Task Based Teaching: Using Modals for ESL Learners

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Abstract

Language teaching is much more than teaching merely rules of grammar. Rules of grammar form only a basis of using language correctly, appropriate to the contextual situation. Therefore, for effecting smooth transition from grammatical knowledge to communicating use of language, a language teacher has to think of difficult pedagogy and strategy. Task based teaching in one such effective way of achieving this alchemy between grammar and communication.

In the present paper I wish to demonstrate the task based teaching by using modals. Modals are used essentially to express a moods and attitudes.

In the preface of Task based language learning and teaching Ellis Rod, “My personal commitment to a form of teaching that threatens language primarily as a tool for communicating rather them as an object for study or manipulation. It is clear to me that if learners are to develop the competence they need to use second language easily and effectively in the kinds of situations they meet outside the classroom they need to experience how language is used as a tool for communication inside it.”
Introduction:

Teachers have been using tasks for hundreds of years. In the past, the task was a piece of translation often from a literary source. More recently, tasks have included projects for producing posters, brochures, pamphlets, oral presentations, radio plays, videos, websites and dramatic performances.

The characteristic feature of all these tasks is that rather than concentrate on one particular structure, function or vocabulary group, these tasks exploit a wider range of language. In many cases, learners may also be using a range of different communicative language skills. The traditional way that facilitators have used tasks is as a 'follow-up' to a series of structure/function or vocabulary based lessons. Tasks have been 'extension' activities as part of a graded and structured course.

The concept of task-based learning was originality developed by N Prabhu in Bangaluru. It is based on the belief that, “student may learn more effectively when their minds are focused on the task, rather than on the language they are using.”

Prabhu revised the traditional model of task-based learning described by Jane Willis, PPP i.e presentation, practice, production. The student start with the task. When they have completed it. Facilitators gives feedback to the language used, making corrections and adjustments to the student's performance. In A Framework for Task Based Learning Jane Willis presents a three-stage process:

Pre Task- Introduction to the topic and task.
Task Cycle- Task Planning and Report
Language focus- Analysis and practice.

Concept of Task:

According to Roger Hunt, “What is, and is not, a task?” is a question that is much debated. Is a gap fill requiring students to differentiate between the uses of certain prepositions or verb forms a ‘task’ or is an activity which asks students to discuss the possible solution to puzzle.

Firstly, a task is a piece of work. According to Long it is “…a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward... By 'task' it is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between.”(89)

Secondly, it's a general activity or exercise for L2 learners. Many L2 textbooks present activities or exercises for learner to accomplish the task. Sometimes these activities or exercises are discussed as tasks, without a particular emphasis on outcome or result.

Thirdly, it is an outcome oriented L2 instructional segment. In Breen's language tasks can be viewed as a range of work plans, from simple to complex, with the overall purpose of facilitating language learning. In fact, Breen observes “All materials for language teaching…can be seen as compendia of tasks”(26)

Prabhu also states that a task “is an activity that requires learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allows teachers to control and regulate that process”. These definitions underline the idea that a task is a structured instructional plan that requires learners to move towards an objective or outcome using particular (teacher4-given) working procedures or processes. Again, a task is imposed from the outside and does not come from the learner.
Why task based learning?

Task- based language instruction can help teachers select and devise useful classroom activities that could lead to task- based learning and help students to further learn a language successfully.

Task Types:

There are a number of tasks that can be given to L2 learners in the classrooms. Problem solving, decision-making, opinion-gap or opinion exchange; information- gap, comprehension-based, sharing personal experiences, attitudes, and feelings by basic cognitive processes, such as comparing or matching listing and ordering/sorting, language analysis, narrative, reasoning-gap, question-and-answer, structured and semi structured dialogues, role-plays and simulations. It also includes picture stories, puzzles and games, interviews, discussions, and debates, and everyday functions, such as telephone conversations and service encounters task types also encompass practice with communication/conversation strategies.

Roles and Characteristics of Facilitators:

Teachers can take many different roles with regard to L2 tasks; there are many critics and writers who have given their views on it. According to Honeyfield, 1993; Nunan, 1989; Oxford, 1990; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992; Willis, 1996 a, 1996b, 1998) Richards and Rodgers (2001) and Scarcella and Oxford (1992) mention the following task-roles for teachers:

Selector/Sequencer of tasks
Preparer of learners for tasks
Pre-task consciousness raiser about form
Guide
Nurturer
Strategy-Instructor
Provider of assistance

Teaching styles influence the roles facilitator feels comfortable to take on. They also have to take into consideration cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the learners.

