

Investigating the Effects of Problem Solving Task towards Teaching English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract: *This paper discusses a learning medium, especially for English language teaching to EFL students through problem solving tasks. By using these methods, they can be one of the exciting activities for bringing students interested in learning English with confident. The essence of problem solving in education is first of all acquisition of methods of gaining new knowledge independently, based on application of existing knowledge and skills. Thus, it is quite logical that this approach is particularly productive in teaching foreign languages to future teachers of any subjects. They are also for the students are expected to be able to improve English language skills, motivation and self-confident, and adoring the English language in school and outside of school. The study examines problem solving task; then it recommends the processes of applying problem solving tasks toward teaching a foreign language. The discussion ends with a conclusion in which the benefits of using problem solving are mentioned.*

Keywords: *task, problem solving, communicative approach*

1. Introduction

important for teachers is to know what the most appropriate approach to teaching the language in that particular environment is and what activities are suitable for a given group of learners. In most cases, teachers are worried about how to teach the students to improve their level of proficiency in English language. So, the problem for many teachers is how to develop genuine interest among students to continue to learn and use English once the examination is over. Consequently, they should realize that they need to find creative ways to teach the language and increase the students' motivation to learn the language effectively and to eventually appreciate it. Tasks are one of the most charming and ethnically prosperous resources that the teachers can easily use in verbal communication classrooms. There are many viewpoints about definitions of task. Initially the definitions involved a tax, piece of work, everyday activity, job responsibility, or general activity for learners. In L2 teaching and learning, task is now often viewed as an outcome-oriented instructional segment or as a behavioral framework for research or classroom learning. Nunan (1989:10) states that task is "a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is

principally focused on meaning rather than form". Willis, J. (1996: 53) stresses that task is "a goal-oriented activity in which learners use language to achieve a real outcome". Skehan (1998:95) lists features of "task" as: (1) meaning is primary; (2) there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities; (3) task completion has some priority; (4) the assessment of tasks is in terms of outcome. Ellis (2003) gives the meaning of task as a "work plan" that requires learners' cognitive processes via the inclusion of Skehan's four criteria. Despite being various by nature, these definitions of task have some common points. A classroom task is an activity having a particular goal and it contains communicative language use in the process. Because task has a certain relationship with the extra linguistic world, it goes beyond the common classroom exercise. The type of discourse emerging from task is aimed to be similar to the one that emerges naturally in the real world (Ellis, 2003). Tasks propose a change from habitual classroom actions. They are valuable resources to expand students' abilities in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. They can also be exercises to teach a variety of language matters such as sentence patterns, vocabulary, pronunciation, rhythm, adjectives, and adverbs. Learning English in the course of tasks also affords a non-threatening ambiance for students, who usually are tense when speaking English in an official classroom location. Tasks also give new insights into the objective traditions. They are the means in the course of which educational topics are presented successfully. While they supply genuine texts, they are inspiring.

1.2 Teacher Roles and Characteristics

Teachers can take many different roles in regard to L2 tasks (Honeyfield, 1993; Nunan, 1989; Oxford, 1990; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992; Willis, 1996). Richards and Rodgers (2001) and Scarcella and Oxford (1992) mentioned the following task roles for teachers: selector/sequencer of tasks, preparer of learners for task, pre-task consciousness raiser about form, guide, nurturer, strategy-instructor, and provider of assistance. Cultural and linguistic backgrounds and teaching styles influence the roles teachers feel comfortable taking (Oxford, Massey, & Anand, 2003; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). The amount and kind of help provided by the teacher was singled out as a task-related teacher factor by Honeyfield (1993) and Scarcella and Oxford (1992).

1.3 Learner Roles and Characteristics

Richards and Rodgers (2001) and Scarcella and Oxford (1992) identified possible task roles for learners, such as group participant, monitor, risk-taker/innovator, strategy-user, goal-setter, self-evaluator, and more. Others (Honeyfield, 1993; Nunan, 1989; Oxford, 1990) have also discussed learners' task roles. A particularly important learner role in a task situation is that of task-analyzer. The learner must analyze task requirements and find suitable strategies to match them.

The learner can take control of the task-that is, be responsible for his or her performance on the task-by considering the task requirements and employing learning strategies to accomplish the

task more efficiently and more effectively (Cohen 1998). On the part of the learner, this involves a serious commitment, motivation, confidence, clarity of purpose, and willingness to take risks (Dörnyei 2001; Dörnyei & Schmidt, 2001), but these may be dampened by language anxiety (Arnold, 1998).

2. Problem Solving Activity

According to the definition: “Problem solving is a mental process and is part of the larger problem process that includes problem finding and problem shaping. Considered the most complex of all intellectual functions, problem solving has been defined as higher-order cognitive process that requires the modulation and control of more routine or fundamental skills”.

