

Task-Based Language Teaching – Problems with Oral Communication in English for Specific Purposes

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Abstract

The goal of task-based language teaching which is a student-centered perspective is to use, rehearse and polish authentic language to accomplish meaningful tasks. During task-based teaching the focus is no longer on teaching grammar or vocabulary, but rather on producing spontaneous, creative spoken or written language using interaction activities. Differently stated, communication plays an important role since students realize that language is a tool to master and (re)solve real-life situations. During the 1980s, the communicative approach focussed mainly on developing skills in which conversation was believed to be synonymous with practicing the grammar, vocabulary, and functions students have learned so far. Most teachers are used to the P(resent) P(ractice) P(roduce) pattern and are also aware of the serious setbacks for the PPP. This method is a very simplified, accessible approach to language teaching/ learning. The drawbacks of such a method outline the fact that we cannot foretell or even grant what our students will learn, because constraining their skills, proficiency, and participation to single chunks of the target language is abnormal and artificial and that ultimately, high exposure to the target language is the best possible solution to make sure that students will learn, develop and use it efficiently and effectively. The purpose of this paper is to examine the suitability and usefulness of task-based language teaching applied to English for Specific Purposes. The research makes use of the descriptive, exploratory content analysis methods, namely critical/rhetorical and creative, performance studies. The research results will enhance the importance and relevance of task-based language teaching. Remarks from this scientific paper may be an outset source for furthermore detailed research.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Present Practice Produce (PPP), task-based language teaching, Know Want Learn (KWL).

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Introduction

How is task-based teaching defined over the years?

Here are some examples of how scientists in the field have defined the concept “task”. According to Nunan (1989, p.10), a task is “a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is primarily focused on meaning rather than form”. From this point of view, students will bring into play their prior knowledge to achieve their goal; whereas the teacher will provide all the information needed, namely linguistic forms or vocabulary.

For Willis (1996, p. 23) a task is defined as an activity “where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome”. Differently stated, in this meaning-based approach students are encouraged to express their thoughts/ideas/feelings even though some of the language used is inaccurate.

Currently, the most broadly used and widely accepted definition is that of Van den Branden (2006, p. 4) according to which a task is “an activity in which a person engages in order to attain an objective, and which necessitates the use of language” which means that the language activity will focus on meaning, as the language is the means, not the end.

Teaching oral communication to ESP students entails a mixture of activities ranging from formal presentations to participating in meetings. Oral communication activities can have many configurations, ranging from an informal talk that occurs spontaneously and impulsively and for which the content cannot be usually forecast, to participation in meetings, which arise in an organized environment, regularly with a prearranged agenda.

Now ask yourselves: how many times have you allowed your ESP students to chat about things they are interested in, which are connected to their life experiences or find appealing? Synchronous communication or chatting has proven over the years to ensure a more efficient task performance by reducing learners' anxiety and establishing trust.

1. Literature review

Nowadays, the conversation/ talk/ speaking should be described as “a time when two or more people have the right to talk and listen without having to follow a fixed schedule. In everyday life, we refer to a conversation as a chat” (Nolasco and Arthur, 1987, p.12).

The concept of task-based language teaching has been given an excessive amount of definitions over the years (see also Ellis, R., 2003, pp. 1-22 or Samuda and Bygate, 2008, pp. 62-70, Rahman, M., 2010, pp. 1-11), but we agree with Van den Branden's definition (2006, p. 4) because to attain successful communication when dealing with real-life communicative situations you as a teacher will have to design your lessons, not just class activities, for genuine communication.

According to Rahman, (2010, p. 4), since the mid-1980s, the concept of “task-based language learning and teaching” has suffered a tremendous evolution (Willis, 1996; Skehan, 1998a; and Bygate, Skehan and Swain, 2000a). The term ‘task’ plays an important role to second language acquisition (SLA) researchers and language teachers (Pica, 1997) because it is regarded both as a method of rationally withdrawing patterns of learner language for research purposes (Corder, 1981) and as a means for systemizing the content and methodology of language teaching (Prabhu, 1987).

