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Effect of Task Based and Content Based Teaching on Writing in TOEFL Practice Classroom

Abstract

The purpose of this research note is to examine the effect of Task Based and Content Based Method of Teaching on Writing in a TOEFL Practice classroom of fourteen undergraduate students of different faculties at the University of Tsukuba. This research is based on the classroom activities at group and individual level, and independent tests on Writing during the TOEFL Practice Course. Writing was taught to the students based on the principle of Task Based Method of Teaching (TBMT) followed with a Task Based Writing Test. Then, on the next class, students were taught writing based on the principle of Content Based Method of Teaching (CBMT) followed with a Content Based Writing Test. The collected data revealed that both types of methods were influential. However, students obtained higher score on the Task Based Writing Test in comparison to the Content Based Writing Test. Clearly, TBMT is more effective than CBMT.
Keywords: Task Based Method of Teaching (TBMT), Content Based Method of Teaching (CBMT), TOEFL practice classroom.

1. Introduction

The history of Foreign Language Teaching Methods is full of enormous changes. The classical method was implemented in the language classroom back in the 18th and 19th century when 'Grammar Translation Method' used to be ascendant. Later on, during 20th century occurred a revolution in Foreign Language Teaching tradition. Language learning as well as the factors like language acquisition and communicative ability were focused in the foreign language classroom. At this point, based on Brown (2007, p.241), Communicative Language Learning technique established itself not only as a method but also as an approach to outshine the traditional method of language teaching. CLL pivots both linguistic competence and communicative competence simultaneously by allowing the students to get involved practically and meanwhile observes the fluency and accuracy of the language.

Nowadays, the main objective of any language classroom is to develop communicative competency in the students by using several methods of language teaching focusing on the four skills of language (Richards & Rodgers 2001). Among those methods are Task Based Method of Teaching and Content Based Method of Teaching which are very influential in foreign language classroom.

Both of these methods are originally derived from Communicative Language Learning (CLL). CLL insists that the communicative competency is the main purpose of any foreign language classroom. TBMT is more practical in language classroom as it involves the students to perform tasks or activities given by the instructor. TBMT involves the students directly to the real world by engaging in several tasks resulting in authentic understanding of foreign language. Willis (1996), says the goal of the 'task component' is to nurture fluency and aid the use of communication strategies. CBMT concerns with integration of both language and content simultaneously in a language classroom. Content refers to academic subject matter and CBMT is basically practiced on the sets of English for Specific Purpose (ESP). CBMT is "an approach to second language teaching in which teaching is organized around the content or information that students will acquire, rather than around a linguistic or other type of syllabus" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p.204).

Language is the fundamental element that makes human beings unique from other animals. "It is language more than anything else, which makes us feel human" says David Crystal (A Little Book of Language). Language is divided into four basic skills: Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. A learner learns his/her native language in this natural order in a linguistic territory and the most challenging part is to master the writing skills (Ellis, 2003). And in case of second language learning the situation is totally different and complex to acquire fluency and accuracy in each basic skills of language. This research aims to explore whether TBMT and CBMT can supplement and help progress the writing skills of the students of TOEFL Practice, Tsukuba University and if so, which of these two methods became more successful in teaching writing skills.

2.   Literature Review

2.1. Task Based Method of Teaching (TBMT)

Nunan (2004) says TBMT attempts to bring the real-world scenario which needs both genuine materials and genuine communication by using the language. The task based lesson comprehends the activities that has task as its basic element. Several layouts have been preferred (e.g., Prabhu, 1987; Skehan, 1996; Willis, 1996; Estair & Zanon, 1994). However, the three basic phases of task based lesson is common with all of them: 'Pre-task', 'During-task' and 'Post-task'. The Pre-task phase intends to make the students ready to perform the task in ways that will enhance language acquisition. In this phase, the teachers and the students perform similar task and practice and be prepared for the main task. The teacher may also provide the model to the students and ask them watch how task is done or get the idea after watching the example. Finally, strategic planning also can be helpful for the learners as they will perform the task in the planned time. 'During-task' phase is the part where students perform the given task. The teacher may ask students to complete their task in the time given. Yuan and Ellis (2003) revealed that a task performed in an unlimited time produced was more accurate than a task performed under time limitation. 'Post-task' phase is the result of the given task or the final output. In this stage, the students get opportunity to make revision, reflection and pay attention to

the performed task. The main purpose of Task-Based Method of Teaching is to generate possibilities for language learning and master the skills via integration of knowledge (Ellis, 2003).

