Exploring Task-Based Learning Frameworks for Enhancing Spoken English in Indian Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study aimed to explore the implementation of Task-based Learning frameworks (TBL) for improving the spoken English of low proficiency learners in the Indian context. The TBL framework proposed by Willis (1996) was chosen as a reference and three frameworks were designed around three language functions- to talk about self, to greet people, and to ask for help. Keeping the level of the learners in mind, the tasks designed were simple and focused on providing comprehensible input and opportunities for language production. Recordings were made while learners carried out various tasks and these were analyzed to investigate the changes in the spoken language skills of the learners. The paper presents the key findings from the study regarding the impact of using TBL frameworks in improving the overall learning environment of an English classroom and in enhancing the spoken language abilities of the learners for carrying out the above-mentioned functions.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition; Task-based learning; Low-proficiency learners; Communicative competence

Introduction

The teaching and learning of English in India are characterized by the diversity of schools and linguistic environments. Ramachandran (2004) has analyzed the hierarchies of access of different socio-economic groups to different categories of schools. Kumar (1996) discusses the divisive nature of schooling in India that separates the 'common' larger population which depends on the state for their education from the 'exclusive' few who can manage to access the best resources and practices, i.e., the good quality education with their money. There is no dearth of studies that report a vast difference in the kind of pedagogies, choice of curricular material, learner engagement, and teachers' professional attitude in the two kinds of systems: Private and government and consequently in learners' achievement. Access (or the lack of it) to English is a defining characteristic of this ever-widening gap between the two systems.

National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 envisions the objective of teaching English as a second language for the spontaneous and appropriate use of language for at least everyday purposes (NCERT, 2005). However, in our classrooms, translation seems to be the most preferred method of making English accessible to those who learn in low-resource classrooms. Classroom procedures are dominated by written work and learners are hardly given an opportunity to express themselves through speech. Even in a resourceful class, instructions tend to be form-focused and skills-based. As a

result of which, learners, while having the required linguistic structures, fail to draw on them to develop the competence to communicate effectively in real social contexts. As proposed by Hymes (1971), knowledge of grammatical rules is not sufficient to use language for authentic purposes, it requires communicative competence. Such observations contributed to a shift in the field in the late 1970s and early 1980s from a linguistic structure-centered approach to a Communicative Approach to language teaching, that underlines the primary function of language as interaction and communication (Widdowson 1990, Savignon 1997).

Task-based language teaching refers to an approach based on the use of tasks as the core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching. Nunan (1989) defines a pedagogical task as "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". According to Willis (1996), Tasks are activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose in order to achieve an outcome. The task-based methodology provides sufficient scaffolding and motivation to the students who otherwise have negligible exposure to English at home and help develop their communicative competence in a phased manner. Task-based Language teaching is often presented as a strong version of Communicative language teaching (CLT) since it draws on several principles that are at the core of the CLT approach (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). The present study aimed to help learners with low proficiency in English to develop their spoken English for functional purposes using the task-based learning frameworks.

Review of Literature

Research in Second Language Acquisition has given us useful insights into the best conditions for learning a second language. Sauvignon (1972) suggests that second language programmes which focus only on accuracy and form do not give students sufficient opportunity to develop communication abilities in a second language. Krashen (1982) in his 'theory of second language acquisition' draws the difference between the acquired system and the learned system and suggests that when a classroom provides ample comprehensible input in an anxiety-free atmosphere, it allows learners to subconsciously acquire the language by engaging in meaningful interaction in the target language. Swain (1985) on the other hand, argued that 'productive output' and not merely 'input' is critical for second language development. Montgomery and Eisenstein (1985) supported the idea that 'opportunities to practice the language in communicative situations' were important for language acquisition. Long (1993) has looked at the negotiation of meaning as the necessary element in second language acquisition. There has been a large body of research recommending a simultaneous focus on form in the process of meaning-making during the second language learning process in the classrooms.

