

Grammatical Skills Development of Bangladeshi Students through Task-Based Language Teaching

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***Abstract:** The research aims at exploring whether the implementation of Task-Based Language Teaching can improve students' grammatical skills and will furthermore investigate its feasibility as a teaching approach. A first year class of English Department at Bangladesh Army University of Science and Technology (BAUST) was used and an action research was carried out. Hence, the study targets to use Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in the communicative grammar learning environment using various meaningful reading tasks. The research problem in this research is the poor scores of students' grammatical mastery observed in the pre-test. The research paper is based on the use of simple present tense. The focus of this study is the use of TBLT which is believed to guide students to experience communicative grammar learning with various meaningful and pragmatic tasks in the grammar class. The research findings revealed improvement of grammar skill for the students that have at least an initial level of grammatical competence, but no difference was detected for the students of no grammar competence, indicating the need for further investigation. Therefore, this research expects to improve not only students' grammatical mastery but also the need for better classroom condition and overall skill development.*

***Keywords:** TBLT, grammar, meaningful, improvement, classroom*

Introduction

To reveal the fact whether TBLT can be helpful for the improvement of students' grammatical mastery or not, some steps were followed in this regard. Firstly, the researcher examined the students, taking a test to determine their grammatical mastery using TBLT, and maintaining an observation dairy to get detailed data about the students' progress in learning grammar. It is more important to make the learning process interesting and engaging by encouraging, supporting,

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helping and also providing them with various interactive and communicate tasks.

Grammar has been defined in many different ways. Some experts argue that grammar covers the study of syntax and morphology, and others argue that it only refers to syntax. According to Galaso (2002, 3) and Radford (2009, 1), grammar is divided into two inter-related studies consisting of morphology and syntax. Morphology is the study of how words are formed with smaller units. On the other hand, syntax is the study of how words are placed in a phrase, a clause or a sentence.

According to Ur (2009, 87), grammar is a set of rules that define how words (or parts of words) are combined or changed to form acceptable units of meaning within a language. She also adds that grammar does not only affect how units of language are combined in order to 'look right'; it also affects their meaning. Moreover, Brinton and Brinton (2010, 7) add that grammar covers the rules or principles by which a language works, that is, its system or structure.

As per the definitions given, it can be said that grammar is the set of principles to combine words which can make meaningful transfer of messages through language.

In this paper, the researcher is going to discuss the use of the simple present tense. The reason of choosing this tense is it is most widely used both for oral and written communication. In addition, the pre-test result shows that students still commit many errors in using this tense.

It is known that learning and using English grammar is very important because it affects the meaning of a message /information we want to convey and communicate. Different studies admit that good grammatical mastery is important. Ur (2006, 4) states that "There is no doubt that a knowledge-implicit or explicit-of grammatical rules is essential for the mastery of a language: you cannot use words unless you know how they should be put together". Further, Widodo (2006, 122) opines that the task of grammar is to furnish the language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Learning and using grammar affect the meaning of a sentence or utterance. In listening, grammar is an important key to grasp the delivery of the speaker. In speaking, grammar plays a very crucial part in producing communicable utterance. In reading, grammar helps reader to comprehend the inner link in a sentence/paragraph/passage. In case of writing, grammar enables the writer to put ideas in such a structured way that they can successfully deliver the message/ information.

Students find learning grammar one of the major difficulties. Many learners have difficulty in internalizing grammar rules, although these are taught intensively. Al-Mechlafi (2011, 72) also found that what most teachers face is that learners often find it difficult to make flexible use of the rules of grammar taught in the classroom. The students may learn the rules perfectly, but are incapable of applying them in different practical situations. Hence, this study concentrates on the students' difficulty in learning and applying grammar in the use of correct rules.

The term 'task', which is one of the key concepts in task-based learning and teaching, is defined in different ways in the literature and instructional tasks are used for different purposes. In everyday use, tasks are seen as the commonplace goal-directed activities of everyday life such as cooking dinner, writing a letter, building a model (Ellis, 2003).

In second language education, a task is defined as an activity that focuses on meaning which the learners undertake using the target language in order to reach a specific goal at the end of the task (Bygate, Skehan & Swain, 2001).

