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The Application of Task- oriented Teaching Approach to Enhancing Communicative Competence of EFL

LI MINGXIN

helenlee@hpu.edu.cn

School of Foreign Studies, Henan Polytechnic University, Jiaozuo, Henan

P.R.CHINA

Abstract – *To communicate is the primary goal of most foreign language learning (EFL). As an important component of the four macro skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), reading should also serve this purpose. However, traditional methodology still dominates extensive reading teaching in most of the universities. To promote a communicative extensive reading class, we may start by designing various tasks and activities. This paper introduces a task-oriented approach in English extensive reading class. According to Nunan, task-oriented teaching involves learners in the classroom to comprehend, manipulate, produce or interact in the target language, but the focus is on the meaning rather than the form. In light of psycholinguistic model and schema theory model, the methodology covers information-gap activity, opinion-gap activity and reasoning-gap activity which can be run in the class. The task-approaches make the interaction between teacher and students, students and students more active and meaningful. Skills of reading to solve communicative problems are always treated consciously. This approach may hopefully result in some improvement on the teaching of English reading.*

Keywords: Task-oriented approach, communicative competence, TEFL

I. INTRODUCTION

The primary goal of most foreign language learning, according to Littlewood, is to develop the ability to use real and appropriate language to communicate and interact with others. The goal of foreign language teaching, consequently, is to extend the range of communicative situation in which the learners can perform with focus on meaning without being hindered by the attention he must pay to linguistic form (1981). But what is going on in the English reading class in most universities in China is not providing adequate chances for both teachers and students to achieve these goals. The common teaching routine is: reading (sometimes before the class), questioning, and explanation and grammar exercises. The method used is mainly structure-based; the focus of the teaching is on language form. The teacher dominates the class, providing input model and ways of assessment while the students are demotivated and passive listeners, who depend too much on the teacher and lack a sense of subjectivity for their own learning. As a result, the students may be linguistically competent, but unable to cope with communicative tasks effectively. To promote a more effective exten`sive reading class in terms of developing both the students' linguistic competence and communicative competence, we should incorporate some communicative moves into the present teaching framework of extensive reading.

Bringing communicative activities into the extensive reading class, we may start by trying to design various tasks and activities. In addition to the target aim to train different skills and strategies for different reading purposes, these tasks and activities will still focus on integrating the four-macro language skills with communicative purposes. This, of course, should base on the understanding of both the nature of reading process and tasks, and also the principles for task designing. A task-oriented approach to the teaching of extensive reading, which the author has been applying in English major students in China for years will be presented in this paper. It is warmly hoped that such an approach may benefit to those teachers who intend to have a more communicative reading class in TEFL context.

II. The THEORETICAL BASIS

1. The origin of task-based teaching approach

The idea of getting learners to acquire English in the process of doing other tasks was developed in India by N.S. Prabhu in the 1980s. His 'Procedural Syllabus' consists, not of language items, but of tasks requiring increasingly complex use of language." (Davies & Pearse, 2002) Nunan also regards task-based language teaching as "an approach to the design of language courses in which the point of departure is not an ordered list of linguistic items, but a collection of tasks."(2001)

A task means "a goal-oriented activity in which learners use language to achieve a real outcome."(Willis, 2002) Therefore, in the process of fulfilling a task or a series of tasks, learners are required to use a particular language so as to achieve the goal of language teaching and practice.

Willis summarized the task-based framework that she developed over a period of time as follows:

Pre-task ⟹ Task cycle ⟹ Language focus

⇩ ⇩ ⇩

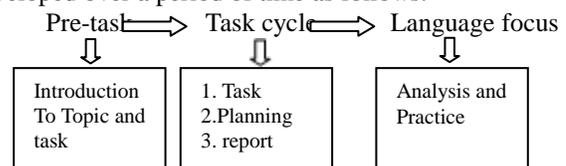| Introduction To Topic and task | 1. Task 2.Planning 3. report | Analysis and Practice |

Chart 1 The Framework of Task-based Teaching Approach

As suggested in the three-stage procedure, task-based

teaching approach is obviously student-centered, aiming at arousing students' learning interest and developing a series of skills such as communication skills, teamwork skills and innovation skills through making them fulfill a collection of tasks with definite objectives and close relevance to classroom teaching.

