The Benefits and Challenges of Using Activity Based Learning Methods for Engineering Students

Prativa Rani Saha,

Asst. Prof., VNR VJIET, Hyderabad

ABSTRACT:

The paper aims at highlighting the benefits and challenges of Activity Based Teaching in an Engineering Classroom. It also focuses on the how these task based methods help students in learning and encourage them to understand and apply what they learn. Task based language learning has gained a lot of importance in the recent times and is acknowledged as a new approach to second language acquisition. It demands learners to complete meaningful, real-world tasks such as writing a report, an sop, a resume or even writing an email and a letter. It also involves other tasks such as facing the interviews confidently, making presentations and getting involved in day to day activities. Through learning by doing techniques they involve in the learning process may it be for writing an email where the primary focus is on making them understand and make them write an email instead of telling them what to learn. The focus of a task is primarily on pragmatic meaning and on form, i.e. grammar, vocabulary, lexis, etc. The challenges and issues that emerge in the activity are addressed during participation in the task itself. This makes Task Based Language Learning particularly suitable for individualised learning and promoting learner independence. The first challenge is to ensure that the design of tasks and rating scales is not just task based but also construct based. (Bachman, 2002, p. 470) Secondly, the task designed should cover all aspects of language learning. Next, specific areas relevant to the course need to be identified and included. "TASKS are activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome" As defined by Willis, that means a task can be anything from doing a puzzle to making an airline reservation. All in all, task based language learning is learning by doing.

Keywords: *Task based Language Learning, Group Discussion, Speaking, Reporting, Task Performance etc.*

The main focus of classroom activity is the task and language is the instrument the students use to complete it. To complete the task and to achieve the desired outcome students use language as one of the components. For example, if the students have to write a resume through task based approach then it is important that they understand, analyse, examine and apply their knowledge. At the end of the class they should be able to write a resume as they are actively engaged in the task. They should be able to produce an effective resume to impress the recruiting committee.

While teaching Resume Writing to students, an activity was prepared where the students were given a handout. The activity sheet contained jumbled information related to resume. The students have to arrange the details in the correct order and have to identify each element and name it as it may contain in a resume. They also had to fill in their details as per the elements

given in the handout. This activity not only gave them an idea of the format of the resume, its structure but also they got an idea on what to include particularly in a resume and the way to strengthen it by mentioning their skills. The students were divided into teams of four and were given twenty minutes to do the activity to discuss and apply their ideas. The students were very enthusiastic in learning and were discussing among themselves. They came up with correct sub headings for each element. At times though the answers were incorrect for some teams, they learnt the correct answer from others while discussing the answers after the completion of the task. The activity created interest in them. The slow learners also engaged in the learning process as they discussed with the team and were able to overcome their fear and inhibitions. The slow learners were found to have some ideas and at times, they were able to give correct answers to their teams but they were afraid to do it in public. They felt confident when discussed and shared their ideas with the team; the teams presented their ideas at the end after discussing among them. They also learnt new words related to Resume Writing. Then they prepared their resume responding to an advertisement. They were able to write their resumes.

Nunan (1989:10) defines task as "a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form". Activity Based Learning involves students in the learning process. Rather than being mere passive learners students engage, comprehend, interact and learn. The advantages could be many in number as they learn, understand, involve, apply and enjoy their learning. We might think this could be more feasible for primary students but is also useful for learners of every level. They learn because they become more involved.

According to Bloom's Taxonomy, a task has to be remembered, understood, applied, analysed, evaluated and created. Bloom's Taxonomy promotes higher forms of thinking in education, such as analysing and evaluating concepts, processes, procedures, and principles, rather than just remembering facts (rote learning). It is most often used when designing educational material and learning processes. Through task based activities we try to make them follow Bloom's taxonomy of learning domain. Hence, a task is first given to them to remember, understand, apply, analyse, evaluate and create. The next topic to be taught to the students was Report Writing, for this again I divided them into team of four. I then gave them a sample report and asked them to read, understand, analyse and evaluate it. They were given 30 mins to complete the task. After going through the report the students discussed with each other. They understood the structure of the report, its components and how to write a report. The second task involved was writing a report for which a handout that contained certain guidelines was given to the students. The handout contained title page, introduction and conclusion. They were asked to write a report on an accident that they have witnessed. They were asked to discuss among themselves and provide discussion/description, methods, results/implications and recommendations for the report. The team members discussed and completed the remaining parts of the report. Finally, they presented their reports before their classmates. For this task the students used all the levels of Bloom's Taxonomy, i.e. remembering, understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating and creating. Hence they were able to create a report at the end. With the above mentioned activities on teaching resume and report, the students learnt and engaged in the activity, and the activity was success.