Task-based language teaching combines these insights from research in second language acquisition and takes into account the knowledge of how people learn languages. Prabhu (1987) argues that task-based teaching follows the Vygotskian scaffolding model where the demand on thinking made by an activity is just above the level which learners can meet without help. He

further suggests that TBL does not lead directly to communicative competence, rather, the success in reasoning tasks supports engagement in such activity (critical reasoning) and that's a condition favourable to the development of grammatical competence.

The Task-based learning Framework proposed by Willis consists of three phases: Pre-task, Task-Cycle, and Language Focus. The pre-task phase introduces the class to the topic and the task, activating topic related words and phrases. The task cycle offers learners the chance to use whatever language they already know in order to carry out the task often in groups or pairs, focusing their attention on getting the meaning across, rather than on the form of language itself. The language focus stage allows learners to have a closer look at some of the specific language features naturally occurring in the language used during the task cycle. This framework with the suggested typologies of tasks comes closest to meeting all the requirements for effective SLA, i.e, it provides comprehensible input, allows for the meaningful use of language by creating a real purpose to use language, builds fluency during the task cycle, allows for the recycling of language through planning and reporting and subsequent task cycles, provides an anxiety free atmosphere to the learners to experiment with language, gives chance to learn through peer interaction and draws attention to the 'forms' which are already processed and contextualized. Thus, TBL framework as proposed by Willis (1996) was chosen as a reference to design three frameworks around three functions for the present study.

Context of the Research:

The site of the study was a government school located in North East Delhi. The school follows Hindi as the medium of instruction for all the classes. Based on classroom observations, it could be seen that despite learning English as a school subject for at least 6 years, learners in the class did not have the confidence to converse in English.

Participants in the study:

Sixteen students of class VI form the above mentioned school participated in the study. As the tasks developed by the researcher for facilitating spoken English required giving a lot of opportunities to learners to communicate freely in the classroom, therefore, due to time constraint, it was desirable to have a class with small class size.

Research Questions and Objectives:

The study aimed to explore the following research question:

● What are the possibilities of exploring task-based learning framework as proposed by Willis (op. cit.) for enhancing spoken English of the learners in an ESL classroom?

The specific objectives of the study were:

1. To identify the general background of the learners and to gauge their exposure to English language in their home environments

2. To establish the present status of the learners' speaking proficiency through a free speaking task

3. To design and transact three TBL frameworks around three language functions for enhancing spoken English of the learners using Task-based learning framework proposed by Willis (1996) as a reference

4. To evaluate the effectiveness of the task-

based learning frameworks for enhancing spoken English of the learners.

Methodology followed:

Since the focus of the study was to enhance spoken English of the learners by exploring the Task-Based Learning Frameworks, the study was exploratory in nature. An attempt was made to document the process of classroom transaction of tasks and analyse them qualitatively.

Tools developed:

1 **Learner's Questionnaire:** The sociolinguistic background of the learners was established with the help of a learner's questionnaire at the beginning of the study. It aimed to collect information pertaining to parental educational background and level, support for English language learning at home and extent of access to English at home in terms of reading materials and audio-video resources such as songs, movies or cartoon series in English. This questionnaire also listed some functions from Threshold 1990 (Ek, J., & Trim, J. 1990) that learners had to choose from.

2 **Topics for free-speaking:** Along with classroom observations, the level of proficiency of learners with respect to English was discerned with the help of free-speaking tasks around a wide range of topics. It was decided to give a different topic to each learner to reduce the possibility of imitating their friends when their chance came. Topics centered on the personal experiences or likes and dislikes of the learners such as My favourite actor, favourite teacher, favourite festival and so on.

