



EFFECTIVENESS OF TASK-BASED INSTRUCTIONS IN CHANGING THE ATTITUDES OF YOUNG LEARNERS TOWARDS ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

The present experimental study explored the attitudes towards English of VII graders studying in elementary schools of Ambala district after being taught through task-based instructions. A sample of 140 randomly selected students participated in the study; of which 70 were allocated to experimental group (taught using task-based instructions) and other 70 became a part of control group (taught using grammar-translation method). A self-made attitude scale was used to explore the attitude of young learners towards English language both before and after teaching. T-tests were run to compare the attitudes of both the groups and to analyze if at all there was any significant improvement within the groups. Results of the t-tests revealed that the groups taught through task-based instructions exhibited a more favorable attitude towards English than their counterparts. This can be attributed to the fact that TBI is learner-centered approach with its emphasis on fluency and not on accuracy i.e. in task-based classroom learners use their language repertoire without the fear of being wrong. Additionally, the tasks used in the class are not mere fragmented pieces of knowledge holding any relevance in everyday life. The tasks practiced, in fact, cater to the real-world activities making learning both fun and authentic. Furthermore, the successful completion of tasks demands the learners to work either in pairs or in groups; this gives them opportunity to construct meaning in a social set-up. It is for this reason that task-based instructions can be labeled as the socio-constructivist approach to learning languages.

KEYWORDS: task-based instructions, attitude towards English.

Throughout history of language teaching there have been many pendulum swings and bandwagon approaches ranging from chalk and talk method to much student oriented methods like communicative language teaching methods. Where on one hand form or grammar is given supreme importance; others claim that language, meaning and vocabulary should be given priority. The approaches with their foci on grammatical accuracy are categorized as form-centered approaches and the ones who advocate the supremacy of meaning are labeled as meaning-focused approaches. The present research endeavor uses both these approaches to tap into the attitudes of young learners towards English and attempts to find which strategy proves more effective in changing their attitude.

One of the several meaning-focused approaches that have grabbed the attention of researchers since past three decades is task-based instruction. TBI was first proposed in the 1980s in seminal papers by Breen and Candlin (1980), Long (1985) and Prabhu (1987) in response to dissatisfaction with traditional 'one-size-fits-all' language teaching approaches that involve teaching pre-selected language items in discrete isolated blocks (Long and Crookes, 1992; Van den Branden, 2006). The proponents of TBI argue that the most effective way to teach a language is by engaging learners in real language use in the classroom. The proponents further hypothesize that the performance of functional tasks involving meaningful language use is the starting point; primary mechanism; and final goal of educational activity (Branden, Bygate, and Norris, 2009).

Task-based instruction (TBI) focuses on the use of authentic language and on asking students to do meaningful tasks using the target language. Such tasks can include visiting a doctor, negotiating with a shopkeeper, conducting an interview, or calling customer service for help. Assessment is primarily based on task outcome rather than on accuracy of language forms and it is for this reason that task-based instructions have been very popular in developing students' fluency (Brumfit, 1984; Skehan, 1996) as well as their confidence. Interaction is a pivotal element of the task-based student-centered approach, since development is not so much a matter of taking in and possessing lots of knowledge but rather of the taking part in social activity (Ellis, 2003). It is for these reasons that a task-based approach takes into account both Piagetian (Piaget, 1970) and Vygotskian (Vygotsky, 1978) perspectives, which in essence makes task-based instructions a socio-constructivist approach to learning languages (Muhaimed, 2013). The students in experimental groups were taught using lesson plans designed in accordance with this strategy.

One of the earliest and most conventional ways of teaching second language is the grammar-translation method (Brown, 1994; Heydari, 2015). The focal point of this strategy is that if language acquisition has to happen, the learners need to learn rules of grammar and translate passages of target language in their native language. The aim of grammar-translation method is to make language learning easier for learners; and to meet this aim traditional texts are replaced by exemplary sentences (Chuan-Chang, 2011; Mondal, 2012). This method is a perfect example of teacher-driven classes in which the students are mere passive recipients of the information and this is one of the major limitations of this approach. It has a very limited scope – there is no listening; no speaking no pronunciation

practice; importance is only given to grammar rules and learning isolated chunks of information; learning rate is very slow and learners mostly think in their mother tongue making new learning all the more tedious (Abdullah, 2013). The students in control group were taught through this grammar-translation approach.

This experimental research was designed to study the effect of both the aforementioned teaching strategies on learners' attitudes towards English language. When people question someone's attitude they refer to beliefs and feelings related to a person or event and the resulting behavior. Taken together, favorable or unfavorable evaluative reactions – whether exhibited in beliefs, feelings or inclination to act – define a person's attitude towards something (Olson & Zanna, 1993). Attitude towards languages is one of the extensively studied phenomena in socio-linguistics. It is the attitude towards language that appears to be important in the restoration, preservation, decay or death in the life of a language (Baker, 1992). Although, there is no one accepted definition of language attitudes but there is a general unifying concept about attitude that it involves both beliefs and feelings. Attitude towards English is a multidimensional variable including dimension such as enjoyment, motivation and confidence. For the present study, the ABC model (Affective, Behavioral and Cognitive) of attitude was used to give theoretical foundation to the construct and later factorial analysis was run to reduce the dimensions into meaningful factors. The self-reported five-point likert scale, after conducting SPSS was divided into five subscales namely desire towards learning English, academic confidence, perceived usefulness, perceived difficulty and interest in extracurricular activities.

