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Task-Based Learning and Learning Outcomes in the ESP Classroom

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Abstract. A model for a Task-Based Learning (TBL) refers to language acquisition through solving a problem or doing a task without concentrating on language features. A task involves an activity consisting of three stages: the pre-task, the task itself and focus on language.
Teaching through tasks creates favourable learning conditions for students who study English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at tertiary level. TBL involves students in performing tasks relevant to their future profession, increases learners' motivation and does not emphasize linguistic issues in the primary stages. Language analysis is incorporated only after learners have performed a task and depends on their needs, which become apparent only after performance. TBL seems to grant meaningful use of language and can promote autonomous learning. Moreover, it implies meaningful use of language and provides unthreatening environment for learning. However, this approach has not been universally accepted by English language practitioners and linguists due to uncertainties in assessing learning outcomes.
This article addresses research into learners' attitudes to Task-Based Learning, which is thought to have advantages over the more traditional and rather simplified Present, Practice, Produce approach, and the investigation of TBL influence on learning outcomes in the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classroom.

Introduction

Communicative language classes strive for the 'Golden Mean': to pursue a balance between language accuracy and fluency. Task-Based Learning (TBL) is thought to create such a balance by providing an ideal environment for facilitating language acquisition. In a Task-Based Learning, learners are presented with a task or problem to solve and do not concentrate on language features during performance. Language analysis is incorporated after learners have performed a task. Although TBL seems to grant meaningful use of language and can promote autonomous learning, it fails to become universally accepted by teachers and linguists due to the difficulties in evaluating learning outcome.

The aim of the research: to study learners' attitudes to the advantages or disadvantages of particular tasks in Task-Based Learning and Teaching in the ESP classroom and to determine what learning outcomes are finally achieved.

The methods used are questionnaires and individual interviews.

Presently prevalent trend of occasionally using fragmentary tasks in teaching a foreign language needs getting a serious consideration.

Review of literature

Task-Based Learning in language teaching has become an important approach in the last years mainly because it promotes communication and social interaction although 'task' in learning languages dates back to the sixties.

A well known and widely practiced PPP approach to teaching language items follows a sequence of Presentation of the item, Practice of the item and then Production, i.e. use of the item (Harmer, 2001:80). This is the approach currently followed by most commercially produced course books and has the advantage of appearing systematic and efficient. Some researchers, however, argue that PPP approach only creates the illusion of learning because for any lasting learning to occur learners need much more communicative experience. The disadvantages with PPP that are raised by some members of language teaching community include:

1) too simplified approach to learning a language – assuming it consists of rudimentary blocks and manipulated by grammar rules,
2) overuse of the target structure,
3) usage of existing language resources,
4) failure to produce the language correctly or not produce at all.

A Task-Based Learning (TBL) refers to activities designed for learners doing authentic tasks (Simpson, online). Learners are asked to perform a task without any input or guidance from the teacher. For task completion, learners have to use the language in a similar way as language is used in the real world outside the classroom. TBL approach does not contain pre-determined language syllabus. Language items that learners need to complete tasks successfully emerge in the process and can be recycled at the end of activities. Among possible advantages of TBL the following have to be mentioned:

1) there is no language control in production stage,
2) learners use their language knowledge and resources,
3) learners experiment with language during task completion,
4) learners' communicate and collaborate during activities,
5) target language emerges from students' needs,
6) TBL offers reflection on language usage.

A model for Task-Based Learning was outlined by Jane Willis (1996) and refers to three stages: the pre-task, the task cycle, and language focus. A task is an activity 'where the target language is used by the learners for a communicative purpose in order to achieve an outcome' (Willis, 1996:26).

Another definition of a task is: 'A task is one of a set of differentiated, problem-posing activities involving learners and teachers in a joint selection from a range of varied cognitive and communicative procedures applied to existing and new knowledge in the collective exploration of foreseen goals within a social milieu' (Long and Crookes, 1992:38).In the pre-task stage, the topic is defined and essential vocabulary is highlighted by the teacher. In the task cycle, learners perform the task in pairs or small groups, rehearse their reports before presenting findings in front of the audience. The final stage is the language focus, during which specific language features that learners encountered in the task are examined and analyzed. Some practice of language features and feedback on students' performance are appropriate at this stage.

