
TASK-BASED LEARNING TECHNIQUE: A STRATEGY TO ENHANCE STUDENTS' SPEAKING SKILLS AT ESP CONTEXT

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Abstract:

Speaking skills are very important. Through mastering these skills, a student is able to communicate his ideas, feelings, and emotions easily. Besides, nowadays, almost all job requirements put a strong emphasis on the speaking skills' mastery to its candidates. However, the students seemed to have low motivation in learning it, especially students taking English for Specific Purpose (ESP), such as English for Front Office. Many factors contributed to this phenomenon. One of them was the learning atmosphere and the learning activities. When they were not enjoyable in their learning and they were not given opportunities to practice their language, their learning achievement would become low. When it remained all the time, they could not achieve the learning goal very well. Therefore, they needed to be helped. One strategy that could be done was by implementing a technique which could arouse their motivation. That strategy was task-based learning technique. It provides the learners with an enjoyable learning environment and gives students a lot of chances to practice their speaking. Thus, it can develop to establishing students' communicative competence and provides them a bridge to reach the intended communicative goal. This paper aims at illustrating how the task-based learning is employed in an ESP classroom to enhance students' speaking skills at ESP context.

Keywords: *Task-based learning technique, speaking skills, ESP*

1. INTRODUCTION

English for Specific Purposes is a branch of English course which is designed to meet specific needs of the learners (Harding, 2008). It refers to the teaching of specific genre of mostly technical English for students with specific goals, for example English for Secretary, English for banking, English for accounting, etc. By learning English specifically, the students are expected to be able to use what they learn in the ESP classroom right away in their work and studies (Bracaj, 2014). Students who learn English for front office, for instance, will focus mastering all materials related with English used by front office staff together with the knowledge and skills required to be a professional staff in the future. Therefore, when they are graduated from their study, they will be competent enough in performing their job in the field. English for specific course is actually a short path to help the language learners to achieve their language learning goal.

To help the students to achieve their language learning goal, the Ganesha University

of Education, particularly DIII English Department also insert some English for specific courses into its curriculum.

One of them is English for Front Office. This subject is a compulsory subject to learn by the students. It supports the purpose of DIII English Department, that is to produce students who are capable to work professionally in tourism industries. It's Mean that the students who are graduated from this department are expected to be skillfull either in using English or in performing the job.

However, the reality happened in a classroom is far from the ideal expected goal of learning the ESP. It is proven by the result of performance test conducted in an English for Front Office Course. In this test, the students were asked to act as a front office staff who served a guest in a hotel. The test showed that almost all of the students were skillfull enough in handling the technical procedures of handling the guests' needs, but were failed on using the language. This is not a very satisfying result of learning ESP because the intended learning goal of ESP is the students can master both content and language use equally. This is basically in line with

Wello and Dollah (2008) belief that ESP combines subject matter and English language teaching. ESP concentrates more on language in context than on teaching grammar and language structures. It covers subjects varying from accounting to tourism and business management. The ESP focal point is that English is not taught as a subject separated from students' real world; instead it is integrated into a subject matter area important to learners.

Having identified the facts above, it seems that there are some problems which are needed to be solved. Based on my observation held in the ESP classroom and the interview held to students who taking English for Front Office, it revealed that there were two main factors contributing to these problems. The first problem came from the internal factor of the students, and the second one was from the teacher. The factors contributing from inside the learners were the attitude toward learning which lead them to be unmotivated to learn. They thought that using the language to communicate was not an easy thing to do. They need to understand how to pronounce the words, how to select the appropriate grammar, and pay attention to the intonation. The second factor causing the problem was the technique strategy implemented by the teacher. In this ESP course, the teacher held presentation, practice, and production technique by combining both content and the language use. In this technique, the teacher presented the materials to the students both on the procedures and language expressions used, gave them examples on a typical conversation which commonly occurred in a hotel, asked the students to memorize the dialogue, and then asked the students to produce similar conversation based on the model given. Even the teacher gave the students exercises like fill in gap exercises on the model of dialogue that the students had to create. It occurs in every meeting. This actually becomes the second factor contributing to the students' failure in performing their ability of using English confidentially.

