Applying Task-based Language Learning Method for Teaching Vocabulary

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Abstract: The study analyzes a 40 minutes long micro teaching in English as foreign language focused on vocabulary related to cooking, which was delivered applying Task-based Language Learning method. The method views a task as a basic unit of language teaching and emphasizes the significance of real-life communication, thus enhancing communicative language competence. The aim of the study is to show how the task-based method works in practice, making the learners not only memorize new terms, but also use them in communicative situations. The secondary research method involves analyzing the theoretical material, while the primary research method is the case study, employing such data collection tools as classroom observation and questionnaires. The results show that teaching vocabulary applying Task-based Language Learning method is effective, as by the end of the class the learners memorized the provided terms, and were able to use them. Moreover, their reading and writing skills developed as well. It is concluded that the right choice of a theme and activities in Task-based Language Learning makes the learning process more fascinating and more connected to 'real-life'. Therefore, it can be effectively applied when teaching ESP.

Key words: Task-based Language Learning method, task, vocabulary, communicative competence, higher education.

Introduction

The importance of developing communicative language competence cannot be underestimated. Thus, being derived from the communicative language teaching approach, Task-based Language Learning method (TBLL) focuses on the concept of communicative task, simultaneously enhancing the learner's vocabulary and grammar skills. To distinguish the notion of the 'task' from 'exercise', one should turn to R. Ellis, who argues that a number of scholars have agreed that a task is an activity, where the meaning is primary, in other words, 'an activity that calls for primarily meaning-focus language use. In contrast, 'exercises' are activities that call for primarily form-focused language use' (Ellis, 2003, 3). In TBLL, the task includes three basic components, such as pre-task, task-cycle, and post-task. Following theoretical description of the method, the aim of the pre-task phase is to think of the vocabulary associated with the topic; the task-cycle involves the students' group discussions of the task and presenting the report – accordingly, real-life communication is practiced; the post-task includes working with authentic material, focusing on the vocabulary, linguistic patterns, etc. (Richards and Rodgers, 2001, 238-239). It is obvious that TBLL is directly linked to the developing of communicative language competence; moreover, it has a clear and logical structure, which can be easily applied in language teaching class. Therefore, the importance and necessity of researching the method and providing the information to the tutors is evident.

From the historical perspective, TBLL is a relatively new method. Although some elements of the method were used starting from 1950s, no research on it was carried out until mid 1980s (Richards, Rodgers, 2001, 223-226). However, later some research works on TBLL were performed, and the results showed that it is a powerful tool for foreign language acquisition. The results are described as follows: 'engaging learners in task work provides a better context for the activation of learning processes rather than form-focused activities, and hence ultimately provides better opportunities for language learning to take place' (Richards, Rodgers, 2001, 223). The importance of Task-based Language Learning for learners' communication skill progress is stressed, as the tasks reflect the way learners use the target language for 'message conveyance' (Ellis, 2003, 3). Despite the positive results, some other researchers have reported the challenges of the method. It is stated by F. Hatip that 'there is naturally more concern for use of lexis and lexical chunks than for grammar and grammatical accuracy'; some learners use mother tongue in discussions or are likely to communicate by means of gestures, miming and odd words; learners risk to achieve fluency but to forget about accuracy; it is

difficult to evaluate performance. Task-based Language Learning requires the change of a traditional teacher's role of a 'presenter' of new material; he/she does not do much during the task phase. The teacher is rather an observer and becomes a language informant only during the 'language focus' stage (Hatip, 2005). To summarize the previous research results, it can be stated that the opinions about TBLL are controversial; this fact aroused the author's interest in the topic.

The empirical part of the present research involved analyzing a 40 minutes long micro-teaching, delivered using TBLL. The aim of the class was to teach the vocabulary linked with the theme "cooking", as well as to improve the students' reading and writing skills. The micro-teaching involved all three components of TBLL. The objective was to observe the use of TBLL for enhancing the students' vocabulary, evaluating advantages and disadvantages of the method both from the teacher's and the students' points of view. The research population included a group of six upper-intermediate adult non-native learners. The method applied was the case study, with such data collection tools as classroom observation and evaluation questionnaire.

