



Shifting Paradigm: From a Communicative to a Task based Approach

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ABSTRACT

This new age would seem to go hand in hand with task-based approaches. For practitioners, applied linguists and educators there is a changed dynamic in which computers have now become much more than a tool or a tutor for developing language skills. Technological innovations have gone hand-in-hand with the growth of English and are changing the way in which we communicate, work, trade, entertain and learn and it is non-native users of English, frequently from Asian countries, who are arguably, at the heart of this.

Keywords: English Language Teaching; Technological Innovation; Task based approach

Introduction

Language teaching education is entering a new and largely uncharted phase and we would seem to be at a crossroads. Warchauer and Kern (2000) have identified this as a "socio-cognitive phase" where, unlike in previous phases, students interact with each other and the world via the computer. A great deal of work has focused on the value of computers in learning or second language acquisition, beyond resource publications rather on the implications of the content of teaching itself, i.e. the syllabus. Even less consideration seems to have been given to how we see, define or classify our learners. It is argued that a task-based syllabus offers a way forward and practitioners will need to reflect upon what is achievable within their own contexts. In addressing these challenges we will clearly need to develop a sense in which English belongs to the students and their fellow countrymen and women just as much as anyone else and to do this we will need to avoid classifying the vast majority of users as "foreign" or "second" language learners. ELT would seem to be at a crossroads. It is heartening to see that much of the momentum for change is coming through practitioners and students.

Warschauer and Healey (1998) have observed that it is now less a question of the role of computers in the language

classroom and more a question of the role of the language classroom in an information technology society. English Language Teaching (ELT) has been with us for many years and its significance continues to grow, fueled, partially at least, by the Internet. Studies indicate that over 80% of information stored on the Internet is in English. For the first time in history there are more non-native than native users of the language and diversity of context in terms of learners' age, nationality, learning background etcetera has become a defining characteristic of ELT today.

Technological innovations have gone hand-in-hand with the growth of English and are changing the way in which we communicate, work, trade, entertain and learn and it is non-native users of English, frequently from Asian countries, who are arguably, at the heart of this. It is fair to assert that the growth of the Internet has facilitated the growth of the English language and that this has occurred at a time when computers are no longer the exclusive domain of the dedicated few, but rather widely available to many. Warchauer (2002) has discussed this change in terms of conflicts between local identities and the globalization of the English language; whilst Jarvis and Atsilarat (2004), have suggested that the Internet may be a contributory factor in shifting away from a communicative towards a context-based approach to language teaching pedagogy. The work of Crystal (2003), McKay (2002), Burns and Coffin (2001) and others, echo a view that today it is more useful to think in terms of English as an international or global language. This new majority being non-native users has, as we have seen, been considerably facilitated by the Internet, and, it is argued, the English language today belongs just as much to this new majority as it does to the now minority native users.

Review of the development from communicative to task based approach

It is in this sense that it is not a foreign or second language because it is their language too. It "belongs" to all users. Every minute, hour, day, week, month and year there are millions of users of English across the Asian region and beyond; more often

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than not the medium for such users is the Internet. When somebody from Korea, China, or Thailand communicates with A.N. Other from Japan, Malaysia or Indonesia they are likely to do so in English and they are likely to do so primarily via the Internet. These people may well meet in person but a great deal of any communication is computer-mediated and they will use a variety of language appropriate to the medium. Given this situation, our challenge, is to promote a pedagogy which reflects what users are actually doing with language, rather than prescribing items to be taught.

Nunn (2005) has argued that linguistic, communicative and other kinds of competences have to be addressed in relation to English language teaching and goes on to argue that "... international communication seems to require the ability to adjust to almost infinitely diverse intercultural communication situations". An alternative approach can be characterized as process-orientated because it focuses not on items to be taught and learned, but on what the learner does with the language. A task-based approach is very much process-orientated because it focuses on "learning through doing" i.e. on tasks. Tasks mean different things to different people. It is useful to distinguish between pedagogic and authentic tasks. In the case of the former, students are asked to do things which are unlikely to occur outside the classroom, information gap activities or ordering scrambled sentences are examples of these. With authentic tasks students are asked to complete activities which are likely to be carried out in real life once the student has left the classroom. Working with a map to ask a classmate for directions, or listening for a departure time and gate number for a specific flight, would be examples of this. Task-based approaches become arguably the only way to effectively take into account the changes in language.

Reflections of the task based approach

There is a lot of emphasis on the need for a pedagogy "... in which the teaching and learning of English should involve valuing and nurturing the expression of other cultural voices in English... and helping learners to construct identities as owners, users, meaning makers and authorized users...". A task-based approach is the most appropriate framework from which to address such challenges. Within a traditional approach to syllabus design we arguably need to plot these new items of language and include them in our programs. It will be more useful to specify a series of tasks for our learners and allow them to generate whatever appropriate language is required in order to successfully complete such tasks. Typically, a traditional ELT syllabus lists learning items in terms of structures, functions, notions and vocabulary which are then set in situations and which usually integrate a variety of skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking). This dominant approach has been characterized as product-orientated because it focuses on what is to be learnt or on products (White, 1988). The problem with this approach, as Nunan (1988) has pointed out, is that input cannot be equated with output and that teaching cannot be equated with learning. In short, what the teacher teaches is not what the learner learns. It is a problem which is compounded within our proposed framework.

It is rapidly changing, subject to trend and fashion and varies in different contexts. This makes product-based approaches virtually impossible. Rather task-based approaches represent a perfect match. It is very easy to devise simple, achievable tasks which encourage students to use email to communicate with each other, their tutors and the wider world; likewise it is not difficult to find useful meaningful ways in which student's access and even post information on the web. The needs of the

learners and the contexts in which they work will ultimately determine the most appropriate tasks.

Conclusion

Computers have historically contributed to ELT with both pedagogical applications and by helping us understand the nature of the language. It is suggested that the Internet and the computer mediated communication has gone way beyond to change the language itself. The implications of such change are: Firstly, for ELT's long established notions of English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL) it is suggested that we need to shift towards a more appropriate view of English as an international or global language (EIL/EGL). Secondly, the implications for language teaching pedagogy needs a shift away from traditional notions of curriculum and syllabus towards task-based approaches

Such ideas can be realized with English for Academic Purposes students. Similar ideas can be utilized with general English students. They might for example be asked to prepare a travel itinerary for a visitor to their country, province or city. This could involve accessing web sites to note and decide upon the best places to visit, using the web and email to arrange flight bookings to and from the city, negotiating amongst themselves (via email) on the best options etc. There must be literally hundreds of task-based activities of this type across the globe which involve students using computers to access information and to communicate with others. The task is specified and students generate appropriate language, with help as required. Success is measured by the extent to which the task is successfully completed and the language is viewed as the tool to achieve the ends. It is not prescribed. The learners are viewed as working with tools which belong to them as much as to anyone else

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