prime learners to view the subsequent task as simply a way to practice the vocabulary or grammar forms introduced pre-task (Ellis, 2006, p. 23). This may be particularly true of learners who have experience with lessons based on presentation, production, and practice (PPP) methodologies. Teachers who plan tasks around linguistic pre-activities may also tend toward evaluating tasks in terms of error avoidance rather than encouraging development of greater complexity and fluency through experimentation and taking communication risks. Ellis distinguishes here between task-supported and task-based teaching methodologies (2006, p. 23) and explains that the integrity of the target task in the task-based approach may be compromised when learners view the task as simply an opportunity to practice linguistic features introduced in the pre-task phase.

Walker (2011) suggests four steps for pre-task activities, but stresses that these are flexible and can be adapted to the needs of a particular situation. These steps are designed "to motivate, prepare, and organize learners for the main task" (Walker, 2011, p. 7).

1. *The first step is to assess and build upon learners' existing knowledge. Walker provides a list of possible activities which includes sequencing, free writing, making lists, and classroom dialogues.*

2. *The second step is to provide either an active model of the task, during which learners may comment or ask questions, or a passive model, during which learners simply observe. From a constructivist standpoint, active engagement is typically preferred whenever possible.*

3. *The third step, which is really not optional unless learners have completed the same or a similar task previously, is to provide instructions for the task. This is fairly self-explanatory. Again, learners may be encouraged to participate in this part of the process, which may help them with the fourth step, which is planning the task.*

4. *Planning activities may include planning for the task itself and/or planning for the language of the task. The temptation in planning for language related to the task may be to focus on structures or vocabulary, but keeping in mind Ellis' advice, the direct teaching of structural elements is not in keeping with the philosophy of the task-based approach and may compromise the integrity of the final task. However, encouraging learners to use language features such as complete sentences and correct spelling in their preparatory activities can spark an awareness of strategies that may be useful in production of the target task (Walker, 2011, pp. 7-8).*

In actual practice, these pre-task steps may be combined in any number of ways and a single activity may serve to address several steps at once.

The post-task phase offers an opportunity for closure and for learners to reflect on their learning experiences, task performance, and strategies employed. Reflection may occur in the form of class discussion and may also include a written component such as a reflective journal entry. Such reflective journals can be an excellent learning tool and their use may be introduced at the outset of a new term. Learners may find it helpful to use the reflective journal as a way to connect new learning to previous experiences as well as to identify insights and further questions. Specific tasks may lend themselves to particular post-task activities as learners check for errors and apply corrective strategies. Walker (2011) suggests, with caveats, the possibility of addressing errors through post-task drills and exercises. Again, this may hark back to the more familiar PPP approach and is not in the spirit of an authentic task-based instructional philosophy.

Long (2016) approaches task sequencing as a series of pedagogic tasks. He uses the term pedagogic

tasks to refer to tasks which are sequenced in increasing order of task complexity—in contrast to linguistic complexity—and which prepare learners for the ultimate completion of the target task, the final task of a module. He refers to the series of pedagogic tasks as the task syllabus and stresses the lack of a linguistic or structural foundation for such a syllabus. In Long's view, the learner's linguistic understanding should emerge from the process of exploring and completing the tasks, that is, the tasks should be the genuine focus rather than tools for reinforcing previously defined structural or linguistic goals (Long, 2016, p. 7).

4. Tasks, Projects, and Problems

Closely related to the task-based instructional approach are project-based and problem-based instructional designs. All of these methodologies focus on facilitating meaningful learner experiences using authentic language and materials. There are some differences between them, however, a few of which are highlighted below.

The difference between tasks and projects, as Grant (2017) points out, is often one of scale, with tasks generally being shorter and of a more limited scope than projects. In addition to providing meaning and authenticity, Grant highlights some potentially motivating aspects of projects, including greater learner autonomy, enjoyable processes, and authentic linguistic and product outcomes (2017, p. 3).

