

Research on the PPP Versus TBLT Debate

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ABSTRACT

It is said that Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) and Task-based Language Teaching(TBLT) lie at opposite ends of a form-based - meaning-based continuum. This essay aims to discuss this relationship and illustrate the reason why TBLT is a response to PPP. Furthermore, a specific ‘task’ is presented to show how it relates to TBLT theory. In the final analysis, how students can be assessed in their completion of the task is suggested.

Keywords: *PPP, TBLT, task, assessment*

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional form-based approaches, such as Grammar Translation and Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) have been widely adopted in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) especially in Asian Contexts [1]. Too much emphasis on forms does help promote learners’ language skills, however, critics of PPP claim that it fails to meet the fundamental requirement of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and learners have more difficulty in effective communication [2] [3]. As a response to PPP, TBLT is considered as a refinement of CLT, which focuses on meaning and communicative task. The aim of this essay is to explore the relationship between PPP (as a form-based approach) and TBLT (as a meaning-based approach) and further look at TBLT theory focusing on the definition of ‘task’ and assessment of TBLT.

2. THEORY AND CRITICISM OF PPP AND TBLT

Based on a notion that practice makes perfect, Byrne [4] makes a brief description of typical PPP procedures. To be specific, the teacher presents the grammatical items first, and then learners practice the language forms that the teacher has provided. Finally, learners produce the linguistic forms themselves based on what they have been trained at the presentation and practice stage. Critics argue that PPP has its own limitations. Firstly, teachers control the whole teaching process so tightly that learners may lose motivation and independent thinking [2]. Secondly, PPP depends on a conception that form precedes meaning and accuracy precedes fluency, which is in contrast with SLA theory that language acquisition occurs in real communication [3].

TBLT is more complicated than PPP, and its primary feature is that language served as a tool for students to perform communicative tasks. As a teaching approach that is learner-centered and focuses on cultivating learners’ communicative competence, TBLT is regarded as a

response to the restrictions of PPP. The following table (Table 1) is a framework for TBLT [5]. TBLT also has its limitations. According to Skehan [6], there have been a number of critiques of Task-based Language Teaching over the last decade. It is argued that although the teacher and students are required to get used to thinking of tasks as an indicator of progress, it is difficult to accept this perception when they participate in a task [7]. Bruton [7] also criticizes that the scope of task seems to be limited focusing exclusively on speaking skills. In addition, there is no complete agreement as to the composition of a task in relevant research and pedagogy, which causes troubles to define the task [2]. Considering the implementation of tasks in real classrooms, Careless [1] points out that the current situation of large-size classes and teachers’ vague comprehension on TBLT theory lead to the difficulty of carrying out task-based instruction in Asian contexts.

Table 1: A framework for TBLT

Pre-task
-Teacher introduces topic and task
Task cycle
Task
-Students carry out the task
Planning
-Students plan how to report on task outcome
Report
-Students report back to class
Language focus
- Analysis
- Practice

3. A SPECIFIC TASK

In this section, a particular task will be used to illustrate TBLT theory.

The task is to make up a story on robbery in a sweet shop which is suitable for intermediate students. In the pre-task stage, the teacher tells the students that the task is based on a true story in The Guardian newspaper and provides a few clues on the board (see Appendix A). Then he can explain some difficult words and phrases such as balaclava (similar to a ski mask that covers someone’s face so that

only their eyes can be seen) and fake (something that is imitation and not real). This initial stage offers students useful exposure to the topic and clues they may use in the next stage [5].

In the task cycle, first, students are asked to make up their own stories in pairs or groups using as many clues on the board as possible. Second, in 'planning', students are told each group is going to tell their story to the whole class, so they need to make a preparation for the report. They may select a spokesperson themselves, while other members help the spokesperson make up and polish the story. In this process, the teacher walks around and offers advice on language, suggesting useful words and phrases [5]. In 'report', spokesperson of each group tells the whole class their story briefly; other students listen to and compare the stories. The presentation of each spokesperson can be recorded for further reflection and assessment after class. After the reports, the whole class is engaged in comparing stories and determining whose version is the most reasonable. During the task cycle, students are able to practice their speaking skills by negotiating the meaning. Before the language focus phase, the teacher can read the original story in the newspaper to the students in order to practice their listening, and then hand out the story for them to read (the story is seen in Appendix B).

