Are task-based lessons better than P-P-P lessons for achieving Bosnian students’ learning aims?

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RATIONALE

Task-based learning is based on the theory that using a language to achieve a real-life aim is more effective for learning than learning about the language through explicit focus on form and pre-determined lexis. (Thornbury, 2006) The Present-Practice-Produce format is based on the idea that learners need grammatical structures explained by the teacher and to practice using them accurately before they can use language fluently.

Almost all of my students have spent years in public primary and secondary schools, at University and even in private language schools learning the rules of English grammar and practising structures with pre-determined vocabulary. Yet when they arrive in my classes after years of study they are still not fluent, confident users of English. Therefore, for students who want to communicate in English, I believe task-based learning has the potential to be very effective. By giving them problems to solve, for example, drawing up a list of policies for mobile phone use in their city, rather than course book exercises to complete, I believe task-based learning will motivate them to actively seek and use new language, rather than react to the agenda, topics and language in a course book. Several of my students have told me they find topics in the official school course book “not so interesting”, and have pointed to my self-created class discussions as something they would like to do more.

My study compared students’ reactions to P-P-P lessons versus task-based lessons over a two-month period. I worked with a group of five B-2 level Bosnian learners, including two high school students, a university student, a doctor and a teacher, both in their twenties. I alternated P-P-P lessons from Face2Face Upper-Intermediate (Cambridge University Press, 2007) with self-created task-based lessons.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definitions

Willis and Willis define task-based teaching (TBT) as an approach based on the belief that “the most effective way to teach a language is by engaging learners in real language use in the classroom. This is done by designing tasks—discussions, problems, games, and so on—which require learners to use the language for themselves.” (Oxford University Press 2007) This approach sees language as a mode of communication, and “meaning as the starting point for language development, and (...) form as developing from meaning.” (Willis and Willis 2007)

TBT is centered around communicative tasks that match undertakings the student is likely to encounter in everyday life. Nunan defines a task as “a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form.” (Prentice Hall International 1989)

In contrast, the approach employed by many course books is Present-Practice-Produce (P-P-P), a lesson structure in which

“a pre-selected grammar item is first presented to the learners, e.g. by means of a text or through demonstration. (...) Its rules of form and use are either explained or elicited from the learners. The item is then practised in isolation, and with an emphasis on accuracy. Teacher control is gradually relinquished, and activities (...) are set up to encourage free production.” (Thornbury, 2006)

Discussion of major themes

i) Motivation: Willis and Willis (Oxford University Press 2007) describe how task-based lessons are designed to be intrinsically motivating by a process of:

1. engaging students in authentic communication on an interesting topic
2. providing clear outcomes such as results of an opinion survey

David Carless’ research seems to confirm the notion that task-based lessons are more motivating. Working in Hong Kong, where TBLT has been promoted by the government through secondary curriculums since 1999, he wrote a paper based on interviews with secondary-level teachers and teacher trainers on their assessments of the pros and cons of TBLT versus P-P-P. Analyzing responses from teachers and trainers, Carless found that “TBLT is seen as potentially providing a more active role for students, and if implemented successfully, more motivating.” (Asian Journal of English Language Teaching, 2009).

ii) learning: Proponents of TBLT argue that lessons comprised of meaning-focused activities are more effective for learners’ language development than presentation, practice and production of pre-selected grammatical forms. How do such activities help learners develop grammatical accuracy? Prabhu writes that “while the conscious mind is working out some of the meaning-content, a subconscious part of the mind perceives, abstracts, or acquires some of the linguistic structuring embodied in those entities, as a step in the development of an internal system of rules.” (Oxford University Press, 1987)

While P-P-P is embraced as a clear, and intuitively attractive approach to transmitting and practicing knowledge of the language, it has been critiqued as “too linear and behaviourist in nature, so failing to account for learners’ stages of developmental readiness.” (Ellis 2003) P-P-P assumes that learners learn what they are taught in the order it is taught, and that accuracy must develop before fluency, though research has shown both these notions to be unreliable. (Thornbury 1999)

RESEARCH METHODS

- Needs analysis for baseline data (see Appendix 1 for a sample worksheet)
  I needed an understanding of their needs, learning aims and relevant background information in order to design tasks that would match their real-life purposes for learning English. I designed a needs analysis worksheet which was intended to encourage discussion in an informal atmosphere.

