

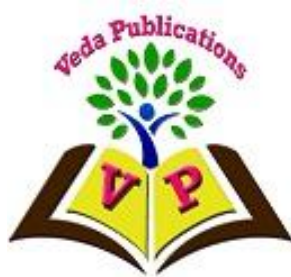


DESIGNING TASKS FOR A HETEROGENEOUS GROUP OF STUDENTS: IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT



Task-based language teaching complements second-language learning in an ELT classroom. When the learners are a homogeneous group, TBLT can be executed effectively. Whereas, in a heterogenous classroom, it throws a greater challenge to a second language teacher. This paper aims to deal with the implications while designing tasks for a heterogeneous class. Teaching English as a second language involves designing various tasks to suit the comprehension and cognition levels of the learners. When dealing with students from different cultures and varied first languages, task-based language teaching becomes complex. When the teacher plans a single task for the entire class, the outcome may not be the one expected—appropriate tasks cannot be given to students with different levels of second language competence. Learners with good second-language skills may underestimate the task, while some learners from a regional language background may find it difficult. While designing a task for a heterogeneous class, a screening test helps in categorising the learners based on their English language skillset. Opinion-gap tasks in which all the needed information and opinions are shared within the group at the start of the activity would be quite helpful in designing tailor-made tasks suitable to a heterogeneous group.

Keywords: *Task-Based Teaching, Opinion-Gap Tasks.*



INTRODUCTION

Second Language Teaching involves a lot of methodologies that are formulated to cater to the needs of the learners. Second Language Learning in the recent years has become learner-centric and is not entirely teacher-centric. So, it is important that the SL instructor is aware of the needs of the learners and provides them with the opportunity to explore the nuances of the target language. Needs are often described in terms of a linguistic deficiency, describing the difference between what a learner can presently do in a language and what he or she should be able to do (Richard 2001). The learner's speaking ability could be improved through communication practice; when a learner takes an effort to convey an idea or concept, the language competence of the learner improves to a certain level.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) promotes that language could be acquired only through the effectiveness of communication and the focus of CLT is not to simply enhance the knowledge of a language but to develop the system of a language through proper communication skills (Howatt 1984). Teaching a language through communication involves many methods among which Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is a very effective one especially when it comes to language teaching to a heterogeneous classroom.

David Nunan defines task as a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language (2004). A task in a linguistic scenario means any structured language learning endeavour with a particular objective (Breen 1987). Designing of tasks for an ESL classroom requires understanding the learners' level of language competence. When the second language instructor designs a task, conscious effort must be taken as to meet the needs of the target group; one task may not be suitable to all the learners and so grouping them based on their levels of language proficiency becomes inevitable.

BACKGROUND TO TASK DESIGNING

TBLT in a heterogeneous classroom would be effective only when the tasks designed by the teacher meet the demands of the mixed ability group. The ESL classroom is generally a combination of mixed ability students from varied levels of

exposure and educational standards. When the teacher gives the same task to the entire group, the outcome may not be the desired one. This is because the students with better language background tend to comprehend the task as a simpler one, whereas the mediocre and the less competent group might find it complex. So, it becomes necessary to group the class according to their level of language competency, when the classroom is not a homogeneous one. While teaching the second language, assigning tasks to smaller groups is very beneficial because when the group is smaller and homogeneous, tasks could be assigned as per the ability of the learner and specific attention towards individuals could be effective.

METHODOLOGY

This study aims at presenting the implications while designing oral communication tasks for a heterogeneous classroom. It is based on the language learning competency of a class of first year Production Engineering students at National Institute of Technology, Tiruchirappalli. The ESL situation in the class is one of varied English language ability. Initially when a speaking task was given to the entire class, the response was not a great one. Only a very few students were participative and the others did not respond even when prompted with questions. Some students did not speak on their own but with prompts given to assist them they made an effort to speak.

The students were divided into three groups based on their level of language proficiency.

Group I – CBSE Students.

Group II – State board English medium students.

Group III – Regional medium students.

The basic idea was to motivate all the participants to involve them in an oral communication activity. In group I, the students were all from an urban background with a better exposure to English language skills. The participants in the groups II and III were a combination of urban and rural students. The challenge to the teacher was that the task had to be designed in a way as to enhance the speaking abilities of the students from all the three groups.

The participants from CBSE background were given an opinion-gap task. This enabled the



participants to converse within the group members and fill the gaps in each other's opinion thus making them interact and pick clues on vocabulary and sentence structure from each other. This task was more helpful with students with higher levels of language competency because it helped them to further improve their oral communication skills.

The students from the groups II and III were assigned a task with a certain level of support from the teacher. This could be termed the supportive task, with partial assistance from the teacher. The participants from group II were asked to talk on topics of their choice and the teacher might help them in between with speaking prompts. The group III comprised students from lower language competency level. Their education was through the regional medium of instruction and hence their exposure to second language was very limited. This group of students were not participative at all during the class activities. So, it was quite challenging for the teacher to enable them to actively and confidently participate in oral communication activity. They were asked to speak on open-ended topics for a very short duration and they were told in advance that it would be a guided conversation involving the teacher for assistance. Guided conversation implies helping the students during the presentation with link words and short expressions in simplified formats. This might help them as prompts which in turn helped them to remember whatever they had to say.

MERITS

The confidence level of the students in all the three groups improved considerably due to the task based language teaching. The students' performance showed a marked improvement in the way they used the target language. They were also able to prolong their speech compared to their performance before assigning them their respective tasks. This was attainable because of the need based designing of tasks.

DEMERITS

This method of language teaching has its own limitations. It may not be very effective in a classroom with more than fifty students. It is moreover difficult to arrive at suitable tasks if the learners belong to mixed age groups. A similar methodology may not be suitable in government

colleges wherein the grouping becomes a complicated one.

CONCLUSION

Designing tasks for language teaching in a heterogeneous class involves categorizing students, assigning tasks according to their language competence, assessment of the individual performance before and after the execution of the tasks and validating the skills acquired in the process of language learning. In this particular classroom activity due to the impact of the difference in the effectiveness of oral communication before and after the tasks was distinct. In a heterogeneous classroom designing tasks in a way that would suit the level of the learner helps to a great extent. This improves the effectiveness of the second language teaching and enhances the communicative competency of the students.

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