3 **Task-Based Learning frameworks**: From the extensive review of the literature around facilitating SLA, the TBL framework as proposed by Jane Willis (1996) was found to be fulfilling the three essential conditions of learning: exposure, use and motivation with an organized focus on language form. The framework adopts a holistic view of the language, inducing language in an integrated way. Thus, three TBL frameworks were designed to facilitate language acquisition around the following three functions:

A. To talk about self (Imparting factual information)

B. To greet people (Socializing)

C. To ask for help (requesting assistance)

This selection was made based on the choices indicated by the maximum number of learners in the learner's questionnaire. Each framework consisted of three phases, Pre-task, Task Cycle and Language focus. Each phase had tasks to support enhancement of spoken English of the learners.

Findings and Discussions:

The main findings of the study and the inferences drawn from them, as per each research objective are presented below.

Access and Exposure to English:

From the responses in the learner's questionnaire, it could be observed that many learners were perhaps first-generation school goers. There was a blank left against the parental educational background by some learners. The highest educational qualification cited for either parent was high school. From this and the responses pertaining to support at home for English homework, it could be gleaned that they might have almost negligible help in their home

environments for English related homework. However, it can't be ruled out that many parents might provide tuition and monitor their study hours, yet the help from parents is not substantial. They use Hindi, Kumauni, Haryanvi, Punjabi and Urdu as the language of interaction at home. English storybooks, magazines, comics and newspapers are accessible to them only through the school library. Movies like 'Harry Potter', 'Stuart Little' and 'Matrix' were reportedly seen by some learners focusing on the content without understanding the dialogues in English.

Current Status of Learners' Speaking Proficiency in English:

From the free-speaking task, it could be observed that the class was characterized by a differential level of speaking proficiency and motivational level. The class as a whole could be divided into three broad groups with respect to their attitude towards English and present status of proficiency in English.

The first group comprised learners who showed a positive attitude towards speaking in English, making a conscious attempt to speak in English. Their sentences were not structurally accurate but they were motivated enough to continue speaking in English despite the long pauses they took to search for the right words and expressions. For Example:

"Hi, I am a Preeti. Meri….my hobbies is dancing and… (long pause) and my age is 12 and my teacher name is Asha Mam". (53 seconds) (Transcript of Learner 2)

The second group comprised learners who, except for the first sentence, conveyed the rest of the message in Hindi. However, they tried reverting back to English wherever they could. These learners' transcripts show their conscious attempts to use English vocabulary and structure to convey complex messages such as stating preferences and reasons for it. For example:

"My favourite teacher is Avantika Mam. Wo Maths bahut achhi tareeke se samajhati hai aur wo samajhne me nahi aaya to wo bolti hai ki samajh me nahi aaya to hazaar baar puchho. Agar paper me gande number aaye to wo bahut ache se padhati hai". (Transcript of learner 7)

The third group of learners did not show any inclination to use English while expressing themselves. This group of learners spoke without pausing and conveyed fairly complex messages such as rules of cricket, narrating the story of a movie and three things that they would want to change about this country. For example:

"Mujhe holi ka tyohaar bahut acha lagta hai kyunki usme log ek dusre ko rang lagaate hain aur ache ache pakwaan khate hain" (Transcript of learner 13)

Three TBL frameworks were developed by the researcher to teach the language functions to talk about myself, to greet people and to ask for help. These frameworks were transacted over a period of 20 periods of 40-45 minutes each. Only one framework would be discussed in detail due to lack of space.

Teaching and analysis of the first TBL framework: To Talk about Self
Overview of the First Framework **Pre-Task Phase** **Task-1:** Name Chain (Students pass on the ball to each other while introducing themselves in a sentence or two) **Task-2**: Read a small text **Meet Anuradha and Rahul** and sort and fill information in concept map **Task-3**: Listing their own qualities taking hint from the above text.
Task-Cycle Phase **Task-1:** Class Survey (Learners in pairs interview their partners taking cues from questionnaire provided and fill in the response sheet. Each learner then comes and introduces her/himself to the whole class. The class listens carefully and notes down each learner's hobby and quality to prepare a comprehensive class survey list. **Task-2**: Role Play Learners would enact according to the situation provided to them with their partners. The situation would give opportunity to learners to introduce themselves to people in different situations.
Language Focus Phase Language analysis and Practice: Re-visiting the text **Meet Anuradha and Rahul** and see the relationship between subject and verb.