The problems above need to solve. Having analyzed the problems and factors causing it happened, it comes to the conclusion that the main root problem is caused by the

teaching technique implemented by the teacher. In teaching, teachers tended to focus on the form than meaning. They were also very rarely put the students into the real context. Students were asked to memorize the dialogues uttered by the front office staff. This will result in the unnatural setting of situation which lead to students' boredom and demotivated to learn. Therefore, it needs to use other technique of teaching which can help the students perform better.

Among many types of teaching techniques applied by the teacher, task-based learning technique is the most rewarding technique to apply in ESP context. Hatip (2005) states that task-based learning technique is a technique seeking to provide learners with a natural context for language use. It aims at providing opportunities for learners to explore the target language through learning activities which encourage the authentic, practical, and functional use of language for meaningful purposes. Here, the teachers provide tasks used by the learner for a communication purpose in order to achieve an outcome in which the emphasis is on exchanging meanings not producing specific language form. Skehan (2003) also states that task-based learning technique emphasizes the central role of meaning in language use. He notes that in task-based learning technique, meaning is primary, and it is not concerned with language display but concerns with the language use. As learners work to complete a task, they have abundant opportunity to interact. Such interaction is thought to facilitate language acquisition as learners have to work to understand each other and to express their own meaning.

This technique is selected since it is suitable with the nature of ESP course itself. ESP programs focus on developing communicative competence in a specific field, such as tourism. Typically Barstukmaen (2010) mentioned that ESP has functioned to help language learners to cope with the features of language or to develop competencies needed to function in a discipline, profession, or work place.

To meet the objective of ESP course one form of task-based learning technique, videotaped simulation, is chosen in an ESP

classroom, that is in English for Front Office course. Simulation is one task that can be selected by the teachers in implementing task-based learning technique. It has been defined as reality of function in a simulated structure environment (Jones, 1982) in (Javid, 2013). Simulation stimulates real life situations and it includes the element of role play, that is representing certain character in everyday life. Moreover, the characteristics of this teaching technique is that behavior is not controlled in a simulation and the participants bring to the situation their own skills, experience, and knowledge. This enriches the learning process and makes the academic setting a real life situation which is one of the fundamental conditions for effective language learning. Tompkins (1998) also states that simulation is an extremely valuable method for L2 learning. It encourages thinking and creativity, let students develop and practice new language and behavioral skills in a relatively non threatening setting, and can create the motivation and involvement necessary for learning to occur.

This article then further illustrates how the teacher of ESP course implement task-based learning technique by using videotaped simulation in his/her classroom, particularly to help the students to enhance their speaking skills at ESP context.

2. TASK BASED LEARNING TECHNIQUE

Task-based learning technique refers to a technique which is based on the use of tasks as the core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching (Skehan 2003). It is a technique that views the “tasks” that learners do as a central to the learning process. The learning process is seen as a set of communicative tasks that are directly linked to curricular goals. Nunan (1993) outlines five characteristics of a task-based learning technique as follows: 1). An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language; 2). The introduction of authentic texts (teaching materials) into the learning situation; 3). The provision of opportunities for learners to focus not only on language, but also on the learning process itself; 4) An enhancement of the learner’s personal experiences as important contributing

elements to classroom learning; and 5) An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activation outside the classroom.

3. BENEFITS OF TASK-BASED LEARNING TECHNIQUE

There are some benefits obtained by the learners by implementing this technique (Sam, 1990) in (Javid, 2013). They are: a) It stimulates authentic conversation because the learners are forced to behave in a natural atmosphere; b) It provides opportunity for the learners to use language freely and creatively; c) it is useful and more suitable for consolidating and practicing aspects of conversational proficiency; d) It creates sensitivity and sense of awareness; e) It increases students’ motivation in learning. It can break from routine and makes the atmosphere less formal and this can reduce tension; and e) it prepares language learners for real life and handle real life unpredictability.

