

Teaching Grammar through Task-Based Language Teaching

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Abstract

The issue of Task Based Language Teaching and its influence on the process of English learning and teaching has been a focus of much pedagogical research. Task- Based Language Teaching has resulted in facilitating and improving the process of English teaching and learning, including grammar teaching.

This study shows the continuity between task-based language teaching and its influence on teaching grammar. It is an approach toward the effects that task-based language teaching has on the students' grammar learning, and teachers' instructional processes of grammar.

In sequence of approving such claims, forty english teachers participated in the study. They were distributed a questionnaire of 11 questions, which were all multiple choice questions.

So, the study brings out the role of TBLT, through the eyes of teachers, to let further research with learners.

The results showed that TBLT rises significantly the grammar knowledge in students, and it provides meaningful results compared to traditional grammar teaching methods.

Keywords: Task-Based Language Teaching, Grammar teaching, task-supported structural syllabus.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching English as a foreign language is a process where a different language structure is being taught. Hereby, methodological peers and

teachers use different approaches, techniques and methods to teach such structures. The success of a language teaching process depends on many factors, whether they are external or internal factors. In a classroom where English language is taught, there are many learners with different levels of English, different age groups, different ethnicities, and cultures. Teachers try to bring and apply many approaches, techniques and methods to adopt such needs. These approaches and techniques, even though applied differently, have the same purpose and destination: language learning.

The four basic skills of English language are: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Though, they act like links of a chain, which can function only when related with each other. When mastering a language effectively, there is a prerequisite: mastering its grammar as well. Learners tend to learn grammar effectively, if they want to be efficient users of English.

Nevertheless, effective grammar teaching requires many steps and procedures, which should be arranged carefully, and which tend to lead to successful grammar mastering of a foreign language.

In the past, curricula and even different teaching methodologies have provided learners with traditional instruction of grammar structures of a foreign language. The traditional method relied on grammar translation process, which required learners to learn English mechanically. It was resulted that such approaches were not successful and led to learners' loss of interest on learning English and the implementation of new approaches on grammar teaching.

As a result, new and productive grammar teaching methods and approaches were established, which provided learners with effective grammar learning, and facilitated teaching process as well. Task-Based Language Teaching & Learning was one of the approaches in language learning, including grammar, which first served as a motivational tool to learners that conducted successful language structures' learning. TBLT provides effective grammar learning by using communicative competences.

In a TBLT, the learner engages in many tasks and activities, where language is not considered as a target but as a tool for communication. Nevertheless, grammar learning is divided in two groups, the group that considers grammar as essential in learning a foreign language and the other group who claims that learners should

give importance to meaning rather than form. However, TBLT proved that the two principles become one, when learners learn grammar through tasks and activities they learn its form, together with meaning.

Baleghizadeh and Ghobadi (2012), list characteristics of TBLT as follows:

- Learners get encouraged to use language by interacting with each other;
- They use language creatively and spontaneously through tasks and problem;
- Learners learn language by relating it to the real world activities;
- Learners' assessment is firstly based on the task/activity outcome;
- TBLT is student-centered.

According to Farahani and Nejad (2009), "Task-Based Language Teaching is predicated on the principle that having learners perform tasks which help them to develop knowledge and skill in the second language in accordance with the way their own language learning mechanisms work".

However, TBLT does not strictly focus on grammar learning, but through everyday tasks and interactive activities, grammar is learned by itself, and learners tend to develop adequate structures faster.

Sanchez (2004) considers that "task based approach can only be fully understood if it is contrasted with preceding methods and analyzed within mainstream of communicative methodology".

Overall, TBLT provides learners with communicative tasks and activities that are related to real life situations, and that allows learners to interact at the highest level with each other, But, when it comes to grammar learning, what is the role of TBLT, and what are the effects and results of such instructional methods? Is there any significant difference between the grammar knowledge of students who are taught grammar through Task-Based Language Teaching and those who are not?