The task-oriented approach introduced in this paper is based on two interactive models of the reading process, namely, the psycholinguistic model, and the schema theory model.

The psycholinguistic model

This is a meaning-based model proposed by Goodman and Smith. Reading is "a psycholinguistic guessing game" "which involves an interaction between thought and language" (Goodman, 1976). In his view, reading is a psycholinguistic process by which the reader constructs, as best as he can, a message which has been encoded by a writer as a graphic display. He summarizes that "receptive language processes are cycles of sampling, predicting, testing and confirming. The language user relies on strategies which yield the most reliable predictions with the minimum use of the information available" (1975). Smith states that two types of information are necessary in reading: visual information, which we get from the printed pages, and non-visual information, which includes our understanding of the relevant language, familiarity with the subject matter, and some general ability in reading, such as skip, scan and study, the predicative ability and the generalizing ability. The more non-visual information we have when we read, the less visual information we need.

According to this model, when the reader reconstructs meaning from the text by using the graph-phonic syntactic and semantic systems of the language, he doesn't need to use all the text cues. The efficient reader only uses minimum cues from the three levels of language to predict meaning and confirm those predictions by relating them to his knowledge of the language and his past experience. The better the reader can make correct predictions, the less confirming through the text is necessary.

The Schema Theory Model

The schema theory has been formulated to account for the role of the readers' background knowledge in language comprehension. "A schema is an abstract knowledge structure which the reader brings to the text while reading" (Anderson and Pearson, 1976). And it is structured in the sense that it represents the relationships among its component parts. The fundamental assumption of this theory is that a test doesn't by itself carry meaning. Rather, it only provides directions for the reader as to how he should reconstruct meaning from his own previously acquired knowledge, such as background knowledge. According to this model, comprehension is an interactive process between the reader's background knowledge and the text; and between new information and old knowledge store. For comprehension to take place both modes of information processing should be functioning simultaneously at all levels. The bottom-up processing ensures

that the reader will be sensitive the information that is novel or that doesn't fit his on-going prediction about the structure or the content of the text. And the top-down processing helps the reader to select between alternative possible interpretations of the in-coming data and to resolve ambiguities. As long as the in-coming information being processed through the bottom-up processing and the predictions being made through the top-down processing are compatible, the reader has a satisfactory interpretation of the text (Anderson and Pearson, 1976). When there is a mismatch between the two modes of processing, the reader is forced to revise the interpretation so as to make the two compatible. To put it simply, comprehension of a message entails drawing information from both the external graphic message and the internal schemata until the two are reconciled as a single schema or message in which the constraints of both graphic message and the internal schemata are satisfied. (Anderson, 1976) the reader has a satisfactory interpretation of the text.

III. IMPLEMENTATION

The task-oriented approach which put into practice can be seen as follows:
1. the interaction between thought and language
2. the interaction between writer and reader
3.the interaction between the reader's background knowledge and the text; between new information and the old knowledge store.

The task-oriented approach involves these three interactive models into extensive reading class, since reading is never a passive, static process but an active and dynamic one. This approach to teach reading is task-based. Then what is a task? What principles do we have to follow to design communicative tasks for an extensive reading class? In Task & Task Designing, task is taken as "a piece of work or an activity, usually with a specified objective, undertaken as part of an educational course, or used to elicit data for research." (Crookes, 1986). The most comprehensive definition for task is "any structured language learning endeavor that has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedure and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the task. Task is therefore assumed to refer to a range of work plans which have the overall purpose of facilitating language learning-- from the simple and brief exercise type, to more complex and lengthy activities such as group problem-solving or simulation and decision making." (Breen, 1987).