- Language games, such as, 'Name-chain' helped in easing out the stress level of the class. The learners who made fun of their

classmates who took longer to respond realized the psychological stress of speaking in front of the whole class when their own turn came. In the second round of the game, proposed by learners themselves, they overcame their initial hesitation and were confident and cooperative and brought variation in their address forms. For instance, from saying *"Hi, I am a Vikas", "Hi, I the Rajan"*, they moved on to say, *"Hi, this is Preeti, I am good", "Good Morning, I am Rajan and I like play"*.

Observations during the classes indicated that the tasks conducted during the pre-task phase did provide comprehensible input to the learners to a certain extent, for instance, the small reading text 'Meet Anuradha and Rahul' provided learners comprehensible input on what all can be shared while we introduce ourselves to others. The task of sorting information in the text as per the categories given in the web format made learners read the text carefully at least three-four times, thus, helping them imbibe the structures implicitly. Discussion held during this task while arriving at the meaning of the words 'quality', 'naughty' and 'nick-name' helped learners in recalling and using these words during the task cycle phase. However, when asked to think and list their own qualities, learners came up with words such as greedy, bad, cruel, stupid, wicked in addition to some positive qualities such as sweet, good, handsome, beautiful, helpful, quiet and so on. When they were asked to categorize these qualities into good and bad, they were quick to do so, however, got stuck at the words wicked and quiet. The girl who had suggested the word quiet could explain it in Hindi (She saw the spelling from a story

in her textbook), but the word wicked could not be explained by anyone. On being asked if they understood some words to be indicating negative qualities, why were these suggested by them, learners responded that they wanted to come up with new words on the board.

- In the task cycle phase, interviewing their partners and giving responses to the same questions when it was their turn scaffolded the learners in activating the structures needed for the target language function. The planning stage of the task cycle allowed learners to take their own time in preparing for the task. In the final reporting stage of the task cycles, although it can't be said that learners moved from the 'reproductive' to 'creative' stage, it could be seen that learners were able to weave in more sentences and could converse coherently. Further, it can be argued that the task pushed them to use whatever language they had to achieve the task outcome. For example:

- *Hi friends, I am Vikas. I am 12 years old…12 years old. My nick name is Vicky. My..My…(Pause)..I like playing football in my free time. I am a hard work person.*

- *I am Sunny Kumar, Hi, I am Sunny Kumar. I am 12 years old. My nick name is Sanju. I study in class VI. I like cricket playing very much. (Thinks and rephrases) I like playing cricket very much. I am a active person.*

While the learners introduced themselves individually, the rest of the class prepared a list with the name of the students, their hobbies and qualities. Later, learners sorted this list according to hobbies and qualities. Preparation of the list

promoted active listening skills and sorting allowed learners to revisit the vocabulary a couple of times. Pair and group activities ensured that the learners remained motivated throughout as they found their classmates to be in the same situation. Giving the whole class a purpose for listening to the presentations by individual students by way of giving them the task of sorting the information into categories ensured active participation in group tasks. A cooperative and non-judgmental environment facilitated by the teacher helped learners in asking questions without any hesitation.

- The Role play task encouraged a lot of free discussion among learners. They could be seen arguing with each other as to who will take which role, and then practicing their lines with their respective partners. Though the aim of the task was to provide a real-life situation for language use, during the role plays it was seen that learners could not define the situation given to play with their conversation. They did it with the help of props and some minute changes in the setting of the class, but not by creating the context with the help of their words. For carrying out the conversation, they referred back to the questions used for interviewing the first task of task cycle. This task gave them further practice and some confidence to initiate talk in a conversation. For example:

Situation: Meeting a new person at Uncle's house

L1: *Hello, My name is Hemant.*
L2: *Hi, My name is Pankaj. What is your…Uh…In which class do you study?*
L1: *I am in class VI and You?*
L2: *I study in VI class. What is your age?*

L1: I am 12 years old and you?

