Assessing the Implementation of Task-based Approach in Teaching Writing

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Abstract

The general objective of the study was to assess the implementation of task-based approach in teaching writing at Aboker preparatory School grade 11 in focus. The study aimed at assessing the challenges that affect the practicability of this approach and the strategies participants used to minimize these challenges. Using mixed approach design (qualitative and quantitative research design), the study was conducted in a government preparatory school. Four English language teachers and sixty students participated in the study. To gather data from the subjects of the study textbook analysis, and classroom observation were used to collect qualitative data and questionnaires both (close and open-ended questions) were used to collected both qualitative and quantitative data. Finally, semi-structured interview were used for data triangulations. The study indicated inadequate training, time constraints, students' background, large class size, and lack of language teaching materials raises as major challenges. The study reveals that most teachers are not properly implementing task-based activities to teach writing skills. They do not even use proper strategies that would help to minimize the challenges that affect the implementation of task-based approach.
Keyword: Task-based approach, Writing skill

1. Introduction

English is the international language of education, science, business, politics and culture. In the Ethiopian context, English has played an important role in the field of education, and taught as a subject starting from grade one up to twelve. It is a medium of secondary and higher education and training policy (MoE, 2004). However, inadequate teaching methodology and lack of educational material, insufficient training of teachers, overcrowded classes have affected the quality of education in general. In this connection, (MoE, 2003) stated that the status of English is very low in Ethiopian schools at all levels. As a result, the government tries putting the maximum efforts and possibilities to minimize the challenges. Similarly, the result of this study might give insight for the language teachers to fill the gap regarding language teaching methodology.

2. Review of Related Literature

Teaching is guiding and facilitating learning, enabling the learner to learn (Brown, 1996). In this direction, the researcher tried to assess the proper implementation of task-based activities, the challenges faced by teachers while implementing task based activities for teaching writing skills. Because of inappropriate teaching methodology, students' low motivation in learning English, and limited time of the teaching-learning process teachers' teaching productivity and the students' writing performances are influenced. Similarly, Oura (2011) stated that one of the most challenging tasks constantly facing language teachers is how to capture the interest of students. Therefore, if teachers teach English language via the special reference of task-based activities specifically teaching writing skills, these challenges might be minimized. As Dicker (2009) stated that a good learning task should be the one that integrates several language skills tasks; address learning strategies to share how to learn; and promote a cooperative as opposed to a competitive classroom climate.

Even though teaching methodology is one of the manageable factors, learning to write accurately and expressively that is the most difficult of the four macro-skills in language teaching (Nunan, 1979). In this regard, for the 11th grade students of Aboker Preparatory School, writing is difficult to the extent of letter formation, spelling and punctuation, limited vocabulary, grammar, and specific structures for each genre and functional text. These problems, of course, are serious to be overcome soon due to the reasons that grammar, spelling, and punctuation are the core components to make a successful writing, and targeted School uses curriculum, which their grade 11students may not be able to express their ideas in the form of functional texts. Thus, it is believed that the proper implementation of task-based activities may minimize the targeted problem. This is because they need practical teaching writing knowledge with reference to task-based approach to cycle the grammatical and functional items.

Thus, performing the textbook writing activities in teaching writing skills with the special reference to task-based activities is the main concern for this study. Because among other approaches, the effectiveness of task-based approach in teaching writing skills may facilitate the teaching-learning processes in which the learners can complete the writing activities easily through task-based activities. As a result, the researcher has initiated to conduct a study on this topic. For this study, thus, task-based language teaching was considered as an appropriate approach to language teaching specifically for teaching writing skills. Because it employs sequences for the task and it is student-centered, and it needs more effort from the learners than the target language teacher does in the classroom.

Language in learning and teaching can use as a tool for receiving and giving the existing information, and for forming and expressing concepts and meanings with the text (Marland, 1977). Accordingly, in order to express learners' ideas in a clear and cohesive manner, teaching writing skills using task-based approach appears to be a better way than other approaches. This is because the activities under TBA like pair work and small group works, which are now on the system.

So far, numerous studies have demonstrated the benefit of task-based learning in English language classes. Their findings indicate that the use of the task-based activities as a

pedagogical task in language teaching classroom. (Breen, 1987; Littlejohn, 1998; Skehan, 1998; Willis and Willis, 2001; Ellis, 2003; and Nunan, 2005).