Learner Roles and Characteristics

The learner can take control of the task- that is, be responsible for their performance on the task by considering the task requirements and employing learning strategies to accomplish the task more efficiently and more effectively.

There are three stages proposed by Willis in the framework of task cycle.

I. Pre- task- Introduction to the topic and task.

II. Task cycle : In task cycle the following points come :

- Task Planning
- Doing the task
- Preparing to report on the task
- Presenting the task report

III. Language focus- Analysis and practice (focus on form).
Pre-task
In the pre-task, the facilitator will present what will be expected from the learners in the task phase. Additionally, the facilitator may focus on the learners with key vocabulary or grammatical constructs. Although, in pre-task phase example, will be based on learning lessons, these will be presented as suggestions and the learners would be encouraged to use what they are comfortable with in order to complete the task. The instructor may also present a model of the task by either doing it themselves or by presenting picture, audio, or video demonstrating the task for illustration the task of model verbs. The task assigned by the facilitator according to the awareness levels of the groups. Facilitators assign tasks by keeping in mind the cultural and linguistic background and handicaps of the L2 learners.

Task Cycle
During the task phase, the learners perform the task, typically in small groups or in pairs, although this is dependent type of activity given to them by the facilitator. And, unless the facilitator plays a particular role in the task, the facilitator's role is typically limited to one of an observer or counselor- thus the reason for it being a more student centered methodology.

Doing a task:
The learners are assigned the task in a pair or a group. For example learners have to frame sentences using modals. For this task they must know the modals, which they have already learn. So, they begin with the task by framing sentences.

Planning:
For doing task learners do planning to frame the sentences, for this first they will discuss the task, and plan out the sentences. Having completed the task, the learners prepare either a written or oral report to present to the class. The facilitator simply monitors the learners.

Preparing to report on the task:
As soon as learners finished the task, they start preparing the report of the task. This report is a medium to evaluate their task. It helps the facilitator to point out learners shortcomings about the modal verbs.

Presenting task report:
After preparing the task report, the learners have to present it in front of the facilitator so that their understanding about the task could be judged by their presentation to the facilitator. Presentation helps to overcome learner's hesitation. It provides a platform to the learners to speak and present his views.

Report:
The facilitator may provide written or oral feedback, as appropriate, to the learners so that they can overcome with their handicaps.

Analysis:
It is an important stage where the work of learners stop and work of fascinator starts. Facilitator act as an analyst of the language use by the learners. Here the focus returns to the facilitator who reviews what happened in the task, with regard to language especially the usage of modals in their conversations.

Practice:
The practice stage may be used to cover material mentioned by the facilitator in the analysis stage. It is an opportunity for the facilitator to emphasize key language. It is a revision for the learners and they share


their knowledge with the other learners. It is one of the stages which provide learners an opportunity not only use his knowledge, but share it to.

In our paper, we have focused on the four stages of teaching and learning a piece of grammar that is modals.

In class-room teaching task is given in the following four stages:

1. **Introduction to topic:** Before giving a task the topic has to be introduced to the L2 learners. Facilitator can also give instant example of modals like he can ask a student to go out of the class room and make him to ask for permission. Through this exercise the learner will go out of the class and takes permission of the facilitator to enter in the class. The learners can use any model according to his understanding like he can use either *May I come in the class? Or Can I come in the class? Shall I come in?*

   Listening to their responses facilitator will now let them know the use of correct modals. Facilitator will explain the difference between the two modals *Can* and *May* as the former is use for informal permission and latter use formal permission where the permission is get after the nod from the permission giver. In this stage facilitator can also raise question in order to enquire the understanding of L2 learners about the topic. It has to be interactive session for the facilitator and the learners. For example if the facilitator would like to teach the use of modals then modals are introduced to the learners by asking them variety of questions related to it.

2. **Illustration:** In order to make learners understand about the modals examples have to be given to the learners and make them to write so that they can understand it. Illustrations are based on the language and sentences based on their discourses. As these learners are already aware of the modal verbs they need the proper understanding about the various modal verbs and their proper application. As modal verbs are used to suggest, determine, request, promise, possibility and probability.