2.2. Content Based Method of Teaching (CBMT)

Content Based Method of Teaching is basically "an approach to second language teaching in which teaching is organized around the content or information that students will acquire, rather than around a linguistic or other type of syllabus" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p.204). CBMT compromises the content or academic subject matter and learning of language concurrently. The content or academic subject may be science, geography or history. In CBMT, language is used as an instrument to teach subject content (Mohan, 1986). CBMT demands better students and teachers as well. Language teacher must be aware about the content areas. Students are required to be active and co-operative and make commitment to this approach of language learning (Stryker & Leaver, 1993). Basically, the subject matter of the content is the materials used for CBMT classroom. CBMT is popular on the settings of English for Specific Purpose (ESP), English for Academic Purpose (EAP) and ESL/EFL language classrooms.

CBMT can be practiced in three approaches in a language classroom (According to Brinton, Snow and Wesche., 1989). Theme-based language approach is the most common models because it can be easily applied in CBMT classroom. And the themes can be chosen according to the interests of students such as save the water, graduation ceremony, Olympic games, global warming or women's education. An effort is usually made to integrate the theme into the basic skills of language teaching (Brinton et al, 1989). Sheltered content approach uses a content based lesson plan which are modified for the second language learners. This sheltered method isolates all the non-native language learner on the same platform so that native speaking learners can communicate with L2 learners from a low tension environment (Krashen, 1981). This approach is originated from Foreign language immersion programs; the teacher will decide the intensity of difficulty measure fit for the L2 learners' language abilities (Brinton et al; 1989). Adjunct language approach matriculates the students in two integrated skills, language skills and academic (content) skills. This method demands both academic strategies and cognitive skills. So, it is more appropriate for the advanced language skilled students. CBMT school of pedagogy is 'learning by doing' based strategy which may be challenging for learners (Stryker & Leaver 1993). The main purpose of CBMT is to improve the language skills of the learners through content subject. CBMT strengthens the process of language learning by underpinning the academic skills.

3.   Research Question

Concerning the purpose of this study, the research questions endorsed are as follows:

Q1. Will there be any positive effect in the writing of students taught TBMT and CBMT in the English practice classroom at undergraduate level in Japan?

Q2. And if yes, which method, TBMT or CBMT, is more effective in students' writing?

4.   Methodology

4.1. Participants

As shown in Table 1, 14 undergraduate students of different faculties at the University of Tsukuba participated the TOEFL Practice Course taught by this author. The purpose of this course was to allow the students to measure their English language skills and improve it significantly to get higher score on the TOEFL. Though this research is mainly focused on the writing skills of the participants, the overall target of this course was to motivate students to keep trying and practicing all the four English language skills; reading, writing, speaking and listening. The participants were taught writing by using TBMT and CBMT. The students actively cooperated and performed the given activities by the instructor. The class covered 3 male and 11 female students. Students performed two types of writing tests: based on TBMT approach and CBMT approach simultaneously.

Table 1: Distribution of students in two types of tests.

Methodology	No. of students	Types of test
TBMT	14	Writing Test based on TBMT
CBMT	14	Writing Test based on CBMT

4.2. Research design

The research was designed to perform the class activities in group and pair based on TBMT followed with a writing test. Similarly, on another class, the instructor conducted the classroom activities based on CBMT followed with a writing test. One of the topic on TBMT lesson was 'summer vacation trip'. Students were provided several materials like road maps and enough discussions about the trip plan, budget and time. When they completed the task, they presented it to the whole class. Subsequently, a class-test was conducted and the question was 'write down a descriptive essay on summer vacation trip'. Students were allowed to use the tasks and materials used in the classroom activities. Likewise, one of the topic on CBMT lesson was 'save the water'. In group, students created a poster with water saving ideas. They used colorful pens to make it effective and attractive. In order to make all the students participate, they were asked to write slogans individually. So, a group poster with a message 'save the water' was created. Thereafter, a written test was conducted and the question was 'write down an essay on save the water'. Of course, students needed to show their language skills in both TBMT and CBMT based tests. TOEFL Practice Course consists of total 16 classes, so the instructor equally divided 8 classes for both TBMT and CBMT lessons. After each lesson, students were asked to write a composition as their homework on the topic discussed in the class room. The total amount of writing produced by the students were 16 compositions (8 each) based on the TBMT and CBMT lessons.

