Implementing Task-based Approach: A Solution for Teaching English Speaking Skills

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ABSTRACT

Teaching English speaking skills is a challenge for teachers in non-native English speaking countries. In reality, language learners often neglect to join English-speaking activities. Moreover, they tend to focus on grammar, not meaning. To deal with this problem, English teachers can take advantage of the task-based approach (TBA) for their speaking classes. In fact, TBA is considered a useful approach to help learners improve speaking skills effectively. It is also called the learner-centered approach, which emphasizes the roles of learners' roles during the learning process. Therefore, this paper aims to introduce the theoretical basis of TBA, the roles of teachers and learners in TBA and Willis's (1996) TBA framework. Furthermore, the example of implementing task-based speaking lessons is illustrated in this paper. Besides that, some recommendations for further research of implementing TBA are presented in conclusion.

Keywords: English speaking skills, task-based approach, teaching English, task-based framework.

1. INTRODUCTION

Decision No. 2080/QD-TTG dated December 22, 2017 of the Prime Minister of Vietnam approving the adjustment of the project on teaching and learning foreign languages in the national education system in the period of 2017-2025 clearly states "creating a breakthrough on the quality of foreign language teaching and learning for school levels; encouraging the application of advanced technologies in foreign language teaching and learning; creating a foreign language learning environment in schools, families and the society so that everyone can learn foreign languages together". Besides the decision also clearly defined "renovating the teaching and learning of foreign languages in the national educational system; continuing to implement foreign language teaching and learning programs at school levels; improving foreign language proficiency to meet learning and working needs; strengthening foreign language capacity for human resources in the integration period in order to contribute to national construction and development." It can be seen that English is a very important language in the integration and considered by many interested people. In fact, English teaching methodologies always have positive changes to bring the best results to English learners. With a variety of teaching methodologies and approaches, English teachers must actively learn and cultivate the necessary knowledge for themselves.

Among English teaching methods and approaches, the task-based approach (TBA) is paid much attention by educators and teachers [1]. This approach helps learners satisfy the needs of discovering the foreign language and meet the requirements of communication ability in their lives. In terms of English speaking skill, TBA helps learners to be familiar with task-based problem solving effectively. Therefore, this paper aims at sharing the background knowledge and teaching procedures of English speaking skill with the application of TBA. Furthermore, based on the experience in applying TBA for teaching English speaking skills, the researcher hopes to help other English teachers master the teaching procedures of English speaking lessons in detail.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1. The concepts of approach

The approach is a theory of language learning or a synthesis of philosophies about how to learn. Approach refers to the necessary teaching techniques of teachers in teaching activities. In addition, the approach describes the different ways that learners use to perform learning tasks.

[2] defined that the approach is viewed as a philosophy or belief related to the problems to be considered and solved. It is a series of views of individuals that are relevant to their interests.

According to the Cambridge dictionary, the approach is understood as an action verb, which means to get close to something or to solve a certain problem. When defined as a noun, the approach is considered a way to consider and solve a problem.

2.2. The concepts of the task-based approach

English teachers believe that TBA helps learners to learn better by encouraging them to concentrate on learning tasks instead of paying much attention to the language they are learning. [3] admitted that the nature of TBA helps learners to use the target language to solve learning tasks. [4] is a pioneer of implementing TBA in English classes. He succeeded in the project of Communication Language Teaching in India.

[5] confirmed that learners find it easy to recognize problems during the process of solving task-based activities by the application of TBA in teaching. Thanks to realizing problems, learners have more chances to improve their language as well as necessary skills.

In Vietnam, there are some concepts related to the TBA. [6] said that this approach gives learners opportunities to solve meaningful learning tasks. Besides, those learners are free of using the target language creatively. [7] admitted that learners can improve their English language by taking part in solving task-based activities which teachers design.