Analysis and practice are involved in the language focus phase. In 'analysis', the teacher designs some language-focused tasks such as identifying verbs followed by the to-infinitive based on the original story students read at the end of the task cycle. Students are asked to underline all the phrases with "to" such as tries to rob sweet shop and attempted to hold up a sweet shop, and then the teacher makes a further analysis dividing the to-infinitive into two patterns and summarizing relevant verbs to raise students' awareness and organise their knowledge of verbs followed by to (see Appendix C). Students do some activities designed by the teacher to practice what they have identified and the teachers have analyzed. A vanishing-words activity the teacher can use is shown in Appendix D. In terms of homework, learners can be asked to read the story after the class and get ready to retell the story the next lesson.

From the perspectives of Ellis [2], Nunan [8] and Skehan [9], the making up a story task mentioned above is a good pedagogical task since it satisfies all the six criterial features: it is a workplan that contains an original story as a text; the story that students made up in the end is a clear outcome; the cognitive processes such as sequencing the information and reasoning are involved during organizing the story; some language and structures such as agreeing and disagreeing in the task are common in the real world; all the four language skills are included in the discussion (listening and speaking), reading the original story and vanishing-words exercise (writing).

4. ASSESSMENT OF TBLT

Unlike the assessment of PPP which is easier due to its focus on discrete items such as vocabulary, phonology and grammar [8], the assessment of TBLT is more complex which requires testers to master the topical, pragmatic knowledge as well as the knowledge of formal elements of language [10]. Ellis [2] shows three methods in assessing performance in task-centered tests: direct assessment of task outcomes, discourse analytic measures and external ratings. Direct assessment can be used in closed tasks which can arrive at a right or wrong solution (task outcome); however, open tasks such as an oral presentation cannot be assessed in this way [2]. Discourse analytic methods are useful in assessing open tasks such as an interview or conversation, since they emphasize the testee's discourse competence (use of cohesive markers), linguistic competence (accuracy, fluency and complexity), strategic competence (strategies of negotiation of meaning) and sociolinguistic competence (strategies used for refusals or invitations) [2].

In terms of external ratings, assessors are engaged in observing and judging learners' performance as they do in the direct assessment, but the distinction is that external ratings lead to a more subjective judgment, while objectivity plays an essential role in direct assessment, in other words, whether the task performance is successful or not matters in direct assessment [2]. External ratings are commonly based on scales that specify levels of performance and the competency such as discourse, linguistic, strategic and sociolinguistic competence mentioned in the discourse analytic methods.

From the perspective of assessors, the assessment can be performed by testees themselves, their peers or the teacher. Teacher assessment which is common in traditional approaches such as PPP can also be used in task-centred assessment, while the popularity of self- and peer assessment is growing since in this process students can focus not only learning outcomes but learning processes, and their autonomy can be encouraged [8]. Regarding assessing the making up a story on robbery in a sweet shop, self-assessment, peer assessment and teacher assessment can be used. To be specific, after each spokesperson reports their story to the whole class, other students can evaluate their performance according to the criteria pointed out by the teacher earlier in class. Moreover, the spokesperson can do the self-evaluation based on the recordings of their speech, which can similarly be used by the teacher for assessing their performance. On a practical level, Brindley [10] points out that in order to adopt the assessment successfully, teachers and learners should expand their perception of tasks as activities into those as processes of making progress, and it is necessary for learners to make sure the evaluating criteria. Generally, the teacher can design different criteria based on the task types (open tasks such as interview or closed task such as reading comprehension tests), and then get students understand each criterion before performing the task-centred assessment.

5. CONCLUSION

As mentioned earlier, as a form-based approach, PPP model pays special attention to linguistic forms rather than language meaning. During the presentation-practice-production sequence, fluency is acquired after accuracy. The teacher takes charge of the pace and content of the lesson. In contrast, task-based framework focuses primarily on meaning and communicative features in the real world; focus on form is involved at the language focus stage to raise students' awareness. The intervention of the teacher is minimized as students perform the task. The combination of focus on meaning and form in the language focus seems to be PPP upside down; however, TBLT as a meaning-approach has a sound theoretical basis, more flexibility for teachers to design an appropriate task according to learners' level, and offers learners far richer learning opportunities than just 'PPP upside down'.

In terms of task-centered assessment, task types should be considered first. It is suitable to make use of discourse analytic methods and external ratings to assess open tasks such as oral presentation. Direct assessment can be used to assess closed tasks such as listening comprehension tests. The criteria of assessment are also of great significance. It may be concerned with assessing linguistic competence in terms of accuracy, fluency and complexity; discourse competence; strategic competence; sociolinguistic competence [2].