5. Data Analysis

Students' written essays were collected and evaluated on the basis of accuracy and logical coherence of writing. Skehan and Foster (1999: p. 77) defined accuracy as "ability to avoid error in performance, reflecting higher levels of control in the language as well as avoidance of such challenging structure that might provoke error." Ellis (2003: p. 340) defined second language accuracy measure as "the learner's ability to produce error free target language". The current research tests are also measured by counting the total numbers of errors in the written sample essays. Although an objective scale of measurement to evaluate writing is impossible, the central idea of the given topic, organized thoughts and evidences illustrated with examples and grammatical and spelling errors are the criteria used to make grading in this research.

6. Result and discussion

The result of this research is based on the descriptive statistical analysis of the two test scores as shown in the Table 2:

Table. 2: Performance of the students in TBMT Writing Test and CBMT Writing Test.

Name of the students	CBMT	TBMT
A	77	90
B	75	88
C	70	80
D	68	82
E	65	84
F	67	80
G	70	85
H	65	80
I	76	84
J	76	86
K	78	88
L	68	80
M	66	82
N	68	85
Mean	70.64	83.85
Std. Deviation	4.56	3.22

The Table. 2 clearly shows that students performed better in the essays written

after TBMT lesson in comparison to the essays written after CBMT lesson. Moreover, the impact of TBMT lesson on writing was more effective with the fourteen students in the TOEFL Practice Course of the University of Tsukuba. And, there was an improvement in writing of the students based on TBMT compared to the writing based on CBMT. Nevertheless, CBMT lessons also motored the writing skills of the students through content which was rewarding for not only learners but teacher. For example, students were given several contents of their own interest and asked to write compositions after CBMT lessons as their homework. Students have shown remarkable performance on the subject of their choice. For instance, on the topic 'Olympic games', one of the student writes, 'Japanese female athletes participated in the Olympics, 16 years after male athletes…Japan couldn't take part in the 1948 London Olympics because of the Second World War'. Similarly, on the topic 'Graduation ceremony', one of the student writes, 'The image of graduation ceremony is associated with cherry blossoms in Japan…It will surely bring you interesting cultural discovery'. CBMT bestows a chance for teachers to meet the students' interests and at the same time allows both students and teachers to widen their knowledge. CBMT, through theme based contents enhance the language acquisition (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989). CBMT integrates both academic skills and language skills simultaneously and promotes language development. However, the observation shows TBMT outperformed the CBMT in teaching writing to the students. This research benefitted from the Skehan and Foster (1996), Yuan and Ellis (2003), Ellis and Yuan (2004) and Wendel (1997) who used the global measure of accuracy in their studies. Generally, the trusted measure of accuracy to evaluate writing are correct verb form, error free clauses, usage of articles, plurals, verb tenses, vocabulary etc. The current investigation shows that the writing produced after TBMT lesson contains less errors in verb forms, tenses and vocabulary etc. Verb forms mean verbs in terms of tense and subject verb agreement (Ellis & Yuan, 2004). In class, TBMT lesson was divided into three phases: pre-task, during-task and post-task (Skehan 1996).

Task-based approach shows a crystalline improvement of Communication Linguistics through its meaningful and real tasks. The analysis of this research is also benefitted from the number of other studies. For instance, Willis (1996) argued that the meaningful language can make the learning process easier, and Ellis (2009) claimed that TBMT supplies an opportunity for 'natural' learning, it's motivating, learner centered yet allows teacher's guidance, enhances the fluency and accuracy to improve communicative competence in learners. Larsen-Freeman (2000) emphasized that while making effort to accomplish a task, a learner gets opportunity to communicate, discuss and interact directly with peers. The analysis of this research incorporated this discussion to pave the language acquisition smoothly and understand each other as well as penetrate their own meaning.

Furthermore, a typical factor, 'a pre-task phase' in TBMT allows the learners to comprehend the language skill by involving in a similar task to the one they will perform later. Eventually, the 'post-task phase' in TBMT is a language focused phase where the learners are taught about the structures and vocabulary. However, CBMT lacks these phases. So, relying on these beneficial factors of

TBMT, this research justifies the better performance in TBMT writing test than in CBMT writing test in English practice classroom.

7. Conclusion

Language learning and teaching in both TBMT and CBMT approaches were influential in English practice classroom. In CBMT, language is used as a medium to study about a subject or content and in TBMT, real life based tasks are tailored to make the students participate in activities. Both methods were essentially learner centered and the purpose was to improve student's language acquisition. However, the above study shows TBMT in writing was more effective to the TOEFL students in comparison to CBMT in writing. In my point of view, using TBMT approach in learning, teaching and exploring can enhance language acquisition more than CBMT approach for the beginners.

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