According to Willis, (1996, pp. 35–6), there are at least eight purposes related to task-based language teaching. They are all meant:

- to build and give learners confidence in trying out and testing whatever language they know; you need to remember that training and mastering their confidence as well as mastering the language forges with time, practice, and patience.
- to offer learners experience of spontaneous interaction; interaction helps learners enhance their language learning and social skills, which means that the teacher's role is fundamental in maximising interaction by means of pair and group work, collaboration, and socialisation tasks. For instance, information gap activities are good examples of a motivating, stimulating, and collaborative approach that supports both realistic language use and interaction.
- to allow learners to profit from noticing how others convey similar meanings; noticing and outlining what's going well during the lecture can have a powerful, positive outcome, and eventually, students will feel much safer, more respected, confident, appreciated, and excited about language learning.
- to offer learners the opportunities for negotiating turns to speak; negotiation skills involve much more than open-ended questioning and can be regarded as a stream of communication back as well as forth that occurs between students concerning the relevance of the things they will be negotiating or exchanging.
- to engage learners in using language purposefully and cooperatively; this means that the teacher will select the appropriate topics and materials that satisfy their skills, competencies, and interests, whereas students will be offered equal chances to use the language.
- to make learners participate in a complete interaction, not just one-off sentences; since oral communication is mainly seen as a person's ability to act reciprocally with their colleagues by means of spoken words while engaged in personal, formal, or informal discussions, fruitful, high-yielding oral presentations, telephone conversations, and interviews, students are supposed to share and exchange ideas, thoughts, feelings, and information or the long and the short of it to communicate, as well as exert influence on others through verbal and nonverbal body language.
- to give learners chances to try out communication strategies; whether they are dealing with verbal, non-verbal, or written communication, students should be able to express and communicate information both efficiently and effectively.

- last, but not least, to develop learners' confidence and trust that they can achieve communicative goals; bear in mind that settling the appropriate goals will help you establish the pace required to get there, giving you the enthusiasm and motivation to try harder each day.

The purposes mentioned above are associated with two main goals, namely communicative effectiveness, and second language acquisition. Only one of the eight purposes is basically related to communicative effectiveness; the rest of them are correlated with second language acquisition. Hence, the widespread belief among language teachers that task-based teaching is predominantly focusing on strengthening students' abilities and competencies to practice and use the target language rather than on assisting them to acquire new linguistic skills (Samuda, 2000).

2. Methodology

The research was carried out using the descriptive and exploratory content analysis methods, namely critical/rhetorical and creative, performance studies focusing on texts. Broadly speaking, the term texts refers to any communication artifact, ranging from films to photos or new stories used by this author to support the debate that the text plays an important role in the construction of student's comprehension of the world or in getting students involved in performing everyday life tasks.

3. Case study: Problems with oral communication in ESP

Moreover, the role of the teacher remains vital in the design of appropriate tasks that not only meet learner needs but also stimulate their active participation in the learning process. In general, you have a task like this one: *Talk to your partner and discuss which hand tools would construction workers use to build a house? You have 5 minutes to try to agree or disagree* (Ionitiu, 2020, p. 5). Now picture yourselves trying to perform this task and ask yourselves the following question: Why would you have little to say? Because this is actually what would happen to most of your ESP students. Even if speaking is generally left at the end of your lecture, many times students may not find these things appealing to talk about.

After 18 years of teaching and after consulting my colleagues about the problems they have with speaking activities the answers provided were basically the same:

- Students don't want to participate and get involved in the activity because they are afraid of public speaking and that their colleagues might judge them. In other words, the solution to getting students to engage in a vibrant discussion is to create a truly safe space by erasing any assessment of their performance.

- Students make a lot of mistakes and they worry that an incorrect answer will question their intelligence. Therefore, you need to pay attention to what, how often, and how much you are correcting them because otherwise if you keep correcting them all the time, students will feel overcome by their mistakes and eventually will stop talking and getting involved in any task. Thus, by creating a friendly atmosphere that focuses on discussion rather than on perfection, your students' anxiety levels will drop and they will feel less frightened to speak in front of the class.

- Students prefer to use their L1.

- Students speak or use at least one or two words like I agree/ disagree, which is neither productive nor encouraging because this is not verbal interaction.

- Students don't speak because they have nothing important or valuable to say or share with their peers. You need to encourage them by telling them that their opinions, reflections, or judgments are gladly received even though they disagree with yours or their colleagues'.

Why would they experience all these? There are some possible reasons:

- Maybe they are unacquainted with the program or the task and, in most cases, they don't want to take any risks to make any mistakes.

- They lack awareness of what it takes to speak in L2.