These are the main questions that this study will try to answer, by investigating the experience of English teachers, who brought their everyday teaching process into light.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Why teaching Grammar?

The issue of grammar learning and teaching has been a major concern throughout the language development. Though, Nassaji and Fotos (2011) have rightly claimed that “nothing in the field of language pedagogy has been as controversial as the role of grammar teaching”.

As far as grammar teaching is concerned, there have been many divisions, where the main divisions are: Pre-grammarians, who claim that grammar learning is the most important element, the essential tool, and learners must learn it in order to produce adequate structures; Anti-grammarians, who proposed that a language can be acquired successfully through communicative practice, and there was no need for grammar instruction; and the Moderate group which led to the establishment of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which pointed out that grammar should not be overemphasized, neither be ejected. Learners should learn the form and meaning, both simultaneously, (Baleghizadeh and Ghobadi, 2012).

However, today, many scholars and researchers agree that the role of grammar teaching is very important, yet not central, in the field of language learning and teaching. Hereby, Fotos (2004),s claims that the ongoing research indicates that grammar responses are necessary, if we want language learners to achieve high level of proficiency in English language, or any other target language.

Ellis (2006), also gives a big importance to grammar teaching, by emphasizing that grammar should not be relied only in the form of grammatical structures, but also explore the meanings and uses of such structures.

The effects of task-based language teaching in Grammar

Task based language teaching requires learners to interact with each other. Hereby, it requires active interaction between learners through communicative tasks and activities. TBLT offers an environment which allows learners to free themselves and feel familiar with the target language. So, through these tasks learners use target language naturally even if they do not know the grammar structures. The Task approach offers more effective ways for the learners to adopt the structures and learn them easily. In such processes learners have the chance to do a task in which they are involved, and their only aim is

to finish this task, even though they do not deal well with the grammar, but they will do their best to use it correctly. And when such processes repeat and become more intensive, learners tend to adopt grammatical structures very fast and more accurately than traditional grammar learning methods, (Büyükkarci, 2009).

“One of the most important things about TBLT is that it promotes learners’ confidence by providing them with plenty of opportunities to use language in the classroom without being constantly afraid of making mistakes”, (Willis & Willis, 2007).

Tasks provide learners with a stress free environment, which does not affect the communication negatively. If learners have pressure in any task, their communication might become inappropriate or they use mother tongue. But, even if their language is incompetent, is better than using mother language.

TBLT was first developed by N. Prabhu, Branden (2006). Prabhu and Long supported the idea that language should be learned by meaning exchange, rather than learning the form only. When learners engage in performing different tasks, they learn more effectively by having their mind on the task rather than on a strict form. They also consider that the main focus of a task is to get them done, and language is the only instrument to do it, so learners focus on using the language freely without focusing on the correct form. In order to reach such goals, tasks should be carefully prepared, and chosen by teachers and pedagogical supervisors, and in accordance with the school curricula.

Grammar Tasks & Teacher

In teaching grammar, Task Based activities require from learners to use some particular language items to complete a task. Grammatical tasks differ from classroom exercises because while engaging in tasks learners are free to say whatever comes in their mind (regarding to the topic); they focus on conveying meaning, and give the best of their performance to their pair, which leads them to successful use of grammar structures, Rashtchi and Keyvanfar (2007). Learners try not only to convey meaning but also to use definite grammatical items to complete the task.

There are many tasks that teachers can incorporate into their classes. Some of them will be shortly described:

Consciousness-Raising (C-R) Tasks: (GCRTs) Integrate the students in the development of grammatical knowledge through interaction. Shokouhi (2009) claims that “CR tasks are aimed at assisting learners to notice grammar forms through meaning-focused interaction”. Through GCRTs, learners find out the grammar rules and principles while being engaged with such tasks, hereby teacher does not give any explicit rule, but learners are free to find grammatical rules and structures.