L2: I am also 12. What is your hobby?

L1: My hobby is playing football and cricket and what do you like?

L2: I like playing chess. I am an active person.

L1: What do you do in your free time?

L2: I am doing my homework in my free time and what is your quality?

L1: My quality…I am helpful. What is your quality?

L2: I tell you.

L1: Ok. Bbye..

L2: Bye.

After the second task cycle, it was felt that the number of tasks could have been increased to give learners more opportunities to speak in English in different situations to develop free use of language.

● Language focus task allowed learners to notice the relationship between 'subject' and 'verb' and they were able to deduce some rules as could be observed from the text given. It was also noted that explicitly knowing some rules did not ensure their correct usage while speaking English such as not to use 'a' and 'the' before their names, it was only after repeated encounters and perhaps their intuitive sense of grammatical competence while performing tasks that a rule could be internalized.

Teaching and Analysis of Second TBL Framework: To Greet People

● The pre-task phase helped in making learners understand the wider meaning of the word 'Greeting' in a social setting by inductively arriving at the meaning of the function 'to greet'. It generated a good discussion on 'greeting words' used in their own respective cultures and made them reflect on their own behaviour in their day to day usage regarding the appropriate form of greeting according to context, seniority and familiarity with the person addressed. Contextualizing it in their personal experiences sustained the interest of even the very shy learners who participated actively in the discussions.

● The novelty of doing listening tasks for the first time made learners excited and enthusiastic about the task. The recording apart from adding fun elements to the class provided them rich input about different forms of greetings according to the contexts. It generated some discussion on formal and informal ways of addressing according to familiarity with people and was helpful in introducing patterns of conversation while socializing in different situations. The impact of these tasks could be observed in other contexts outside the classroom where learners could be seen trying to use different forms of greetings with their juniors and other teachers.

● Transcripts of the role play revealed that the learners restricted their own role-plays to the patterns observed by them in the recordings. Role play as an activity pushes the learners to use whatever language they have to achieve the goal of the conversation. In the two role plays, it was observed that the various situations which learners had to negotiate placed some demands on the learners to carry the conversation further, which even the learners could feel, but due to their limited proficiency in English, most of them could not go beyond exchanging

greetings. So, even though the goal of the activity was achieved, spontaneous language usage when put in a natural context could not happen. Perhaps recordings with full conversations would have done them justice.

- An interesting thing to observe during the execution of this framework was the intrinsic motivation of some learners to practice on their own during the practice phase without any need for the teacher's encouragement. Further, while on the test cycle-2 of the second framework, learners were almost correct with their sentence structures though there was no effort made by the teacher to specifically outline the structures needed to carry out the function of greeting people till then. The learners seemed to have learnt through self-monitoring and repeated exposure through activities and by observing their friends doing the same tasks in different experiential environments.

- Language focus task once again allowed learners to observe the relationship between 'subject' and 'verb'. It was observed that students are better able to analyze sentences that they have used in their conversations.

Teaching and Analysis of the Third TBL Framework: To Ask for Help

- Recording in the pre-task stage helped in directing the learners' attention to the difference between the manner in which we order people around and we politely ask for help. It helped in making the learners understand this difference by directing their attention to specific words such as 'can' and 'please' and towards the politeness in the voice. The Listening task in this framework was more purposeful as the learners knew

that they had to use the information in the next activity that they would do.

- It could be further analysed that language games such as Bingo can be successfully incorporated into the methodology to bring the element of novelty as well as excitement. The game was successfully utilized in making the learners understand an otherwise difficult concept of the relationship between the verbs and the object that they can take. The game allowed the processing of the information by each learner at their own pace. It was also noticed that learners had started imbibing the input in a much more efficient way as, during the cross-checking phase of the Bingo game, learners themselves realized the inappropriateness of the structures, since they had heard the correct sentences spoken in the recording.

