Chapter 8

Teaching and Learning to Write: Using a Task-Based Approach in an EFL Class

Abraham Panavelil Abraham
University of Nizwa, Oman

ABSTRACT

Teaching writing is one of the most challenging tasks an EFL teacher has to face, and students find writing a difficult skill to develop. This chapter, however, focuses on Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) as a successful tool for tackling this problem. It defines TBLT and examines its importance for enhancing the writing skills of the EFL students, giving examples of tasks that have been successfully tried out in the classroom. The chapter also examines the use of various strategies for increasing EFL learners’ involvement in reading-to-writing activities.

INTRODUCTION

Writing is an important skill that can open up a world of possibilities for any student. Even in these days of the Internet and other technologies, written communication in English is still an asset for the aspiring student. But for a majority of our students writing is a skill they find hard to acquire. The major problems they face in writing are (1) finding an apt word suitable for the topics, (2) using appropriate tenses based on the situation, (3) using correct spelling and punctuation, (4) organizing ideas neatly and coherently in paragraphs.

Such difficulties place a heavy burden on students, often causing them to lose interest in writing. They find it difficult to write a composition based on their own ideas and they are afraid of making mistakes in grammar, usage, vocabulary etc. However, one way to resolve this problem is to use a TBLT approach in an EFL class as it creates a free instructional environment in which students and teacher work together and collaborate in a relaxed atmosphere.

TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING: AN APPROACH

Task-based language teaching is an approach rather than a method which creates a natural context for using the target language in the classroom. It allows students to explore their ideas and choose
their own words, and thus become active learners. It also gives teachers an opportunity to develop activities in the form of interesting tasks on familiar subjects. The lesson is based on the completion of a task and the language studied is determined by what happens as the students proceed with the work. It is an approach that offers students material that they have to actively engage with in the process of their learning, enabling them to explore their ideas freely and use their own words without worrying about mistakes in grammar, vocabulary or other mechanical aspects of writing. When they practice to write continually and complete their tasks, they can build their vocabulary and improve their handling of grammar, spelling, punctuation, and useful expressions. The familiarity of the topic and the enjoyment of the task are a solution to students’ writing difficulties.

Different Views

TBLT is an outcome of the communicative approach and plays an important role in developing communicative language competence. The goal of language teaching is to develop what Hymes (1972) called “communicative competence” (p.272) and according to Johnson K. (1984) the acquisition of communicative ability in a language is an example of skill development (p.193). Richards (1986) says that the two types of materials used for communicative approaches to language teaching are text-based and task-based (p.73).

This communicative approach later evolved into a task-based language teaching method. Since the publication of Jane Willis’ A Framework for Task-Based Learning in 1996, the word ‘task’ has been popular in ELT circles. Willis defines ‘task’ as “a goal-oriented activity in which learners use language to achieve a real outcome” (p.53). Hence, tasks are activities that require learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through a process of thought, and which allows teachers to control and regulate that process. In TBLT, assessment is primarily based on task outcomes rather than on the correctness of language. According to Foster (1999), TBLT methodologies “share a common idea, giving learners tasks to transact, rather than items to learn and provides an environment which best promotes the natural language learning process”. (p. 69).

Skehan (2003) defines ‘task’ as an activity in which meaning is primary (p.3), while according to Nunan (2004), ‘task’ is a “piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form” (p.10). Prabhu (1987) saw a task as “an activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process” (p. 24). Prabhu further stated that there are essentially three types of tasks: filling an information gap, where students use language to share, give or gain a piece of information; filling a reasoning gap, where students use language to share opinions; and problem-solving, where language is used to solve a problem (p.34). Whatever the focus of a particular task, students are asked to perform it in response to topics that have been assigned. This means a task can be anything that motivates students to learn the target language. Hence, in developing writing skills, teachers should select tasks that will motivate learners, engage their attention and promote their writing skills as efficiently as possible.

Dave and Jane Willis (2007), in their book Doing Task-based Teaching, listed seven kinds of task that can be used in an EFL class to enhance student writing skills:

- **Listing**: Brainstorming and/or fact finding (qualities, priorities, things, features, things to do, reasons)
- **Ordering and Sorting**: Sequencing, ranking, classifying (sequencing story pictures, ranking items according to cost, popularity, negative or positive)
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