Phases of TBI Model are:

Pre-Task: The topic and the task are introduced to the students in the pre-task stage and the teacher makes the students remember the old or new vocabulary. “The purpose of the pre-task phase is to prepare students to perform the task in ways that will promote acquisition” (Ellis, 2003).

Task Cycle: This stage includes the period when learners perform the task given to them by teachers, by interacting with their peers. This is a stage that aims to create an environment suitable for the learners to tend to improve their communications skills, (Yayli, 2006).

Post Task: Willis & Willis (2001) call the post task stage as language focus. After finishing the task, learners are conscious about the grammar structures they have used and the unconscious improvement of such structures they have done during the interactional tasks.

Methodology

This part of the paper will describe the context of the study, the participants, and the procedures of data collection.

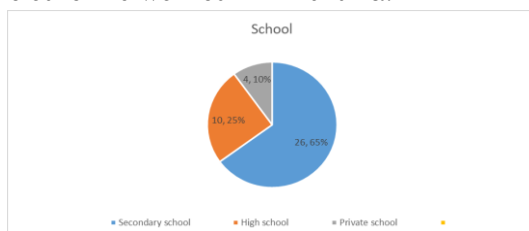
Means

For the purpose of this study, quantitative methods were used. A questionnaire of 12 questions was compiled. This questionnaire consisted of two parts: the first part consisted of 4 questions, general questions related with the participant experience background. Then, the second part consisted of 12 questions, which had 4 multiple choice items. The questions posed to the participants dealt with grammar learning through TBLT, and the teachers’ experiences in regard to grammar teaching. The questionnaire was designed by the researcher. (see Appendix 1).

Participants

Initially 60 teachers were chosen to participate in the study. Later, only 40 agreed to fill in the questionnaire. 26 of the teachers were secondary school English teachers; 10 of them were high school teachers, and 4 of them were teachers at private secondary schools. Out of 40, 32 of them were females, whereas only 8 were men. This was due to the big number of Female teachers employed in the public education system in the Republic of Kosovo.

The teachers' age ranged from 23-55, who taught English in different schools around Kosovo. 18 of them worked in the municipality of Vitia; 4 of them in the municipality of Ferizaj ; 3 worked in the municipality of Podujeva; 5 of them in the municipality of Peja and the other 10 worked in Prishtina:



The average English classes per week in secondary and high schools in Kosovo are 2 or 3. So, choosing teachers who teach learners with different age, grade and English level was done purposely, in order to come up with more specific and accurate data.

Procedures

In order to find and evaluate the effects of Task-based Language teaching in the process of grammar teaching, 60 teachers were notified through internet if they can be part of the study through questionnaires. Then only 40 agreed to participate in the research. 20 questionnaires were handed over to 20 teachers, whereas the other 20 were sent through mail and messenger. It took more than three weeks to finish these procedures, whereas the data calculation took more than three days.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

This chapter deals with results and discussion of findings. Some of the findings drawn out from the data analysis are given below.

Regarding the first question, whether teachers ‘Teach grammar using traditional methods’, 70 % of the teachers disagreed, by claiming that they do not use traditional methods anymore:

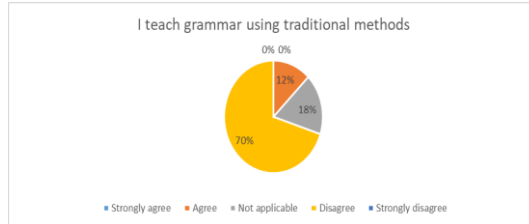


Fig.1- The percentage of respondents for the first question

If teachers do not use traditional methods to teach grammar, then do they use task-based activities to do so? Out of 40 participants, 30 of them responded that they use task based activities to teach grammar, while 5 of them strongly agreed with this assumption, and the other 5 were neutral to this.

Concerning the third question: ‘After each grammar instruction I use different activities and tasks’, 30 % of the teachers agreed, 20 % of them strongly agreed, 25 % of them disagreed, while the other 25 % were neutral.

