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A TASK-BASED APPROACH IN TEACHING ESL READING

This paper aims at presenting the main components and tenets of task-based approach to second language teaching, specifying its basic features, and highlighting its role as a powerful approach for teaching ESL reading. Teaching reading in terms of task-based approach has been viewed from two perspectives, intensive and extensive reading, and implications for the ESL classroom have been drawn. Three phases of task-based teaching reading have been described and best practices for each phase have been outlined. The benefits as well as possible challenges for the task-based reading have been defined. A number of general principles to design, introduce, and integrate tasks into the teaching of reading have been proposed. The overall purpose of task-based approach in teaching reading has been regarded as creating opportunities for language learning and skill development linked to learners' interests and resembling their real-life process of reading for pleasure or for getting information.

Key words: task-based approach, intensive reading, extensive reading, meaning-focused, focus-on-form

МЕТОД КОМУНІКАТИВНИХ ЗАВДАНЬ У НАВЧАННІ ЧИТАННЮ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЮ МОВОЮ

У статті представлено основні компоненти і засади методу комунікативних завдань у навчанні англійській мові, окреслено основні характеристики методу комунікативних завдань і висвітлено його роль у навчанні читанню іноземною мовою. Навчання читанню методом комунікативних завдань розглянуто у двох площинах – інтенсивного та екстенсивного читання – та визначено певні можливості для його застосування. Виокремлено переваги та потенційні труднощі у навчанні читанню методом комунікативних завдань, а також запропоноано низку загальних принципів для створення, введення та застосування комунікативних завдань у навчанні читанню іноземною мовою.

Ключові слова: метод комунікативних завдань, інтенсивне читання, екстенсивне читання, зосереджений на змісті, зосереджений на формі.

МЕТОД КОММУНИКАТИВНЫХ ЗАДАНИЙ В ОБУЧЕНИИ ЧТЕНИЮ НА АНГЛИЙСКОМ ЯЗЫКЕ

В статье рассмотрены основные компоненты и принципы метода коммуникативных заданий в обучении английскому языку, определены основные характеристики метода коммуникативных заданий и раскрыта его роль в обучении чтению на иностранном языке. Обучение методом коммуникативных заданий рассмотрено в двух плоскостях – интенсивного и экстенсивного чтения – и определены основные возможности его применения. Выделены преимущества и потенциальные трудности в обучении чтению методом коммуникативных заданий, а также предложен ряд общих принципов для создания, введения и применения коммуникативных заданий в обучении иностранному языку.

Ключевые слова: метод коммуникативных заданий, интенсивное чтение, экстенсивное чтение, сосредоточенный на смысле, сосредоточенный на форме.

In their search for best TESOL practices, second language acquisition researchers and language teachers have claimed about the need for finding the tool to elicit second language use the way the learners will perform when they are not striving for accuracy, which will provide evidence of their ability to use the language in real life communication. They agree that providing learners with the opportunity to experience such language practice will facilitate them to develop the kind of second language proficiency that is needed to communicate fluently and effectively [7, p.1]. The tool that can be employed and is discussed over the last three decades is a «task». There has been plethora of publications on task-based learning and teaching, the authors of which raise many issues from different perspectives, like difficulties of defining what a task is [7; 15; 19; 22], different approaches to analysing tasks [3; 4; 7; 19; 21], task-based assessment [2; 7], using task-based teaching for developing various skills [11; 16; 17; 20; 24] employing technology in task-based language learning [23].

This paper will deal with teaching ESL reading by means of a task-based approach. In regards to this, there will be considered the main components and tenets of task-based approach to language teaching as well as the connections between task-based approaches and the teaching of reading. The conclusion will involve a proposition of a number of general principles to introduce and integrate tasks into the teaching of reading.