Typology for TBL task design lists six task types and their corresponding outcomes (after Willis, 1996:149):

Task Types	Tasks' Outcomes
- listing	completed list or draft mind map;
- ordering & sorting	information sorted according to specific criteria;
- comparing	identification of similarities & differences;
- problem solving	finding solutions to problems;
- sharing experience	exchanging opinions & attitudes;
- creative tasks	end product - can be appreciated by audience.

The main advantage of TBL is language usage for a meaningful communication. In this respect, TBL is closely associated with Content-Based Instruction that combines language learning and content of subject matter. Both methodologies allow to integrate all language skills, i.e. reading, writing, speaking and listening, into development of fluency towards accuracy.

An extensive up-to-date monograph on Task-Based Learning and Teaching by Rod Ellis appeared in 2003. The first six chapters of the book are oriented towards theory while the last four chapters give guidelines for teaching. According to Ellis (2003:65), 'TBL is mostly about the social interaction established between learners as a source of input and means of acquisition, and involves the negotiation of meaning, communicative strategies, and communicative effectiveness'. Ellis (2003:320) also outlines the teaching principles: level of task difficulty, goals, performance orientation, students' active role, taking risks, focus on meaning and form, need of self-assessment of progress and performance. The author is honest about some weaknesses of this methodology and states the need to do more research into Task-Based Learning and Teaching.

Quite a diverse attitude to TBL is expressed by Nunan (1988:44): 'the focus is on learning process rather than learning product' and 'there is little or no attempt to relate these processes to outcome'.

Obviously, a *learning outcome* is being meant here. Moreover, although a TBL may well satisfy the desire to provide meaning-based learning, 'such syllabus remains 'ad hoc', and fails to command sufficiently widespread support amongst teachers and methodologists for it to become universally accepted'.

The opponents of TBL approach claim that 'concrete evidence of language learning in TBL, in the sense of progressing from not knowing (how to do) something to some degree of knowing, is almost non-existent. In a monolingual context, the potential for learning from peers may be minimal and the development of classroom pidgins maximal' (Bruton, 2003:6). Furthermore, 'two main pre-occupations are input / intake and productive correctness, the mainstay of many of the debunked proposals. Receptive abilities are generally noticeable for their absence with the focus on production'.

It should be highlighted that having finished a secondary school, non-native speakers of English are expected to be proficient users of General English, i.e. according to the European standards, to have mastered either the highest C_1 or slightly lower C_2 level (http://culture.coe.int/lang). Unfortunately, this is a wishful thinking. On average, school leavers usually reach either B_2 or B_1 level. However, at a tertiary level, the objectives of English for Specific Purposes course are to ensure the mastering of the usage of professional language in spite of lack in proficiency in General English. On the other hand, a curriculum of ESP courses is usually designed according to the learners' needs and in accordance with the institution requirements, and it involves a number of professional topics. Moreover, mastering ESP encompasses necessity for students to learn a number of vocabulary items and be able to function in language orally and in writing. Therefore, the approach of Task-Based Learning in teaching ESP can be widely applied at university level. However, the area of learning outcomes in TBL and learners' preferences to various types of tasks remains unexplored. This research aims at filling this gap which might help language practitioners structure their everyday teaching activities.

This background information explains why the authour has undertaken the study of learners' perception of utility of TBL and learning outcomes.

Research Methods

Learners' attitudes to the utility of various task types and how they benefit learning outcomes were investigated by administering a questionnaire on TBL tasks and learners' priorities and interviewing learners during counseling hours (which are scheduled once a week). There were 56 respondents who have had a three-term twice a week instruction in ESP.

As it was described in (Willis, 1996), each type of task consists of different components, and respondents were requested to choose the most beneficial to them. The findings are presented in the following section.

Research Findings and Discussion

The listing tasks are divided into two categories – brainstorming and fact-finding. The learners' attitudes to them are demonstrated in the bar figure 1.

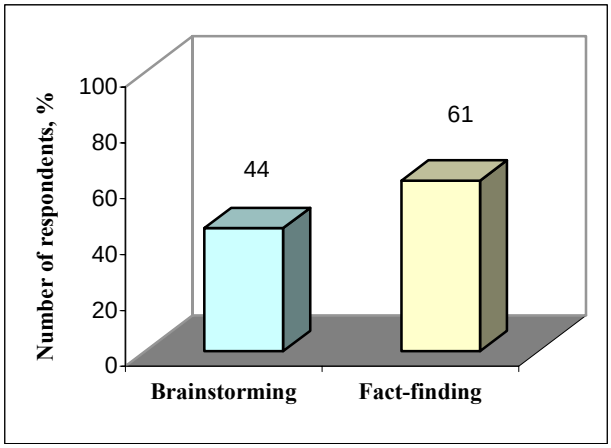

Figure 1. Learners' Attitudes to Listing Tasks.