In addition, local researcher (Teshome, 1995), and (Demelash, 2010) conducted a study on freshman students' views and preferences with respect to structure-based versus task-based approaches to ELT and dealt with the English language teachers' and students' perception and implementation of task-based activities. With the purpose of founded out the views of Addis Ababa University freshman students regarding the task-based approach to ELT as compared to their previous English language learning experiences. The study showed that the students' views on the task-based approach were more positive than their views on the structural approach. An attempt was also made to assess the students' views on the classroom organizations pertinent to the task-based approach. The study showed that the respondents favoured the organizational techniques like pair and group work, which suited the task-based language learning activities.

Thus, this research was designed to assess the implementation of task-based activities in teaching writing skills that benefit teachers' teaching performance and students' achievement in writing skills. Therefore, developing the strategies of teaching writing skills using task-based approach is expected to give a base to the teachers as well as the learners to develop other related skills directly or indirectly and to minimize the challenges teachers and students faced to make the textbook writing activities more productive in terms of learners' learning outcome.

This study mainly focused on the assessments of whether task-based activities are being implemented or not in teaching writing skills in EFL classroom in the area of Aboker Preparatory School, Harari region, grade 11 in the year 2012/2013. It was delimited to the challenges teachers faced in implementing task-based activities in teaching writing skills.

The findings of the study can be used as basis for teachers for employing pair work and small group works in classroom. Similarly, it would give an understanding for Aboker preparatory school English language teachers, and students may increase their language skills as well as confidences through practice.

Definitions of Task

The core concept of task-based language teaching is the task. There are different definitions concerning both the real world and pedagogical perspectives of tasks. For instance, Breen (1987) states that task are a range of work plan for exercises and activities in language instruction. (Littlejohn, 1998). Similarly, Lee (2000) define a task as a classroom activity or exercise that has an objective obtainable only by interaction among participants, a mechanism for structuring and sequencing interaction and a focus on meaning exchange. Moreover, a task refers to a language-learning endeavor that requires learners to comprehend, manipulate and produce target language as they perform the set task, involving real-world language (Richards, 1986). Ellis (2003) states that task is a work plan that requires learners to process language pragmatically to achieve an outcome. Similarly, Nunan, (2005) described in his work, task is a piece of classroom work to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. He also argues that Long's definition of task does not necessarily involve language use. Therefore, assessing the implementation of task-based activities in teaching writing classroom minimizes the challenge teacher and students face in classroom work accomplishment.

From pedagogical perspectives, real world target tasks are likely to be too difficult for learners to achieve because of potential semantic, pragmatic, lexical and syntactic difficulties. Breen (1987), defined tasks from the pedagogical perspective: task is therefore, assumed to refer to a range of work plans which have the overall purposes of facilitating language learning from the simple and brief exercise type, to more complex and lengthy activities such as group problem-solving or simulations and decision-making. Thus, all kinds of activities relating to language learning can be tasks, but Breen's definition of task does not clarify how task is different from practices or exercises because it is a broad view. However, tasks are not synonymous with practices or activities (Nunan, 2005). Thus, this definition does not seem to help teachers to understand what tasks are in a language classroom particularly in writing classes.

There are more perspectives in defining tasks than those discussed here, which come from the different contexts in which tasks are used. In conclusion, considering the principles of TBLT (i.e., authentic, learner-centered, using language, intentional and interactive), task is a central component of TBLT in language classrooms because they provide a context that activates learning processes and promotes ESL/EFL learning.

Characteristics of Task-based Activities

According to Nunan (1991) there are three main criteria for task-based activities with an emphasis of giving for interaction in the target language and the introduction of authentic text (teaching materials) into the learning situation. First, they have a goal or purpose that requires the use of the target language. The second criterion involves making use of the unique features of writing classes to create a learning environment that cannot be recreated in the regular classroom. The third characteristic of a task-based activity is that it involves the students in a way that intrinsically motivates and lowers the affective filters they believe. When the learners work together in a small group or in pair they can reflect their ideas and want freely. To want something is to be motivated, and motivation initiates and sustains involvement in learning. As a result, assessing the implementation of task-based activities then can provide students with the opportunity to practice and accomplish different writing activities. This opportunity is enriched by the positive feedback received from their teacher and their peers.

The Principles of Task-Based Language Teaching

There are seven principles of TBLT defined by Nunan. These are scaffolding, task dependency, active learning, integration of forms and functions, learning strategies, reproduction to creation and reflection. Under the principle of scaffolding, lesson and material should provide supporting frameworks within which the learning takes place. Secondly, task dependency shows within a lesson one task should grow out of and build upon the ones that have gone before. Through the principle of active learning learners acquire the language by actively using it. The next principle of integration of form and function in which, learners are taught in ways that make clear the relationships between grammatical form and semantic meaning.