2.3. The roles of English teachers and learners in the task-based approach

The roles of English teachers have been highlighted in studies of [7]; [8]; [9] and [10]. These studies indicated that teachers have important roles in the implementation of TBA. [7] defined the roles of English teachers as follows:

1. Make sure suitable levels of learning tasks
2. Establish clear objectives of task-based lessons
3. Make sure that learners show active roles in solving task-based activities
4. Encourage learners to join learning tasks and take risks
5. Make sure that learners understand the meaning of learning tasks
6. Create chances for learners to enhance their language learning
7. Encourage learners to evaluate their progress during solving learning tasks

More specially, [12] suggested that teachers should have the roles of language adviser, leader and controller during the process of solving task-based activities. Furthermore, [7] and [13] pointed out necessary duties which teachers need to manage during the process of solving tasks. English teachers need to be alert during the pre-task, task-cycle and post-tasks.

• For the pre-task, English teachers should consider the content of tasks that will be done by learners suitably. They also should consider other issues such as time allotted for each activity, the meaning of tasks and the forms of solving tasks.

• During the task cycle, apart from the roles of organizer and controller of tasks, the teachers should be partners of learners in solving tasks. The teachers give comments, sources and suitable models of solving tasks. Besides, the teachers should be motivational supporters during the task cycle in order that learners feel secure and comfortable to solve tasks effectively.

• Finally, in the post-task, the teachers will create opportunities for learners to consolidate and accumulate more necessary knowledge by evaluating learners' performance of solving tasks [3]. For example, the teachers can discuss chosen strategies to solve tasks with learners. In this phase, the teachers need to evaluate learners' use and proficiency of the target language. The evaluation form can be done by mini-tests which are designed according to the teachers' purposes.

[12] also demonstrated the active roles of learners during the solving-task process. Learners need to be confident to try on various ways of solving tasks in order to practice the target language. In addition, cooperation between learners is very important. [14] affirmed that the role of the partner in solving tasks is considered a teacher.

2.4. The framework of the task-based approach

Various frameworks for designing task-based lessons have been proposed (e.g. [4]; [12]; [15]). [8] noted that these frameworks have common sequences consisting of pre-task phase, task-cycle phrase and post-task phase. In particular, [12] suggested a standard framework that can be adapted to teaching English speaking skills.
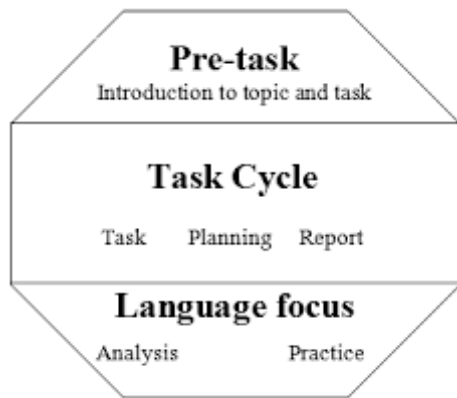

Figure 1: The framework of a task-based approach

a) The pre-task phase includes common activities for both the teacher and learners as follows:
▪ The teacher helps learners understand the topic and purposes of tasks by brainstorming activities
▪ Learners can take part in the preparation process of tasks
▪ The teacher lists necessary words and phrases for the process of solving tasks
▪ Learners are informed the timeline of solving tasks.
b) The task-cycle phase has three important stages which describe the specific duties for both the teacher and learners. These stages are described as follows:

Task stage

- Learners are divided into groups to solve tasks. They are free of using the target language.
- The teacher observes and motivates learners to solve tasks
- The teacher does not interfere with learners' use of the target language when they are solving tasks
- The teacher encourages learners to focus on the sequences of tasks and self-confidence to solve tasks

Planning and report stages

- In the planning stage, learners need to write a short report of their task performance
- Learners can rehearse their reports several times before
they present in front of class
- The teacher helps learners use words and phrases when they are preparing their reports
- The teacher can encourage learners to work in pairs to share comments on reports
- The teacher should encourage learners to raise questions regarding the use of language in their reports
c) The language focus is the post-task phase in which the target words and structures are described by the teacher as follows:

Analysis

- The teacher presents the language focus based on words or phrases relating to the topic
- The teacher can base on learners' questions to explain the use of the target language

Practice

The teacher can design games and exercises to help learners master the target language and structures.