Data indicate respondents' priority for creative activity of findings facts – 61%, while brainstorming activity is chosen by 44% of learners. The latter allows students to retrieve their subject knowledge and to use in presentations or for other purposes, e.g. writing, discussions, etc. Interestingly, the sum equals 105% which means that some respondents ticked both tasks as being beneficial to them.

The bar figure 2 presents learners' viewpoints on criteria sorting tasks. Surprisingly, none of the respondents have chosen the tasks of categorizing and sequencing. Therefore, these tasks have not been shown in the figure 2. However, the tasks of ranking in order of importance and classifying have been selected by 33% and 53% of respondents, respectively. While being interviewed learners stressed the significance of classifying facts and ranking information in order of importance as a tool to amass relevant and neglect irrelevant materials. Only 14% of respondents ignored ticking either of these tasks. This shows that only minority of learners have negative attitude to ordering-sorting tasks as being useless.

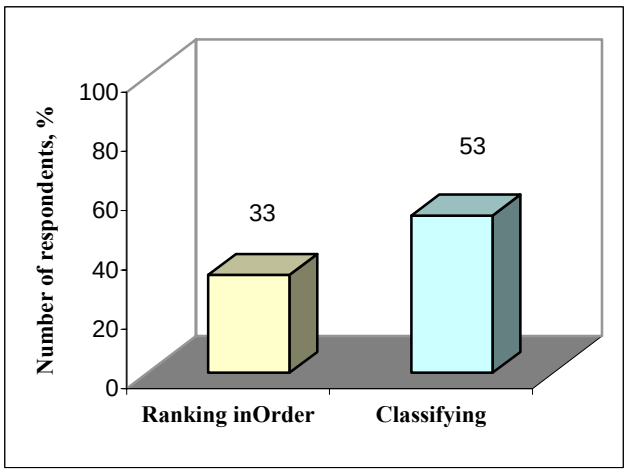

Figure 2. Learners' Attitudes to Ordering-Sorting Tasks.

The components of TBL comparing tasks include matching, finding differences and similarities. None of the respondents ticked matching tasks in their responses (not shown in the figure 3). The distribution of students' attitudes towards finding similarities and differences is shown in the column figure 3.

In the figure 3, the respondents' preference to spotting differences rather than spotting similarities – 67% against 56% – shows their intention to scrutinize all aspects of the topic under consideration, and differences seem more relevant than similarities. The total score exceeds 100% which means that some students ticked both tasks.

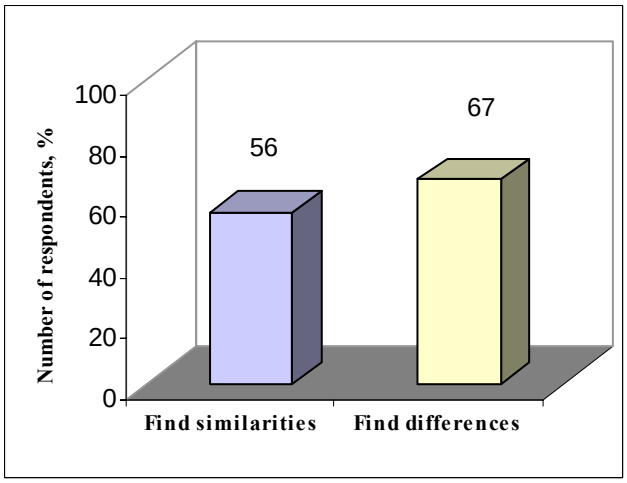

Figure 3. Learners' Attitudes to Comparing Tasks.

The typology of problem solving tasks includes analysing real or hypothetical situations, reasoning and decision making. The findings on this aspect of TBL are shown in the column figure 4. None of the respondents seemed to be interested in analysing hypothetical situations or reasoning, but a vast majority of 83% showed a priority for analysing real situations. The task of decision making is picked by a small minority of 19%. Similarly as in the previous figure, a total sum exceeds 100%, which demonstrates that some respondents indicated both tasks.