- The problem-solving task where the learners were presented with a situation and they had to ask for help in order to solve it, gave learners opportunities to process language at their own pace and it could be seen that learners had taken the hint of differentiating between giving 'order' and 'asking for help' as they toned down their voice to make it appear polite. The subsequent problem-solving task of interpreting the problem from the pictures and then frame a request statement processing the solution to the problem gave learners the push to not just use language while asking for help but also to add reasons for the same. From here, one could see the impact of the cyclic process of learning in a TBL framework.

- Use of an enrichment source that is, the picture was helpful in keeping the learners

interested throughout the activity. Other things to note about the picture reading activity was the multiple interpretations of the situations presented in the picture that the learners came up with.

A role-play activity was chosen for the learners to check their progress after the transaction of three TBL frameworks. The use of props, change in the settings as well as gestures used by the learners highlighted the learners' attempt to naturalize their performance. Transcripts of the learners' conversations indicated that most of the learners did justice to the situation given to them. They could negotiate the interaction with their respective partners, often fumbling in between, taking pauses and repeating sentences, but carrying out the entire exchange in English without reverting back to their mother tongues. Though it cannot be said that the learners were able to speak spontaneously, yet the fact that they were able to plan what they had to say and were able to use language to get their meaning across points towards their progress in the process of SLA. Learners displayed an understanding of how to start a conversation, with the usual exchange of greetings and then moving ahead with the interaction for a purpose during their final performance.

Conclusion:

This study attempted to enhance spoken English of learners with very limited proficiency in English. The Task-Based Learning Framework proposed by Willis (1996) was chosen as the overall pedagogical framework to facilitate this process and it can be concluded that the TBL frameworks met the requirements of creating a facilitative environment for second language acquisition in the context of a low proficiency Indian classroom. The structure of the framework allowed the researcher to provide a variety of comprehensible input to learners in the form of games, short reading texts and audio recordings. While it can be concluded that the input generated meaningful discussions in the class, letting learners process the target language at their own level and using it to carry out further tasks, it was also felt that it could be made a little more challenging to provide a lot more exposure to language samples in authentic contexts. From the way learners responded to the various kinds of input 'texts', it can be asserted that when learning materials and tasks invite learners to make personal connections and contextualize learning in the cultural experiences, learners tend to become involved and motivated in the class activities. The task cycle phase in all three frameworks gave opportunities to learners to work individually, in pairs and as a whole class, and that helped in creating a non-threatening safe environment for the learners lowering their affective filters (Krashen, op. cit.). Some very shy learners who were extremely apprehensive in the beginning could also be seen making efforts to converse during the Role plays. It can be argued that the variety of tasks during the task cycles posed a communicative challenge to learners to channelize all their language resources and use the target language for a meaningful exchange of sentences to carry out a purpose (Percival, 1992, Savignon, op.cit.). Problem-solving tasks were particularly successful which involved interpreting some new information from the given situations. This was in line with what Prabhu (op.cit.) suggests that task-based teaching follows the Vygotskian scaffolding model where the demand on thinking made by the activity is just above the level which the learners can meet without help. He further argues that the success experienced by the learners in doing such tasks support sustained

engagement and sustained engagement is a condition favourable to the development of communicative competence. Research data also suggests that learners benefitted from the language focus tasks, as they were better able to abstract rules from authentic language use rather than being taught grammatical rules explicitly. From the study, it can be concluded that the TBL framework offered a holistic language learning experience to learners with very limited proficiency in English where they learnt the target language in an integrated manner, rather than focusing on discrete skills as in the PPP paradigm and experienced many opportunities for receiving corrective feedback from each other, thus, getting facilitated in self-monitoring and peer learning.

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