

Rethinking the Methodology Used in Developing Reading Skill in Omani Students of a Design College

N.C. Kiranmayi
Foundation Program
Ministry of Health,
P.O. Box 3720, P.C. 112,
Sultanate of Oman
E-mail: mayidhar@gmail.com

(Received: 28-2-12/ Accepted: 15-5-12)

Abstract

This paper discusses an ESL teacher's reflections on the use of traditional methodology to teaching and the advantages of using Task-Based Language Teaching Methodology for improving the reading skills of Omani students in the setting of Foundation Program. The samples for this study were two sections of students with 25 students each. The duration of the project was two semesters (roughly one year). This research is very vital in the sense it reports that though the students do not have reading culture (common problem faced in the Gulf), they can be encouraged with fruitful results to read academic and non-academic texts as the methodology suggested provides for brain storming, preparing and scaffolding the instruction. It also reports the adaptation of the prescribed text book in a reading project undertaken in her college to reinforce the claim that TBLT is more effective and how she helped facilitate learning of useful reading techniques with students becoming confident in tackling any reading text.

Keywords: Rethinking methodology, Task-based language teaching, adaptation of the text, reading project.

1. Introduction:

Though I have been working as an English teacher for the last 22 years on various platforms and in various capacities, (13 years in India and 9 years in Oman), teaching reading skill to Omanis was a little daunting to me. This might be because of the attitude of Omani students to reading and also the way it is taught in classrooms. The students' exposure to English Language outside the classrooms is also very limited. Al-Husseini's study, though, was conducted solely on FYP (Foundation Year Program) and about speaking skills in technical colleges in Oman; the findings seem to mirror the state of English programs in Omani colleges in general. "The students need more opportunities to practice English and use it communicatively inside and outside the language classroom" (Al-Husseini 2004, p.175). The students "might have learned a great deal about the rules and the system of English. "However, the scarce application of these rules in genuine interactive situations results in failure to use the language communicatively" (Al-Issa 2005, p. 8). In Oman, English is considered as another fact-based school subject to memorize and pass and is characterized as textbook-based, production-oriented and teacher-centered.

Moreover, as observed by teachers in most colleges, there are some problems associated with the textbooks. Firstly, all of them are written in western countries and contain some topics which are considered culturally unsuitable for the Omani context. Therefore, teachers have to exclude those unwanted topics. "Some tasks, in addition, are very boring or they are above or below the students' actual proficiency levels." (Al-Husseini, 2004, pp.21) "However, the Ministry of Education does not always take account of the cultural connotations (such as allusions to dating and alcohol) that might be incompatible with Muslim culture." Husna (2009, pp .22).

There is a lack of a reading culture or reading habit in society because of the prized oral tradition in Gulf societies (Shannon 2003 quoted in O'Sullivan (2008). This absence of reading culture in Omani students results in the absence of any background knowledge, which is critical to comprehension of reading. The hobby of reading is rather in a sordid state as there is nothing much to encourage it. There are no public libraries; most of the reading material is imported from abroad and hence expensive. As a language teacher, I have always looked up for different teaching methods to inculcate reading habits and found that "Any attempt to change the curriculum- whether indirectly through changes in teaching materials, for example, or more directly, through **changes in teaching methods** implies a need for teacher learning, i. e. opportunities for teachers to learn about the rationale for the new form of teaching, to critically evaluate it, and understand how to get the best out of it" (Waters and Vilches, 2001 p 137). In the quest for a methodology that helps the students to become independent, confident and interested, she came across TBLT (Task-Based Language Teaching). After reviewing the available literature, and also armed with insights provided by the research conducted by Meena and Geetoshree (2006) in an identical context, I have concluded that the appropriate method to achieve the above-said goals to be Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). To ascertain that "TBLT has an edge over other traditional methods of language teaching as it is student-centered, practical, realistic and flexible approach, I undertook a small project in Scientific College of Design which is one of its kind in the Gulf region and where instruction in all the majors in Design, viz Graphic Design, Interior Design, Fashion Design and Fine Arts is provided. It is in this context that this paper discusses the application and effectiveness of TBLT specially focusing on inculcating and enhancing the students' critical thinking in reading by using task-oriented teaching strategies. They could further greatly influence students' motivation of reading independently. I firmly, as a teacher, believe that "Reading for a purpose provides motivation – an important aspect of being a good reader." (Grabe 1991; p.378).