- They are afraid of being ridiculed – for instance, they don't speak because other people would make fun of them because of their pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary.

- They lack adequate preparation – you can't simply tell them to talk, you need to give them time to prepare.

- The purpose of the task is unclear or unrealistic.
- They lack the proper scaffolding – that is to say as a teacher you will assist and enable your students to become more independent, more autonomous language users.

When you design your lecture or even coursebook, to progressively transfer control over speaking to your ESP students, bear in mind that your activities should focus on meaning at all times. However, you should offer opportunities to practice both forms (which means that you will have to teach the grammar that students need for that specific topic in that communicative situation or context) and focus on implicit knowledge without disregarding explicit knowledge. Focus on forms is extremely useful for sustained L2 development because students are at the stage of consciously noticing linguistic elements, but do not design your speaking activities as a further practice of grammar and vocabulary.

Furthermore, during the lecture remember to expose your ESP students to a wide range of naturally occurring language which is fundamental altogether with offering them the chance to use it, to interact with their peers. Most of the oral communicative activities are done in pairs. For instance: Talk to your partner about ground conditions. This is an imposed theme, giving students no opportunity of being spontaneous. Moreover, conversation in real life happens in groups and perhaps we should explore and design our speaking activities based on this reality and instead of using pair-work activities we should design group-work activities that are more productive, motivated, and fruitful.

Apart from focusing on your ESP students' Learning needs and goals, there are several questions to address while selecting a topic:

- What should students be able to do with the topic?
- What can students bring to this topic? – in our case current communicative ability or articulating and producing authentic language by means of verbal interactions.
- What can students learn from the topic? – learning the language through the topic: grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation; learning the skills. Bear in mind that we are no longer training our ESP students for what we want them to be able to do, but we are preparing them to be remarkable, successful, and appreciated in their future careers.

So, how do I get my students to speak productively? Are there any methods to inspire conversation or to practice and stimulate my ESP students to engage in a conversation/ debate? Simply, by following the *A-B-C of communication* which means:

- *Activate* what your students already know, so they can move one step further. This means you will have to stimulate their prior knowledge by drawing out from your students what they know and forging the initial knowledge that they need as a means of approaching the forthcoming content. There are many ways of tapping prior knowledge such as K(now)W(ant)L(earn) charts focusing on what they know, what they want to know, and what they have learnt, anticipation guiding activities which could be a list of statements students will have to agree or disagree on.
- *Bridge* activities to take them where they need to go. At this stage, you can focus your teaching on problem-solving activities, strategic team-building activities, and creative or even virtual team-building activities to proactively engage your team in a speaking task. The advantages of team-building activities would be to strengthen their trust and constructive criticism by speaking up without being afraid of the repercussions.
- *Communication* for real. To boost your students' self-esteem or trust and to improve their decision-making or problem-solving skills, you need to bear in mind that effective communication is more than just exchanging information, is also about being an engaged listener. Learning how to communicate effectively and efficiently is a long process that doesn't take place overnight. It is a continuous and sustained learning process, which is worth developing, no matter how long it lasts.

4. Results and discussion

How to implement this approach?

Now that we have the theoretical background, here is an example of a lecture I have designed in my coursebook English for Civil Engineering. Part II, 2020. The course, focusing on task-based activities, also trains my ESP students to handle and make the most of the language in real-life settings or contexts whether they are involved in professional, social, or academic circumstances. The purpose of the course is to enhance

learners' communication skills, namely interpersonal communication skills such as negotiation skills, decision making, problem-solving skills, assertiveness, and teamwork.

To activate what my ESP students already know, here is a set of activities I have proposed (Figures 1,2).

“Group work activity. Conversation (5 minutes). Look at the pictures below and try to identify/list as many construction tools as possible. Compare your lists.



<https://www.google.com/search?source=univ&tbn=isch&q=tools+and+equipment+used+in+civil+engineering+pictures&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiqysTj-u3qAhVosYsKHTduD54Q7Al6BAGHECw&biw=1366&bih=657#imgrc=tCZeGm4TkeAUzM.>”

Figure no. 1. Prediction activities. Making suggestions and decisions. Displaying/ sharing pictures.

