Improving Reading in L2: Task-Based Learning

Ayda TANDIRCI[1]
Türkay BULUT[2]

Abstract

Task-based approach is based on the completion of the task, free of language control. The teacher facilitates learning opportunities by exposing the students to comprehensive input through social interaction. The aim of this study is to reveal the role of task-based reading activities on the students' English language development and their attitudes towards reading skill. The texts were taken from PET (Preliminary English Test) samples. The sample (n=60) was randomly formed out of the population of the preparatory classes at Istanbul Aydin University. Their mean age was 21. The experimental group was instructed to follow task-based learning approach, and the control group was to follow the traditional approach. This experiment lasted four weeks, and then the researcher assessed the performances of both groups according to the post-test results. The data revealed that the task based method for reading skill in the experimental group enabled the participants to take part in reading tasks more actively, and to be more autonomous in their reading process. Hence, the students managed to get higher grades in the reading class. Moreover, they developed cognitive learning strategies through this learning methodology.

Keywords: Task, Task-based instructions, L2 learners, Reading comprehension

[1] İstanbul Aydın Üniversitesi, atandirci1@yahoo.com
[2] Prof. Dr., İstanbul Aydın Üniversitesi, İngilizce Öğretmenliği, turkaybulut@aydin.edu.tr

İkinci Dilde Okuma Becerisinin Geliştirilmesi: Görev Temelli Dil Öğrenimi

Öz

Görev tabanlı yaklaşım, görevin yerine getirilmesine ve dil kontrolünden bağımsız olmasına dayanır. Öğretmen, öğrencilerine sosyal etkileşim yoluyla kapsamlı girdiler sunarak öğrenmeyi kolaylaştırır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, göreve dayalı okuma etkinliklerinin öğrencilerin İngilizce dil gelişimi üzerindeki rolünü ve okuma becerisine yönelik tutumlarını ortaya koymaktır. Metinler PET (Preliminary English Test) örneklerinden alınmıştır. Örneklem (n = 60), rastgele yöntemle İstanbul Aydın Üniversitesi'ndeki hazırlık sınıflarının popülasyonundan oluşturulmuştur. Katılımcıların yaş ortalamaları 19,2 olarak saptanmıştır. Deney grubuna, göreve dayalı öğrenme yaklaşımı uygulanmıştır. Kontrol grubunda geleneksel yaklaşım benimsenmiştir. Bu çalışma dört hafta sürmüş ve araştırmacı, her iki grubun performanslarını test sonrası sonuçlarına göre değerlendirmiştir. Veriler, deney grubundaki okuma becerisi için göreve dayalı yöntemin katılımcıların okuma görevlerinde daha aktif olarak yer almalarını ve okuma süreçlerinde daha özerk olmalarını sağladığını göstermiştir. Böylece, öğrenciler okuma sınıfında daha yüksek notlar almayı başarmışlardır. Ayrıca, bu öğrenme yöntemi ile bilişsel öğrenme stratejileri gelişmiştir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Görev, Görev temelli öğretim, D2 edinenler, Okuduğunu anlama

1. INTRODUCTION

Many scopes of education alter in the way teaching and learning is considered. Structural-syllabus approaches and teacher- centered classes are turning into more practical, flexible approaches and student-centered classes (Shank and Cleary, 1994). Task-based Learning (TBL), which has grounds on communicative language teaching methodology and the constructivist theory of learning, has developed due to the restrictions of the conventional Presentation, Practice, Performance (PPP) approach. (Ellis, 2003; Long and Crookes, 1991).

Willis (1996) defines tasks as meaningful activities where the learner uses the target language for a communicative purpose to achieve an output. Tasks are meaningful because the students need a purpose to communicate, and they have a clear outcome so that the teacher and students know whether the communication has been successful. Task-based learning was first promoted by N. Prabhu in Bangladore, India, who claimed that learning is achieved effectively if their focus is on the task itself, not on the language structure (Prabhu, 1987 cited in Littlewood, 2004). Unlike PPP, the instructor does not pre-determine what language item is to be used in TBL because the objective is not to learn the structure or the lexical area but to complete the task. As Nunan puts forward, while using a communicative language, learner focuses on meaning instead of form (in Ruso 1999, p. 3). However, in order to complete the task successfully, the learners have to use the right language, and they need to communicate their ideas to achieve productive outcome. The language, therefore, is not the aim but is an instrument of communication whose purpose is to help the learners to complete the task. TBL facilitates language acquisition by allowing learners to recycle the grammar and lexical items they have already learned. As Mckinnon and Rigby (2004) state, if the language in the classroom is made more meaningful and more memorable, it will be more likely for the students to develop the target language in a natural way.

