

Developing Speaking Skills through TBLT

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Abstract

Out of all the four basic skills, Speaking is regarded as the most active skill. To achieve good speaking skill, it takes tireless efforts along with a good amount of strong determination and a regular and religious practice as well. Unlike other three basic skills, it can be acquired in an informal setting. But the one learnt in an informal setting renders less effectiveness, whereas the one learnt in a formal setting has a long standing-effect. Speaking not only involves a mere utterance, but also tone, intonation, and stress patterns etc. Mastering these prosodic features is a tough task.

It takes a considerably long time for a non-native speaker of English to speak like a native speaker. Notwithstanding being learnt in a formal situation, a host of segmental as well as supra-segmental features of the L1 retain in the target language. This is well known as a Mother Tongue Influence (MTI hereafter). MTI can be checked by regular and frequent practice. The paper will look into different issues involved with MTI which hinder develop good speaking skill. It will also give an insight how to develop Speaking skills through Task Based Language Teaching approach.

Key words-

Segmental and Supra-segmental features, MTI, TBLT

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Introduction

English has been the international lingua franca and is rapidly emerging as the global language. It is now consolidating its position as the global language of communication. Thus, there is an urgent need for all people across the world to learn English. Fortunately, this need of learning English has been well recognized in India and concerted efforts are being made to strengthen the teaching and learning of English. The objective is to make the acquisition of English as early as possible.

Out of the four basic skills, i.e. Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing, Speaking is regarded as the most difficult and untameable. Learners begin either by listening or reading and gradually, in the passage of time, switch to speaking and writing. Out of these four skills, listening and reading are skills of comprehension while speaking and writing are known as skills of expression.

Though not impossible, it is quite difficult to excel in speaking. When a non-native speaker of English ventures to learn English, she has to encounter a host of other problems, apart from language differences: MTI, prosodic feature differences between the source language

and the target language etc. MTI is well known as ‘mother tongue influence’. While learning a target language, if some of the linguistic as well as phonological features reflect in the target language that is called as a mother tongue influence. This is a widely common phenomenon faced by L2 learners while learning a new target language.

There is a major reason why MTI occurs and the reason is the difference and non-availability of the same speech sounds in other languages which are available in English, e.g.

- a) English phonetics has two semi-vowels /j, w/ that are consonants in other languages, e.g. in Odia.
- b) There is a substitution of [v] for English /w/, e.g. west as [vest] and understood as vest.
- c) People tend to use unaspirated /p/, /t/, /k/ at the beginning of accented syllables, e.g. in touch, pull, come.
- d) English affricates [ts], [dz] are not universal. They are pronounced distinctly in other languages.

Apart from these given differences, there are a number of other differences found. Due to such differences in phonological level, the confidence of the

L2 learners decreases. They are afraid of speaking. They fear that they might go wrong and make mistakes. A dearth of vocabulary is also noticed. They shy away from the scene, even though they know the right answer of a question. They have adequate knowledge, but lack in presentation skills or how to express. This is a major issue across Indian classrooms. There are a lot many other problems that can be discovered in segmental and supra-segmental features.

Segmental and Supra-segmental features

Segmental features include consonants, vowels and their nature of speech and word accent in English phonetics.

Features, which relate to an utterance longer than a sound segment are called supra-segmental or prosodic features. These include length, stress, and pitch. The term 'length' relates to duration, 'stress' relates to intensity, muscular activity or air-pressure, and 'pitch' relates to the note of the voice as determined by the frequency of vibration of the vocal cords.

(Bansal and Harrison, 1994: 14)

When the non-native learners of English start learning English, there are certain linguistic as well as phonological features that are transferred to the target language, i.e. English. This is where the real problem arises. This influence is so wide and extensive that it is very difficult to do away with them. This influence is seen widely in the areas of pronunciation, syntax, and semantics. This is where Selinker's (1972) Interlanguage hypothesis comes to play a vital role.

Interlanguage Hypothesis

Selinker (1972) defines, 'Interlanguage hypothesis is a situation which most of the language learners face quite often. The basic idea underlying the interlanguage hypothesis is that the L2 learner of a language is always moving towards the target language. This move towards the target language occurs in stages of approximation to the ideal state of target language attainment. This implies that a learner has to go through stages of learning; it means that this learning best occurs through trial. It also means that trial and error is therefore a means for attaining the rules of the target language. Though it is not a complete language in its own right, interlanguage has some signs of development and movement towards a target language. The L2 learners

continually strive for perfection in the target language until they achieve it. In attempting to understand the relationship between the first and second language, interlanguage does try to aim for some sort of pattern or structure in development. The idea of stages of development in linguistic terms is implied, and perhaps also indicates a natural order of acquisition.'

Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

Acquisition of a language in a natural way and learning it in an artificial way are two different things altogether (Krashen, 1976). Both the processes are not at all equal. Natural way of language acquisition relies much on the surroundings or the natural setting, unlike a laboratory setting for the second language acquisition (SLA henceforth).