The definition of a pedagogic task is considered to be problematic and R. Ellis claims that in neither research nor language pedagogy is there complete unanimity upon this term [7, p. 2]. P. Skehan suggests a number of criteria which can be employed while specifying what a task is and defines a task as an activity in which meaning is primary, there is some sort of relationship to the real world, task completion has some priority, and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome [22, p. 38]. The scholar also emphasizes on the communicative nature of a task-based activity and argues for the importance of involvement of cognitive approach in language learning and its link to the task-based learning [22, p. 42–51]. R. Ellis suggests a broader list of features characteristic to a task, namely, that a task constitutes a plan for learner activity, involves a primary focus on meaning,

implicates real-world processes of language use, employs any of the four language skills, engages cognitive processes, and has a clearly defined communicative outcome [7, p. 9–10]. M. Long explains that by task he understands «the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at paly, and in between» [15, p. 89]. In language pedagogy, he regards «task» as the unit of analysis throughout the design, implementation, and evaluation of a task-based language learning program, including the way student achievement is assessed [15, p. 89]. M. Long advocates his idea of task-based language teaching and uses orthography to distinguish «genuine» TBLT (upper case) from other approaches to language teaching that involve tasks. M. Long's TBLT model emphasizes that tasks involve learners in communicative language use and more focus is given to meaning rather than to grammatical form. Considering the ideas mentioned above, it is possible to infer certain general features that a task has to include, which are the relation to the real world, a primary attention to meaning rather than form, the assessment of the task performance in terms of task outcome, a clearly defined communicative outcome and engagement of cognitive processes in completion of a task. M. Long also urges to differentiate between task-based and task-supported teaching, meaning by task-based teaching a methodology which starts with a task-based needs analysis to identify the target tasks for a particular group of learners, in other words what they need to be able to do in the new language. He warns that task-supported teaching, which still delivers a pre-planned, overt or covert linguistic syllabus of one sort or another, may not always have merit to students, and advocates for genuine task-based approach which, he claims, unlike synthetic linguistic syllabi, is broadly consistent with the findings in second language acquisition on how learners acquire foreign languages [15]. However, the majority of the second language acquisition researchers agree that instruction is most effective when it is primarily meaning-based but is supplemented by timely focus on form, i.e. focus on language features such as grammar, lexis, pronunciation, and pragmatics [8; 9; 10; 13; 18].

Now that the notion of the task has been defined, there is a need to look at some common task dimensions that are used to differentiate between different types of tasks. M. Long makes an important distinction between what he calls target tasks and pedagogic tasks, arguing that target tasks are the ones that people do in their everyday life, while pedagogic tasks are simpler versions of target tasks that language learners can work on in language classes, the goal of which is to prepare learners to a future target task performance in real-life settings. As the scholar explains, a pedagogic task always constitutes a sub-task of a target task. At times the distinction between a pedagogic task and a target task might be blurred [15, p. 90]. In one-way tasks, one participant has all the information to be conveyed; they do most of the speaking or writing, although the other participant or participants can indicate whether they can follow or comprehend the speaker or writer. As a result, this participant is responsible for a successful task completion. In two-way tasks all the participants need to take part in the task so that it can be completed successfully [14; 17]. Open tasks do not offer predetermined outcome that participants need to achieve. Completing closed tasks, by contrast, participants need to reach a given solution as there is a predetermined correct answer. Related distinction is between convergent and divergent tasks. In convergent tasks, participants are required to reach an agreement regarding the task outcome, whereas in divergent tasks, participants do not need to agree about the task solution. The terms focused and unfocused tasks were coined by R. Ellis on the basis of whether or not the task is designed to elicit specific linguistic features. Unfocused tasks do not have a predetermined language focus, whereas focused tasks are constructed to induce the use of particular linguistic constructions [7, p. 65]. Finally, the distinction, particularly relevant to this paper, is the difference between input-based versus output-based tasks. As R. Ellis explains, the difference between these two types of tasks lies in whether the learners are required to produce the language while they are carrying out the task [9]. Output-based tasks require language learners to produce language, that is, to engage in either speaking or writing. Input-based tasks do not require production as learners are expected to primarily engage in listening and reading during task work. The majority of literature on task-based language teaching and learning has so far focused on oral and written tasks, which basically belong to output-based task types.

