

The Effectiveness of Task-based Teaching: Instruction Using the Popular ‘Survival Game’ Activity

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Abstract

Communicative competence expects language learners to use their L2 for different purposes; to vary language usage based on setting / participants; to produce various textual forms; and, to communicate despite limited vocabulary. This expectation creates practical opportunities for task-based teaching / instruction (TBT/ TBI) utilizing pair work, role play / group work, and project work activities to facilitate Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) through cognitively demanding situations. TBT / TBI is characterized by classroom language activities which engage learners and derive overall language skills improvement from the cognitive process such as problem-solving (i.e. listing, classifying, sequencing, etc.). Certain types of classroom activity may generate individual speaking / group interaction in an EFL classroom setting. One such activity “Lost on the Moon”, adapted from the popular “N.A.S.A. Survival” task-based survival game, is suggested for students to reach consensus and encompasses active participation essential to group cohesion in a hypothetically hostile environment.

Keyword: Communicative competence, Tasks, Task-based teaching, Task-based instruction, Task-based teaching / Instruction (TBT / TBI), Survival games, Problem-solving skills

1. Introduction

We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win, and the others, too.

- President John F. Kennedy

“Space Program” Speech -
Rice University (09/12/62).

Task-based teaching / instruction (TBT / TBI) is an effective form of classroom instruction that attempts to engage language learners in real language. Willis & Willis (2007) defined task-based teaching as providing students with “activities which will promote interest and interaction” in the classroom. This approach to teaching places emphasis on developing / designing tasks that engage learners’ appropriation of the target language (p.11).

Richards (2006) says that the majority of language teachers today employ a “communicative language teaching” (CLT) approach in their classroom as a matter of Choice (pg.2). This teaching method sets as its primary goal *communicative competence* which considers that learners to know the following: how to use the target language for different purposes and functions; how to vary language usage based on setting and participants; how to produce and understand various forms of text (e.g. narratives, reports, interviews, conversations, etc.); and, finally, how to maintain communications despite limited vocabulary or insufficient language knowledge (e.g. learning strategies). To this end, TBT / TBI utilizes pair work activities, role plays, simulations, group work activities and project work to facilitate CLT by producing cognitively demanding situations that directly teach learners in tasks that enhance this process to take place.

Language learning tasks may be characterized as activities that are used in the classroom to engage learners to produce real language. A broad form of tasks may be derived from the cognitive process of problem-solving. Students can be asked to perform specific tasks, such as *listing, ordering, classifying, and sorting*. This process may be further facilitated through the use of visual / graphic clues or prompts that relate to new vocabulary to real items or actions (i.e. the items listed in the proposed “survival game”). Willis and Willis (2007) consider that problem-solving activities (e.g. listing and ranking the effects of the problem in order of severity) not produce group discussion, but they also stimulate a wide range of writing activities such as note-taking, drafting and finalizing proposals for solutions (pp. 93-94).

Thornbury (2005) considers that communicative tasks are fundamental. This view holds speaking to be a cognitive skill, whereby language knowledge becomes increasingly automated through successive practice and then repetition (pg.79). Similar to the previously cited Willis & Willis (2007), Thornbury also chooses to characterize wholly communicative activities in a number of specific ways:

- the motivation of the activity is to achieve some outcome, using language;
- the activity takes place in real time;
- achieving the outcome requires the participants to interact; i.e. to listen as well as to speak;
- because the spontaneous and jointly constructed nature of the interaction, the outcome is not 100% predictable; and,
- there are no restrictions on the language to be used (pg.79).

Willis and Willis (2007) proposes a “mind-map” that specifies seven broad parameters that are useful for adapting / refining tasks to meet instructional needs in TBT / TBI classrooms. These parameters include, but not limited to:

- Any possible outcome: Open or closed;
- A starting point for task;
- The need for pre-task preparation;
- Control of agenda and task structure;
- Recognizable interaction patterns and participant roles;
- Pressure on language production among participants; and,
- Post-task activities (pg.157)

2. General Activity Discussion

The activity proposed in this paper is centered on adult learners in an EFL / ESL classroom. Before engaging in discussion of the proposed activity, it is important to ask the same question first posed by McKay & Tom (1999), when they asked, “What do adult learners bring to class?” and, then they self-answered it by providing:

1. Language - L1 knowledge; social constraints not to feel embarrassed (loss of face).
2. Background - Knowledge of the real world.
3. Expectations - Differing attitudes / experiences.
4. Learning styles - Different and preferential.
5. Confidence - Most important aspect - supportive.
6. Motivation - Variable (Based on interests).
7. Circumstance - Age, health, flexibility that requires the teacher to become informed. (pp.2-5)

This form of activity was chosen partially on the basis that “older learners”, especially students in language classrooms, are more likely to receive only limited exposure to the second language throughout their study. This means that activities should be interesting and engaging, without being too demanding because of that limited exposure. This is a difficult and realistic set of circumstances for any ESL teacher to accept, since we all hope that English would be the center of learning for our students.