Problem oriented approaches share some features of the task and project approaches as noted above, but they may differ in fundamental ways. Hearn and Hopper (2008) identify these as differences in goals, processes and outcomes (p. 41). From their perspective, while task-based instruction focuses primarily language production, problem-based instruction focuses primarily on cognitive processes. Tasks are generally designed to elicit a particular outcome, such as a pre-selected product, while the problem oriented approach presents learners with an authentic problem which may lend itself to any number of solutions to be devised by the learners themselves. While task-based learning is consistent with the communicative approach in terms of goals and outcomes, problem-based learning may or may not produce primarily communicative results. The results, that is, proposed solutions, are not predetermined and will depend on the problem being addressed and the learners involved in generating possibilities.

The process for approaching problems differs somewhat from that used in planning for tasks. Mathews-Aydinli (2007) describes four basic steps involved in a problem-based lesson (p. 1). To rephrase her description, the steps include introducing the problem, making connections with previous learning and identifying gaps, generating possible solutions, and selecting promising or viable options. Mathews-Aydinli suggests an outcome in which only one option is chosen, but in a real-life situation, more than one option might be tested.

Many articles on task- and problem-based learning use examples that may be tied to scenarios that are highly unlikely to be relevant to a learner's actual life experience. For example, Hearn and Hopper (2008) describe a problem scenario involving the design of a coin or a monetary system. While this could be a fun activity, whether it qualifies as an authentic problem might be open to debate.

5. Application of a Task-based Approach: Challenges

The educator or curriculum designer who is interested in applying a task-based approach may want to

assess her or his personal philosophy and orientation in terms of teacher-focused versus learner-focused instruction. In addition, a personal assessment of one's skill set in terms of planning and implementing a task-based program may reveal weak areas that can be strengthened through professional development activities such as workshops and online webinars. While many teachers agree in principle with the concept of task-based instruction, they may feel inadequately prepared to apply it in their own classrooms. As Long (2016) emphasizes, the role of the teacher in a task-based language classroom is, in fact, more challenging than that of a teacher in a more grammar based, PPP classroom (pp. 24-25, 27). As with the application of any classroom approach, a strong foundation and adequate preparation—of both teachers and learners—is more likely to result in an enjoyable learning process and successful outcomes.

Long (2016) also addresses the issue of a lack of reliable criteria for measuring task complexity and planning for sequencing of tasks (p. 27). While he has identified more than 300 studies on task complexity, he cites a lack of comparability and reproducibility, as well as conflicting results, as limiting factors.

Finally, there is a lack of consensus on how to assess results in a task-based curriculum. Long states that the transferability of skills acquired via task-based instruction, as well as how or whether linguistic skills should be separately assessed, are pending issues (2016, pp. 27-28).

6. A Few Closing Thoughts

Applying a task-based approach in the classroom can be rewarding and fun for both the teachers and learners. Well planned tasks that use authentic materials and are relevant and interesting shift the focus away from rote memorization of structures and forms, encouraging negotiation of the target language in the service of achieving a pertinent outcome. Proponents argue that this approach more accurately represents situations in real life in which the additional language user is called upon to achieve results using whatever language skills are available to him or her. In addition, there is greater acceptance, even encouragement, of the risks involved in taking linguistic chances and learning from both successful and unsuccessful attempts. Heterogonous groups of learners with different skill levels and the availability of fluent speakers of the target language and natural language inputs can further promote communicative success. Ideally, tasks attempted in the classroom will be genuinely meaningful and relevant beyond the classroom walls.

Tasks may be expanded upon or combined into longer term projects. With care and attention in the planning stage, such projects may build communicative confidence and skills while simultaneously producing products of real value to learners (and possibly, to the wider community).

Finally, there is a place in the English classroom for problem-based approaches in which learners identify genuine areas of concern and work together to create solutions. When these solutions are negotiated using target language, or better yet, when the problems addressed exist in the target language environment, the resulting solutions may have a lasting impact.

The switch from a predominately PPP methodology to a task-based one may present challenges to both teachers and learners. Care during the planning and preparation stages will support success with the resulting rewards of greater learner confidence, enthusiasm and communicative skill.

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