Task- Based Learning: Arguments and Concerns

Nguyễn Văn Sơn

Abstract— **Task – based learning has been a hotly discussed issue in the scholarly world. In this article, after the introduction of historical background and its definition, the arguments and concerns are clearly presented. Task –based learning is proven to increase learners' motivation, enhance learners' spontaneous interaction and increase exposure to the target language. However, some concerns about it are arisen because it is thought to be not appropriate for low-level students and lack focus on forms. Some potential solutions based on literature are provided to these concerns.**

Index Terms— **language exposure, motivation, spontaneous interaction, task-based learning**

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, English has become the international communicative language used widely all over the world. Therefore, teaching and learning it have drawn attention from everyone at every age and level. A variety of methods were born as the aids to help people learn it better so that they can use it proficiently. Some traditional ones include grammar translation method and audio-lingual method. Total physical response, Silent Way and Neuro-linguistic Programming are to name some alternative methods. One method belonging to current communicative approach called "Task-based learning" seem to be the concerned-about recent one where learning and teaching processes are conducted wholly through communicative tasks. Focusing mainly on meaning and language use after the tasks completed as an assistance for language acquisition, therefore, task-based language learning has proved to be an effective way for language acquisition. Hence, it should be applied more widely in language learning and teaching. In this essay, the overview of task-based learning, the reasons for its effectiveness and some concerns related will be clearly presented.

II. OVERVIEW OF TASK-BASED LEARNING

A. Historical background

In the 1970s, communicative language teaching approach became more and more common among the world of second language acquisition scholars and teachers. In the 1980s, the term "task" gradually substituted "communicative activity" and as a result, task-based language learning turned to be the updated teaching method widely utilized in the language classrooms.

B. Definition

There are various definitions of "task".

Nguyễn Văn Sơn, Center for International Education, Water Resources University, Hanoi, Vietnam,

Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001) define a task as "an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective" (p. 11). Agreeing with that, the definition by Shehadeh (2005) says a task is an activity that is goal-oriented, content-focused; has a real outcome and reflects real-life language use and language need and Ganta (2015) points out that tasks aim at "meaning-focused language use" so they give the participants the chance to be "language users" rather than "language learners" (p. 2716). According to Nunan (2004), a task is "a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form." (p. 4). Therefore, task-based learning pays attention to "communication and conveying message" (Ganta, 2015, p. 2760). In the other words, learners may use the language with speed and confidence although sometimes they have to sacrifice grammatical accuracy (Willis & Willis, 2009).

To sum up, from my perspective, tasks let learners communicate in their own ways in the second language to achieve some real-life goals.

III. ARGUMENTS

A. Task –based learning increases motivation among learners

The evidence supporting for this point is the result of a study carried out by Ruso (1999) saying that task-based learning is "helpful in students' motivation and learning. It encouraged students' practice opportunities of the target language receptivity in the lessons as a result of presenting various tasks." (pp. 13-14). Another research by Akhtar, Khan & Kiran (2014) also argues that the tasks based learning cut down on learners' stress in classroom and at the same time their motivation increases while they participate in simulations, role-play and other activities.

Indeed, task-based learning helps learners to be motivated in the class for three main reasons. First of all, it brings them to the real-life world. It is proved that people tend to take part in a task which has authenticity, personal meaning and relevance to their work (Voke, 2002). In task-based learning, in each lesson, students are provided with a task which is communicative and close to real life and the purpose of task is to increase the learners' time of working to "experiment spontaneously, individually and originally with the foreign language" so the task will bring the learners with the "new personal experience" with the second language (European Commission, 2009, pp. 3-4). It also recalls the memories or experiences in the past for the learners (Richards & Rodgers,

2001). In addition, Willis & Willis (2009), claiming "Leaners may engage with a task simply because the topic is appealing." (p. 4) give an example of a task to raise motivation among learners "Write a list and agree on the three most important ingredients of a good party." (Kay & Jones, 2000, p.62 as cited in Willis & Willis, 2009, p.4).

Secondly, task-based learning gives learners a chance to improve their performance. In accordance with Ellis (2005, cited in Shehadeh & Coombe, 2010), in the cognitive perspective, task-based learning gives the learners an opportunity to enhance 3 aspects of performance including fluency which is the "capacity to communicate in real time", accuracy which is the "ability to use the target language according to its norms" and complexity which is the "ability to use more elaborate and complex TL structures and forms" (Skehan, 2003 as cited in Shehadeh & Coombe, 2010, p. 2). This definitely enhances learners' English skill and makes them feel more motivated in learning this language.