Having described the importance and background of the method, as well as having provided the general information on the current study, the author of the paper continues with discussing the methodology, results and conclusion of the research in a more detailed way.

Methodology

The present part of the paper contains more specified information on the research method and data collection tools, as well as describes the stages of the study. Due to the small number of participants and a short time period available, the selected research method was the case study. 'Case study method enables a researcher to closely examine the data within a specific context. In most cases, a case study method selects a small geographical area or a very limited number of individuals as the subjects of study' (Tellis, 1997); moreover, 'case studies can establish cause and effect ("how" and "why")' (Cohen, Manion, 2013, 289). The data collection tools were administration of questionnaires and observation. The observation was performed by the researcher herself, thus, the role of the teacher was 'participant-observer'. The questionnaires were administered among the students after the class and contained 3 close-ended questions on the evaluation of the class, namely, its organization, attractiveness and usefulness of the tasks, the learners' progress. There was one more open-ended question, requiring the learners to write their comments on what the particularly enjoyed during the TBLL class and what might be improved. Speaking about research population, there were 6 participants, females, upper-intermediate. The topic "Cooking" was selected because of personal interest of the learners in the field; however, it should be added that none of the learners had any experience with English cooking-linked vocabulary.

Next, the stages of the micro teaching were presented. Following the traditional framework of TBLL, it included three parts: pre-task, task-phase and post-task.

The first stage of the lesson consisted of pre-task activities. This phase was divided into two parts. During the first one, the learners brainstormed the topic and answered the teacher's questions linked to the theme. Some replies that were considered to be useful for the task phase were put down on the blackboard by the teacher. The second one was a matching task, in course of which the learners had to link the definition to the term linked with cooking. Some terms were new for the learners; however, the teacher had included them as she had considered them to be necessary for the following stage of the lesson.

The second part of the lesson was the ask phase. The teacher divided learners into several groups, and each group had to perform a task – to create their own recipe of pizza. First of all, the learners brainstormed and discussed their ideas. Secondly, they had to write a small report on their recipe. The last stage was an oral report, when one spokesperson from the group had to introduce their recipe (students were given some time to choose a spokesperson and to prepare oral report); after each recipe other learners were encouraged to express their suggestions, opinions, remarks, etc. While the learners were performing the task, the teacher was monitoring and helping them. Dictionaries were available as well. After all reports had been discussed, the teacher provided the learners with an authentic text containing a homemade pizza recipe. The learners were asked to read it, to examine the difference

between the text and their own recipes (vocabulary, grammar constructions, style, etc.), and to highlight vocabulary that was considered to be useful for cooking

The final part was a post-task phase. The teacher decided not to use a lot of exercises, as it is traditionally suggested in Task-based Language Learning, due to time restrictions. On the contrary, the learners discussed what they had done, their success and expressed their opinions about the activity. However, still, one small exercise was included. It concentrated on activity verbs linked with cooking. The learners had to associate the verbs with corresponding nouns.

Results and Discussions

Having discussed the organization of the class, next, the results obtained via data collection tools are provided. First, the results of the observation are described, and then the figures showing the data received via questionnaire are presented.

To comment on the lesson, the teacher believes that the learners enjoyed it. The group consisted of adults of upper-intermediate level, so the difficulty level was acceptable; however, the learners admitted that some words in the matching task and the recipe were not familiar. However, later, during the task-phase, while discussing their ideas, writing them down (bullet points) and getting ready for the presentation, the students actively used the newly-acquired vocabulary. Therefore, it can be concluded that their communicative competence developed through real-life communication, and the vocabulary was enriched. The students engaged in communication and discussion. The learners also admitted that the exercise in the pre-task phase was useful, as it included vocabulary that was necessary for the performance of the task.

There were several challenges during the lesson. First of all, the teacher noticed that when the learners heard the task, they felt frustrated, because they were not exactly sure about the procedure of making pizza. However, they overcame the 'fear' quite fast and succeeded. Nevertheless, the teacher had an idea that if there were some male-learners in the group (the target group consisted only of female-learners), it would be better to change the theme to a more neutral one. Another challenge was that the learners found it difficult to present a report orally, as they had submitted the written report before the oral presentation, so they forgot some elements of the sequence of activities. The teacher suggests that the learners should be given more time to prepare their oral report. Some students also had slight problems with activity verbs; however, these were solved with the help of the teacher and other learners.

