



The Influence of Task-based Learning on ELT in ASEAN Context

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Abstract

Since task-based learning was proposed in the field of second language acquisition in the 1980s, the popularity of this teaching approach has risen due to the effectiveness in enhancing learners' communicative competence. To complete tasks, learners have opportunities to use the target language in various situations so that they can transfer what they learned in the English classroom in real-life. In the past decade, task-based learning has received increased attention from educators and researchers from all around the world. This article provides the evidence for the influence of task-based learning on ELT in ASEAN context and discusses how teachers and educators in ASEAN context have responded to this teaching method. Additionally, the article also identifies the problems with using task-based learning found in Asian countries. The conclusion is that in order to implement task-based learning effectively, EFL teachers and educational institutions must carefully create teaching syllabi, activities in the classroom and assessments which are suitable for language learners' characteristics, levels of proficiency and limits of the classroom in particular countries.

Keywords: ASEAN context, ELT, Influence, Task-based learning,

1. Task-based Learning

Task-based learning (TBL) was first introduced to educators and researchers in the field of second language acquisition in the mid-Eighties due to the belief that students should be able to communicate in English language effectively. Nunan (2004) suggested that language should not be recognized as a process of memorizing a set of grammar rules and vocabulary. Students should learn language in order to improve their communicative competence. Students should be able to use knowledge that they have studied in the classroom to communicate. Task-based learning is a language teaching approach in which students learn communicate through the completion of tasks. Tasks form the core of the teaching syllabi, the actual classroom activities and the learners' assessment of language learning outcome (Nunan, 2004; Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

There are various interesting characteristics of task-based learning observed by researchers and educators. First, task-based learning supports learning through meaning-based and content-based approach rather than learning through grammatical or linguistic forms. When performing tasks, learners will focus on meaning to complete the tasks (Carless, 2004; Littlewood, 2004). Second, task-based learning is considered a learner-centered approach. Task-based learning encourages interaction between learners. The learner can take on various roles in class, such as group participant, classroom monitor, and risk taker (Nunan, 2005; Richards & Rodgers,



2001). Additionally, task-based learning contains three particular components: purpose, process and product. These components are connected by the task assigned to the learners (Murphy, 2003; Nunan, 2004).

In task-based learning, the structural framework includes three phases. There are different roles for teachers and learners in each phase (Ellis, 2003; Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Skehan, 1996; Willis, 1996). The first phase is pre-task, which refers to the introduction of the task. Teachers have to make sure that learners understand the objectives and the task clearly (Willis, 1996). The second phase is the task cycle. In this phase, learners perform the task given by using the target language to communicate. They have to report what they have done and also the outcome while teachers monitor the classroom and comment on learners' outcome of the task. The third phase is post-task in which learners analyze and discuss the language they used in the performing task (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Willis, 1996).

2. The Influence of Task-based Learning on ELT in ASEAN Context

Since task-based learning has interested many researchers in the field of second language acquisition, it is interesting to find out how the educators and educational institute in ASEAN context respond to this teaching method. Littlewood (2007) reported that national policies in ASEAN context encourage the university, college and school to plan teaching syllabi which involve various kinds of communicative approaches (e.g. communicative language approach and task-based language approach) to improve learners' communicative competence and increase the number of language learners who can communicate in English in their real life effectively. For task-based learning, Nunan (2004, p. 606) adds that in East Asian context "Task-based Language Teaching (the latest methodological realization of Communicative Language Teaching) is the central pillar of government rhetoric."

The situations of task-based learning in some countries in South East Asia which include Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia are presented in this article. In Thailand, it is important to provide opportunities for English language learners to communicate in daily-life situations because Thailand is not an English-speaking country. English is not generally used in daily life. As a consequence, the government set a goal in The 8th National Economic and Social Development Plan (1997-2001) stating that after completing their education, Thai students must be able to communicate in English effectively. Teachers are encouraged to use activities which enhance learners' communicative competence in the classroom (Tachom, 2014). In addition, the National Education Act of 1999 stated that English language teaching in Thailand must put emphasis on learners' needs, encourage learner-centeredness, focus on learners' thinking skills and promote teaching by using a communicative approach. Numerous researchers investigated the effectiveness of using task-based learning in an English classroom in Thailand. The results revealed that task-based learning can successfully improve English language learners' abilities in various skills. After applying this teaching method, learners' English skills, especially speaking, listening and reading, clearly improved. This suggests that task-



based learning is helpful for learners (Pietri, 2015; Pongsawang, 2012; Promruang, 2012; Saeheng & Prammanee, 2012; Sae-Ong, 2010; Saiyod, 2009; Thanghun, 2012).