My belief is also supported by research which finds that students, if dynamically involved in the learning process learn better than through traditional lecturing. (Hayes, 2003).

2. Literature Review:

Every language teacher has his methods of teaching which are his /her guiding principles in teaching. These methods lead to the designing of appropriate teaching plans, learning activities, instructional materials and evaluation techniques. It is quite notable that the method is in proportion to the performance of the students. Of many methods that are available, TBLT which Prabhu (1987) deserves credit for originating seems to be the methodology as it is based "on the concept that effective learning occurs when students are fully engaged in a language task, rather than just learning about language." Much has been written, talked and argued for TBLT as the method that takes learners' learnability into account. As Breen (1987) concurs "the task-based approaches communicative knowledge as a unified system wherein any use of the new language requires the learner to continually match choices from his or her linguistic repertoire to the social requirements and expectations governing communicative behavior and to meanings and ideas he wishes to share". Breen (1987: 161)

2.1 What is a Task?

The basic tenet of TBLT is the task. Then how do we define a task? Nearly 20 years ago, Breen (1987) defined task broadly as “a range of workplans which have the overall purpose of facilitating language learning—from the simple and brief exercise type to more complex and lengthy activities such as group problem-solving or simulations and decision-making” (p. 23). In a more recent work, Ellis (2003) synthesizes various definitions to derive a composite one: A task is a workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed. Consequently these authentic tasks can promote students’ motivation and interest, which are of great importance to the second language acquisition. The following table adapted from Nunan (2005) summarizes the above discussion neatly.

Table 1: Differences between traditional and TBLT classroom

Traditional classroom	TBLT classroom (Nunan, 2005)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional form-focused pedagogy • Rigid discourse structure • Teacher controls topic development • The teacher regulates turn-taking 	<p>TBLT classroom</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Loose discourse structure Students able to control topic Turn-taking is regulated by the same rules
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The teacher knows what the answer is 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teacher does not know what the answer is to
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students’ responding role & performing a limited range of language functions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students’ initiating and responding roles and performing a wide range of language functions.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little negotiate meaning • Scaffolding for enabling students to produce correct sentences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More negotiate meaning Scaffolding for enabling students to say what they want to say
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Form-focused feedback • Echoing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Content-focused feedback Repetition

3. Context of the Study:

It is this close association of TBLT with the real world that prompted me to reflect upon my own teaching methods and that of the teachers around me. This contemplation resulted in trying TBLT as a methodology to teach reading skill. This study primarily looks at the teaching of reading skill to the students of General Foundation Program. This project provides the results of work and study undertaken for more than a year. As I have been teaching the same skill (reading) to the same sections for more than a year, I could find a huge change in the way these students tackle any text. When I started with them, they used to read every word and underline, look up every new difficult word. If they found too many words difficult to comprehend, they would switch off mentally or lose interest. But after I started implementing task-based methodology to teach reading, their reading skills have improved vastly. They can read any unseen text (in their level) with little or no trouble. They can identify the topic and main idea, can get the meaning from the context without looking for dictionaries, which was impossible for them earlier. The examples that I provided refer to the content the students read and were reading that semester .