Last but not least, learners create an opportunity to co-work with their mates in task-based learning or show "partnership and collaboration" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 229). Research studies state that group-work encourages leaners to be active in learning and moreover, improve decision-making, critical thinking and communication skills (Implementing group work in the classroom, n.d.). To be more specific, Ganta (2015) indicates that in task-based learning, learners create a chance to work and cooperate with others in groups so the relationships among them will be established. It is this bond that encourages them to involve actively in learning because they are really working with their peers as stated by Shehadeh & Coombe (2010) that pair work or group work in task-based learning not only makes them responsible in their work but also involves them more in the learning process.

Therefore, more often than not, learners' motivation will be really enhanced when task-based learning is conducted in classroom, which is regarded as "one of the primary causes of success and failure in second language learning" (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p. 344).

B. Task – based learning enhances spontaneous interaction

When task-based learning is utilized in the classroom, students are allowed to use the vocabulary and grammar they already have. For example, learners are asked to act as a receptionist in a five-star hotel talking with the guest when he/she mislaid his/her luggage so they have to interact with each other to deal with the real situation. Thus, it provides them with an opportunity to both use the language they already know and pay attention to as well as learn from their friends' language so it helps to gain gradual confidence and eventually for them to interact spontaneously in terms of two main perspectives.

First and foremost, it is the sociocultural perspective. To be more specific, when learners do the tasks, the interactions will wake their cognitive processes including cognitive and language development up; besides, the cooperative establishment of knowledge in such tasks is of importance to the language learning (Shehadeh & Coombe, 2010).

Secondly, input perspective cannot be overlooked in this case. Accordingly, through interaction, learners stand a chance to get feedback suitable with their comprehension level, thereby leading to the "negotiated modification of conversation" and then an important factor of second language acquisition, "comprehensible input" (Shehadeh & Coombe, 2010, p. 1). To be short, Shehadeh & Coombe (2010) conclude that tasks facilitate students by letting them negotiate meaning, modify input and pay more attention to the second language's part. Therefore, they will probably strengthen the ability to interact in an impromptu way.

C. Task – based learning increases exposure to the language

In the task-based learning, students are encouraged to communicate in English all the times regardless of the accuracy so the more they do the tasks, the more they are exposed to the language. As a result, the more exposure to the language, the more the learners "acquire" it (Krashen, 1982 as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 36). It means the exposure can result in learners' better achievement in language. Lightbown and Spada (2006) also indicate that when students collaborate with each other in the task, they can gain and create a big amount of language and although errors may occur, task-based learning presents learners with many more opportunities to speak the aimed language. Therefore, through the task, the access to English is greater and greater, which eases the language acquisition because "language acquisition is a matter of exposure" (Galliot, 2007, para. 1).

IV. SOME CONCERNS ABOUT TASK-BASED LEARNING

A. Task – based learning is unsuitable for low-level students

In order to successfully conduct task-based learning in classroom, teachers may question the appropriateness of tasks to the learners' current level or the difficulty of tasks which is "the cognitive load and clarity of the goal of the task, code complexity and interpretive density of the language to be used" (Candlin, 1987 as cited in Tavakoli, 2009). Skehan (1998, cited in Tavakoli, 2009) gives the definition of task difficulty in terms of code complexity including vocabulary load, redundancy and density, communicative stress which comprises of time limits, time pressure, speed, number of participants; cognitive complexity which consists of cognitive familiarity comprising of familiarity of the topic, familiarity of the discourse genre and familiarity of the task itself and cognitive processing with information clarity and sufficiency of information given. More notably, Tavakoli (2009) argues that regarding cognitive demand, both teachers and learners complained the difficulty they suffered in understanding the task such as the story, the follow-up and realizing what was going on in the story. Tavakoli (2009) also maintains that they found the task challenging because task-based learning asks for "certain vocabulary and structures that the learners did not know." (p. 10). Besides, according to Tavakoli (2009), the overload of information in a task is stated to enhance its difficulty. To support this

viewpoint, Ganta (2015) points out that low-level students who are not equipped with linguistic knowledge will struggle to participate in a task. They may not understand the demands of the task and "find it hard to make themselves understood while taking part in the task" (p. 2767). Thus, eventually, demotivation or the loss of confidence can be brought about. Ellis (2006), however, argues that teachers can modify the task difficulty by using the appropriate methodology and make sure that learners have the tactics to take part in task-based learning. Sharing the same viewpoint, Griffey & Housner (2007) suggest that if the task challenges learners too hard, teachers can reduce the task difficulty and vice versa to "do the task higher or lower, farther or closer, faster or closer, with a longer or shorter implement, or with a larger or smaller ball or target." (p. 45).

From my perspective, it is the teachers that determine how difficult the task is to carry out task-based learning. After observing the class and well understanding the level of students in terms of knowledge, skills or even conditions, teachers may design tasks which are suitable for their students, find the materials to support the tasks, give students useful language relevant to the tasks. Hence, the question of the difficulty of tasks by the opponents is seemingly answered.