- Feedback questionnaires from the learners (see Appendix 2 for a sample form)
  In order to compare students’ reactions to task-based lessons versus P-P-P lessons, I designed a short questionnaire to get their immediate reactions after the lesson. The form is very short because my lessons are only one hour long, and I didn’t want to overburden the students with giving feedback, or take too much time out from the lessons.

  I designed my feedback questionnaire based on data gathered from the needs analysis worksheets and my notes from our class discussion, in order to determine how well Face2Face lessons vs. task-based lessons addressed students’ needs and aims.

  Questionnaires asked for a score from 1, the highest, to 5, the lowest for these four criteria:
  - how well the lesson prepared them to use English in real life (preparation)
  - whether the lesson gave them opportunities to express their own ideas (self-expression)
  - whether they had to learn new language to complete the tasks (learning)
  - how much they enjoyed the lesson (enjoyment)
WHAT THE DATA SHOWED

A) Needs analysis

The results of needs analysis data show that students’ top three needs for English were:

- to communicate while travelling, ranked in the top three by four students
- to communicate with colleagues and students from other countries, ranked in the top three by five students
- to study at University in another country, ranked in the top three by three students

This data shows that a broad range of education, work, travel and social topics and tasks are appropriate for this group. They are young and may be citizens of the European Union in the next fifteen years.

Part C. of the needs analysis form prompted a paired, then full class discussion. My notes showed the following:

- students had very broad, rather than specific aims for learning during the course, for example, “I want to improve my speaking,” and “I want to improve all aspects of my English,” and “I want to improve my vocabulary.”
- a good lesson included a variety of activity types, opportunities for each student to express themselves on an interesting topic, learning new words, and learning new things apart from just English.

B) Student feedback questionnaires

For each lesson, I calculated average scores for each of the four criteria on the feedback form based on scores from 1 to 5 given by each of the 5 students. (See appendix 3 for the scores for each lesson) Scores for each criteria generally rose from the beginning to the end of the project, implying that students perceived an increase in the quality of lessons throughout the course. However, comparing student feedback from one lesson to the next, there is no significant difference between the P-P-P scores and the TBL scores. Task-based lessons consistently scored slightly higher than P-P-P lessons for the “learning” and “enjoyment” criteria. But for the “preparation for using English in real life” and the “self-expression” criteria, neither lesson approach was consistently better than the other, according to the data.

Based on the scores for each lesson, I generated a set of average scores for each criteria for the task-based lessons overall to compare with the overall average scores for each criteria for the P-P-P lessons. These data are represented in the table below.
Overall, the task-based lessons got slightly higher scores for each category except learning, where the score was eleven points higher. Students were also invited to write any additional comments about the lesson, and did occasionally include short comments. Overall, the task-based lessons received five positive comments, for example, “I enjoyed the text we read,” “very good class,” “I love this type of lesson,” “I enjoyed it.” The only negative comment pointed out that the text was long and that the student didn’t like reading long texts in class. The Face2Face lessons received four positive comments, similar to those above, such as “interesting topic,” and “I learned a lot.” The lack of stark differences between students’ evaluation of the two different lesson types suggests that there are factors other than teaching approach that are more important to students when deciding whether lessons are helping them achieve their aims.
C) Supplementary feedback

Since reactions to the two different types of lessons were quite similar, I decided to ask students for supplementary comments. I showed them their needs analysis worksheets and asked the following questions:

1. What, if any, difference was there between the course book lessons and the task-based lessons?
2. Did you find either of these kinds of lessons better for achieving your learning objectives?
3. Did you find either kind of lesson more motivating than the other?