Methodology of Task-Based Language Teaching

The methodology of task-based language teaching lead teachers to follow teaching steps effectively. As it employs sequences that differ from other teaching methods like, pre-task phase, main task phase, and post-task phase and the participatory structure of task-based lessons, individual student activity, teacher-class activities and small group work (Ellis, 2006).

Task-based assessment

Bachman and Palmer (1996) consider tasks as an activity that involves individuals in using language for the purpose of achieving a particular goal or objective in a particular situation. Task-based testing is part of a broader approach to assessment called performance assessment. There are three essential characteristics of performance assessment. Firstly, it must be based on tasks; secondly, the tasks should be as authentic as possible; and finally, success or failure in the outcome of the task. Again, Task-based tests are defined as any assessments that require students to engage in some sort of behavior which stimulates with as much fidelity as possible, goal-oriented target language use outside the language test situation (Brown, 2004).

The Advantages of Task-Based Teaching

Task-Based Language Teaching is an application of second language teaching informed by the most recent research findings on second language acquisition. As such, it plays an important role in current language pedagogy (Solares, 2006). A task-based lesson usually provides the learner with an active role in participating and creating the activities, and consequently increases their motivation for learning. A task-based learning offers more opportunities for the students to display their thinking through their actions. The teacher can also be more open to the needs of the students. The task usually requires the selection of some objects as an outcome. These can provide a shared focus for which students can work together. This will encourage reflection as well as the development of critical awareness of the students (Ki, 2000).

The Drawbacks of Task-Based Learning

According to Skehan (1996), task-based learning holds some dangers if it is implemented carelessly. Therefore, assessing the implementation of task-based activities in the language classroom might minimize the dangers because both teacher and students will be responsible for the given task implementation in the classroom. Similarly, Swan (2005) states the claim that task-based learning is an advanced teaching approach that offers a different rationale for the use of tasks as well as different criteria for the design and use of tasks. However, it depends on tasks as a primary source of pedagogical input in teaching and it lacks of the type of syllabus that characterizes current versions of TBLT.

The Role of Task-Based Activities in Teaching Writing Skills

As Taylor (1983) suggests task-based activities give learners the opportunity to interact with target language directly and use it accurately. In this way, the writing activities can serve as a valuable tool in the language teaching and learning process; to develop learners writing skills.

What does a tool mean, however, is only as effective as there implementer. Thus, the role of the teacher is central to the success of language learners by implementing task-based activities. In that, part of the teacher's art is to create, or stimulate students' creation of the types of situations in which interaction naturally maximizes what they have been learning in a more formal fashion (Rivers, 1987). On his part, Ellis (2003) states that task-based activities help learners to solve problems in real conditions by focusing on the target language. Learners develop their competence in genuine situations that the teaching-learning processes that are described in language classrooms where the teacher claims that teaching a language communicatively is the way to smooth the teaching learning process.

Thus, task-based activities offer the opportunity to practice writing inside the classroom, which emphasizes meaning over form, and it can cater for learning form. These activities are basically motivating the learners that are compatible with a learner-centered educational philosophy, since writing needs more effort from the learners than the teacher does to develop the target skills. Therefore, task-based activities may make the classroom participants aware of what do they do and how do they do and to act in the belief that they can learn the writing skills indirectly through communicating in it rather than directly studying it (Dorthy and Lisa 2003). It is probably easier to achieve when students are interacting among themselves. Therefore, pair and group work were seen as the core point to task-based approach implementation in teaching writing skills.

The Nature and Approaches of Teaching Writing Skills

Writing is the final product of separate acts that are hugely challenging to learn simultaneously. To do so, the writing activities should be structured in ways that help students learn to produce cohesive and coherent discourse on their way to become self-sponsors of their own writings. Many activities in the new textbooks will be aimed at developing skills that in such activities students will be concerned not just with structural accuracy but also with expressing their own ideas, and make choices and a range of vocabulary. According to White cited in Nunan (1979) also, states that writing is not a natural activity; it is the activity of creating pieces of written work, such as stories, poems or articles. Writing is a complex process that allows writers to explore thoughts and ideas, and makes them visible and concrete. There is no one answer to the question of how to teach writing in ESL classes. There are as many as there are teachers and teaching styles or learners and learning styles (Raimes, 1983). In the traditional way of teaching writing, there is a distinction between the way of teaching, which focuses on products and process. In the product-oriented approach, teachers pay attention to the learners' final product with a list of criteria such as vocabulary and grammatical use, spelling and punctuation, and the content of the final product (Brown, 2001)