According to Willis (2007), it is believed that TBL puts emphasis nearly on the oral language because TBL classrooms provide many opportunities for students to promote their speaking skill through interaction. However, TBL can also be used to develop reading strategies and comprehension for students. The crucial point is that the instructor has to be aware of the students' cognitive and linguistic needs in order to adapt tasks or create tasks according to their needs.

Besides, it is quite significant to discover the students' interests and negotiate with them in terms of the topics that are of their interests. As Anderson (2006) states, reading is considered quite boring for some of the learners because they have not ever experienced the pleasure of it. Therefore, it becomes more necessary to use different methods and techniques to make the reading activity more interesting and enjoyable

for students. The usage of tasks to develop reading skills in ESL/EFL (hereafter L2) classes seems to be a possible solution to this problem. Richards and Rogers (2001, p. 229) state that task-based instructions, task activities, and the accomplishment of the tasks are motivational. The process of completing a task and working in groups or with a partner helps learners to develop not only important skills but also pride in their work. This sense of achievement and the success they receive with the outcome of the report lead students to a stronger sense of motivation for learning. Brown (2000) approves the role of TBL "to raise students' motivation by stressing out that if someone is motivated enough, success in any task is due to be achieved" (p. 160). The usage of tasks to develop reading skills in L2 classes seems to be a possible solution to these problems.

The researchers working on TBL have proposed three different frameworks in sequence (Ellis, 2003; Lee, 2000; Prabhu, 1987; Skehan, 1996; Willis, 1996) for task-based instructions. Ellis (2003) calls these phases 'pre-task', 'during task', and 'post-task'; whereas, Willis (1996) labels them as pre-task, task cycle and language focus. The task itself should be complete and must have a purpose of communication as a whole with a beginning, middle and conclusion phases (in Van den Branden, 2006; Willis and Willis, 2007; Ruso 1999; Nunan, 1989).

Phase 1: The first phase is 'pre-task', during which the instructor presents the subject and defines the task that the learners are going to complete. Willis (1996) proposes that the instructor as a facilitator explores the subject with the students and emphasizes useful phrases or lexicon to help them recall or learn new ones to use while performing the main task.

Phase 2: This task cycle stage provides the learners the opportunity to recycle the vocabulary and grammar that they know and improve their language while planning their reports under the guidance of their teacher. Task cycle offers students holistic experience of language practice and the instructor encourages the learners. There are three constituents of a task cycle, namely task, planning, and report. First, the learners implement the task; it could be reading or listening exercises or a problem–solving exercise done in small groups or pairs. The learners are allowed to use their

language resources they know in order to express themselves. The teacher acts as an observer or a counselor in order to apply a student-centered methodology and promote their fluency instead of accuracy. Therefore, the learners' faults, and hesitancies should be ignored as long as students produce a meaningful language. After completing the task, the learners design a report, orally or written to introduce to the class. During this stage, the learners are aware that their work will be made public; therefore, they will concentrate on accuracy. The role of the instructor here is therefore to provide assistance with language usage. Finally, the students present the class their findings or interchange their written reports, and compare the outcomes. The written reports can be posted on the walls in the classroom, and the students can read what the other groups did during the task phase. For the oral reports, one student from each group can deliver the report to the rest of the class. Because the aim of the report stage is to emphasize accuracy, the instructor may write down the distinctive faults that take place while the students are revealing their reports. Therefore, the report phase gives learners a natural linguistic challenge to improve their language and communicate both fluently and accurately. The instructor acts like a chairperson deciding on who will report successively, and may provide feedback on the form and the content as a whole. In addition, s/he may play a recording of others in order to compare how well they did the task.