B. Task – based learning lacks sufficient focus on form

Due to the fact that during task-based learning, learners spend most of the time communicating with each other to do the tasks and they may say what they want without the interruption or immediate correction from teachers, many researchers raise concerns about the existence of form or accuracy in learners' long-term speaking skill. Skehan (1996) suggests that if the learners excessively focus on meaning during the task without noticing the forms, their strategic solutions will be restricted. Therefore, task-based approach may not be reliable to "automatically drive inter-language forward", and it will be necessary "to think about the "methods of focusing on form without losing the values of tasks as realistic communication motivators, and as opportunities to trigger acquisitional processes" (Skehan, 1996, p. 42).

In fact, task-based learning "does not exclude a focus on form" but there is a "marriage of meaning and form" to establish one of the main features of this kind of instruction (Van den Branden, 2006, p. 9). However, if yes, there are potential solutions to these concerns. There should be a harmonious combination between meaning and form in the task. Specifically, teachers may provide students with some necessary and important vocabulary and structures at the beginning so that they can refer to during the task completion. After the task, as proposed by Willis (1996, cited in Skehan, 2003), language focus and practice will be kept eyes on. More interestingly, forms or grammatical items may be learnt or discovered from "its role in meaningful communication" by the activities to catch attention and raise awareness (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p. 181). For example, students can learn present perfect through the task of talking about life experiences (what they have ever done or never done).

V. CONCLUSION

Task-based learning has been the subject of widespread debate and controversy. This essay has attempted to discuss the benefits and drawbacks of task-based learning. Specifically, task-based learning plays a significant role in enhancing motivation, interaction and exposure to the language whereas it is criticized due to the unsuitability for the low-level learners and the deficiency of focus on form. I hold my conviction that task-based learning is an effective tool to acquire the language because of its aforementioned advantages. Despite some critiques, its potentials should not be ignored and clearly more can be done to make task-based learning more efficient and widely applied in the future.

REFERENCES

[1] Akhtar, N., Khan, T., & Kiran, S. (2014). The effectiveness of TBL in EFL learners' performance in Pakistan. *European Academic Research, 2*(4), 4665-4677.

[2] Ellis, R. (2006). The methodology of task-based teaching. *The Asian EFL Journal Quarterly, 8*(3), 19-45.

[3] European, C. (2009). Task-based Learning. Retrieved from www.languages.dk

[4] Galliot, L. (2007). Language acquisition is a matter of exposure. Retrieved from New York Times: http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/26/style/26iht-alang.1.5454742.html

[5] Ganta, T. G. (2015). The strengths and weaknesses of task-based learning (TBL). *Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies, 3*(16), 2760-2771.

[6] Griffey, D. C., & Housner, L. D. (2007). *Designing effective instructional tasks for physical education and sports.* Illinois: Human Kinetics.

[7] *Implementing group work in the classroom*. (n.d.). Retrieved from Center for Teaching Excellence, University of Waterloo : https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/alternatives-lecturing/group-work/implementing-group-work-classroom

[8] Ligthbown, P. M., & Spada, N. (2006). *How languages are learned* (3rd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[9] Nunan, D. (2004). *Task-based language teaching.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[10] Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2001). *Approaches and methods in language teaching* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[11] Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2014). *Approaches and methods in language teaching.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[12] Richards, J., & Schmidt, R. (2002). *Longman dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* (3rd ed.). Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.

[13] Ruso , N. (1999). The Influence of Task Based Learning on EFL Classrooms. *Asian EFL Journal*, 1-23.

[14] Shehadeh, A., & Coombe, C. (2010). Introduction: From Theory to Practice in Task-based learning. In A. Shehadeh, & C. Coombe, *Applications of Task-based learning in TESOL* (pp. 1-7). Virginia: Teaching English for speakers of other languages.

[15] Skehan, P. (1996). A framework for the implementation of task-based instruction. *Applied Linguistics, 17*(1), 38-62.

[16] Tavaloki, P. (2009). Investigating task difficulty: learners' and teachers' perceptions. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics, 19*(1), 1-25.

[17] Van den Branden , K. (2006). *Task-based language education: from theory to practice* . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[18] Voke, H. (2002, February). *Motivating students to learn*. Retrieved from ASCD : http://www.ascd.org/publications/newsletters/policy-priorities/feb02/num28/Motivating-Students-to-Learn.aspx

[19] Willis, D., & Willis, E. (2009). Infinite possibilities: expanding limited opportunity in language education . Paper presented at 8th Annual JALT Pan-SIG Conference . Chiba, Japan: Tokyo Gakuen University.

Nguyễn Văn Sơn, Honors Bachelor Degree of English Language Teacher Education, University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam National University is a lecturer of English language in Center for International Education, Water Resources University.