Source: Ionitiu, 2020, p.17

This activity is utterly student-led, which means that students will assume all the roles, acting either as a leader, group presenter, observer, or participating members. This type of activity that is labeled a “discussion/debate” activity incorporates both debates and group discussions, together with a little bit of oral presentation.

a. Can you arrange the following words into the correct category: electric tools, masonry tools, protective gear, heavy machinery:

chisels, gloves, pliers, helmets, wrenches, tape measure, trowels, earmuffs, saws, pickaxes, drill, concrete mixers, levels, flat-headed screwdrivers, cranes, paint rollers, shovels.

b. You are refurbishing an old mansion and you need to buy some tools from a nearby local store. Fill in the following equipment purchase request:

requested items	reasons for request/ buying

Figure no. 2. Pre-task. Group-work activity. A classification task

Source: Ionitiu, 2020, p.25

This could be an effective and efficient way of eliciting negotiation of meaning by focusing on new vocabulary. Use at least 3 words in the Pre-task to explain the functions of those tools. Using their own language, giving them time for planning and working in groups, will be a challenging activity as they will have to present their work to the rest of the class. As a teacher, you will have to guide them and decide who will present which part. For instance, you can tell them that one of the groups should talk about electric tools and explain why those tools are suitable for that particular job; another group will talk about masonry tools; the third group about protective gear, and the fourth group about heavy machinery. You could help them by asking additional questions such as (see Table 1):

Table no. 1. Additional questions

What tools could be used for cutting metal and sawing wood?
 What tools will you use to break up a concrete slab?
 What safety equipment allows workers to climb on a building?

Source: Ionitiu, 2020, p. 28

To round the A-part, you will ask students to prepare and rehearse what they want to say, to remember to speak clearly, and to be enthusiastic. Further on, as part of the bridge activities, you can include into your lecture listening to and/ or reading the dialogue activity. The purpose of this collaborative task in which the learners are engaged in a constructive dialogue would be to compare and notice the differences between what they did and what they should have done and to integrate what they have learned so far (Table 2). Remember to practice focusing on both accuracy and fluency.

Table no. 2. Dialogue activity

"Listening/ viewing. Watch the video and try to perform the tasks:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4o0tqF0jDdo>
 6.1. *After viewing the material, mark the following statements as true (T) or false (F):*
 a. You can use a hammer and a punch to strike with and make a dimple.
 b. A ratchet is a driver.
 c. A Philips screwdriver has a flat tip.
 d. A ball-pin hammer is used for sawing wood.
 e. There are three different standard drills.
 6.2. *Answer the following questions:*
 a. How many tool families are mentioned in the video?
 b. What is a double-opening wrench?
 c. What is the difference between a socket wrench and a ratchet?
 d. What is the difference between a ball-pin hammer and a carpenter's hammer?"

Source: Ionitiu, 2020, p.16

Last but not least, the purpose of the C-part would be for students to actually communicate. With that in mind, you can design cooperative tasks in which the focus is on how to organize the interaction by means of using roleplay assignments to improve their critical thinking (Table no. 3).

Table no. 3. Roleplay assignments

"Pair work activity – roleplay. Imagine you are a tool supervisor. Talk to your partner about what tools are needed to mend a cabinet.
 Roleplay activity. Imagine you are a construction worker in need of tools. Ask a shop assistant for help or tool options.
 Roleplay activity. Imagine you are a building contractor. Talk to your construction site manager about the consequences of not wearing PPE."

Source: Ionitiu, 2020, p. 34

In between the discussion/debate activity, the ESP students are required to prepare, carry out, and present in front of the class an assigned topic. Remember that at the end of the lecture you can assign them relevant homework, as a logical follow-up activity. They might write a reflective, self-critique essay based on their in-class activities.

Conclusions

The tasks illustrated in this paper were widely accepted by most of the ESP students. They found the exposure to real-life situations to be enriching, profitable, rewarding, intrinsically motivated, and educationally useful. If you want to refine your students' oral communication skills, you should design assignments, tasks, and activities that encourage students to communicate, convince, strengthen current attitudes or behaviours, engage and exert influence on others' emotions by using various types of activities, exercises, and practices that stimulate, persuade and inspire the students to use the language in relevant and purposeful situations. Moreover, ESP students should be actively engaged in choosing and sorting out the teaching materials that are suitable for their needs and interests, especially when talking about learning ESP.

To conclude, the task-based approach to teaching oral communication has much potential, but it has a long way to go before it can claim empirical success in the field of second language instruction.

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