Through tasks, students are provided with a 'purpose' to use the target language (Lee, 2000, p. 30). In this purposeful learning process, learners are not instructed to use only certain language forms. Moreover, they are encouraged to build and use the target language on their own to accomplish the given task. The teacher observes and supports as a facilitator.

Hence, tasks as organized sets of activities can play essential roles in grammatical mastery development.

Literature Review

Grammar has gained a lot of attention from English Language Teaching experts in the history of learning and teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). Grammar instruction is critical in every course, according to experts. Despite the importance of grammar in the language learning process, learners have found grammar to be the most difficult aspect to grasp (Sawir, 2005). As a result, it has become one of the most common issues encountered by EFL students. According to Shatz and Wilkinson (2010), second-language (L2) learners are normally unable to articulate their high-order thinking because they cannot generate complex sentences.

In his review of TBLT, Ellis (2009) suggests several strategies that teachers may use in the post-task phase to focus on form. These are: review of learner errors, consciousness-raising tasks, production practice activities, and noticing activities.

To go into more detail as to what Ellis (2009) has proposed as adequate ways to focus on form during the post-task phase, he notes that reviewing learners' errors requires the teacher to note down some of the noticeable errors that students make during the main-task phase. Then, in the post-task phase, the teacher draws their students' attention to these errors and asks them to provide corrected forms, keeping this as a student-centered activity. During this process, the teacher can provide brief explanations that highlight the correct use of the erroneous forms. The second suggestion, using consciousness-raising tasks, encourages learners to notice particular features of the language, to draw conclusions from what they notice, and to organize their view of language. Consciousness-raising tasks make the students explicitly focus on the erroneous TL form, use their intellectual effort to understand the linguistic feature, and develop their own personal rules to describe the patterns of a given language form. When used as a follow-up task, students might be presented with a common error that they make during their task performance and asked to pinpoint it and correct it by developing a rule to describe the feature.

The third option suggested by Ellis, to add production practice activities, involves incorporating traditional activities such as substitution drills,

sentence transformations, split sentences, picture dictations, gapped sentences, dialogues, and matching sentences to pictures. The aim of these activities is to provide plenty of opportunities for students to practice the problematic grammatical form until it becomes more familiar. These activities may aid learners to automatize structures that they have started to use on their own but have not yet gained full control.

Menicoll and Lee (2011, p. 127) assert that “consciousness-raising is one available method which allows students to collaboratively improve their grammatical knowledge through discussion, thereby keeping the classroom communicative and maximizing student talk time”. Students’ grammar knowledge gets higher while they are busy with their tasks. Teachers do not interfere in students’ interaction because in consciousness-raising tasks students are expected to acquire grammatical rules on their own. It is possible for teachers to fix teaching grammar into students’ communication. Learners find the chance to practice forms and to communicate at the same.

Rashtchi and Keyvanfar (2007, pp. 173- 174) underline that a grammatical task is different from an exercise in that learners are free to say anything that comes to their mind regarding the situation; it is a task in that learners’ attention is primarily to the meaning they want to convey to their partner and is focused in that for the best performance they have to use the suitable grammatical form. Learners try not only to convey meaning but also to use definite grammatical items to complete the task.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is a development of CLT where tasks or activities are viewed as central to meaningful language learning (Nunan, 2004). TBLT and learning activities naturally engage learners as problem solvers who have to fulfill a target real world task as per the instructional objectives or learning outcomes such as booking a room in a hotel for a friend (Prabhu, 1987. In Richards and Rodgers, 2001). The primary goal of TBLT is to prepare learners with language that suits their contextual need and familiarity (Ellis, 2003).

Demirel and Amer (2017) opine that Task-based instruction is given by the teacher to students which is in favor of learner involvement. This task is shared by both the students and the teacher. The teacher encourages students

by asking them some questions. They attend the courses actively. Students complete the given task which provides a peer-learning. The teacher teaches students how to implement a task by working in groups in the class.