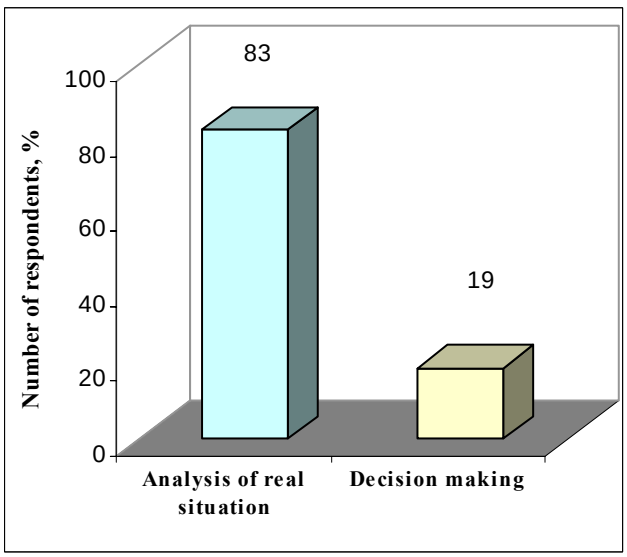

Figure 4. Learners' Attitudes to Problem-Solving Tasks.

The typology of problem solving tasks includes analysing real or hypothetical situations, reasoning and decision making. The findings on this aspect of TBL are shown in the column

figure 4. None of respondents seem to be interested in analysing hypothetical situations, but a vast majority of 83% show a priority for analysing real situations. The task of decision making is picked by the minority of 19%. As the sum exceed 100%, it demonstrates that some respondents indicated both tasks.

TBL framework of sharing personal experience involves narrating, describing, exploring & explaining attitudes and expressing opinions and reactions. In our survey, the respondents have chosen only two items – describing attitudes and giving opinions& comments. This is demonstrated by the bar figure 5.

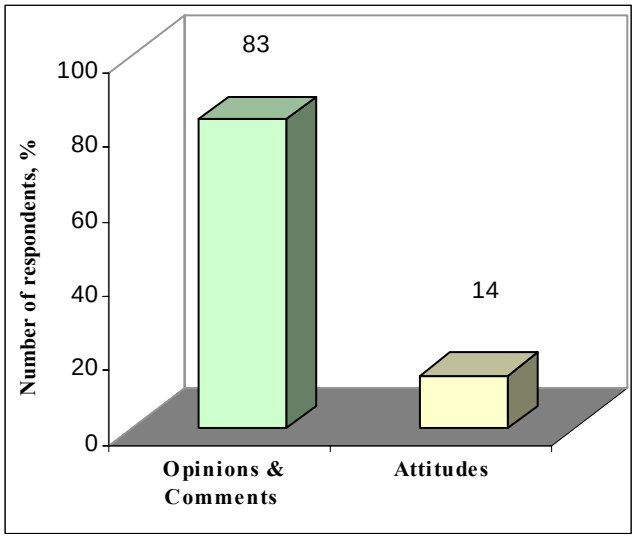

Figure 5. Learners' Attitudes to Sharing Experiences.

The figure 5 is very similar to the figure 4: 83% of respondents support a task of giving opinions and comments, but fewer – just 14% – feel like describing their attitudes.

In the typology of TBL tasks, the sixth includes creative tasks which cover brainstorming, fact-finding, sorting, comparing and problem solving. The distribution of students' responses are displayed in the column figure 6.

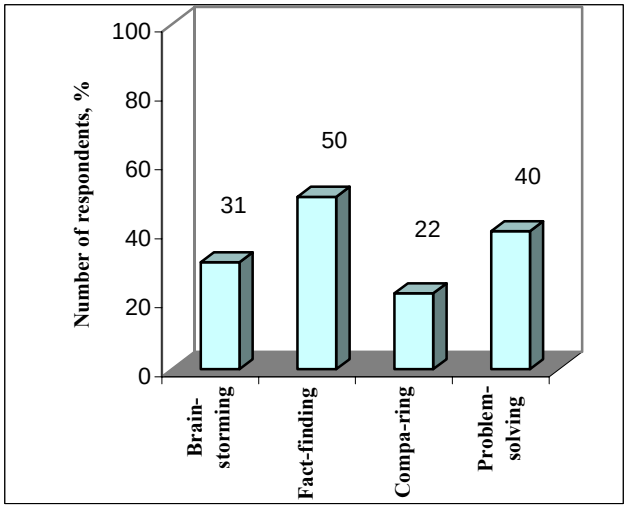

Figure 6. Learners' Attitudes to Creative Tasks.