The focus of this paper is reading tasks, thus the primary attention will be given to the effective use and design of input-based reading tasks. J. Macalister pointed out that successful teaching of reading requires three approaches, namely intensive reading, extensive reading, and reading fluency development. According to the scholar, intensive reading is the type of reading that happens in class, directed by the teacher, using the text that learners would be unlikely to read successfully without assistance and it is considered to be a vitally important activity by the teachers. Teachers train their learners to acquire the skills and strategies needed for successful reading and to understand how language conveys meaning in a text, as well as practice useful new vocabulary. However, J. Macalister recognizes two problems in this approach: teachers devote too much time to intensive reading, and they teach it poorly. He argues that students can spend hours on intensive reading activities in class, and even follow a speed reading course for a time, but without a programme of extensive reading, giving them the opportunity to put their skill into practice, the benefits from the first two activities will be sub-optimal. The key message, the scholar it trying to convey is that learning skills, strategies, vocabulary, and grammar should be embedded in the meaning focus [16, p. 391 – 393]. This idea is not new, for example, T. Johns and F. Davies proposed that teachers should view the text less as a linguistic object than as a vehicle for information [11]. Similarly, in task-based approach, teachers are required to draw learners' «attention to the surface forms realising the meaning they have already become familiar with during the task cycle and so help them to systematise their knowledge and broaden their understanding» [25, p. 114].

As it was mentioned above, focus on language activities can be included in task-based language learning. There are a number of options for teachers how to integrate language learning into the intensive reading lessons. These options must be considered in terms of the three main stages of the reading lesson, the pre-task or pre-reading stage, the during-task or while-reading stage, and the post-task or post-reading stage. The pre-task stage lends itself well to both language-focused and content-focused activities and it can be used to introduce learners to new language as well as recycle linguistic features that students have previously learned. Pre-teaching or recycling vocabulary is the most common practice and is regarded by teachers of immediate help to learners when completing the actual reading task in the during-task or post-task stage. However, this practice is considered to be somewhat controversial, as while having the potential to increase fluency and enhance the chance to complete the task successfully, according to R. Ellis, there is always the danger that pre-teaching vocabulary may result in learners treating their task as an opportunity to practice pre-selected words [7, p. 247]. In other words, pre-teaching vocabulary might divert learners' primary attention from meaning to language, eliminating the task aspect of the reading task. Pre-teaching vocabulary can be useful if it involves rich instruction of frequent vocabulary items. I. Nation explains that rich instruction means several encounters with the word and focusing on many aspects of what is involved in knowing a word. Rich instruction is a time-consuming activity and therefore should focus on high frequency items that are likely to be encountered in other texts. Moreover, pre-teaching of unimportant infrequent words may mislead the learners and lead them to poor comprehension [18, p. 157].

In the during-task or while-reading stage, learners read the text to achieve the task outcome. At this stage, they may incorporate a focus on language by means of incidental focus-on-form techniques. This term was coined by M. Long and involves briefly drawing students' attention to linguistic elements in context as they arise incidentally in lessons the main focus of which is on meaning or communication [15]. Glossing is one of the most frequently used focus-on-form techniques in reading instruction. Glosses are

used to provide linguistic information about items in the text, usually in the margin of the reading passage, and can take the form of a definition, a synonym, a translation, a picture etc. The research proposes that glosses may benefit learners since they provide information about the meaning of the word and consequently promote the comprehension of the text. Glossed items also help learners acquire targeted lexical items incidentally, without interrupting the reading process, thus, the primary focus remains on processing the text [18, p. 252]. Although glosses have positive effect on reading comprehension and on second language vocabulary learning, the effect is claimed to be relatively small, because glossed items by providing readily accessible word meanings may not encourage learners to employ a mental effort to find out the meanings of words. Addressing this issue B. Laufer and J. Hulstijn propose the idea of the involvement load hypothesis which persists that words that are processed with higher involvement load will be retained better than words that are processed with lower involvement load [10, p. 552].