In the final analysis, as a strong version of CLT, a number of studies have been done on the theory and application of TBLT [2] [6] [8] [9]. In addition, as a weak version of CLT, PPP is selected by quite a few researchers as a form-based approach to compare with TBLT [5] [11]. In a word, TBLT is a response to the limitations of PPP.

APPENDIX A

Clues written on the board:

<p>The Characters: A shopkeeper Her two children A young man An eight-year-old boy The police</p> <p>The Setting: A corner shop in Ashton-under-Lyme, Manchester.</p> <p>The Props (things used in the story): A balaclava A packet of Smarties A plastic bag A gun</p> <p>Some phrases from the story: A young man came in to buy a newspaper He pointed a gun at her and told her to fill up the bag I pretended to reach for some money They are taking the case very seriously, like all</p>

cases which involve a firearm, fake or not.

(Robbery in a sweet shop. Source URL: <http://willis-elt.co.uk/taskbased.html>)

APPENDIX B

Eight-year-old tries to rob sweet shop

Manchester police are looking for an eight-year-old boy who attempted to hold up a sweet shop last night in the suburb of Ashton-under-Lyme.

The boy, who was wearing a balaclava, went into the corner shop and bought a packet of Smarties for 25p. As the shopkeeper gave him his change a young man came in to buy a newspaper. The boy waited until the man had gone then threw a plastic bag at the shopkeeper. At the same time, he pointed a gun at her and told her to fill up the bag.

"I'm not sure whether he wanted me to fill it with sweets or with money," said the shopkeeper, who did not want to give her name. "I didn't know if the gun was real or not, but it certainly looked more real than the guns my little boy plays with. I was quite frightened because I had my children with me. I pretended to reach for some money, but I pressed the alarm instead. When it went off he turned and ran out of the shop."

She described the boy as 1.2 metres tall, and dressed in jeans and a dark coat. The police are asking the public to help. They say they are taking the case very seriously, like all cases which involve a firearm, fake or not.

(Robbery in a sweet shop. Source URL: <http://willis-elt.co.uk/taskbased.html>)

APPENDIX C

Two Patterns

PATTERN A

VERB	To	VERB
tries	to	rob
attempted	to	hold up
(not) want	to	give
pretended	to	reach for

PATTERN B

VERB	NOUN	to	VERB
told	her	to	fill
want	me	to	fill up
asking	the public	to	help

Exercise 1: Are they Pattern A or Pattern B?

- I need to borrow some money.
- We need someone to help us.
- The boy ordered her to fill up the bag.
- We always had to get up early.
- Can you help me to carry these boxes?

These are the commonest verbs with pattern A:
agree, appear, attempt, begin choose, continue, decide, expect, forget, happen, hate, help, hope, intend, love, live, learn, mean, plan, prefer, pretend, promise, refuse, remember, seem start, try, want, would like

How many of these verbs are to do with speaking?

How many are to do with thinking?

Can you find other words in the box which mean the same as: *appear, attempt, begin, intend, like, want*?

These are the commonest verbs with pattern B:
 advise, allow, enable, expect, help, intend, invite, mean, order, prefer, tell, want warn (usually warn someone not to), wish, would like.

Can you find eight words that are also used with pattern A?

How many words are to do with speaking?

How many words are to do with wanting or liking?

(Robbery in a sweet shop. Source URL: <http://willis-elt.co.uk/taskbased.html>)

APPENDIX D

Vanishing words

- Take a sentence from the text. For example:
 As the shopkeeper gave him his change a young man came in to buy a newspaper.
- Write the full sentence on the whiteboard.
- Ask one or two learners to read it out.
- Rob out two or three words:
 _____ the shopkeeper _____ him his change a young man came in _____ buy a _____.
- Ask learners to work in groups of three or four. Tell them to work as a group to recall the sentence. Ask a learner to recall the sentence. Ask the class if the recall is correct. If they are not satisfied, they can go on guessing until they are content.
- Remove more words:
 _____ the shopkeeper _____ his _____ a _____ man _____ in _____ buy a _____.
- Repeat e).
- Go on until you have removed all the words.

(Robbery in a Sweet shop. Source URL: <http://willis-elt.co.uk/taskbased.html>)

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