Task based learning, in recent days has gained a lot of importance. Here, the teacher *presents* any topic through context based situation to get across its meaning. This could be done in a

variety of ways: through discussion, peer discussion, interaction, think pair & share, dialogue etc. Students are then asked to complete a guide *practice stage*, where they may have to discuss, interact, and prepare etc. Finally, they move on to the production stage to *produce* the task. Task -based learning offers a topic to be learnt and aims at completion of the topic focusing students learn and apply it. The lesson follows certain stages.

Pre-Task

During this stage the teacher introduces the topic and gives clear instructions to the students on what they will have to do at the task stage. She informs the members in the team to actively involve and create it. Pre-task includes instruction, organization and execution of the plan.

While-Task

During the while-task students complete given task in pairs or groups following instructions given by the teacher. Here, the teacher monitors and offers encouragement. In While-task the students also follow certain steps like: Planning, Preparing, Practicing & Presenting.

Planning

In the planning stage students form into groups, discuss, plan and analyze their task. They prepare a short oral or written report to tell the class what happened during their task. They then practise what they are going to tell in their groups. Meanwhile the teacher is available for the students to clarify any doubts.

Preparing

In the preparing stage students draft their task, check for errors, edit and proofread it. They prepare for a good presentation.

Practice

In the practice stage the students practice their part to be presented before the class.

Report

Reporting or presenting is the last stage where the students have to report back to the class orally. Once done with reporting, the teacher and their classmates review their work and give feedback.

Post-Task

This is the last stage where the students take feedback, suggestions and incorporate the same. They also involve in a question and answer session where they can clarify doubts raised by others.

BENEFITS OF TASK BASED ACTIVITIES:

- Students are free of language control as it also encourages for free writing because students can write and present as they want without being monitored during the task. In all three stages they may feel free to share their ideas with their team members and learn from them. It provides the opportunity for 'natural' learning within the classroom context.

- Slow learners feel confident as they discuss with their friend and are encouraged by them.
- Students have a varied exposure to language and all others skills like listening, speaking etc. with TBL. They are exposed to different formats and patterns to understand the given topic and to do an activity on the same.
- It is a strong communicative approach where students spend a lot of time communicating. So they learn by doing as they spend communicating during a task-based lesson.
- It is consistent with a learner-focused philosophy but also allows the teacher to give input and guidance.
- It contributes to the enhancement of communicative fluency while not disregarding accuracy.
- It can be deployed together with a more traditional approach.
- It is enjoyable and motivating.

CHALLENGES:

There are some challenges that we face during a task based activity. Some of them are:
- Task-based learning involves high level of energy, creativity and dynamism. The teacher has to be creative in designing the tasks to involve the students in the learning process as well as the students should be involved in the learning process instead of thinking that they team members will complete the task and they can sit idle.
- Task-based learning necessitates resources beyond the textbooks and related materials.
- Some individuals are diffident and find difficult to interact with the group.
- Designing activities for LSRW skills are sometimes challenging.
- Some members may be inactive and may not involve.
- Some members in the team discuss with their team members but do not agree to present it before the class because of their fear.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of teaching is not to assist learners in meeting with the targets but to provide them with the context and conditions where learning can take place. The teachers' roles have also been altered from giving lectures as an instructor to facilitator by guiding and supporting the students. Task-based approach assists learners in internalizing skills in a natural way and shows learners how to sort out the problems that they encounter in real life (Lin, 2009). At this juncture, language teachers aiming at infusing task-based approach into their language classrooms should attribute prominence to the following points for the effective implementation of task-based pedagogy (Ellis, 2009). Learning by doing fosters simplified approach to language learning. It is based upon the idea that one can understand and present by enjoying it. Task based activities is an effort to understand the concept easily and take it to the next level of creating.

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