Method

Participants

Participants included 140 VII grade boys and girls studying in CBSE affiliated public schools of Ambala. Of the selected sample 70 students were randomly drawn to be part of experimental group and other 70 were allocated to control group.

Materials

A self-made attitude scale comprising of 56 items divided into five dimensions viz. desire towards learning English, academic confidence, perceived usefulness, perceived difficulty and interest in extracurricular activities was used to gauge students' attitudes towards English both pre and post instruction.

Procedure

At the initial stage participants gave informed consent to participate in the study. The English language teacher was then requested to provide each participant's achievement score in English on the last test that they sat through. Participants were randomly assigned control and experimental groups on the basis of their achievement scores collected from the subject teacher i.e. both the groups were matched on the basis of their achievement in English tests. Further groupings were also done, as TBI necessitates working in groups for the successful completion of tasks. So, every group consisted of five members each comprising one high achiever, one low achiever and three with average scores.

Afterwards, the experiment was conducted in three phases viz. pre-testing, administering instructional program and post-testing. In the pre-testing phase the self-reported attitude scale was administered on both the control and experimental groups. In the second phase of this stage, the experiment was conducted for 46 working days wherein the students of experimental group were taught writing dialogues, messages and emails through TBI. A total of 11 major teaching episodes were designed in accordance with TBI framework. Every teaching episode was divided into three stages – pre-task (preparation for main-task), during task (main task) and post-task (replication of what has been done). The students were encouraged to focus on fluency and it was assumed that accuracy would automatically flow. As a ground rule, everyone was instructed to speak in English only. On the other hand, the students in control group were taught through grammar-translation method with particular emphasis on reported speech and active-passive voice. The last and the final phase of the whole procedure was administration of post-test to both experimental and control groups. The same test (the one used in pre-testing) was again administered to find whether or not any gain

has occurred in the dependent variable namely attitude towards English.

Statistical Techniques

Descriptive statistics like arithmetic mean, median, standard deviation, skewness and kurtosis were studied to understand the general nature of sample. Graphical representation was carried out to understand and analyze the data qualitatively. T-test was then employed to find out significant difference, if any, exists in the mean gain scores on attitude towards English of groups taught through TBI and GTM.

Results

An analysis of descriptive data indicated that the data were normally distributed and had no extreme values (outliers). An independent sample t-test was run to further analyze the difference between mean gain scores on attitude towards English for two groups.

Table 1: Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff	Std. Error Diff	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
GainAtt	Equal variances assumed	1.138	.288	-14.57	138	.000	-28.21	1.937	-32.04	-24.39
	Equal variances not assumed			-14.57	116.512	.000	-28.21	1.937	-32.05	-24.38

The table 1 above confirms that the p value for Levene's test for equality of variance is greater than the alpha value of 0.05. Hence, it can be safely concluded that variances are not statistically different and so, t-test assuming homogeneous variances was read. The t-ratio was found to be statistically significant, $t(138) = .000$, $p < 0.05$ for attitude towards English. This result suggested that groups taught through grammar-translation method and task-based instructions differed significantly on mean gain scores. A further look at the descriptive statistics revealed that experimental group ($M = 54.17$) outperformed their counterparts in control group ($M = 25.96$) indicating that there is a significant improvement in students' attitudes towards English after been exposed to task-based approach.

Discussion

This study was aimed to explore the attitudes of VII graders towards English language after being exposed to task-based instructions and grammar-translation method. Participants who were taught through task-based instructions showed significant improvement over their peers in control group. The findings of this study confirm the findings of earlier studies that examined the effect of task-based instruction in developing favorable attitudes towards English of young learners (e.g. Kavaliauskiene, 2004, 2005; Chen and Chen, 2005). Lopes (2004) further supports the findings of this study when he suggested that students who were taught using TBI learnt English more effectively because they had ample opportunities to use language, access information and solve problems. Additionally, when compared with other teaching strategies like the traditional present, practice and produce (PPP) approach TBI has proven to be more effectual in creating favorable attitudes of students (Kavaliauskiene, 2005).

Besides the result of quantitative data analysis, the results of informal observation of the researcher show that pupils overwhelmingly expressed their delight as they got engaged in various pair and group tasks. Reason for this general positive disposition towards learning English language is that task-based lessons developed an urge in the students to improve their communicative competence as these tasks were not only helpful in enhancing their attitude and academic achievement but were also helpful in their routine conversations with their teachers, shopkeepers, doctors and other general telephonic conversations.

Conclusively, it can be stated that although education in general, and teaching of English, in particular, receives due attention from governmental organizations, schools and concerned authorities in India. But data from previous researches present a rather bleak picture of students' attitude towards languages. In current study task-based instructions were employed to see its effect on learners' attitude towards English. This study also sought for insights that can be used for implementing task-based approach. Overall results indicated that TB approach was successful in establishing a positive attitude towards English language and its learning. These results can be attributed to the fact that task-based teaching strategy is based on constructivist pedagogy and principles that respond to the diverse needs of language learners. All in all, it can be safely stated that task-based lessons provide ample opportunities to the students to play with their language repertoire and display their cognitive and affective skills through action. Findings of the said study intend to inspire the policy makers, curriculum designers and teachers to make a move towards integrating task-based approach in regular language learning class and drift away from a highly structured and compartmentalized syllabus to a more constructivist curriculum.

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