However, it is entirely possible to formulate an activity that will challenge most language learners if certain assumptions about language learning (i.e., those that underlie second language acquisition (SLA) success) can be made. McKay & Tom (1999) provide a list of given considerations for developing any activity:

- 1.) Learning a language is an integrated process (does not happen singularly, occur in a vacuum).
- 2.) Mistakes are a normal and necessary part of the language-learning process – Corrections should be made through collective restatement.
- 3.) The classroom atmosphere directly affects learning – it should be friendly and supportive.
- 4.) The learner is an active partner in the overall learning process. (pg.15)

These assumptions are validated in Ur (1981) which discussed how the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) requires fluency practice in order to take place. In her 1981 book “Discussions that Work”, Penny Ur said that language should be used “creatively, purposefully, individually, and in discussion as a group”. This author adds, effective discussion promotes learning through the use of interesting topics, group-work, role-play exercises, task focus, and the organization of processes (pg.1).

3. The Survival Game: “*Lost on the Moon*”

The subject of this paper is about how a specific classroom activity can generate individual speaking and group interaction in an EFL classroom setting. At the same time, such an activity accommodates a variety of “learning styles (Reid, 1995) since learners are known to possess different cognitive learning processes whenever they acquire language.

A game activity is proposed that will provide enhanced input for language learning in a classroom setting. The role-playing game is called “*Lost on the Moon*”. It is adapted / modified from the popular “*N.A.S.A Survival*” game, which according to Ur (1999) “is easily the most well-known” survival game in use (p.70). This discussion activity asks students to work individually, then in pairs, and then finally as a group to perform a common task. Participants are asked to reach a consensus related to the listing of communally agreed upon priorities that are seen as essential to survival in an imaginary environment. The environment is the lunar surface and is both hypothetical and hostile to the learner, thus presenting critical thinking problems for learners to solve through the targeted use of real language.

The “*N.A.S.A Survival*” game was originally designed for the U.S. National Air and Space Administration (NASA) as a team-building exercise to promote group-decision making in any native language. According to Pfeiffer & Jones (quoted in Ur (1981) – no reference), this game is widely used to teach reasoning as it relates to the decision-making process; however, it may also be effective as an ESL / EFL activity intended for adult learners. It may be further modified for younger students wishing to participate by introducing more less-remote locations and more rudimentary survival needs to facilitate discussion.

The game itself actually originates from an earlier version of a survival game used for the training of clandestine operatives of the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS) during WWII. This organization is best-known as the predecessor of the modern day Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Quick decision-making skills in foreign language might result in the difference between life and death for an agent operating in enemy territory. The game has continued to be modified for use at the United States Military Academy (USMA), for the Boy Scouts of America (BSA), and then as part of ESL / EFL curriculum in many communicative settings.

For purposes of this paper, the game “*Lost on the Moon*” was adapted / modified for use in the EFL / ESL task-based classroom (Rogers, 1978; Ur, 1981; Klippel, 1984). Meaningful communication among participants ultimate goal is the achievement of fluency, is the fundamental purpose of this language-learning activity. The objective of the activity is to integrate / facilitate the teaching of oral communications skills with actual speaking by promoting individual participation, critical thinking, vocabulary use, and then group activity to solve a commonly-held problem.

4. Activity Design

“*Lost on the Moon*” - Survival Game-Group Discussion Activity [Adapted/modified from Ur, P. (1981), pp.70-73]. This game is to be modeled at a student level of “Intermediate / Upper-intermediate – (CEF-B2~B1) for Adult ESL / EFL Learners. The game is to be structured in the following manner:

- 1.) Preliminary Session - (5~7 min. Teacher explanation)
 - a.) Join “team” pair-work dyads among participants: “*Work with a partner to ...*”
 - b.) Provide the following handouts to participating teams:
 - (1.) “*Mission Control...*” role-play explanation sheet.
 - (2.) “*My List*” – inventory of survival items.
 - (3.) “*Team List*” – graphic inventory of survival items.
 - c.) Provide the narrative structure of the game by reading the “*Mission Control...*” role-play instructions before beginning the game.
 - d.) Make sure that all of the vocabulary items are understood by participants by pointing out the graphic examples found on the “*Team List*”.
 - e.) Answer any questions the participants may have before beginning.
- 2.) Group Discussion – (10~20 min. Activity)
 - a.) Step 1: Begin the “game” by asking each participant to individually complete the “*My List*” handout without assistance from their teammate. There is to be no group discussion at this time. Participants may refer to the “*Team List*” handout to qualify vocabulary using visual clues provided, but they should perform this task independent of their team partner. “Important” - Maintain this aspect of the game to insure that the primary objective of subsequent discussion / agreement is accomplished.
 - b.) Once participants have defined their individual priorities on “*My List*” then they should then compare their list to their partner’s list and discuss it only with their partner, not with other groups.
 - c.) Step 2: Participants should use both lists to decide what differences exist and then resolve those differences so that all of the priority item listed on “*Our List*” will be the collective choice of both team members.
 - d.) Step 3: Each “*Team*” will be asked to report their “*Top 5*” choices by posting them on the white board in front of the class using magnets provided for this purpose.
 - e.) The class will then be asked to review the “*Top Five*” items provided by each team, to find out whether or not each prioritized item is the same on their list, or if they are not the same sequential order; and if so, why not?.
 - f.) Class discussion should be open to discuss any choices that are in the minority and those teams should report why they picked those “survival” items vs. the majority items picked by the other teams.
- 3.) Feedback – (5~10 min. – Conclusion- End of Task cycle)
 - a.) Provide the background of the game and then the final “*definitive*” (NASA) solution.
 - b.) Vote for a final list consensus, if required.
 - c.) This final “*report*” stage allows participants to appropriately recycle, refine and extend the language they have learned while playing the game.

5. Justification for the Activity

This activity was chosen to allow participants to speak using real language in conjunction with their use of critical reasoning skills during the performance of a task. This task consists of “prioritizing” a list of needed equipment for the imagined survival of the team or group in a hypothetical, hostile setting. Students are expected to discuss, choose, argue, agree upon, and then explain a set of priorities that may be familiar or unfamiliar to them. It will require the use of vocabulary acquisition and also the ability to perform the task to possible completion.

Throughout the activity, the task-based classroom teacher must assume a variety of roles as an instructor. These roles focus attention on leading and organizing discussion, classroom management, adviser, motivator, facilitator, and the traditional role of language teacher. The teacher is responsible for controlling the learning environment and must be aware of time and interest constraints while doing so. Lee and Van Patten (1995) considers that as the teacher's roles begin to shift, so do the roles of the students'. Interestingly, the primary role in the TBT / TBI classroom is either as "resource person" who responds to specific needs or as an "architect" who processes information for use by the students (pp.67-68).

6. Evaluation in the Activity Setting: Benefits and Criticism

Generally speaking evaluation techniques related to TBI can take place in a number of ways. Since this game activity is designed to promote speaking and reasoning, these are the two elements I shall focus upon. In group and pair work discussion, likewhats takes place within the game, evaluating the information available to the group is only the first element of critical thinking. Galanes and Adams (2007) consider it equally important to evaluate how both information sources and group members' reasons from the information provided or obtained (pg.306). They suggest that valid reasoning should connect plausible information with conclusions in an appropriate and defensible way.

This means that the fallacies of overgeneralization, *ad hominem* arguments, suggestion of unreasonable causal relationships, positioning of false dilemmas, and faulty analogies should all be refrained from during performance of the task.

Based on the classroom experience while using this activity, I would suggest flexibility while teaching a task-based curriculum. Students must be allowed to find their own way towards solving the "issues", "problems" or assuming the "roles" they have been given, so teachers must adopt a subordinate role. Sometimes these tasks, albeit "real-world", may be wholly foreign to the students' experience and require genuine effort to reason or comprehend. Above all, students are best served if teachers concentrate on the writing of clear, easy-to-follow instructions that are at the heart of any effective lesson plan based on the TBT/TBI method.

The perceived benefits of using an *inventory prioritization* activity, such as "*Lost on the Moon*", are that "survival games" are less abstract in their execution than many other classroom activities. Although reasoning is an integral part of many activities, this kind of a game requires less "intellectual" effort and more creativity on the part of students to determine solutions to problems during performance of the task. "Survival" games are based on dramatic, urgent situations that require input from those directly involved. Discussion does not have to be overly demanding, yet it can remain complex, entertaining and absorbing to the participants. This philosophy of outside engagement is the game as what is used to draw viewers or readers to "survival" situations in books, on TV or film.