3. THE APPLICATION OF TASK-BASED APPROACH INTO ENGLISH SPEAKING LESSON

For this part, the researcher adapts Willis's framework to implement an English-speaking lesson in 45 minutes. Learners are expected to be more fluent at sharing the differences between the city and countryside in Vietnam and using the comparative form.

a) The pre-task phase (10 minutes)
- The teacher shows some images of some areas in Vietnam on slides (Figure 2) and then asks learners to join the activity "Look, answer and describe"
- The teacher asks learners to work in pairs to brainstorm adjectives to describe these places
- The teacher asks learners to change adjectives into the comparative form with the given explanation on board (Figure 3)
- The teacher asks learners to guess the topic of the lesson and then ask them to join the next activities

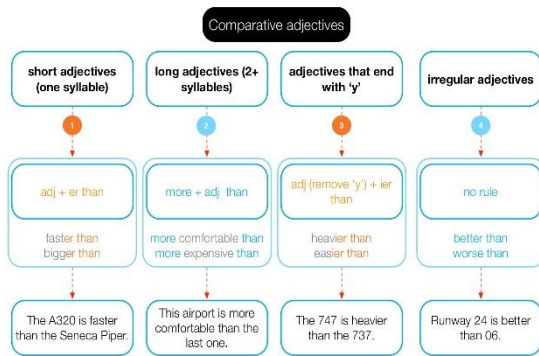**Figure 2**: The activity "Look, answer and describe"

Figure 3: The comparative form of adjectives

b) The task-cycle phase (25 minutes)

- Learners work in groups of three or four people to share ideas about differences between the city and countryside.
- They are instructed to use the target language to discuss.
- Learners are given A0 papers to write down their answers during the discussion
- The teacher walks around and gives learners support if they need it.
- The teacher notes down difficulties about the target language and structures when they discuss.
- Each group has some minutes to rehearse presenting their findings.
- The teacher asks learners to present their findings and listen to other groups' presentations.
- The teacher gives feedback to each group on the findings
c) The language focus (10 minutes)
- The teacher writes on board good ideas presented by each group and common mistakes in terms of words, phrases and structures.
- The teacher asks learners to correct mistakes of words, phrases and structures of each group.

- The teacher hands out the exercise "Transformation of sentences using the comparative and given words."
- The teacher asks learners to work in pairs to do this exercise and then asks them to correct on board.
- The teacher summarizes the content of the topic, the target language and comparative structures.
- Learners write down notes they wish to remember.

In a word, a task-based speaking lesson with the adoption of Willis's framework will become easier for the teacher and learners. The teacher can instruct their learners to use the target language effectively. Learners will have chances to master the target language when they discuss with their friends. Furthermore, the learning environment is interesting and relaxing for learners to join.

4. CONCLUSION

In Vietnam, teaching English is really necessary when the world economic integration is increasing. It is no doubt that English teachers need to pay much attention to instructing necessary skills for learners in communication as well as solving problems. With the application of a task-based approach into English lessons, teachers can bring many benefits to their learners to improve their English skills.

From the teaching practice, we find that the task-based approach is completely consistent with the trend of teaching that focuses on communication and learners' roles. Moreover, this approach will be useful for most learners who are interested in the English language. It helps learners have positive attitudes to English learning. More specially, Vietnamese learners are more confident to communicate with other people in English.

Based on what we have learned and experienced about the task-based approach, we find that constructing pedagogical learning tasks and choosing a reasonable teaching methodology will create a learning community in the classroom, where there is positive interaction between learners and teachers. As a result, learners will have better learning methods and easily adapt to real life. The author also proposes that the next research should be the compilation of appropriate learning materials and tasks to support the application of the task-based approach in teaching English speaking skills.

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