

Activity Based English Language Teaching in Technical University Affiliated Colleges



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Abstract:

In most of the Colleges affiliated to the Technical Universities in India, English language is being taught as a second language, but the mode of instruction was totally teacher-fronted earlier and the students were left out as passive listeners. English language training was more like a subject than a language. Most of the academicians and course designers reflecting on teacher-learner introspections felt the dire need for the reformations in the curriculum of ESL. This led to task-based curriculum. This paper focuses on the impact of Activity-based learner-centered curriculum at Indian technical colleges. Each chapter of the text prescribed is divided into five sections, first being pre-reading section involving task aiming at thought provoking on a particular topic as a part of listening activity. Second section has activities training the students in reading skills with comprehension check, vocabulary and grammar practice exercises. Third section is for speaking skills, where students are provided with situations for dialogues and debates. Fourth section aims at analytical writing which includes letter writing, E-mailing and report writing. Fifth section concentrates on training the students for life skills focusing on soft skills like communication, team work etc. This curriculum totally changed the roles of teacher and the taught. Teacher has become the trainer or the facilitator where as the learners became the active participants. The present case study investigated teachers' and learners' reactions to a task-based ESL course at a technical University college. For this study, the author who was also one of the teachers teaching the syllabus, collected the teachers' and learners' impressions and experiences doing the course over a period of six months within a semester. Their reactions were identified using qualitative analysis of oral and written data elicited both formally and informally through (a) task analysis (b) learning note books (c) Peer observations (d) feed backs questionnaire and (e) Interviews. The findings thus derived indicated that, the course encouraged learners to become more independent and helped the learners to meet out their real world academic needs.

Key Words: English Language Teaching, vocabulary, grammar, speaking skills

1. Introduction

This case study investigated teachers' and learners' reactions to a Activity-based ESL course at an Indian Technical university. Although the L2 acquisition and pedagogy literature (Ellis, 2003; Long, 2000; Nunan, 1989; Prabhu, 1987; Skehan, 1998) defines *task* in different ways, most studies agree that the crucial feature of tasks is their focus on the communication of meaning. For pedagogical contexts, researchers (e.g., Bygate, Skehan, & Swain, 2001) have defined a *task* as “an activity, susceptible to brief or extended pedagogic intervention, which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective”. Proponents of task-based language teaching have also claimed that it can address the growing need for relevance and accountability in L2 teaching, particularly for learners with specific academic, occupational, or vocational purposes (Long, 2005). In Long's (2000) approach to task-based language teaching, the emphasis on learner-centeredness and relevance is achieved by analyzing the learners' real-world needs and interests. Their needs and interests are then organized and sequenced into a task syllabus, which by definition is a type of analytic syllabus and materials are developed and pedagogical procedures are selected based on context-specific factors such as teacher philosophy and preference; learner age, proficiency, literacy level, aptitude, and cognitive style; the nature of the target linguistic features; and the nature of the learning environment (Long, 2005). In the final stage, performance-based assessment instruments are administered to assess learning outcomes, and the entire course is evaluated. The learners and teachers who were accustomed to traditional teaching questioned whether they possess the English proficiency, oral communication skills, and sociolinguistic and strategic competencies needed to implement communicative approaches (Butler, 2004; Carless, 2003, 2004; Karavas-Doukas, 1995; Hui, 1997; Li, 1998). Teachers have expressed concerns about discipline if learners became noisy while carrying out tasks, particularly in large classes, which can create tension with other teachers and administrators (Carless, 2004; Hui, 1997; Li, 1998). They have also reported some difficulty monitoring learners' language use and voiced concerns about the learners' use of the first language rather than the target language (Carless, 2004; Carless & Gordon, 1997). In terms of learners' perceptions, they have reported appreciation for the more learner-centered and self

directed approach associated with task-based language teaching (Wiriyakarun, 2001). However, they have expressed some reservations about the greater emphasis on expressing and sharing opinions (Hui, 1997) and about the value of peer interaction (McDonough, 2004). In addition, learners with lower English proficiency have expressed reservations about interacting in the target language (Tsui, 1996).

Instructional Context

In response to growing and changing needs of the technical students and train them for employability, this technical university of India thought of revising the English syllabus so that the learners would develop the ability to use English to foster cross-cultural communication, to achieve personal and academic goals, and to promote lifelong learning and carried out a questionnaire-based needs analysis, which revealed that teachers and learners were dissatisfied with the previous course thus proposed a Activity- based syllabus. The University also decided to incorporate learning strategies into the course.