Whether teachers motivate their learners by using task-based activities, teachers’ answers were as following:

Task-based activities motivate my students more to learn grammar	
Choices	Teachers’ responses
Strongly agree	16
Agree	8
Neutral	10
Disagree	6
Strongly disagree	0

Table 1- The teachers’ answers for the 4th question

Do English learners show better results in grammar, if they are taught it through tasks? Regarding this question, teachers have responded differently. Most of them were neutral, 27, while 5 of them disagreed, and 7 of them agreed.

Similar to that, teachers were also asked whether the class is student-centered when tasks are being developed. According to that,

73 % of the teachers strongly agree with this, while 11 % percent agreed, and the other 16 % were neutral.

But while using tasks, does it get easier for teachers to teach grammar, or not? Most of the teachers agreed that it is easier for them to explain grammar through tasks, but the other part in doubt, so they stayed neutral to this, while some of them disagreed with the fact that it is easier for teachers to teach grammar through tasks.

Regarding the 8th question, whether task based teaching fosters motivation and deprives learners from anxiety, teachers were split into two groups:

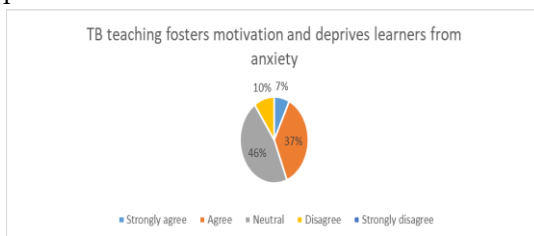


Fig. 2- The percentage of responses regarding the 8th question

Task-based learning and teaching is also included in the new curriculum of Kosovo. But, when it comes to English language, does it foster the use of Task-Based activities while teaching grammar? According to the participants, the new curriculum fosters the use of task-based english learning. Among 40 participants, 31 of them agreed with the assumption, while 6 of them were neutral and only 3 disagreed.

If curriculum do foster TBLT, then what about textbooks used in the schools? Here teachers expressed their opinions differently: 29 of the agreed, 6 strongly agreed, while 5 of them were neutral.

There are activities and tasks outside the book that teachers can use in their language classes. Hereby, in the last question, 12 % strongly agreed that they use extra tasks to teach grammar, while 66 % of them agreed with this assumption; 18 % were neutral and only 4 % disagreed.

DISCUSSION

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is one of the learner-centered approaches to language teaching which supports the fact that the

teacher and the learner should work collaboratively in decisions on content selection, methodology and evaluation', (Yayli 2006). Hereby, the respective study evaluated such approaches, focusing on the process of grammar teaching through Task-Based Teaching. According to the study and the participants, grammar nowadays is taught mainly through tasks and different activities. This is also supported by Yayli, 2006, who claims that nowadays grammar teaching should be seen differently, and taught differently. Learners, in order to learn grammar effectively, should be engaged in multiple tasks and activities that allow them to freely use the language, which will precede with unconscious form acquisition. In such processes teachers should act as guiders and facilitators, rather than as full-time speakers.

But in order to create and introduce Tasks in the process of English learning, first previous learning and teaching methods should be checked and evaluated. Sanchez (2004), claims that *"task based approach can only be fully understood if it is contrasted with preceding methods and analyzed within mainstream of communicative methodology"*.

The participants of the study were asked whether they still use traditional methods to teach grammar. As many teachers fully agreed that they use TBLT approach to teach grammar, few of them responded that they still teach grammar traditionally. But, should this phenomenon be avoided totally, or combined? According to the scholars, traditional methods of teaching grammar always marked negative results on grammar learning. Traditional grammar teaching focuses only on the form, which according to Long, 2012, brings such consequences:

- Teacher cannot identify the learners' learning needs, and this cannot be done without communicative methods;
- This is discouraging for learners and especially young learners, it leads them to anxiety and they do not get motivated;
- Focus on form leads to non-realistic models of language use. Simplification of texts and dialogues does not bring learners to adequate language forms but it brings negative results in learning a second language.
- A focus on forms produces many more false beginners than finishers.