The definitions imply that tasks involve realistic communicative language use in which learners focus their attention on meaning rather than linguistic structure, and that learning tasks help learners acquire the ability to perform certain communicative functions through the new medium (English). Learning tasks, according to Prabhu (1987), can be classified into three principal activity types:
1. Information-gap activities, which operate on the principle of supplying information to some students and withholding it from others. Prabhu provides the examples of pair work in which each member of the pair has a part of the total

information and attempts to transfer it verbally to the other.

2. Reasoning-gap activities, which involve deriving some new information from given information through possessed of inference, deduction, practical reasoning, or a perception of relationships or patterns.

3. Opinion-gap activities, which engage learners in identifying and articulating a personal preference, feeling or attitude in response to a given situation such as story completion or taking part in the discussion of some issues. In performing this activity, students may use factual information and formulating arguments to justify their opinions.

We may infer from the task types cited above that the communicative task as a piece of classroom work should be the one involving learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form. Nunan, "learners to approximate in class the sorts of behaviors required of them in the world beyond the classroom" (Nunan, 1989) Having explored the theoretical basis of the task-oriented approach, the nature of tasks and principles for task designing, the author is going to exemplify how to carry out the task-oriented approach in the actual teaching by demonstrating the tasks designed for the reading material " Wuthering Heights". These tasks intended to interweave the communicative purposes with the lesson planning.

IV. DEMONSTRATION

To foster both students' linguistic and communicative competence, to increase their access to and comprehension of the core materials, the author often applies, in the teaching of the extensive reading, an **Into, Through and Beyond** framework for the lesson planning. This lesson framework originally was adapted from California Literature Project (Briton, Goodman, and Ranks, 1994), involves a three-stage process designed to maximize students' comprehension and mastery of content. Different communicative tasks are usually designed for different stages to meet different end goals.

Teacher puts forward the topic " Wuthering Heights" and asks students to orally brainstorm the answers to the questions like "who betrayed love", "why and how", then the students fill up the left half of information grid in the following:

My guess Information from the text
What
Who
Where
Why

These **Into** activities generally take as their departure activating students' existing background knowledge to give the chance later for them to reconstruct meaning between new information and old knowledge store. In this manner, the teacher can ascertain whether students have sufficient command of both the necessary language skills and the concepts to proceed to the next step of the lesson. It will take the teachers about 20 minutes to conduct **Into** activities. The end goal of this stage is for students to gain an entree into the topic, recognize the depth of their own prior knowledge, build up their hypotheses, and be better prepared for the new content materials they are about to encounter.

In the second stage, students encounter the new content, relating it to their discussion of the concepts during the **Through** stage. This may entail confirming, or rejecting the hypotheses they formed or expanding their knowledge base with new facts, ideas or opinions. Activities that are typically found in this lesson stage include grammar development, or vocabulary expansion, reading guides (e.g. idea sequencing and /or text completion exercises), and information gap tasks (such as jigsaw reading). Through activities also include a variety of text explication exercises, either oral or written. As for the second teaching stage for "why the hero eloped and came back", the author designs the following reading activities to promote communication:

1. The excerpt reading
2. Group/pair discussion about the comprehension questions given both by the text and the teacher (discussion on the theme and content)
3. Group/pair discussion about the technical problems: style of writing, attitude, tone etc.
4. Vocabulary development game: students are divided into groups, and one group member will be given a list of five new words appearing in the text. One will act them out one by one, and the other group members try to guess the meaning of each. The group who first finishes correctly will win.
5. Guided oral summary of the text with key words and phrases offered.

The above tasks are designed for this stage with the purpose to offer students chances to practice new language skills while demonstrating their comprehension of the basic concepts. The teacher may spend about 40 minutes on this stage.