4. Adapting the Textbook to Suit the TBLT Approach :

4.1 Need for Adapting the Textbook

Armed with theoretical knowledge and the objective firmly in mind, I looked at the textbooks, Interactions 2 Reading series by Elaine Kirn and Pamela Hartmann, published by McGraw Hill Company. These are very different from any other textbooks that are used in other colleges in a few ways. 1. These is a set of books one for each skill. (viz reading, listening & speaking and writing). 2. This set of books is based on integration of skills. In other words, the same topics with similar vocabulary are used to teach four skills. 3. They are graded according to the level. In spite of these advantages, the topics presented a challenge to the students as they are highly rooted in western culture posing a problem to the students as they can relate neither to the material nor the culture presented in these books. Ability to relate to the learning material is the first step in getting motivated to read. However, Smith (1976 cited in McKay, 2000, p.7) argues that English as an international language (EIL) does not belong to any one culture, so that non-native speakers do not need to internalize the cultural norms of native speakers. Others, however, argue that a language cannot be taught without the knowledge of a target culture. Lademann (1992, p.13 cited in Zaid, 1999, p.112) argues that a language and its cultural knowledge are inseparable: He says “Language learners must have knowledge of the cultural and social background and behavioral styles of the members of the target language culture”. The likely culture contradiction students would experience when using teaching materials that have been developed in Western countries without concern to local students’ experience or expectations, leads to creating confusion in them and might also lead to developing a negative attitude to the learning materials. In her discussion of western culture and the teaching of English as an international language (EIL), McKay (2004, p. 10) argues that one of the most complex problems is the cultural basis of the teaching/learning process. She points out that despite the growth in learning English as an international language, some countries reject the inclusion of western culture and values in teaching texts and the Omani students are no different. As the students I was teaching were in foundation program and reading to strengthen their language skills needed to pursue their majors, I agree with McKay (2004) who gives Japan as an example of a country that inserts its own cultural content into English teaching materials. Suzuki (1999) the writer of the bestseller: Why the Japanese People are No Good at English, wrote that Japan, as an international power, has no need for western culture or to emulate everything western in order to learn English. Husna (2009, pp.68) says “.....a completely different set of cultural understandings in the way of choice of materials ... is relevant in that culturally different approaches affect the way the Omani students learn.”

4.2 Authentic Examples of Adaptation of Textbook:

As I couldn't do away with the prescribed text book, the material was adapted to suit the TBLT approach to improving reading skills leading to better communication. Explained below are some of the examples of classroom situations where TBLT method was followed. First, the context and the content (what the class was supposed to be doing) is explained , and then what was the teaching methodology and the third, how students responded to the task and fourth, how it achieved the purpose stated implicitly before the lesson started.

4.2.1 Example 1: A GFP 1 (General Foundation Program) Reading Class

Content: Reading passages from "Global Climate Changes"

Task: Identify topic and main idea .

Teaching Methodology:

Lead In

According to Ellis (2009, pp.7) "The purpose of the pre-task phase is to prepare students to perform the task in ways that will promote acquisition." Hence to prepare the students for the task and also to stimulate their interest, their attention was drawn to the pictures provided, some related vocabulary elicited and to activate background knowledge about the topic, the topic was brain stormed on the whiteboard.

Priming & Preparation:

Teacher introduces topic lexis, does a task briefing, learners prepare (Jane Willis, 2007). Once their interest in the topic was stimulated, their attention was guided to the vocabulary related to the topic. The students came up with the meanings when context using the word was presented. Once this was done, a power point presentation was used to show them how to identify the topic and main idea of a reading passage. In addition, they were given a new paragraph to identify the topic and main idea. Once it was established that the students understood the task, they were prepared for further reading. This time the topics and the main ideas were typed on a paper and cut them into strips and put them in a cover. Then the students were grouped and explained that they have to read the passages, identify the key vocabulary to help them identify the topic and main idea. Once they finished, they got the packet with main ideas and topics slips. They needed to interact with one another in the group when they were matching the given strips of topics and main ideas .

Target Task(s) Cycle/s Task > Reporting Back

The students sat in groups, read the passages and discussed the possible topic and main idea of the passage. The students underlined the important words and then took out the strips from the packet and started reading them out. I then prompted them to look for signal words that they underlined while reading. Thus the students were successful in matching the topics and main ideas .