Similarly to glossing, textual input enhancement is a frequently used implicit focus-on-form technique. This technique involves highlighting certain aspects of the input or text by means of typographical devices, such as bold facing, underlining, and italicizing. Researchers S.-K. Lee and H.-T. Huang found that input enhancement assists in learning language constructions but it may have slight negative effects on learners' meaning processing which could be accounted for by competition between learners' form and meaning processing [13, p. 323]. It has also been noted that visual input enhancement may produce more positive results when learners have some prior exposure to the targeted forms [13, p.325].

The post-task or post-reading stage is generally considered as a suitable phase to engage learners in language focused activities, as at this stage there is no longer danger that the quality of the task gets compromised by drawing learners' attention away from meaning. Therefore, at the post-task stage, the teacher may engage students in overtly focus-on-forms activities, targeting linguistic features which were relevant to completing the task or appeared problematic. R. Ellis indicates that at this stage there is no danger that focusing on language will threaten the integrity of the task [7]. For this reason, D. Willis recommended that focus on language should only be integrated into the post-task stage of the lesson [25]. However, the majority of the researchers hold the view, that focus-on-form is a useful way to draw learners' attention to form throughout a task-based activity [8; 9; 18]. It is also not a must to include a language focused post task activity into a task-based sequence.

While there must be a conscious effort of an educator to transform an intensive reading activity into a real-world task, extensive reading mirrors a real-world activity to a greater extent. According to C. Davis, an extensive reading programme is a supplementary class library scheme, attached to an English course, in which students are given the time, encouragement and materials to read pleasurably, at their own level, as many books as they can, without the pressures of testing or marks. The scholar notes that the attention should be focused on quantity an variety, rather than quality, therefore the books are selected for their attractiveness and relevance for students' lives, rather than for literary merit [5, p. 329]. Among the benefits of extensive reading, the researcher listed the overall improvement of comprehension skills not only in English class but in other subjects as well, the overall improvement in writing skill and increased confidence and fluency in speaking, the development of wider knowledge of the world and understanding of people, more effective employment of thinking skills and enlargement of imaginative scope. Although the benefits do not emerge immediately and teachers need to consider the importance of continuous exposure to a large amount of language and these benefits are difficult to quantify, C. Davis claims them to be considerable and proves the effectiveness of extensive reading [5, p. 330]. R. Day and J. Bamford formulated top ten principles for teaching extensive reading which are as follows: the reading material is easy; a variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available; learners choose what they want to read; learners read as much as possible; the purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding; reading is its own reward; reading speed is usually faster that slower; reading is individual and silent; teachers orient and guide their students; the teacher is a role model of a reader [6].

There is a widespread assumption in the second language reading literature that texts for extensive reading should be easily comprehensible and there should be little or no unknown vocabulary or grammatical features. According to D. Beglar and A. Hunt this means that learners need to know between 95 to 100% of the lexis in a text for successful extensive reading. Furthermore, knowing at least 98 % of the vocabulary in a text is necessary for unassisted comprehension and for providing learners a reasonable chance of inferring the meaning of unknown vocabulary. Simplified texts should provide learners with a more supportive environment for reading rate development than unsimplified texts [1, p.33]. The study, conducted by the scholars, produced three main findings: the most successful participants read 200,000 standard words or more over the academic year; simplified graded readers provided significantly better results than unsimplified texts; and lower-level simplified texts were more effective than higher-level simplified texts.

In the post reading phase, it is important to offer learners tasks but not activities, bearing in mind the framework for defining a task, that is they must be meaning focused, have a clear outcome, a real-life corollary, and a communication problem to solve. The examples of such tasks can be writing a book review, designing a book cover, choosing the best design from among existing covers, asking learners to write a summary of the book or of a chapter and incorporating a mistake in it, asking learners to come up with their own idea for reporting about the book, asking learners to come up with a summarizing activity, writing a diary entry for one of the characters of the book, illustrating part of the book, or producing a recommendation for classmates. There is also a possibility of providing a choice and using creativity for completing the task, when the outcome is not necessarily linguistic, which is connected with a learner-centered approach. And there is an option of not asking the learners to do anything apart from just reading for its own reward.