Phase 3: This is called language focus stage where learners gain a linguistic focus and have a chance to examine some specific errors that are made during the task cycle (Willis, 1996). As the students had already processed the language for the meaning previously, now it is time to focus on the form through this phase with two constituents: analysis and practice (Bulut & Algül, 2017). The first one is a consciousness raising process in which the teacher draws the learners' attention to the form that the learners could have constructed but they did not or that they have used but not the way they could have. The teacher may also present any other form that is relevant to the task or is worth focusing on. The learners striving for accuracy check the lexis and patterns they are not certain about. A recording of a native speaker doing a similar task or the text they have read can be used to explore those lexical items or grammar structures. The latter requires that the teacher selects language areas to be practiced. The

teacher might have noticed them during the task and report phases. Giving a controlled practice activity might be the best solution to overcome this problem because they will be required to use the target language correctly.

2. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to identify the effect of the task-based reading activities on the pre-intermediate level L2 learners' ability towards reading activities and language development. At the end, the following research questions will be answered:

1. Will the students in the experimental group receive higher grades than the ones in the control group?

2. Will the students in the experimental group become readers that are more independent?

3. Will their other language skills be positively affected when compared to those of in the control group?

2.1. Participants

To investigate the above questions, the study was conducted in the form of an experimental design in which 60 pre-intermediate level students participated. The data obtained from the Demographic Questionnaire are displayed in Table 1. They were from different departments at Istanbul Aydın University and attending English preparatory classes. They also came from various socioeconomic backgrounds, and some of them were from different cites of Turkey. Randomly the participants in Class 1(N=32) were assigned to the control group, and the participants in Class 2 (N=28; 14 were male and14 female with the mean age of 19,2) to the experimental group.

Table 1: *The results of the Demographical Questionnaire*

	N	Gender	Age	English Background
Experimental Group	28	14 (female; 14 (male)	(18; 23)	(10; 18)
Control Group	32	15 (female); 17 (male)	(18; 24)	(12; 20)

While the experimental group was given reading instructions according to TBL, the control group did not receive such treatment. They were instructed according to the traditional PPP method. The posttest was administered four weeks after the pretest.

2.3. Instruments

There were three instruments. The first one was given to find out the demographical information about the participants such as their gender, age, educational background. The second instrument was "The General Proficiency Test for Placement Purposes" prepared and administered by the IAU Preparatory School to determine the language proficiency of the students. The classes were formed accordingly. Then two classes were randomly selected as the experimental and the control groups.

The experimental class time composed of three stages: pre-task, task cycle and language-focus stages. Four reading passages were used in total to reinforce the reading skill of the two prep class students. They were given different tasks designed according to the principles of the task-based learning. The topics were chosen according to the learners' interests, age, and culture. Some of the texts and tasks were used from their textbook, some from ' PET Direct' book published by Cambridge Press for the preparation of B1 level English exam.

To evaluate whether the task –based instructions had any significant effects on the experimental group's interest and progress of reading skill compared to the control group or not the reading section of the PET (Preliminary English Test) was conducted to both of the groups. The post-test was administered on both control and experimental groups at the same time, under similar conditions.

2.4. Procedure

The study took place six weeks, and the reading course for each class was applied once a week lasting for 90 minutes. During the first week, two intact classes were assigned randomly, and the proficiency test was applied to ensure that they were at the same level. The following weeks, task-based treatment on reading was administered to the experimental group. During the pre-task stage, the researcher (as the instructor) tried to activate the learners' schemata, to set up a purpose, and to raise their interest to read the text. First, I explored the topic with the class, highlighted the important words and phrases and made the instructions of the task clear for the students. They learned the new words through the visual aids, and short dialogues were provided to make them acquire the meaning through that context. I gave them a vocabulary task to accomplish in pair work. In the task-cycle stage, the learners made an effort to complete different tasks for different texts. The tasks were designed to improve the students' skimming, scanning, reading for gist, reading for specific information, and deducing the meanings of certain words from the context. In one of the tasks, they were required to put the events in the text into the correct time order. This task was a sequencing task in Willis's classification design that enabled the students to read the text for a specific aim. The other tasks compromised information gap and jigsaw reading tasks accomplished in group work and pair work. These types of tasks promoted their speaking and communication skills as well. Then, they were led to discuss their output in groups and report their work. I did not interfere with their reports but monitored and encouraged them and took some notes for their mistakes. In focus on form stage, I gave them some general feedback and wrote the problematic sentences on the board without mentioning the names of the learners who were responsible for the mistakes and asked them to do peer-correction that raises the learners' awareness, and they became actively involved in the correction and application.