In English language teaching (ELT henceforth), there are several methods and approaches offered by various theorists. These methods and approaches include the Direct Method, Grammar-Translation Method, the Structural approach, the Communicative language teaching method, the natural approach, the community language learning method and Task Based Language Teaching approach (TBLT). All these methods and approaches

may be suitable for different contexts and situations but not vice versa. TBLT approach is a successful communicative approach in ELT.

What is TBLT?

TBLT or more popularly known as TBL is a new approach which provides an alternative way of teaching to the language teaching practitioners. Rather than focussing on 'form', it focuses more on 'meaning'. It means more emphasis is given to the meaning-focused activities rather than form-focused activities.

TBLT is variously defined by different people. Given below are some of them.

Ellis (2003) defines TBLT in the following words:

TBLT is an approach to teaching a second/foreign language that seeks to engage learners in interactionally authentic language use by having them perform a series of tasks. It aims

to both enable learners (1) to acquire new linguistic knowledge and (2) to proceduralize their existing knowledge.

(Ellis, R., 2003:30)

Newby (1998) states about TBL,

The task based approach allows the learners to use the language they possess. They are advised to focus on conveying their message, without being overly careful about the structure. This makes the activity based approach closer to real-life communicative situation. As a result of the activities employed in the classroom, the learners feel involved. When they arrive at conclusions or rules with gentle guidance from the teachers, there is a sense of achievement and learning is better. Learning/teaching through activities involves the employing of what we call Immersion Techniques, where learning takes place through interaction with fellow students. Teaching through activities is a learner-centred approach that

gives centre stage to language learners and to acquisition processes and learning strategies. Underlying some of these approaches is the view that a language 'cannot be taught' but can only be acquired by the learner, the teacher taking on the role of a facilitator in this process. Thus, grammar rules explained by the teacher give way to discover techniques and awareness-raising tasks by the pupil.

(Newby, D., 1998)

Though Newby stated it in reference to grammar, this is applicable to all other skills of English, i.e. speaking, listening, etc.

Task

Task holds a central position in TBLT. A task can be any activity which produces some outcome. The task is defined by various theorists in different ways.

A 'Task' as suggested by Nunan (2004) can be briefly divided into two broad categories: Target tasks and Pedagogical tasks. Target tasks, as the

name implies, refers to the uses of language in the world beyond the classroom; pedagogical tasks are those that occur in the classroom. Nunan (1989) further defines, 'A communicative task is 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. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right.'

There are several other ELT practitioners who have defined it in various other ways. Given below are some of them.

A target task as defined by Long (1985):

A 'task' is a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Thus, examples of tasks include painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form, buying a pair of shoes, making an airline reservation, borrowing a library book, taking a driving test, typing a letter,

weighing a patient, sorting letters, making a hotel reservation, writing a cheque, finding a destination and helping someone across a road. In other words, by 'task' is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play and in between.

(Long, M., 1985: 89)

Prabhu (1987) states, 'A task is an activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allowed teachers to regulate that process.'

When the task is performed in a classroom it is called a pedagogical task. Richards, et al (1986) defines a pedagogical task as:

.....an activity or action which is carried out as the result of processing or understanding language (i.e. as a response). For example, drawing a map while

listening to a tape, listening to an instruction and performing a command may be referred to as tasks. Tasks may or may not involve the production of language. A task usually requires the teacher to specify what will be regarded as successful completion of the task. The use of a variety of different kinds of tasks in language teaching is said to make language teaching more communicative.....since it provides a purpose for a classroom activity which goes beyond the practice of language for its own sake.

(Richards, et al. 1986: 289)

Breen (1987) offers another definition of a pedagogical task:

.... Any structured language endeavor which has a particular

objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedure, and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the task. 'Task' is therefore assumed to refer to a range of workplans which have the overall purposes of facilitating language learning—from the simple and brief exercise type, no more complex and lengthy activities such as problem-solving or simulations and decision making.

(Breen, M. 1987: 23)

Prabhu (1987) focussed chiefly on 'meaning', thus he argued that a task had some kind of 'gap'. He identified three main types of such gap: information gap, reasoning gap, and opinion gap. A learner was required to use some thought process to fill the gaps.

An Experimental study

To ascertain a positive outcome of TBLT, the author carried out an experimental study in an Engineering

college named Balasore College of Engineering and Technology, Balasore, Odisha. Two groups were selected for the research design: Control group and Experimental group. Both the groups were heterogeneous. While the control group consisted of 60 students from Civil and Computer science branch (30 each), the experimental group had 60 students from Mechanical and Electrical branch (30 each). For experimentation purpose, the control group was taught with the same syllabus and there was absolutely no change in their teaching methods. On the other hand, the experimental group was taught by the same method that was used for the control group. Apart from the conventional method, the experimental group was taught with various communicative tasks and activities for three months. Since the students were very less exposed to English, a needs analysis was conducted. After conducting a thorough needs analysis, the tasks were selected keeping their level of understanding and exposure in English and socio-cultural background in view. The selected tasks included role play, information gap activity, storytelling, and reasoning-gap activity.