The limitations of this activity are that it requires specific, integral vocabulary knowledge that must be provided for meaningful activity interchange to take place. Participants are also required to use their imaginative capacities to consider specific "hostile" environments that would necessitate survival skills and equipment use.

Consideration should be made that the need for group / team unanimity may cause a long, drawn-out discussion that would effectively prevent full individual participation. This requires for the teacher to act as a "moderator" in the discussion if such an outcome takes place. Generally speaking, if group discussions that have taken place have been long and thorough, then summing up should remain brief. If, on the other hand, group discussions have been short and superficial in nature, then the group should proceed with a general form of debate until consensus is reached or an impasse is drawn.

This activity is easily replicated in a host of other environmental settings where "group survival" might be an issue. A list of suggested "environmental" settings is provided with a companion list of items necessary for survival in such hostile environments. As previously mentioned, the popularity of such a game should not be underestimated in light of such popular network and syndicated television programs such as "*Survivor*" or "*Lost*", or Hollywood blockbuster films such as "*Castaway*(1986)", "*Gravity* (2013)", or "*Interstellar*(2014)".

Criticism of the task-based teaching / instruction (TBE / TBI) method is discussed in Richards (2006):

Many issues arise in implementing a task-based approach. To begin with, there is little evidence that it works any more effectively than the P-P-P approach it seeks to replace. Criteria for selecting and sequencing tasks are also problematic, as is the problem of language accuracy. Task work may well serve to develop fluency at the expense of accuracy, as with some of the other activities suggested within the CLT framework. Content issues are also of secondary importance in TBI, making it of little relevance to those concerned with CBI or mainstreaming. The fact that TBI addresses classroom processes rather than learning outcomes is also an issue. Incourses that have specific instructional outcomes to attain (e.g. examination targets) and where specific language needs have to be addressed rather than the general communication skills targeted in their task work, TBI may even seem too vague a methodology to be widely adopted (pg.35).

Despite the relevant criticism and problems teachers face when using TBT, any focus should be placed on how the proven methodology works within the inherently larger CLT framework. This focus is on input to the learning process and how instruction can better serve the learners' collective and individual interests towards achieving autonomy.

7. Conclusion

The implications for a communicative language teaching pedagogy are evident since it affords learners a better opportunity to acquire real communication skills. Richards (2006) summarized the principles behind using this approach as follows:

- Make real communication the focus of language learning.
- Provide opportunities for learners to experiment and try out what they know.
- Be tolerant of learners' errors as they indicate that the learner is building his or her communicative competence.
- Provide opportunities for learners to develop both accuracy and fluency.
- Link the different skills such as speaking, reading, and listening together, since they usually occur so in the real world.
- Let students induce and discover grammar rules (pg.13).

The proposed activity "*Lost on the Moon: Survival Game*" was suggested in such a way as to engage learners' in a language-centered, task-based activity. There is no sense of accuracy, outside the larger consideration of agreement or disagreement of the priorities set forth in the exercise. This aspect of game-play should serve as the catalyst for discussion, whereby all of the participants of the game will voice affirmation or objection to what is brought forth. Language usage, communication achievement, communication strategy, and linking the learners' language to the context of the game are all meant to facilitate the acquisition of language fluency.

The ranking task of placing all of the items on both lists in order of importance asks students to compare values, share opinions and question beliefs. By completing this task, participating students will have the opportunity to acquire unfamiliar real-language vocabulary, stimulate discussion in a communal setting, and gain a sense of shared accomplishment. The individual ("*My List*"), pair work ("*Team List*"), and group work ("*Mission Debriefing*") facets of the game should help students to develop different levels of motivation and a personal sense of accomplishment when the task is completed.

The real focus of introducing this exercise is to promote learner autonomy by giving students a greater choice over their own learning experience. Thornbury (2005) regard the purpose of this focus in the following way, "Speaking activities involving a drama element, in which learners take an imaginative leap out of the confines of the classroom, provide a useful springboard for real-language use" (pg.96)

Ultimately, the aim of this activity, supported in Jones (1982), is not to produce the "correct words, grammar, and pronunciation, but to communicate effectively according to roles, functions, and duties." (p.38) Therefore, it is best to take a relaxed attitude and "do too little rather than do too much" (p.39) to help students learn from such a task. Finally, Shie (1991) provides an apt bit of advice those teachers who choose to use game activities (tasks) in their class room, "EFL games can promote learners' motivation not only through their changeable forms of activity and kaleidoscopic nature of engagement, but also through their positive effect on foreign language anxiety (pp.113-114).

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