Form Focus:

Guided Analysis of written or spoken text and practice of specific forms / patterns; consolidation to aid recall.

In the feedback session, the correct matching of the topics and main ideas was checked by writing the topics on the board while they were being elicited. The main ideas were asked to be read by the students. The aim in writing the topics on the board was to focus on the structure of writing the topics. A few strategies in writing the topics and identifying the main ideas were explained with examples. Further practice was given in the form of a set of other passages in the next class .

4.2.2 Example 2: Context: A GFP 2 (General Foundation Program) Reading Class

Content : Entertainment and Media

Learn the media-related vocabulary leading to identifying the genre of the film.

Read short synopsis of some films and identify the genres of the films.

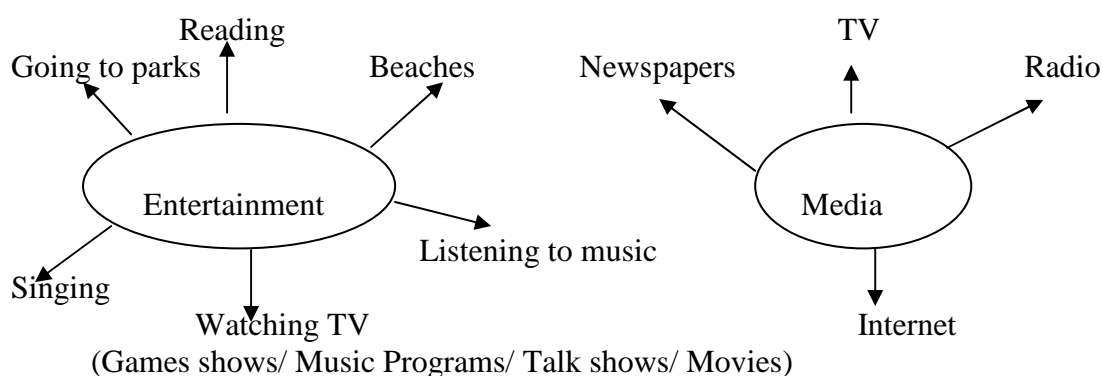
Underline the main idea and topic of the passages.

Teaching Methodology:

The textbook listed some questions which activate students' background knowledge of the topic, list the genre vocabulary and the passages to read. To improve students' comprehension skills, a variety of pre-reading tasks to build background knowledge were designed, like activating vocabulary by discussing the topic, describing the pictures, predicting the content of the text and so on.

The class started with brainstorming by writing a word "entertainment" and "media" on the board in a circle with arrows to elicit their knowledge of the topic .

Figure 1: Advanced Brainstorming



Harmer (1983) calls this as **Lead-in**, where students' interest is stimulated and their reading made easier. The idea was to activate their background knowledge without pressure of being it right or wrong, as Nunan (2006, pp.14) states the TBLT reinforces "An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning." The students were asked to freely express whatever that comes to their mind and I wrote everything that they came up with. (Checking the spelling and giving them other synonym which they duly noted in their books was also done). Then the focus shifted to the kinds of media and some examples of programs that they watch on TV. They could immediately relate to the topic as they were excited to discuss their favorite TV shows. They were also asked to tell the category to which these programs related to.

For example, "Oprah – a talk show", "Who wants to be a millionaire- a game show", "Mr. Bean – a comedy ." They also gave the names of some of the films and then identified the genre when prompted to. For example, "Titanic- a romantic film", "Avatar- a sci-fi film" (a new word for them, instead they gave "science") etc. This led to focusing on genre – related vocabulary .

Priming & Preparation:

Teacher introduces topic lexis, does a task briefing, learners prepare (Jane Willis, 2007): The next step was to introduce them to film-genre vocabulary. They read out the vocabulary words which gave them a chance to learn proper pronunciation and understand the vocabulary.