Moreover, Thai teachers and students have positive attitudes towards task-based learning. McDonough & Chaikitmonkol (2007) found that with using task-based learning, teachers are no longer worried about course content, whether there will be sufficient knowledge of grammar. Apart from that, this kind of teaching method is able to relate language use in the classroom to language use in daily-life situations. However, findings from the author's research study (Bunmak, 2016) exploring Thai EFL teachers' understanding and perceptions of task-based learning revealed that in EFL teachers' opinion, there are a number of problems of using task-based learning in an English classroom. First, the problem that affects the use of task-based learning is that teachers do not have good understanding and experience in using task-based learning. Second, in terms of learners' English proficiency, the interaction in groups can be dominated by learners who have a high level of English proficiency. The third problem is limited teaching time and big class size in English classrooms in Thailand. Moreover, it is difficult to find suitable materials to use in task-based learning classroom. Lastly, there is also the problem with evaluation. It is difficult for teachers to ensure the reliability and validity of the evaluation for students' performance in task-based learning classroom.

In Indonesia, according to Marcellino (2008), language learning in Indonesia is quite complicated because Indonesia has more than seven hundred languages and various dialects. Nevertheless, the implementation of task-based learning has been accepted by teachers and educators in the field of language teaching. Griffiths (2001) describes how communicative language teaching and task-based learning approach have been applied in the curriculum for secondary schools in Indonesia called Curriculum 1994. However, it is difficult for schools in Indonesia to swing the trend in curriculum design from form-focused based to task-based syllabi. Moreover, variables such as sociocultural, political and natural characteristics of each classroom should be carefully considered when designing task-based syllabus. Rohani (2013) investigates the use of task-based learning to improve students' oral communication skills. Oral communication skills are considered the most important skill for Indonesian university students. Indonesian university students should be able to communicate with native speakers in various situations at work. He found that the students thought that they were happy with activities in the task-based classroom. They perceived task-based learning as a tool to encourage them to communicate and give them opportunities to speak, interesting teaching materials and relaxed classroom atmosphere. However, the results reveal that students faced with problems during the implementation of task-based learning. First, there are problems concerning students' level of English proficiency since they have limited vocabulary so that they have difficulty in producing sentences and expressions in communication. Moreover, students also perceived themselves as low in proficiency level and self-confident. Also, different cultural and professional factors lead to several problems in the implementation of task-based learning in Indonesian context. Cultural factors are, for example, the relationship between teachers and students and learning perspectives.



The professional factors include teachers' class preparations and knowledge of the teaching approach (Mercellino, 2008; Adi, 2011).

In addition, task-based learning has been also supported in Vietnam. Vietnamese EFL teachers commonly use this language teaching approach. Canh and Barnard (2009, p. 23) demonstrated that the new version of English language curriculum in high schools in Vietnam emphasized that students should have basic communicative competence. They should be able to communicate with native speakers of English in their daily life (Hung, 2014). Additionally, as cited in Barnard and Viet (2010), Ministry of Education and Training (2006, P.6) states that "communicative skills are the goal of the teaching of English at the secondary school while formal knowledge of the language serves as the means to the end." Consequently, the new textbooks used in EFL classroom for Vietnamese secondary schools are based on task-based learning syllabus design (Hung, 2014). Furthermore, various research studies have been undertaken with Vietnamese EFL teachers' beliefs and perceptions of task-based learning curriculum and classroom practice. The results showed that the majority of the teachers had positive attitudes towards task-based learning and its curriculum. They believed that task-based learning activities are interesting and informative. Additionally, they thought that activities in task-based learning can effectively motivate students and improve their learning outcome (Barnard and Viet, 2010; Cahn, 2007).

Despite many research results that support the effectiveness of task-based learning in enhancing learners' language competence, there are challenges in implementing task-based learning in Vietnam. First, norm-reference examination is an important barrier in teaching students communicatively. Teachers sometimes have to rely on knowledge and exercise in textbooks more than activities or tasks. Second, teachers have insufficient understanding and experience of using task-based learning. Even though they recognize the advantages of implementing task-based learning in an English classroom, they do not apply the teaching method in their actual classroom due to their strong beliefs in form-based instruction. Teachers seem to put more emphasis on grammar. In other words, teachers want students to produce language correctly not fluently (Yen, 2016).

However, although some countries, such as Malaysia and Singapore, are different from other countries since they are considered English speaking countries, it was observed that task-based learning has also been used in the field of English language teaching. In Malaysia, the new version of Malaysian Integrated Curriculum for Secondary Schools (KBSM) also put more emphasis on communication skills because they see communication in English as an important tool for work. The main reason for this change is because the way English is used in society or in everyday life should be reflected by English learned in the classroom. Therefore, ESL teachers are encouraged to apply communicative approaches such as communicative language teaching and task-based learning (Ministry of Education, Malaysia, 2003). Mustafa (2010) found that the communicative approach has been popular in the field of second language acquisition in Malaysia for a long time. It was found from the study that half of the teachers are familiar with task-based learning. Likewise, Ahmed and Bidin



(2016) investigated the effect of implementing task-based learning on writing skills of ESL learners in Malaysia. He found from student feedback that most students perceived task-based learning as an effective teaching method. They agreed that task-based learning helped improved their English abilities.