A task is “an activity which requires learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allows teachers to control and regulate that process” (Prabhu, 1987, p. 17. In Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

In addition, learners are also positioned as the monitors of their own learning by attending to the grammatical forms that are focused in the tasks and as risk-takers who have to attempt the target language by devising language innovation such as paraphrasing, restating, using paralinguistic signals and so forth due to their lack of control or knowledge of the L2 (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Many L2 researchers have recommended TBLT as a suitable and practical instructional approach for second and foreign language learning because it promotes real-life communication and learning is meaning centered (e.g., Basturkmen, 2006; Shehadeh, 2005; Van Lier, 2004).

Rahimpour (2008) finds that TBLT will lead to greater fluency and complexity but does not lead to greater accuracy since it focuses on the meaning rather than form. The study also finds that the approach attributes lesser cognitive load to learners. Therefore, it concludes that this approach facilitates better learning and promotes learners’ performance in oral skill. More L2 researchers have argued that the focus on task may disadvantage learners in developing linguistic competence which they need as academic preparation (e.g., Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Widdowson, 2003) because the focus of TBLT is primarily on the fluency of communication flow and task completion rather than on language accuracy.

Nunan (2006) sets out some basic principles of task-based language teaching in the Asian context. He defines a task as a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language. The learners’ attention is focused on improving their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. The task should also have a

sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, a middle and an end.

Methodology

Action research is one of the ways for encouraging and improving students' learning process and for helping teachers' professional development. Hence, it is expected that students' grammatical difficulties can be overcome by the learning process in a new atmosphere with more communicative grammatical activities and tasks.

The research was conducted from November 2021 to February 2022 with the first-year students of the Department of English at BAUST. The procedures included identifying problems and planning, implementing acting, observing and finding results. Pre-test and post-test scripts of the students were analyzed for Qualitative data through the descriptive method.

The average score of pre-test is 65 and post-test is 71. The students' enthusiasm and confidence level increases during this study period.

There were 25 students including 18 female and 07 male students. They were between 18-20 years old. This course consisted of three grammar classes in a week which were conducted in the first semester. The researcher conducted the class based on the problems identified in the pre-test. This course required the students to learn English tense aiming to encourage them to be aware of the use of correct and communicative English.

Hence, the objectives of the course were:

- to identify the tense in sentences and understand the basic patterns of it
- to write English sentences using tense with the correct patterns and meaningful expressions
- to use the tense in correct forms for making a successful communication.

Objectives

The reasons which triggered the researcher to carry on this study were mainly

two. Firstly, the pre-test result showed that many students of this class had a low mastery of grammar. Their ability to comprehend English grammar also varied from the highest to the lowest level. Their comprehension needed improvement to move towards their core literature courses. Few students were found inactive among them. Their motivation to join the class and learn grammar was still low.

Secondly, the teaching-learning process was also observed as teacher-centered or teacher/student-centered in the mentioned class. Hence, the researcher chose this small group as focused one to create valuable contribution to improve their grammatical mastery. The grammatical knowledge could support the language skills they need to learn and the researcher as the teacher wanted to improve the teaching skill.

From the discussion, it was assumed that a task is a number of meaningful activities which engage learners in particular forms to comprehend, manipulate, produce or interact in the target language resulting in an outcome that can be assessed through this study.

Findings and discussion

25 EFL students and a teacher researcher participated in the study. The findings of the study show that implementing the TBL approach creates a scope of various meaningful activities for the students in EFL classes. In addition, it enhances their learning as TBL tasks keep students involved resulting significant improvements regarding language performance. The participants suggested that they did not like teacher-directed lessons where they could not find enough opportunities to express themselves in the target language.

Situation Prior to the Research

It was found that the first-year students had some difficulties in using tenses in grammar class, such as, in using correct auxiliaries, regular and irregular verbs, making sentences with correct forms, meaning, and use. The pre-test result of 25 students showed the average score 65. There were only 09 students or 36% who got score above the criterion of success. It means that 16

or 64% students got score under the criteria. The result showed that many students made mistakes in making verbal and nominal sentences; in using auxiliaries or judging the verb form in accordance with the tense, in making meaningful sentence based on the tense used, and in using the appropriate form in accordance with the time (e.g. do/does/did).