To summarize the observation results, it is possible to state that, despite being challenging for the learners, TBLL is a good tool for enhancing the learners' vocabulary. If one looks back at the aim of the study, one of its points is to evaluate advantages and disadvantages of TBLL from the teacher's point of view. Following the above-mention description, it is possible to sum up pluses and minuses in the Table 1.

Table 1

TBLL advantages and disadvantages as considered by teacher

Number	Advantages	Disadvantages
1.	Using new words – vocabulary enhancing	**Non-linguistic contextual difficulties**
2.	Team work skills development	**Initial frustration**
3.	Acquiring a relatively large amount of vocabulary during one class	**Problems with remembering information**
4.	Development of the communicative competence	**Time restrictions**

Next, the results of the questionnaire for the students are provided and analyzed. As it was mentioned before, the questionnaire contained 3 close-ended and one open-ended question. All close-ended questions followed the same organizational pattern, in which the students had to evaluate their

progress, etc. via choosing points from 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest. In the open-ended question, the learners were asked to provide their positive comments ('What was particularly interesting and useful for you during the class?') as well their opinions on what might be improved ('What do you think should be changed and how?').

Figures 1, 2 and 3 show both the results obtained from the students and the exact questions that were asked, which are provided as the titles.
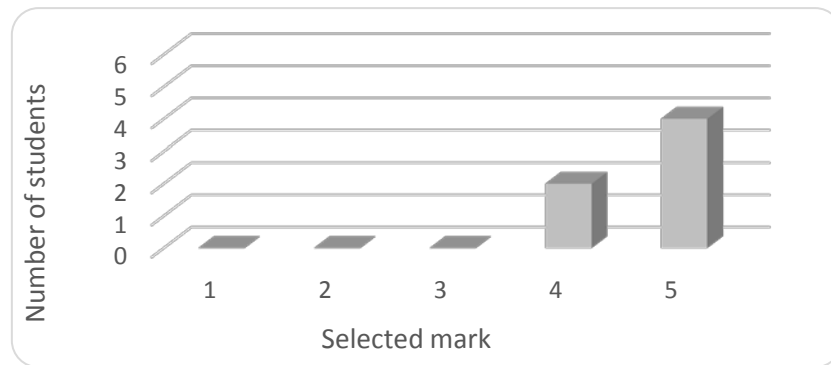

Figure 1. Respondents answer to the question:
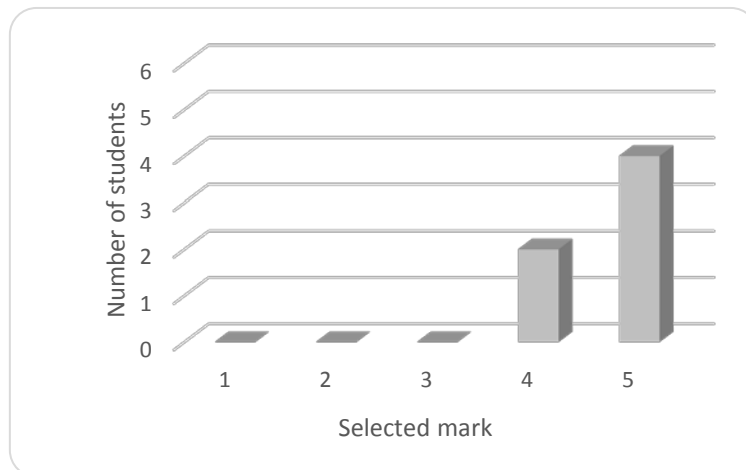"Did you find interesting and useful the organization of the class (3 stages)?"