For some vague reasons, sorting tasks were neglected by respondents, while other items received a varied response. Brainstorming has been favoured by 31% of learners, fact-finding – by 50%, comparing tasks – just by 22%, and problem-solving received 40%. Surprisingly, in listing tasks (figure 1) brainstorming was ranked by 44% and fact-finding – by 61% of respondents. Why fewer learners favour brainstorming and fact-finding in creative tasks is questionable. Learners' wish to demonstrate more independence in gathering information for creative tasks might be a possible explanation.

The visual display of respondents attitudes to the utility of TBL tasks has shown which are considered beneficial to learning. The most useful tasks can be ranked by the percentage they received: in problem-solving tasks – analysing real situations is favoured by 83% (in figure 4); in tasks of sharing personal experiences – giving opinions and comments – 83% (in figure 5); in listing tasks – fact-finding – 61% (in figure 1); in comparing tasks – finding differences – 67% and finding similarities – 56% (figure 3); in ordering-sorting tasks – classifying – 53% (in figure 2), and in creative tasks – fact-finding – 50% (in figure 6).

The tasks' outcomes were thoroughly described by J. Willis (1996:149). Interestingly, the respondents have almost unanimously (97%) supported the views on tasks outcomes, which are quoted from this reference in the section of Literature review.

However, learners' views on learning outcomes in each type of tasks vary. All learners without exception emphasized learning ESP vocabulary from context in all types of tasks and improving speaking and listening skills. However, none of the respondents marked grammar or previously unfamiliar structures among the mastered items, although a considerable amount of time was devoted to them in the language focus stage. Possible interpretation of disregard for language focus lies in administering an open-ended survey on learning outcomes. A selection of an open-ended version of the survey is justified by researcher's desire not to prompt answers to learners. Respondents were requested to produce their own responses instead of answering multiple-choice questions. It seems likely that omission of grammar aspect in students' responses highlights its irrelevance to learning subject through language, which is regarded as a tool for learning something in spite of deficiency in language itself. Moreover, learners at tertiary level do not attach the same importance to focus on grammar as it happens at lower levels.

Conclusions

Research into application of Task-Based Learning has shown that respondents are in favour of performing a variety of tasks in the ESP classes.

The most well-liked tasks in a descending order have been:

1) problem-solving tasks: analysing real situations– 83% are in favour;
2) sharing personal experiences: giving opinions and comments – 83% are in favour;
3) listing tasks: fact-finding is supported by 61%;

4) comparing tasks: finding differences is favoured by 67%, finding similarities – by 56%;
5) ordering-sorting tasks: classifying – 53% are in favour;
6) creative tasks: fact-finding is supported by 50%.

The data on learning outcomes have been based on learners' self-assessment. The respondents highlighted three learning outcomes:

- build-up of professional vocabulary,
- development of speaking skills,
- refinement of listening skills.

Focus on language in ESP studies has not been highlighted in the open-ended survey possibly due to respondents' disregard for language features at tertiary level.

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Galina Kavaliauskienė

Profesinės užsienio kalbos mokymasis naudojant užduočių metodą bei mokymosi rezultatai

Santrauka

Mokymo, naudojant užduočių metodą metodika remiasi kalbos išmokimu atliekant įvairaus tipo užduotis. Yra žinomi šeši užduočių tipai, kurias atlikę besimokantys pasiekia tam tikrų tikslų, pavyzdžiui, išsprendžia kūrybinę problemą, suranda reikiamą informaciją ar parengia pranešimą. Užduotys susideda iš trijų dalių: įvadinės, užduoties ciklo bei kalbos vystymo stadijos.
Straipsnyje aprašomi tyrimai, kurie buvo atlikti nagrinėjant studentų požiūrį į mokymo, naudojant užduočių metodą bei mokymosi rezultatus. Nustatyta, kad tokias užduotis – problemų sprendimą, pasikeitimą asmenine informacija, faktų paiešką, lyginimą bei klasifikavimą, ir kūrybines užduotis studentai vertina palankiai. Užduočių vykdymo mokymosi pagrindinės išdavos yra profesinio žodyno tobulinimas bei kalbėjimo ir klausymo įgūdžių vystymas. Įtakos kalbos savybių tobulinimui tyrimuose nepastebėta.

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