The Activity-Based Syllabus

The University designed the task syllabus targeting the learners' real world interests, such as Indian culture, social and environmental problems, and media programs, and was motivated by the demands of the global market. The tasks also targeted real world activities. The designed course was given through a commercial textbook, Step-by-Step by Pearson Publications. They selected excerpts from the speeches of the people with great profiles and also extracts from the fiction written by famous authors, complemented by the tasks in all four language skills such as Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing as well as the knowledge and skills needed to carry out the tasks. They also created supplementary materials to explicitly introduce learning strategies that were useful for task completion. The target learning strategies included *cognitive strategies* (i.e., techniques that learners can use to acquire knowledge or skills) such as guessing meaning from context, and *metacognitive strategies* (i.e., management techniques that learners can use to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning) such as task analysis and self-reflection. However, explicit information about the language forms relevant for each task was provided as resource materials that the learners could consult if they required additional knowledge about language structure. The course assessment included oral and written task performances, periodic

in-class quizzes, a final examination with tasks similar to those carried out in class throughout the semester.

2. Methodology

Participants

The ESL learner-participants ($N = 60$) were enrolled in the section for Technical study course. They were first-year students in Bachelor of Technology between the ages of 17 and 19. They were all native speakers of Telugu who had studied English in primary and secondary schools for a minimum of 12 years. They had been admitted to the course based on their scores on regional or national entrance examinations for sciences. The learners were of pre-degree level, but more specific information about their proficiency was not available because they had never taken standardized tests, such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). They rarely used English for communication outside class but were exposed to English through mass media, such as music, movies, and the Internet. The EFL teacher-participants ($N = 11$) represented the various types of teachers who worked in the English department at Engineering colleges affiliated to the same Technical University. All the teacher-participants were Telugu speaking people with master's degrees in English Literature; only two of them were trained for teacher education and have at least 8 to 12 years of experience teaching English in a traditional teacher-fronted class.

Sources of Data

This case study drew on data from four primary and two secondary sources to gain a rich understanding of the participants' reactions to the task syllabus. The following sections describe each data type in detail.

Learners' Task Evaluation

Learners completed a task evaluation in English at the end of each task, which consisted of fixed format of questions about the aspects of the task that the learners liked and those that they disliked; the skills, knowledge and strategies they had learned; the real world relevance of the materials; and the teaching approach. The task evaluation included a multiple-choice item about their satisfaction with the amount of class time spent on the skills and knowledge targeted in the task.

Learning Notebooks

The learners were required to keep a learning notebook as part of their portfolio. They were encouraged to record any information about the vocabulary, strategies, skills, and tasks that they were learning. They made entries in their notebooks either during class or in their free time (or both). The teacher-participants periodically collected the learning notebooks of their respective students to monitor their progress and provide feedback as needed.

Peer Observation

Several ESL teacher-participants observed the task-based classes of their colleagues. They received the lesson and materials one or 2 days in advance of the observation and were asked to comment on the effectiveness of the teaching procedures and materials. They provided the teacher concerned with written comments that they recorded during or immediately after the observation.

Course Evaluation

The information obtained from task evaluations and observations was used to create the course evaluation, which consisted of 12 open-ended questions about various aspects of the course, including the teaching approach, the materials and activities, the real world applicability of the content, and the tasks. The remaining two items were a scalar response item about the usefulness of the course for learning the skills, strategies, and areas of knowledge targeted in the course. The learners completed the course evaluation in English during class on the last day of the semester.

Interviews

A secondary data source was informal interviews carried out with learners during the class hours and teacher-participants who acted as observers and provided written comments about the syllabus and materials.

Field Notes

The other secondary data source was the field notes of the teacher-participants themselves regarding their reactions to the teaching materials, which they recorded in a notebook while preparing lessons, during class, and immediately after the class. The teachers also recorded the discussions about the syllabus and materials that occurred during departmental meetings and in informal conversations with their colleagues.

3. Data Analysis

The primary data for this study consisted of the task evaluations, learning notebooks, observations, and course evaluations, and the secondary data were the interviews and teachers' field notes. As is typical in qualitative research (Creswell, 1998, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Rossman & Rallis, 1998), a cyclic, recursive approach to the data analysis was adopted, so that the preliminary reflections guided our subsequent data collection, and the subsequent data helped to refine the reflections. After all the data had been collected, the entire corpus was analyzed for general themes that illustrated the participants' reactions to the task based course. Inductive approach was adopted in which themes emerge from the data.

4. Findings

Teacher and Learner Reactions

In terms of the first research question, which asked how the teachers and learners reacted to the task-based course, analysis of the data revealed that their impressions centered on three themes: (a) increased learner independence, (b) concerns with the course content, and (c) perceptions about real world relevance. The following sections present the findings related to each theme.