Figure 2. Respondents answer to the question: "Did you find the provided
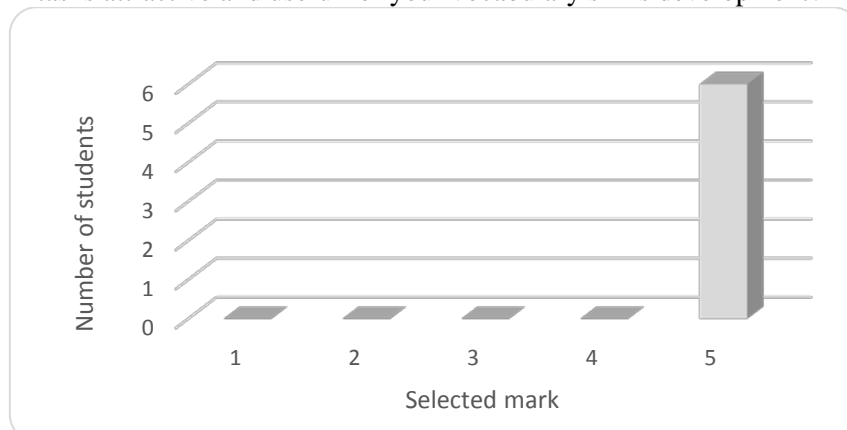tasks attractive and useful for your vocabulary skills development?"

Figure 3. Respondents answer to the question: Do you consider that you
vocabulary skills progressed after the class?

It can be concluded that the method was highly evaluated by the students. Possibly, the organization of the class, which is different from the traditional one, as well as the exact choice of the tasks made some students feel slightly frustrated (which also was noticed by the teacher in her observation).

Nevertheless, all 6 students considered that their vocabulary skills improved during the class, which also corresponds to the opinion of the teacher.

The results obtained in the last open-ended question were particularly interesting for the current study, as they focused exactly on the advantages and disadvantages of TBLL from the students' viewpoint. The opinions of the students

Table 2

TBLL advantages and disadvantages as considered by students

Student	Advantages	Disadvantages
Student 1	Good for remembering and using new words in speaking and writing	**Difficult to get used to a different organisation of the class**
Student 2	Improves vocabulary a lot, interesting style	**Short time**
Student 3	Using vocabulary in speaking and writing, particularly enjoyed group discussions	**Some tasks were difficult, e.g. to invent a pizza recipe (due to non-linguistic problems)**
Student 4	Interesting and unusual tasks, easy to remember vocabulary, performing many activities (reading, writing, discussing)	**No disadvantages**
Student 5	Intensive vocabulary improvement, communication skills development	**Short time, too big number of new words**
Student 6	Interesting and productive organization of the class for learning new words and communicating	**No disadvantages**

It is possible to conclude that generally the class delivered using TBLL was accepted by the students. The disadvantaged listed in the table are minor, and some of them, i.e. the time limit, are characteristic features of the organization of the particular class, not of the method as such, and thus can be easily eliminated in the future. Moreover, 2 students out of 6 did not mention any disadvantages at all. However, all students stated that their vocabulary skills have improved, and 5 out of 6 students noted the development of communication skills. It can be also added that the opinions of the students about advantages and disadvantages of the class mostly corresponded to the results of the teacher's observation, provided in the Table 1.

Having discussed the results obtained via data collection tools, one can turn to drawing the final conclusions.

Conclusions

On the basis of the data collected, the following conclusions are made:
- TBLL is a useful tool for improving vocabulary skills of the students. Due to a variety of different types of tasks (speaking, writing, non-productive vocabulary tasks), working with new vocabulary becomes unavoidable and constant, thus improving and facilitating the learners' abilities to remember new words.
- TBLL develops the learners' communicative competence, both in speaking and writing. Also, it provides a possibility to communicate in real-life situations, i.e. discussing the report and presenting it, which provides learners with the skills, necessary also outside language class.
- The disadvantages of TBLL noticed during the current case study are minor and mostly refer not to the method as such, but to the organization of the class. It can be concluded that the method should be used more widely, thus the learners and the teacher will avoid frustration and difficulties when encountering with it. Moreover, all mentioned minuses can be easily avoided and corrected.

Finally, speaking about the possible further investigation, in would be interesting to test the method in the group of intermediate and pre-intermediate learners – possibly, it would reveal some problems or changes that have to be made. Otherwise, the author of the paper believes that TBLL can be successfully applied when teaching both general and ESP vocabulary in different fields, making the learning process active, facilitating and exciting for the students.

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