In the final stage of the framework, students further demonstrate their comprehension by creatively applying their new knowledge. Such application may take several forms: application of the knowledge to personal experience, to a literary passage etc. **Beyond** activities involve more extended oral and written output such as role-plays, debates, and essays. In this stage of the author's teaching, what the students are supposed to do are as the follows:

A. In groups students take roles of a journalist, the visitors, and the narrators to have interviews focusing on the topic Utilitarianism to express different opinions they may hold.
B. A debate centering on the topic of love and marriage (group work)
C. Each student is asked to write a letter to Catharine and then change the letter with her/his pair partner.

At last they have to answer the letters. The end goal of this stage is for students to demonstrate both conceptual and linguistic mastery, and to provide a forum for communicative practice. The teacher may spend about 30 minutes on this stage.

V. FINDINGS

This author chose two classes to do the experiment, one class with traditional way of teaching in the control group, and the other with task-based approach teaching in the experimental group. After a semester's teaching, the researcher contrasts the results which can be referred to Table 1.

Table 1. Results of Placement Test

Groups	Percentage of students' marks (%)						Average mark
	F	E	D	C	B	A	
Experimental Group (36)	2.86	9.6	48.6	26.7	15.6	12.7	78.8
Control Group (39)	2.94	10.76	44.2	25.2	13.6	10.4	76.1

As far as the development of students' reading and writing skills is concerned, the differences between the two classes in these aspects will be illustrated respectively in their classroom performance. (Refer to Table 2)

Table 2. Students' Classroom Performance

Groups	Writing skills	Reading skills
Groups	When being assigned a writing task concerning a discussed topic within a certain time period	After reading a passage concerning cultural background
Experimental Group	Most of the students (75%) can compose a passage of an average length and some employ new words and phrases flexibly.	Most of the students (75%) can understand the main idea and retell it.
Control Group	A few students (25%) write with ease, some keep rewriting and a few cannot write down complete sentences.	A Few students (30%) can understand the main idea , but only 10% can retell it.

In fact, the experimental students' interest in learning English has been aroused so greatly that they develop a strong liking for the English Reading course, which can be demonstrated in their evaluation of English teaching after task-based approach adopted (table 3)

Table 3. Students' Evaluation of Task-based Approach English Teaching

Group / Evaluation	Experimental Group	Control Group
Interest	85%	40%
Consistency	90%	35%
Effectiveness	80%	46%
Rewarding results	84%	50%

VI. CONCLUSION

Not all the tasks and the activities have to be used in this unit of teaching, and they may take other alternative forms as well. However, from this framework, we can see that the main principles of the communicative approach have been applied to the process of teaching/learning. The lesson is task-based. The class is student-centered. Communicative activities are carried out from the beginning to end. Students are engaged in solving problems, and the tasks make the interaction between teacher and students, students and students, reader and writer more active and meaningful. Although the emphasis is on meaning, language form is not neglected. Skills of reading to solve communicative problems are always treated consciously. We take care of both accuracy and fluency in view of the students' future needs. The teacher changes his/her knowledge-imparting role. Here the observers, evaluates, plans, organizes, participates and experiments with communicative tasks. The main methodological point is that learners would be doing the problem-raising, experimentation and discovery rather than teacher providing ready-made answers to problems which may not be those most directly affecting the learners. Discovery rather than teacher providing ready-made answers to problems which may not be those most directly affecting the learners. Of course, difficulty may be experienced in applying the suggested task-oriented approach in teaching. For example, such task designing involves sophisticated adaptation techniques and strategies. For many teachers, it may entail a rethinking of how to present materials to students. It is also demanding and challenging to the teacher, since s/he has to spend much time preparing the lessons and it requires more not only of her /his organizing skills as well as language ability, but also of her /his flexibility in dealing with unexpected problems and questions that may pop up at any time. However, with due efforts, this approach may hopefully result in some improvement on the teaching of English reading.

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