3. **Implementation:** As for L2 learners writing helps to understand the piece of grammar illustrate by the facilitator. After introduction of the task and illustration of the task, facilitator takes a back seat. It is this stage where learners have to perform and proved their understanding to the piece of the grammar. Learners now acquainted with the modal verbs. Now they have been given task for their performance. Facilitator gives them variety of exercises like use of modals in conversation, fill the correct modals, and give examples of matching sequences by using various modals. These exercises opens the learners scope of thinking and emphasis their language on the use of this grammar. At this stage, the concept is clear to the learners and the task has to be implemented by giving them exercises. These exercises are developed keeping in mind the capacities of the L2 learners.

   Ones the task has been given to the learners, then learners are divided into pairs so that they accomplished the task in allotted time with more understanding and working in group helps them to do the task easily. It also helps their interpersonal skills as in future they will use modals for communication.

4. **Feedback:** It is one of the important stages where facilitator discusses about his observation to the learners. Facilitator gives feedback on the basis of the L2 learner's performance. Once they have finished the task the facilitator does the analysis and gives his/her observations about the learner's performance. Facilitator corrects the learners here as he doesn't interfere at the time of implementation.

   In the English language modal verbs are used in many ways they can be use to offer, to suggest, to request, to show the determination or possibility or for giving advice. In this paper we have taken the
sample of the L2 learners with focus on the usage of auxiliary verbs-Modals. Modals were assigned to the students in three different ways.

Firstly, In the conversation, where modals are used either to initiate a conversation or during the course of conversation. Learners were divided into pairs. Each pair of learners was given specific set of model which they have to use in their conversation in given duration. Firstly this helps them to understand the variety of modals. Secondly, it helps to remove their hesitation of public speaking.

Secondly, Demonstration of the usage of modals in its various contexts like sentence building, match the following, true and false, use the appropriate modals. In this activity a group of learners were given different set of activities related the usage of modals verbs. For example (i) one group has to prepare an exercise where the other group fills the correct modal verbs, (ii) one group will speak some sentences using a modal which has to marked true and false by other learners, (iii) a group presents a set of sentences with a blank which had matched by the correct modal by the rest of the learners. This activity also helps their communication skill. They encountered with group activity which lead to healthy competition. It also highlighted the spirit of team work.

Thirdly, games based on Modals like quiz. In this activity the learners were divided into 2 groups, that's A and B. Each group prepared a quiz which had set as question created to modals. In this task, one group asked question to other group and vice-versa. This game proved a success among the L2 learners as by this game they got the opportunity to explore their understanding about the modals.

The reason why, we choose modals is because they are a typical feature of English language which hardly exist in any other Indian languages. So, the usage of modal verbs in various contexts in English language has to be understood properly.

Studying modals in the conventional grammar learning method doesn't help the learners of L2. They have to understand its everyday usage. The task ends there. But the learners now use the conversational aspect of modals.

There can be many ways to initiate a conversation it can be a request, an offer, a suggestion, a compliment or an advice. Modals, when used for beginning a conversation make it livelier and add an impact. Not only asking questions or asking for information can be done through modals but also appropriate and a variety of responses can be made through them.

Being a facilitator we observe that the learners first understand the task then they start implementing and enjoy this concept of learning. This is the core of task based teaching and learning where the involvement of both the learners and facilitators in clearly visible.

Secondly, some of the learners have come up with very bright conversations and ideas and inspired the other learners.

Thirdly, it is a way to boost the confidence of the L2 learners that they can come out of their own shell and enjoy the language and its usage. So far, they were just passive receivers of language but as active participants of language learning process, they understand the different ways of using modals.

Fourthly, many of the learners give us the feedback that after understanding the application of the modals and their concept has become clearer. Now they can frame crisp sentences and can make regular conversation on their own.
Fifthly the role of the facilitator as an analyst is very important in the implementation task the learners used the modal verb to frame the conversation by using the various modal. For example: Use of May, Can and Shall

(i) Student : Can I come in?
Teacher: Yes You may.
Student: I want to know about this problem.
Teacher: I am busy right now so you can come tomorrow.
Student: What time would you prefer sir?
Teacher: You will come at 10:00 a.m. in the library.
Student: Thank you Sir.

In this piece of conversation the highlighted Can used by the learner is not appropriate as here the permission used by the student is formal in nature which is expressed with the informal modal May. So, the facilitator after analyzing the task, gives his feedback to the learners and tell them about their mistakes using modals.

The purpose of task based teaching is involvement of the student in accomplishing the task, their interest element in doing it, motivation by the facilitators which gives him sense of enjoyment in learning the usage of language.

Task based pedagogy is the most successful and effective method of ensuring zealous participation of the student in the learning process besides having motivational value.

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