According to Ormond (2006:1 11) problem solving is using existing knowledge and skills to address an unanswered question or troubling situation, while problem based learning is approach to instruction in which students acquire new knowledge and skills while working on a complex problem similar to those in the outside world (Ormond, 2006:121). Problem solving was introduced to education as early as ancient times. Socrates, in particular, was famous for applying it. Later it was almost totally abandoned and revived only in the 1960s. Recently it has been widely studied and popularized (Martinez, 1998; Botti, J.A. & Myers, R., 1995, Simon, 1980), especially for teaching mathematics and science at school and at university . However, surprisingly for us, problem solving has not been very widely applied towards either teacher training or teaching foreign languages. In fact, many teachers may say that problem-solving in their subject is not possible. But this activity can be successfully used at the English classes. Problem-solving activity, which is task-based and has a purpose beyond the production of correct speech, is one of the most preferable communicative activities. They show not only the competence and knowledge but also the performance of the learner and their communicative skills. Questions which require students to be reasonable and logical and help students to learn language in an interesting way are the types of problem-solving activities. In problem solving activities, the problems may be based on real or imaginary situations, and students are expected to find possible solutions for the problems.

Problem-solving activities can be used at all levels. Regarding student’s knowledge of English, age and their experience, appropriate activities might be successfully applied. It is also important to work out clear and easy directions for these activities. Problem-solving activities have many advantages, which shouldn’t be ignored. While talking about the problem, students use the target language and improve their communicative skills. They learn to interact with others as they discuss solutions and outcomes of the solution. They learn to negotiate when they try to agree on different points of the solution, thus they develop critical thinking skills. It is a learner-centered that helps the students to develop their communicative skills. In a way, students acquire language unconsciously since their whole attention is engaged by the activity. By providing personal,

social, and cross-cultural issues to define, they sometimes simulate real life situations. It is also possible to integrate all skills in such activities. Reading or listening to a situation, a problem, or a question; responding or commenting either through speaking or writing. It is also necessary to keep in mind that as Professor Linda W. Little states: "... such activities provide opportunities to practice thinking clearly while focusing on the form unconsciously". In such activities the teacher should act as a facilitator rather than a teacher. He introduces the problem and guides the process of discussion while the students are involved in the process of learning. He should create friendly and relaxed teaching-learning atmosphere in which students will not be embarrassed. As Stephen Krashen(2003) the Professor of the University of Southern California says: "...it requires meaningful interaction in the target language - natural communication - in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding".

Games and problem-solving activities, which are task-based and have a purpose beyond the production of accurate speech, are the examples of the most preferable communicative activities. Such activities highlight not only the competence but also the performance of the learner. In such activities, the attention is on the discourse context. Both games and problem-solving activities have a purpose. Games are organized according to rules, and they are enjoyable. Most games require choral responses or group works, whereas problem-solving activities (though they are structured) require individual response and creative solutions. Games and problem-solving activities are generally used after the presentation, in the practice part, because such communicative tasks can only be handled after mastering sufficient grammar and lexical points. Through well-planned games, learners can put into practice and internalize vocabulary, grammar, and structures extensively. Play and competition that are provided by games enhance the motivation of the young learners. They also reduce the stress in the classroom. At the same time as playing games, the learners' attention is on the message, not on the language. Problem solving tasks are an influential means of livening up the lessons and scattering tediousness, which frequently results from drills. Such tasks , must be constructed in such a way that they give linguistic practice in imperative constructions. Each task must have an extraordinary aim and the educator must be conscious of what meticulous cleverness is practiced through scrupulous tasks.

In the English language classroom this is more appropriate to create tasks because the explanations are given in another language that requires even more effort by the students to comprehend than their own mother language. The teacher must be creative and flexible. Depending on the nature of the class and the students' levels, the dynamics of the class must be appropriate. Some students at the advanced level, a little above what they already know have been observed. They are energetic. But sometimes when they don't understand, teachers have to change mechanism and think of another way as not to lose the energy of the class. Some students who are not energetic at all have also been observed. The lessons must be simple, and interesting, with a lot of changes from a writing exercise, to a speaking session, then to a

listening practice, again back to writing, and so on, all in the same class. If the students' span of attention and levels are lower, they usually don't like to take in something a bit challenging. But students who enjoy challenging materials will try harder to understand some things on their own. Rightly instructed students when they face with something they do not understand, will say, «I think I know what the teacher means, I'll give it a try», instead of «I didn't understand, I can't possibly start this on my own.»

Another important aspect of improving the intrinsic motivation of students is to be a caring teacher. Although guidelines and rules must be set and understood by the students, and if they cross the guidelines a punishment will follow, the teacher must be caring approachable, and understanding.