Their written responses offered good insights as to what students found most motivating and useful. I have sorted the comments into three columns:

| “the task-based lessons were more interesting and motivating” | “I didn’t notice any difference at all” (between the two lesson types) | “the course book subjects are quite boring” |
| “the task-based lessons were more creative and fun” | “both kinds of lesson were very good” | “the course book lessons were more interesting” |
| “the task-based lessons were more useful” | “I found good things in both kinds of lessons” |
| “the task-based lessons were more creative” |

Students valued creativity, fun and interesting topics, but also liked having a balance between more and less traditional learning activities. They didn’t seem to find the idea of completing a “task” important for learning. From this I conclude that the approach of the lesson doesn’t matter as much as how well the topic and activities:

- match learners’ idea of what is interesting
- engage learners’ creativity
- help students learn new grammar and vocabulary

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

A) Balanced response: Although students responded slightly more positively to task-based lessons than to P-P-P lessons, there wasn’t a definitive enough preference for either type of lesson to be able to conclude that one type is helping students achieve their objectives better. One unusual factor that contributed to the balanced reactions was that the group had chosen which P-P-P lessons to do. During the first class we looked through the course book and the students agreed on which ones to do. They may have responded less positively to P-P-P lessons they had not chosen. For this group, the usefulness of a lesson depends more on their interest in the topic, the degree to which new lexis in the lesson can be picked up and used outside the classroom, and the creativity and fun found in the activities, than on the approach employed in the lesson.
B) Variety: I chose to experiment with self-designed task-based lessons in part because I had heard negative comments from students in this and other groups about the course book being boring. Based on these comments and my data, I am led to the conclusion that it is not desirable to try to find one “best” approach or method and to use it for an entire course. Students responded positively to having the option to accept or reject course book lessons and to the variety of having two different lesson approaches and many different activity types.

C) Needs analysis and lesson feedback: Perhaps the most useful thing to come out of this experiment was the students’ raised awareness that came from their identifying their needs and objectives for the course then evaluating and giving feedback on the lessons. Though their initial stated objectives were general and vague, their supplementary feedback at the end of the course showed the beginnings of more specific objectives. For example, one student gave “improving my speaking” as an initial objective, but found in the supplementary feedback that short presentations were useful to her. With a little reflection, she may decide that in the next course, her objective is “to improve my skill at presenting a large amount of information in English using minimal notes”.

I had worked previously with this group for two terms, and I saw an increase in students’ engagement during this project. The atmosphere was more lively and rapport among the students increased; in short, they gelled as a group. I attribute this to the increased sense of purpose that came with identifying objectives and evaluating lessons. It is also interesting to note that students’ scores increased from lesson to lesson. This is an indication that student feedback gave me the data needed to teach better lessons each time.

D) Future Implications: Negotiated Syllabus: This project has given me a new research question. Can more effective learning come about using a negotiated syllabus? A negotiated or process syllabus is one in which “the content and direction of the program is jointly and continuously negotiated between the learners and teacher.” (Thornbury, 2006) I envision a three-fold process of helping students to clarify their learning objectives, take a more informed and active role in deciding on lesson types and activities, and evaluating what has been done. This process would help ensure that the courses are effective and could also be the basis for students evaluating their own learning. These three skills, identifying specific, realistic objectives, evaluating activities and evaluating learning, would help students become more self-directed, effective learners.

EVALUATION

Despite the mixed conclusions, I believe the project answered my research question and taught me valuable things I had not expected to learn. Rather than finding the more appropriate of two different methods, I struck upon first steps toward a negotiated syllabus. I saw how continuous student evaluation of learning can help clarify learning objectives. Finally, I experienced firsthand the impact that choice can have on students’ motivation.

One benefit the students experienced was a raised awareness of how well their English classes are helping them achieve their learning objectives.

A) problems with data collection: My needs analysis form was too narrow and not detailed enough. It did little to help me determine what types of activities would best help my students. It would have been more effective to use the whole first lesson for activities to help students articulate their needs and identify specific objectives. Alternatively, I could have revisited the question of needs and objectives another time during the course.
Severe time constraints and flaws in my student feedback questionnaire resulted in a rather unclear picture during the project of how well the lessons were meeting students’ objectives. The forms should have included at least one open-ended question, such as what did you learn from this lesson, or, which activity did you find most useful and why?

In addition to the standard feedback questionnaire after each lesson, various quick, informal feedback-gathering activities may have yielded useful insight.