In the control group, the students worked on the same reading texts through traditional reading methodology such as defining the meanings of the unknown words and answering comprehension questions designed as matching, true/false, fill in the blanks, and open-ended types of questions. They all answered the questions on their own, and I attached importance

on grammar points when it was necessary and corrected their grammar mistakes while they were answering the open-ended questions. The sixth week, the post-test (the reading section of a PET exam) was conducted to both groups, lasting 90 minutes.

3. RESULTS & DISCUSSIONS

The dependent variable was the learners' reading comprehension, and the independent variable was the effect of task-based learning. The obtained data in pretest and posttest were analyzed by SPSS and illustrated in tables. Table 2 displays that the mean of pre-test of experimental group was 43.0357 and that of the control group was 43.9062 indicating that there was not a remarkable difference between two groups in terms of their proficiency level.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of experimental group pre-test, posttest

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
gender	28	1.00	2.00	1.5000
pre-test	28	25.00	60.00	43.0357
post-test	28	35.00	75.00	55.1786

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of control group pre-test, posttest.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
gender	32	1.00	2.00	1,5312
pre-test	32	25,00	70.00	43,9062
post-test	32	30,00	70,00	47,0313

The post-test results revealed that the reading performance of the participants in the task-based class was notably more enhanced than that of the conventional class. The post-test mean of experimental group with the score of 55.1786 exceeded the mean of control group that scored just 47.0313. Apparently, the significant improvement in reading skill of the experimental group must have occurred, even within a short period, due to the instructions that they had been exposed to during the experiment.

4. CONCLUSION

TBL attaches importance on how to learn rather than what to learn; therefore, it promotes autonomy and learning styles of the learners. Applying TBL in reading classes, offering plenty of opportunities to interact with one another through pair and group work activities, and creating an active classroom atmosphere enables the learners be responsible for their own learning process. Most students are not aware of their learning capabilities and believe that teachers are the only sources of information. In TBL authentic tasks are used as instruments to promote the learners` communication skills in L2 and to have them internalize the target language through real-life situations. The process of understanding, evaluating, discussing, problem-solving, negotiating meaning, and reflecting on the task enables the students to use the target language and meets the requirements of student-centered classes. This research reveals that TBL can promote reading skill in collaboration with speaking and listening. According to Nahavandi & Mukundan (2012), a reading text is not only a pleasurable activity and a source of information, but also means of unifying and broadening one`s knowledge because it is a cognitive process. Furthermore, reading is a communicative practice between the author and the reader, and requires a process oriented and an interactive methodology. Thus, compared to conventional approaches, the outcomes affirm the practicability of TBL in reading classes.

This paper has comprised the following main points: i) the theory of TBL in reading classes and its application, ii) the comparison between TBL and traditional method, and iii) its effect on the improvement of other skills and creating autonomous learners. It is seen that task-based instruction has a positive impact on reading skills alongside additional sub-skills. Therefore,

the outcomes of the study may have some pedagogical implementations for L2 instructors, syllabus designers, teacher trainers and the researchers interested in this field. However, there is still a need for further research on this topic. In spite of the promising aspects of TBL, some problems might be occur especially during the implementation of the tasks. This may vary among English teachers and researchers. For instance, while reporting the tasks, some learners with lower level of English, might be afraid of making grammar mistakes in the beginning of task-based lessons, even though they are assured that the aim is not the form but the meaning. Therefore, enthusiastic learners should be chosen to let the anxious learners report whenever they are ready. The required outcome for TBL may take quite a long time. Moreover, teachers should have a positive attitude towards TBL and practical knowledge of task-based methods in order to implement the tasks successfully. Compared to other methodologies TBL requires long-term planning and serious considerations to organize the tasks. Nevertheless, this approach is quite promising and I am looking forward to seeing more teachers and scholars doing theoretical researches on this topic, as it will contribute to effective language teaching methodology in ELT classes.

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