A number of scholars have been working on the issue of developing an effective task. To investigate how effective task designers work on task design, K. Johnson conducted a comprehensive research in which she pointed out common items mentioned by expert task-designers, which they consider in their work, namely: identifying real world situations in which people are described, thinking about task genre, thinking about task type, thinking about who learners are, providing some motivation for learners to speak, taskifying (which is defined as the procedure of thinking of a real world situation and converting it onto a task fit for class use) [12, p. 86]. According to A. Paran, to design a reading task and improve students' attitude to reading as well as their ability to comprehend, a teacher needs to adopt the following teaching behaviours: to choose texts which are interesting and relevant to learners; to make learners want to read the text, designing an appropriate pre-reading activity; to ask about students' reaction to the text immediately after students have finished reading the text; to focus on meaning rather than language issues, which should be incidental; to offer choices to learners in which the choice of not reading must be also included; to introduce narrow reading, or reading a series of texts about the same topic; to underuse texts, doing fewer exercises and reading more texts; to present texts and activities that learners can do; and to use electronic resources more [20, p. 27–28]. R. Ellis suggests certain principles that should be considered by the educators willing to implement task-based learning, namely:

1. The tasks must be adjusted to the proficiency levels of the students (e.g. if the students have limited proficiency, tasks should initially be of the input providing rather than output-prompting kind).

2. Tasks need to be tested to ensure that they result in appropriate second language use and revised in the light of experience.

3. For task-based language teaching to work, teachers need a clear understanding of what a task is.

4. Teachers and students need to be made aware of the purpose and rationale for performing tasks (e.g. they need to understand that tasks foster incidental learning of the kind that will facilitate their communicative skills).

5. Ideally, the teachers involved in teaching a task-based course must be involved in the development of the task materials [8, p. 241].

Conclusion. Task-based learning has developed prominently in the last three decades and has remained a potentially productive approach for a number of ESL teachers and researchers. Task-based learning is learner-centered and it starts with the task-based needs analysis to identify what learners need to be able to do in the second language. The benefits of this approach include the opportunity for real-life learning inside the classroom, its highly motivating factor, it fosters communicative fluency, it is meaning-focused but can be combined with focus-on-form activities. The concerns associated with the task-based learning may include the lack of task-based materials, little focus on language, some tasks may result in non-linguistic activity, students may start using mother tongue at the stage of discussing the task.

Although the communicative approach to language teaching has become synonymous with speaking and conversation, it has as much to do with reading as reading is a communicative act. However, in the language classroom a text is mostly perceived as a linguistic object, rather than a vehicle for information which has very little in common with real-life process of reading. Moreover, the subconscious message that learners may receive is that reading is something you do in order to learn a language. In such context, it is vitally important to show learners that reading has a strong real life element to it and can be performed for pleasure or for getting information. Designing a reading task, an educator should keep in mind his or her learners who need to be mainly concerned with processing the semantic and pragmatic meaning of the text. There also should be a clearly defined communicative outcome other than the use of language while the language will serve only as the means for achieving the outcome. The text needs to be linked to learners' real life and learners have to rely on their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources to complete the task. Besides intensive reading in the classroom, students need to be exposed to a big amount of extensive reading which should mirror their reading experiences outside the classroom as much as possible. Extensive reading texts need to be easy, relevant to learners' interests, and preference should be given to quantity rather than literary merit. As a final note, it should be pointed out that reading in the classroom should assist the learners to apply what they have read to their real lives, and, as J. Macalister claims, teachers should continue to ask themselves a simple question: how has today's teaching prepared my learners to be better readers tomorrow [16, p. 395]?

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