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

Mixed approach (both qualitative and quantitative research designs) was used in order to help the researcher to have a valid data and to gain better understanding of the issue on the research questions (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2004). In this method, the researchers found a useful ways of understanding human behaviors, feelings, and views to get factual information from the respondents in the area of the present study. Purposive sampling and simple random sampling were used. Purposive sampling is the most successful when data review and analysis are done in conjunction with data collection (Mack, Woodsong, Kathleen, Namey, and Guest, 2005). Accordingly, Aboker preparatory school is selected purposively which is suitable for effective data collection processes because the population it holds come from rural area around Harar and urban area in Harar city. Grade 11 English Language teachers in the targeted School and grade 11 students were targeted group. Out of the total number of 714 students, 40 students were selected randomly for questionnaires in order to avoid biases among students, and 20 students were selected for semi-structured interview through purposive sampling technique to have mixed participants as high, medium and low achievers based on their classroom participation and English mid-exam results.

The Data were collected through selection of a technique that allows for documentation, observation, description and integration. Therefore, in order to collect data from the samples of the targeted school and its population, textbook analysis, classroom observation, questionnaires (open and close ended questions) and semi-structured interview were employed as data gathering instruments. Short notes were taken from the direct interview. The researcher did not administer all instruments and the discussion as well at the same time. Therefore, the nature and procedures of writing activities in the textbook were identified. The researcher briefed about the objective of the study to the participants. Then, classroom observation was conducted to observe the methodology teachers employed and the interaction between teachers and students and students with their colleagues while they perform the writing activities in the target language classroom. Thirdly, participates of the study were selected.. Questionnaires were distributed. Fourth, on the basis of the insight obtained from the major instruments (textbook analysis, classroom observations, and questionnaire) semi-structured interview was conducted for data triangulation. Finally discussion was done. Based on the research findings, conclusions were drawn and recommendations were forwarded.

4. Findings and Discussion

Expect from the context of the gathered and discussed data, there are practical challenges that participants have forwarded as the reasons, why teachers are not teaching writing skills with special reference to task-based activities. As the data shows, the challenges in terms of implementing task-based activities in teaching writing skills are inadequate trainings, time constraints, students' background, low level of language proficiency, and lack of teaching materials. The absence of adequate pre-service training has highly affected language teaching strategies through TBA. "Training can help teachers to improve a number of aspects in their teaching, and training can change teachers" (UNICEF, 2000). The findings of this study showed that the participants seem not to have adequate trainings about the TBA. As a result, it is difficult for the proper implementation of task-based activities in teaching writing skills.

As it is known that, the time allotted for one period is 42 minutes in Ethiopian school context. As a result, teachers were forced to use the traditional teaching methods to finish the textbook

within the allocated time. However, in task-based teaching environment where pair and group work were used, students can develop cooperative and independent learning (Nunan, 1989). From the above reflection, one can suggest that there is an inconsistency between the writing activities provided in the new textbook and the allotted time for one period. On the basis of the above expression one can conclude that, time constraint are considered as a major challenge for the proper implementation of task-based activities in teaching writing skills.

Participants have raised students' low level of language proficiency, lack of confidence, and low level of motivation in their written reflection and interviews related to students' background as a challenge in implementing TBA in teaching writing skills. This might also have a negative impact on the teaching learning process of writing. As the result revealed that 75% of the students are not confident enough to write and show their ideas to the teacher as well as their peers. Thus, the teacher was seen using teacher-centered approach in which students were not actively participating in the class and show confidence to perform the textbook writing activities based on the instruction provided in it. Furthermore, the teacher did not provide opportunities for students to practice the textbook writing activities. Thus, students were not sharing their ideas and did not compare their writing performance with their peers. Finding reveals that the background knowledge they hold about learning writing skills has affected the students' motivation in the classroom. The reason might be the students' background. Since, the students come from the rural area surrounding Harar city they have low level of motivation to write using the target language. So, low level of motivation is one of the difficulties that hinder the implementation of TBA in writing sessions. On the basis of this, the research findings most of the teachers rarely used motivational input in a writing class and they still have inadequate skills on how to apply active learning environment with large class size. For this matter Inadequate training, time constraints, students' background, large class size and lack of teaching materials were forwarded as major challenges for the proper implementation of TBA in English language teaching classroom specifically in teaching writing skills.

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