Teachers must be kind and helpful to the students, and be patient when they don't understand. There are some teachers, who conduct their classes very strictly, almost as a sort of dictator in class. The teacher gets upset when it appears that the students don't understand what is taught in the class. A caring teacher tries to develop a relationship with the students. If the teacher sees potential in all students, and communicates this well to the students, they will in return build a desire to learn and participate. When the students realize that teacher is not going to get angry, s/he is being nice and understanding, and the reason they are trying so hard is because it is important to them that their students learn and do well. A teacher's positive energy could lead to the students becoming more motivated. If the students see that the teacher is happy to be in the classroom and excited to teach them, then the students can learn by example. A smile is contagious. Positive attitude is a must for successful learning atmosphere. To promote self-confidence, it helps if the teacher is self-confident. Positive approval and appreciation of student efforts is very effective, even if the student is wrong. Let the student know that the teacher is glad, they tried and being wrong or making mistakes is not such a big problem, and the students won't be so reluctant the next time when they are called on to participate. Positive energy affirmation and a belief in the student's ability develop a comfortable atmosphere for the students in the classroom.

3. How should problem-solving activity applied in an English class?

Before choosing the problem we should thoroughly study it as there are problems with different levels of difficulty and require different skills and knowledge. That is why the choice of the problem which you want to solve in class is closely connected with the level of your students' knowledge. We can divide the process of problem-solving into several stages :The first stage of introducing the problem could be warm-up activity where the teacher can ask students to answer some questions related to the problem and thus giving a chance to predict what the problem might be and motivate the students. It can be a picture shown on the active-board, or a video. The teacher may ask low level students to describe the picture, when high level students may pay

more attention to the situation, shown in the picture. The questions will help students to review some grammar, which can be used in the process of discussion.

The second stage is reading of the story or watching video. Find out what words are unfamiliar for the students and write down them on the blackboard. Be sure that the students understand the situation.

The third stage is comprehension check. Comprehension check can be done in different ways, for example as listening or reading exercises. At first the teacher can ask “yes” or “no” questions then go to special questions and then offers the students to ask their own questions. Or the teacher may offer different statements, which can be right and wrong and ask students to say whether they are correct or not and correct the wrong ones. The next stage is discussion. Here the students are encouraged to talk about the issues presented in the reading and also their personal experience. The questions may require students to make suppositions and use their judgment. There are no correct answers.

Now the students are ready to identify the problems and to find the solutions and talk about the consequences. The problems can be written on the blackboard. The teacher may begin the discussion by asking the questions: “What’s the problem?”, then “What can be done?” and at last “What is the solution of the problem?” Encourage the students to present their ideas and it is important here not to make emphasis on their grammar mistakes. Don’t correct their mistakes; try to help them with the questions which can give them a hint if they are in a difficulty what to say next. When the solutions are ready the teacher should write them on the blackboard and ask students about the possible consequences. Encourage them to use their imagination and critical thinking to come up with the possible consequences. In order to choose the best solution the teacher may divide students into several groups of three or four people and ask them to discuss the possible consequences of their decision. In this activity the teacher gives the chance to shy students who can’t speak in public, express his opinion. It is possible for students to come up with new solutions if they consider them to be more successful. In each group there should be a moderator, who facilitates the discussion and is responsible for the group’s decision. On this stage the teacher shouldn’t interrupt students to correct their mistakes, but he should write them down in order to discuss them the next day. When the groups are ready to come up with their solution, ask the leader of the group to sound it and explain why it was chosen. Ask the students from other groups if they agree with it or not. Encourage the students to take active part in this discussion as it develops their ability to persist in opinion, giving his reasons in the target language. The last stages of this activity is the discussion of mistakes made in the process of problem solving, but do it after careful consideration in order not to hurt students and encourage them to take an active part in the next problem solving activity.

Thus, problem solving activities provide favorable usages for extended communicative practice. They are motivating and create a meaningful context for language usage. The application of such activities increases cooperation and competition in the classroom and stimulates students' interest to the learning process.

Conclusion

Problem solving task improves students' communicative skills. They learn to interact with others as they discuss solutions and outcomes of the solution. They learn to negotiate when they try to agree on different points of the solution, thus they develop critical thinking skills. It is a learner-centered activity where the students communicate with each other while studying the problem and looking for possible solutions for possible future actions. The teacher can only observe and sometimes coordinate the process, helping the students to develop their communicative skills. It is an intellectually demanding approach for both teachers and learners, too. But this approach is indispensable if we want our learners not only to have essential knowledge, which today very quickly becomes outdated, but also to have the skills to acquire knowledge incessantly. This idea of various authors (Barrows, 1980, Botti & Myers, 1995, etc.) was supported by our research as well. We hope that our recommendations will to some extent help foreign language teachers to apply this approach and become as enthusiastic about it as we are.

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