Hatip (2005) also provides advantages of this technique. Some advantages of task-based learning technique are: a) It is widely applicable as it is suitable for learners of all ages and backgrounds; b) During the activity the learners are allowed to use whatever language they want, freeing them to focus entirely on the meaning of their message. This makes it closer to real-life communicative situation, which is a way of bringing the real world into classroom; c) A natural context is developed from the students’ experiences with the language that is personalized and relevant to them; d) Because learners are striving to express what they want to say, they are more motivated to absorb the language needed-either new language that they ask you for, or language that they have already met, but not acquired properly so far; d) The language explored arises from the students’ needs. This need dictates what will be covered in the lesson rather than a decision made by the teacher or the course book; e) the students will have much more varied exposure to language. They will be exposed to a whole range of lexical phrases, collocations and patterns as well as language forms; f) It provides a natural opportunity for revision and recycling and give teachers the opportunity to assess learners’ progress; g) It provides clear objectives in

terms of what participants will gain from the tasks; h) It contributes to progress by encouraging students to plan and be more ambitious in the language they use, rather than just saying the first thing that comes into their heads; i) It provides both the input and the output processing necessary for language acquisition; j) It is motivational. It is said to improve learners' motivation and to promote learning. This is because they require the learners to use authentic language, they have well-defined dimensions and closure, they typically include physical activity, they involve partnership and collaboration, they may call on the learner's past experience, and they tolerate and encourage a variety of communication; k) Learning difficulty can be negotiated and fine-tuned for particular pedagogical purposes. Specific tasks can be designed to facilitate the use and learning of particular aspects of language as they provide a vehicle for the presentation of appropriate target language samples. They can also be used "channel" learners toward particular aspects of language.

Looking at the above advantages proposed by the implementation of task-based learning technique, it is strongly recommended for the teachers to apply this strategy his/her classroom.

4. THE STAGES OF IMPLEMENTING TASK-BASED LEARNING

In order to implement task-based learning technique, there are three steps that must be followed (Nunan, 1993); they are: **a) pre-task**. Pre task is the head of the activity. The topic and task are introduced here. At this step, teacher is the guide. He or she gives the key note and goal of the task, **b) Task cycle**. Task cycle can be considered as the time for learners to perform, produce whatever they know in the target language. Learners work in pairs or groups. At this stage, teacher becomes a motivator for students to use the target language and becomes a helper as well; and **c) Language Focus**. Language focus is the outcome of the activity. In this case, teacher sometimes get students to find a word or a phrase, read, underline, and pay attention to the language focus learned on that day. At this stage, teacher is the conductor of the classroom because he or she makes learners start and continue on their own. At that time, of course,

he or she answers all questions that students have. At the end, he/ or she sums the activity up and helps learners to see what they have learnt.

Having conducted this technique, I could see the progress on students performance. They could perform the task better. They were confident enough in using the language and tried to perform their role as a front office staff professionally. They really paid attention especially to the pronunciation, even though their grammar still needed to improve. Students were happy in performing the task. They tried their best showing their best performance. The learning atmosphere was more fun than before since the students were allowed to make mistakes in producing their language, even though at the end, they would be guided to produce the more appropriate utterances. There was also a two way interaction from both teacher to students and students to teacher. They were comfortable enough to discuss the task with me as their facilitator.

5. THE IMPLEMENTATION OF VIDEOTAPED SIMULATION AS ONE FORM OF TASK-BASED LEARNING TECHNIQUE IN A ESP CLASSROOM

As I mentioned previously that one type of task-based learning technique which can be performed in ESP course is videotaped simulation. In this case, I used this strategy to teach 25 students taking English for Front Office. Below are the steps of using the strategy following the stages proposed by Nunan (1993): **a) Pre task**. In this stage, I gave an instruction to the students to do a videotaped simulation on handling all guests' needs at the front office department, starting from handling reservation, guest check in, handling telephone, handling guest complaints, escorting guest to their room, handling, giving information to the guest, and handling check out. I mentioned the guidelines and the requirements of an excellent performance to them. I distributed the rubric which they used as their guidelines to self assessing their work; **b) Task cycle**. In this stage, students begin to work in a group doing their task. They might consult with me when they found problems or difficulties during the accomplishment of their

work. I facilitated them and always motivated to do their best achievement; **c) Language focus.** In my class, both students and me, watched their videotaped performance together using LCD. Having watched the performance, they were asked to present their comments on their own performance and their friend's one based on the rubric given. At last, I provided the last comments on either strength and weaknesses, and gave them feedback to improve their performance in the future.

6. CONCLUSION

From the previous explanation, it can be concluded that task-based learning technique can be a fruitful technique to be implemented to facilitate students in achieving their intended learning goal. It can influence students' speaking achievement because it provides sufficient opportunity for students to use the language, provides more exposure on the target language, and increases students' interest, motivation, and self confidence.

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