The tasks

1. Role play- it involves playing the role of another person. The learners were asked to play the roles of doctor-patient, vendor-customer, conductor-passenger, teacher-student, and some social role plays like father-mother, brother-sister etc. It was a pair activity.

2. Information-gap activity- it refers to the transfer of information from one group to another that does not have it, e.g. filling up the names of capital cities of different states looking at a given map of India. This activity was done to enhance interpersonal communication. It was a group activity.

3. Storytelling- it involves telling a story in the lines demarcated by the teacher. Some hints about the story were given and the learners were asked to complete the stories. It was designed to enhance their communicative and creative skills as well. It was a pair work.

4. Reasoning-gap activity- it involves deriving some new information from given information through processes of inference, deduction, and practical reasoning, e.g. a time-table of a class was given and the learners were asked to make a time-table for another class. This was

done to enhance the learners' reasoning ability. It was a group work.

Methodology of TBLT

1. Pre-task (motivation and pre-knowledge of the activities).

2. The main task (when actually the tasks were done).

3. Post-task (language practice activities).

1. **Pre-task-** at this stage a thorough motivation and orientation was carried out. The teacher introduced different activities to the learners. Concealing the intention of the researcher, the learners were asked whether they have any idea of these selected activities. Most of the learners gave a positive response and expressed interest in those activities as well.

2. **Main task-** this was the stage where the tasks were actually done. The learners were divided into pairs and groups as per the requirement of the tasks. Each of the groups or pairs was assigned some tasks to complete.

3. **Post-task-** this stage was the language practice stage. This stage enabled the learners to enhance their vocabulary and grammar ability through the various information gap and storytelling activities.

Findings of the experiment

The findings of the experiment were quite impressive. The experiment continued for three months. The main focus of the activities was on 'meaning' though 'form' was focused at a later stage (post-task). Fluency was the main objective of the researcher. Given below are some of the major findings, we achieved from the experiment:

1. The participant learners of the experimental group were seen taking more interest in the activities. Some of the weak learners known to the researcher were the forerunners in almost all the activities.

2. Those students who were able to utter a few words in English, like some verb words (go, come, eat, and make etc.) they were able to speak complete sentences using those verb words. Though the accuracy level was low, fluency enhanced to a greater extent.

3. Compared with the control group, the experimental group was more expressive, more fluent.

4. Though some disadvantaged learners experienced some difficulties during the tasks with regard to the instructions, they were well handled by the teacher.

5. At least 40 students out of 60 were found to be taking part in all the activities and in the post-test they were found to have achieved some fluency.

6. The use of TBLT amazingly regained the confidence of the learners. Those who tended to shy away, they led the class in various activities.

Shortcomings in TBLT

There are some shortcomings in TBLT as well. Since the main focus is on 'meaning', the 'form' part remains least addressed. Sheen (2003) claims that, in TBLT there is 'no grammar syllabus'. Similarly, Swan (2005) argues that TBLT 'outlaws' the grammar syllabus. Swan (2005) also claims, 'TBLT promotes learner-centeredness at the expense of teacher-directed instruction.' The claims of Sheen and Swan may be right. But such claims can be invalidated. Grammar has been focused in a number of studies through TBLT (Mackey, 1999). The other claim by Swan may not be a correct one. Ellis (2003) has consistently argued that tasks can be usefully performed in teacher-class interaction (i.e. need not involve group or pair work) and points to the advantages this have for ensuring a teacher-led focus on form. Prabhu (1987) insists that tasks are better performed in

lockstep teaching. Thus, TBLT is a democratic approach both for the learners and teachers. A teacher can be a 'scaffolding' or 'interlocutor' for the learners. Which is why, if the class is completely teacher-centred, there is a fear of 'least outcome' from the learners' side.

Conclusion

TBLT is a new approach to look at language learning and teaching. It is the strong version of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Method. Some theorists are skeptical about the success of TBLT since it focuses more on 'meaning' rather than 'form'. Meaning is associated with fluency and form is associated with accuracy. Accuracy can be achieved slightly later once fluency is achieved. But accuracy cannot be achieved at the cost of fluency. Most of the classrooms in Indian setting are suffering from this problem. The traditional way of teaching has been focussing more on form than meaning. Hence, fluency has suffered a lot at the cost of accuracy. Not only in speaking skills, TBLT can also be integrated with other basic skills, i.e. listening, reading, and writing. However, TBLT has the potential to remove the MTI and enable the learners to achieve good speaking skills.

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