However, ESL teachers in Malaysia tend to have many problems with using task-based learning in their actual teaching (Hamida, 2004; Mustafa, 2010). First, teachers' inadequate knowledge, training and experience of implementing task-based learning can be obstacle for successfully applying this teaching method. This might be due to the lack of opportunities to apply it in their actual classroom. Sidek (2012) examined the instructional framework of English language teaching in ESL secondary school in Malaysia. The results showed that the curriculum in ESL secondary schools in Malaysia does not conform to the characteristics of a task-based learning curriculum. Mustafa (2010) investigated the level of use of task-based learning among ESL teachers in Malaysia. The findings reveal that a number of teachers used task-based learning at either Level 0 (Non-Use) or Level 1 (teachers who were only introduced to task-based learning). Second, teachers also perceived that class size is considered another problem in adopting task-based learning especially in Malaysia where there are normally 40-50 students in the classroom. The teachers found it hard to provide opportunities for every student to speak. Moreover, there are insufficient research studies regarding task-based learning. The findings from research studies are important evidence that helps teachers, stock holders and schools realize the various problems in the classroom and help them find suitable solutions to those problems (Mustafa, 2010).

Conclusion

Task-based learning has been popular and influential in ASEAN context. Various researches have been done with task-based learning in ASEAN context. EFL teachers in ASEAN context have positive attitudes towards task-based learning and they recognize its benefits very well. Many of them have been trying to apply this teaching method in their curriculum and actual teaching. However, researchers and educators found that there are some problems with implementing task-based learning in an English classroom. Each country seems to experience similar problems. The comparison of the problems with implementing task-based learning in some countries in ASEAN context is presented below.

Table 1 Problems with using task-based learning in an English classroom

| Countries | Problems with Using Task-based Learning |
|-------------|---|
| 1. Thailand | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teachers' understanding - Learners' level of proficiency - Classroom management - Teaching materials - Evaluation |

| Countries | Problems with Using Task-based Learning |
|------------------|---|
| 2. Vietnam | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Norm-reference examination- Teachers' insufficient understanding and experience |
| 3. Indonesia | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Curriculum- Learners' level of proficiency- Culture- Teachers' knowledge and preparation |
| 4. Malaysia | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Teachers' inadequate knowledge, training and experience- Curriculum- Class size |

As indicated in Table 1, it was apparently shown that all four countries face similar problems with using task-based learning. In Thailand, there are problems in implementing task-based learning in English language teaching involving various aspects: teachers' understanding of the method, learners' level of proficiency, classroom management, teaching materials and evaluation. In Vietnam, the major problem with using task-based learning concerns the norm-reference examination which unables teachers to put more emphasis on activities than exercise in the books. Besides, Vietnamese English teachers do not have efficient understanding and experience in implementing task-based learning since they rarely apply the teaching method in their actual classroom.

In Indonesia, it is noted that the major obstacle to implementing task-based learning is cultural difference since there are many languages and dialects in the country. Other problems deal with Indonesian curriculum, learners' low level of proficiency and teachers' preparation and knowledge. In addition, in English speaking country like Malaysia, there are also problems with using task-based learning. First, teachers, like Vietnamese English teachers, do not have adequate knowledge, training and experience of using task-based learning. Secondly, the curriculum in ESL secondary schools in Malaysia does not support the use of task-based learning. Moreover, having about 40-50 students in an English classroom is also an obstacle for implementing task-based learning in Malaysia.

Suggestions and Pedagogical Implications

Based on the theoretical review in this article, it is important for teachers and educational institutions to carefully apply this teaching method by considering the specific factors in the context of their countries. Teachers who want to use task-based learning in an English classroom should understand the teaching method and the nature of their students clearly in order to find the best way to use task-based learning to enhance students' language proficiency successfully. Therefore, some pedagogical



implications for English teachers in the ASEAN context are presented so that the teachers can increase their awareness of the significance of task-based learning and apply the teaching method in their instruction successfully. First, since teachers' understanding and attitudes towards task-based learning are considered very important, it can affect the way learners will be exposed to English language. One recommendation which could be made is that teachers should study and practice this teaching method by, for example, attending a program or workshop on task-based learning to increase their understanding, knowledge and experience as well as familiarize them with task-based learning. Moreover, in relation to the problems and concerns with implementing task-based learning in an English classroom in ASEAN context, teachers should be aware of the educational factors in the context of their countries such as different learners' English proficiency and big class size as mentioned earlier so that they can avoid the problems which could happen in their classroom.

About the Author

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