In order to avoid using traditional methods, teachers are required to use many tasks and activities to teach grammar. These traditional ways of teaching grammar brought negative results and are assumed to be boring to students and do not help them to raise their communicative competence mostly because they are teacher-centered, Marzouk (2015). Most of the teachers strongly agreed that by using communicative tasks in the classroom, the class becomes student-centered.

Also, the curricula and the textbooks in the education system in Kosovo are being designed with the purpose of introducing the Task- Approach in the language classes. The participants also agreed that the curricula and the textbooks include and foster the use of tasks in the process of grammar teaching and learning.

Accordingly, Marzouk claims that 'Task-Based Language teaching is an approach to analytic syllabus design which focuses on the ability to perform a task or activity without explicit teaching of grammatical structure'. However, for Rahimpour (2006) grading and sequencing of pedagogical tasks are one of the major challenges for the task-based syllabus designers as they are graded and sequenced by the degree of difficulty (from simple to complex).

Using tasks in the classroom, also deprives students from feeling unmotivated and anxious. According to Tale and Godarzi (2015), learners are allowed to use the language they want, by concentrating on the meaning and learners focus on reaching the task goal without thinking of the form. This situation creates a communicative situation which motivates learners, even those who seemed to hesitate and felt anxious. But, syllabus designers should be always careful, because learners by being free to make utterances, they sometimes do not make grammatically correct sentences, and they continue to make such mistakes. So, the designers should also create specific tasks for specific grammar rules or structures.

Most of the teachers who participated in the study strongly agreed that TBLT brings students in the center of learning process. The new English teaching program prepared by the Ministry of Education puts the students in the center of the learning process. The program claims that all activities applied in the classroom should support the student-centered classroom atmosphere. At that point, TBLT stands out with its properties suitable for the purpose of the Ministry.

The use of TBLT not only supplies the participation of students to the classroom activities but also help to create a positive and motivational classroom for EFL learners, Ellis, (2006). The participants also support this assumption by agreeing that their learners become motivated and get better marks when tasks are being used.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

This study paper investigated the role of Task Based Language Teaching in teaching grammar. It was a study seen from the teachers' point of view, including the theoretical background as well. The results of this study indicate that teaching grammar through the Task-Based model is superior to the traditional grammar instruction model. However, it cannot be claimed that the results of this study are conclusive since it involved only 40 participants. Further experiments regarding TBLT and its role in teaching grammar are needed in order to conclusively accept or reject it in EFL classes. However, many conclusions were drawn from the study, which need further investigation. The results proved that the use of Task-Based Language Teaching is effective in increasing the grammar knowledge of the learners. As a result, TBLT should be a considerable alternative and be used in teaching grammar. Also, TBLT is a model that the new curricula suggest and it implies teachers to use it and include it in each lesson.

Although grammar has not been fairly emphasized in the Task-Based Language Teaching Approach, the teaching of grammar and the inclusion of form tasks proved to add another dimension to such a communicative approach.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire- Teaching grammar through Task-Based Language Teaching

1. Which city/village do you teach in?

2. What type of school/institution do you work in?

3. What grades do you teach?

4. Age/Gender

Please complete the following questionnaire with specific regard to the above enquiry, by placing a CROSS (X) in the appropriate box.

	strongly agree	agree	uncertain/ not applicable	disagree	strongly disagree
1. I teach grammar using traditional methods	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. I teach grammar using task-based activities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. After each grammar instruction I use different activities and tasks	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Such activities and tasks motivate my students more to learn grammar	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. By using task-based activities, students know grammar better and they have better marks	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. By using task-based activities, learners are centered in the process of teaching.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Through TB activities, it is easier for me to explain grammar	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. TB activities foster motivation and deprive learners anxiety	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. New curricula fosters the use of Task-Based activities while teaching grammar	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Textbooks contain a lot of activities and tasks to practice grammar	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>