To prepare them to read the film synopses in a simple but effective way, short videos of films like *Gone with the Wind*, *Star Wars*, *Mr. Bean*, *Ice Age*, *Rambo* and others were shown to them. While showing, the genre of the movie was elicited. This helped the students in two ways: 1. Students' interest in the topic was stimulated and 2. They were able to relate to most of them as they had seen some of those films earlier and it was easy for them to learn the vocabulary.

Target Task(S): Cycle/s of Task > Reporting Back

The stage was set for reading the passages. Their attention was directed to the task at hand. One of the students was asked to read the task instructions and explain it to her peers. After she did so, the same was reiterated but with using correct English so that the mistakes of the student do not sit with the students and to make sure that they understand the task well. Now that the students were motivated and interested, reading didn't pose a big problem for them. While they were reading, they were reminded to identify important and relevant vocabulary which would help them in identifying the genre of the film being discussed in the passage. They were also asked them to tell whether they would watch the film or not and why . reading finished they after.

Form Focus:

Guided Analysis of written or spoken text and practice of specific forms / patterns; consolidation to aid recall

Once they were finished with one passage, they were asked to identify the genre and the relevant vocabulary. They were also asked to voice their opinions regarding the preferences. They had to say whether they would watch the film or not.

This was guided analysis of the text. When the students gave the answer in one word, they were encouraged to give answers in complete sentences, because it was time to focus on the form required to express their opinion also. Having made sure that they were on the right path, I asked them to continue with the rest of the passages. For every passage, they had to express their opinion about which film was worth watching and why .

Task Evaluation:

It was time for evaluation of the outcome of learning. As the students were giving their opinions, the form of sentences required for voicing their opinions was focused on and also consolidating the language learnt.

5. Findings from the Project :

The findings from this project undertaken in Scientific College of Design, Muscat are very encouraging to both the students and teachers. The following are the findings

1. The lead-in stage in the task -based class motivated the students by activating background knowledge of the topic and the students used the language they had at that point. It was the first step in building their confidence. An enhancement of the learner's own personal

experiences (here background knowledge) is an important contributing element to classroom learning.

2 . It provided more learning opportunities for students than traditional teaching. The students focused on interacting with each other, correct other students' spellings without feeling pressurized .

3. The task cycle motivated the students to improve upon the language, and the language focus component enabled learners to systematize their knowledge of language structure .

4 . The task phase got the students organized into groups for interacting with one another and they used their language resources to develop a natural context from their experiences with the language and it was also more students oriented with the teacher being only the facilitator.

5. Working in groups in task phase helped the weaker students to look up to their peers resulting in less stress on them. They got help from their peers which was less intimidating for them.

6 . In the language focus stage, I reviewed what happened in the task, with regards to language and highlighted relevant parts for the students to analyze. I had the opportunity to select the language areas to practice based upon the needs of the students .

7 . Task-based reading teaching required students identify the need to read and think actively. They fulfilled the tasks by thinking, investigating, discussing, communicating and cooperating.

8. The language acquisition is always got in the communication with others. The fulfillment of the tasks depends on the learners' participation and cooperation. Each learner acted as a part in the tasks of reading such as discussion, opinion exchange, etc. Besides, they cultivated the spirit of cooperation and got the feeling of achievement.

9. In task-based reading, students paid more attention to reading as well as dealing with tasks and expressed their ideas which led to effective teaching and learning. This also generated interest in students in reading outside the classroom .