Increased Learner Independence

Teachers and learners believed that the task-based course helped the learners to become more independent thinkers and learners. The learners reported that the teaching approach gave them an opportunity to think by themselves to accomplish the tasks and manage their learning. The following comments from the students help reinforcing the above said statement:

- Solved problems by thinking independently
- Felt interesting as the tasks had given them chance to think
- taking pride in their accomplishments
- being more responsible
- remembering what they had learned
- gaining self-confidence
- feeling more curious about learning
- realized the need for independent thinking
- helped the student to realize what exactly he needs to learn
- helped learners utilize the knowledge gained

Course Content

Though learners and teachers initially expressed concerns about the course content, their reactions became more positive as the semester progressed. Their initial concern was just the ‘fear of change’. On the task evaluation for Task 1, half of the learners reported that the linguistic forms relevant for Task 1 (Parts of speeches, gerunds, infinitives) they already knew. Several teachers also complained about the amount of grammar instruction and the language forms targeted in the course. One of the teacher-participants wrote on the observation checklist that “the grammar is too easy . . . it’s not challenging.” When asked in the interviews about what could be done to improve the course, several learners and teachers made suggestions related to grammar instruction, including adding more advanced grammar topics and teacher-led explanations about grammar and assigning grammar exercises. However, by the end of the semester the teachers and learners no longer voiced complaints about the amount or type of grammar instruction provided in the task course, rather they expressed positive reactions to the target language skills and learning strategies. Several learners reported on their task evaluations that the learning strategies introduced in the materials were useful for learning English both inside and outside the classroom. They also reacted positively to the metacognitive strategies that had been targeted in the course, such as *task analysis*, *critical thinking*, and *evaluation*. The teachers also had positive comments about both tasks and the observation classes they have attended of their colleagues.

Real World Relevance

Participants recognized the relevance of the task-based course to the learners’ real world academic needs. Many learners replied that they could apply the skills that they had gained in the task-based course to other academic subjects. The participants believed that the skills they had acquired in the task course were applicable to a variety of academic tasks that they carried out in other courses, such as preparing for examinations, planning and delivering oral presentations, carrying out collaborative projects, and listening to lectures.

Addressing Participants’ Concerns

The analysis of the data regarding task-based course revealed three primary concerns: (a) preparing teachers and learners for the task-based course, (b) providing greater support for the learners, and (c) managing course materials.

Adjusting to Activity-Based Language Teaching

The participants reported that they needed time to adjust to the task based teaching approach they also expressed their inability to get the students into this system. Several learners commented that they had never taken an English course like the task-based course before and their previous English courses simply required them to remember grammar rules. To address this concern, the course design team undertook several revisions designed to help learners and teachers understand and adapt to task-based language teaching. For the learners, the team developed an introductory unit in which learners discuss their ideas about language learning and their roles in the learning process. They included the topic of grammar instruction in this introductory unit so that the learners had opportunities to discuss the role of grammatical knowledge in their previous English-learning experiences and to recognize that the activity-based course emphasizes the application of knowledge and skills. For the teachers, they compiled a detailed teacher's guide that explained the learning strategies targeted in the course, described the objectives for each class, and provided teaching suggestions for each lesson and the teachers were also facilitated a day long workshop assigned to teach the course introducing the principles and philosophy of task-based language teaching and demonstrated how to introduced cognitive and metacognitive strategies explicitly.

Providing Learner Support

The participants expressed concerns about the amount of teacher support and guidance that was provided in the course. The teachers also commented on the need to provide learners with clear instructions and feedback. To provide the learners with additional guidance, the course design team created supplementary materials that helped the learners understands the task assignments and recognizes the steps they needed to complete to perform the tasks. Peer and teacher feedback opportunities were incorporated into the course so that the learners could check their understanding of the task requirements prior to performing them. They also created materials to help the learners improve their time management, prepare for task performances, and recognize what they were learning. They also included a self-evaluation exercise at the end of each task so that learners could reflect on their task performance and assess whether they had achieved their objectives.

Managing Course Materials

The participants had some reservations about the amount of materials used in the task-based course. Some teachers felt that too many activities were assigned for each lesson. The team

undertook two revisions designed to address the participants' concerns with the course materials. First, they reduced the number of materials and activities targeted in each lesson so that the teachers would have more time to address their students' needs. Second, they consolidated the course materials so that the teachers and learners would not have to switch repeatedly between sources during a lesson.

5. Conclusion

This study has made a modest contribution to understanding teachers' and learners' impressions of a activity-based ESL course, but considerable research is still necessary to create a robust empirical base that L2 teachers can draw on when implementing task-based courses. Innovative research should be thoroughly done in creating a suitable method of evaluation of the students' knowledge gained thus but a little focus was observed in this direction. To summarize the findings these teachers and learners generally had positive reactions to the task-based course. They believed that it encouraged learners to become more independent and that it targeted their real world academic needs. Although they initially reacted negatively to the course content because it did not include explicit grammar instruction, they came to appreciate the emphasis on learning strategies and task performance. The teachers as well as learners required activities and information that could help them adjust to task based teaching, and both groups had some concerns with the amount of materials and activities per lesson. In addition, the learners required more support and guidance to carry out the tasks successfully.

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