**B) lesson planning:** One of my sub-aims in this project was to learn how to plan and teach task-based lessons, a process which took more time than expected. I relied heavily on read-and-report tasks, and though these got positive reactions from the students, a greater variety of task types would have better prepared students to use English in real life. Read-and-report tasks were familiar to students, having come through an education system which emphasizes a knowledge transfer from books to students, ending with students repeating what was learned. While they potentially have real world value, read-and-report tasks can also be merely pedagogical tasks.

As I was continuously reading about task-based teaching, I planned on a lesson-by-lesson basis, rather than planning a series of task-based lessons that would have given an over-arching coherence and included a better variety of real-life activities like producing a webpage or a radio broadcast.

**C) learning outcomes:** Of all the criteria, the averages score for learning were the lowest. One of the reasons for this may have been that the earlier stages of many of the task-based lessons continued longer than I had expected and we ran out of time for the later form-focused stage. Because the task-based lessons tended to lack a focus on form, one student drew a dichotomy between task-based lessons and studying grammar, saying “I find that task-based lessons were much more interesting and consequently more motivating for learning. But to learn something new and revise previously learned stuff from grammar, I think it’s useful to go through some course book lessons. So, combining both approaches is best for me.”

This is a strong group and learning outcomes for the course book lessons would have been better if I had adapted these lessons to make them more challenging.

**D) motivation:** One of the problems associated with using a course book is that the course marches from unit to unit regardless of the interest of the students. Students can become de-motivated simply because they know exactly what is coming, with each lesson following the same routine. Students confirmed that task-based lessons were more motivating due to the creativity and fun involved in the lessons. Allowing students to choose which course book lessons to do may have increased their motivation to use the course book, leading to inconclusive results as to which type of lesson was more motivating.

In summary, task-based lessons are not necessarily better than P-P-P lessons for achieving Bosnian students’ learning aims. However, P-P-P lessons from course book are often found lacking with regard to motivating students, engaging their creativity, and involving them in stimulating activities on interesting topics. The best way to help Bosnian student achieve their learning objectives will involve a careful, ongoing process for identifying those objectives, involving students in deciding which topics to cover and which activities to use, and using a variety of formal and informal evaluation methods.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Appendix 1. Needs Analysis Worksheet

What do you need English for?

A. **Number** these things from 1 to 9 according to how important they are for you. **1** is the most important and 9 is the least important.

I need English to:

___ find information on the internet
___ understand films and TV
___ communicate with foreigners who come to Sarajevo
___ communicate when I travel to other countries
___ communicate with colleagues from other countries
___ study at University in another country
___ understand and write emails in English
___ understand pop music
___ pass an exam

B. **Compare** your answers with your partner. Tell your partner why some things are important to you and some things aren’t.

C. **Discussion.** Discuss these questions with your partner

1. What are your objectives for learning English?
2. Which topics in Face 2 Face do you think are interesting? Which aren’t interesting?
3. What other topics would you like to discuss in class?
4. What is difficult for you in English? *(for example, understanding people when they speak, or, using grammar correctly)*
4. What happens in a **good** lesson?
Appendix 2: Student Feedback Questionnaire

What did you think of the lesson?

1. Did this lesson prepare you to use English in real life?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YES</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(it prepared me)</td>
<td>(didn’t prepare me)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Did this lesson give you a chance to express your own ideas?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YES</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(I expressed my own ideas)</td>
<td>(didn’t express my own ideas)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Did you have to learn new language (words and/or grammar) to complete the activities?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YES</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(I had to learn new ...)</td>
<td>(I didn’t have to learn new ...)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Did you enjoy the lesson?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YES</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(I enjoyed it a lot)</td>
<td>(I didn’t enjoy it)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Please write any comments you have about the lesson:

_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________

Thank you for your feedback!
Appendix 3: Scores for each lesson based on student feedback.

Lesson 1: (P-P-P) National Stereotypes

Lesson 2: (TBL) Dance and attraction

Lesson 3: (P-P-P) Who owns English?

Lesson 4: (TBL) Learning Styles and Strategies

Strategies
Lesson 5: (P-P-P) Urban Legends

Lesson 6: (TBL) Shaun of the Dead

Lesson 7: (P-P-P) Food and Nutrition

(Continued on next page)
Lesson 8: (TBL) Use your senses

[Bar chart showing score averages for Preparation, Self-Expression, Learning, and Enjoyment]