6. Conclusion:

From the above findings we can conclude that TBLT is an effective methodology in stimulating language learning in reading classes. It gives ample opportunities for the students to practice their language inside the classroom. It helps to create a student-centered environment in the class giving the students more power in deciding their roles in group activities. It helps in negotiating meaning for the purpose of language learning. Moreover, this approach lets teachers adapt the textbooks to suit the level of the students. The language acquirers (in this case, the students) need not have the knowledge of grammatical rules because they are not consciously aware of the grammar of the language, but rather develop a "feel" for correctness." TBLT methodology, which is also thought to have foundations in Krashen's theories, provides the teachers to grade the language learning tasks. There might however be some intimidating factors like students using their native language, weak students shying away from responsibility etc. To solve this problem, the weak students can be given more opportunities and encouraged to perform in the initial stages of the task like lead in. This builds confidence in them and leads to their active participation. To conclude, application of TBLT has led to fostering a positive attitude to reading in the students.

References

- [1] Al-Husseini, An analysis of the English needs of Omani students on vocational and technical courses with implications for the design of foundation year English language programmes, *PhD Dissertation*, (2004), University of Leeds.
- [2] Al-Husseini, The visible and invisible role of English foundation programmes: A search for communication opportunities within EFL contexts, *Asian EFL Journal*, 8(4) (2006), 35-51.
- [3] A. Al-Issa, An ideological discussion of the impact of the NNESTs' English language knowledge on ESL policy implementation: A special reference to the Omani context, *Asian EFL Journal*, 7(3) (2005), 98-112.
- [4] H. Al Jadidi, Teaching English as a foreign language in Oman: An exploration of English language teaching pedagogy in tertiary education, *PhD Dissertation*, (2009), Victoria University, Australia.
- [5] M. Breen, Contemporary paradigms in syllabus design, *Language Teaching*, 20(3) (1987), 157-174.
- [6] R. Ellis, *Task-based Language Learning and Teaching*, (2003), Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [7] R. Ellis, The methodology of task-based teaching, *The Asian EFL Journal Cebu Conference Proceedings*, (2009), 6-23.
- [8] B. Hayes, An experiment using teacher centered instruction versus student centered instruction as means of teaching American government to high school seniors, (2003), Available at <http://www.Secondaryenglish.com/approaches.html> (version current at 26/12/2003).
- [9] S. Krashen, *The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications*, (1985), London, England: Longman.
- [10] S.L. McKay, Western culture and the teaching of English as an international language, *English Teaching Forum Online- Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs*, 42(2) (2004), 10-16, Retrieved on April 07th, 2005 on the World Wide Web: <http://exchanges.state.gov/forum/vols42/no2/p10.htm>
- [11] Meena and Gitoshree, Task based teaching: Learning English without tears, *Asian EFL Journal*, 8(3) (2006), 140-164.
- [12] D. Nunan, Important tasks of English education: Asia-wide and beyond, *Asian EFL Journal*, 7(3) (2005), 5-8.
- [13] D. Nunan, Task-based language teaching in the Asia context: Defining task, *Asian EFL Journal*, 3(2006), 12-18.
- [14] A. O'Sullivan, Reading and Arab college students: Issues in the United Arab Emirates higher colleges of technology, *The Reading Matrix*, Retrieved December 8, 2008, from <http://www.readingmatrix.com/conference/pp/proceedings/sullivan.pdf>
- [15] N.S. Prabhu, *Second Language Pedagogy*, (1987), Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [16] J. Shannon, Getting gulf students to enjoy reading, *Perspectives*, 11(1) (2003), 21-24.
- [17] L. Smith, English as an international auxiliary language, *RELC Journal*, 7(2) (1976), 38-4 .
- [18] T. Suzuki, *Nihonjin wa naze Eigo ga Dekinai ka [Why the Japanese People are no Good at English]*, (1999), Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, ERIC Document.
- [19] R.C. Shank and C. Cleary, *Engines for Education*, (1994), Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- [20] A. Waters and M.L. Vilches, Implementing ELT innovations: A needs analysis framework, *ELT Journal*, 55(2) (2001), 133-141.
- [21] J.A. Willis, *A Framework for Task-Based Learning*, (1996), London: Longman.
- [22] M. Zaid, Cultural confrontation and cultural acquisition in the EFL classroom, *IRAL*, 37(2) (1999), 111-126.