Another problem also occurred in grammar class. It was found among the students, the teacher, and also the learning process. The students were not found active in the learning process; they often relied on their friends who were more capable for completing task, they did not pay attention or listen to the teacher's explanation to the point. They sometimes felt nervous to join the grammar class. The teacher's focus was on the smarter students in the classroom who dominate the learning process. Both the students and the teacher were more interested in individual tasks than in cooperative tasks. The low scoring students tended to be quiet during the learning process.

Some other factors were also causing difficulties; e.g. the students themselves, the classroom condition, and the researcher as the grammar teacher. The students had lack of knowledge about tenses. They also had low motivation to learn grammar. The researcher as the teacher, tended to encourage the students to produce grammatically correct sentences, which caused the students feeling nervous. The learning process was also more teacher-centered. The researcher as teacher dominated the learning process.

Considering these problems, the researcher used task-based language teaching to improve the students' grammatical mastery especially in tenses. Task-based activities provide the scope of many meaningful activities that can build the learners' awareness of the language they are learning.

The Implementation of the Research

This implementation of the task was conducted in four steps: planning, implementation of the action, observing and reflecting. The result of post-test from each step was also discussed.

Planning the Action

The researcher took some necessary preparations before executing the action: lesson plans, instruments, observation sheet, and students' worksheet with the material for grammar class. The teaching learning process consisted of the activities in pre task, during the task and language focus activities in those four months. The researcher also provided instruments to measure the students' comprehension of the tense.

The researcher wanted to gather further information and improvement about the grammar teaching learning process using task. Hence, the researcher prepared an observation sheet which was filled at the end of every week.

Implementation of the Action

The process of teaching grammar using task was implemented in the grammar class of English Department at Bangladesh Army University of Science and Technology in the classes from November 2021 to February 2022.

The researcher greeted them and they replied variously at the very beginning. The researcher then asked about the students' routine activities, especially the sports time activities in the afternoon e.g. their clothing, arranging bag, water bottle, putting on shoes, starting for destination, etc. before they get to the playground. They answered in various ways. Some of them answered in English in complete sentences, or short ones, or they even answered in Bangla. They also had various answers in correct grammar.

Main Activity

Pre-task

In the pre-task step, the researcher shared a list describing someone's bedtime activities and asked them what they thought about that list. Two students of the class explained that list. The researcher asked the rest of the class to share their thought. Some students responded to it. The class became very noisy because they answered all at once.

The researcher asked them to speak one by one. Then the teacher asked the learners if they had the same activities as those on the list. Again the students' reply varied. The class was not only found very responsive but also the situation seemed blasting.

Task

There were some steps in this part. First, after asking the students to answer whether they had the same activities as those on the list or not, the researcher asked the students to list their daily, weekly, or monthly activities they did. They started to do as per instruction. Some students looked very energetic to respond but many students still looked confused about how to respond. Thereafter, the researcher tried to help them to understand the instruction by asking them what they had not understood. One of the students asked whether they should write in their notebook or not. The researcher asked them to write down their activities in their notebook or in an extra sheet.

After writing their daily, weekly and monthly activities, they were asked to work in groups of four to compare their own activities in their group and find out the similarities and the differences of their activities among them. In this session, the researcher monitored the situation of the class by walking around each group and asked if they found any difficulty. They worked in cooperation accomplishing their task.

The last step was the presentation session. The representative of each group presented the result to the whole class and the other group had to pay attention to their friend who was presenting the result. They had to pay attention to the spokesperson and decide which groups had the most different or similar activities with theirs. Some students paid attention to their friend's presentation and some did not.

Most of the students could not present the summary in complete sentences. For example, the sentence "Our similar activities are, watching TV, brushing teeth, arranging bed etc." They presented the sentence as "our activities which similar is watching, brushing, arrange....."

Grammar Focus

After the students finished doing the presentation, the researcher chose three sentences from the students' list and gave two sentences which had the incorrect grammar and one correct sentence. Those are: "We are watch TV at 8.30 every evening; After brush teeth, we arrange bed; Then we go to bed". The researcher asked them to rethink if those sentences were correct or incorrect. They gave various responses; some students said that there were two incorrect sentences and one correct sentence, some said that two sentences were correct and one incorrect, the others thought that all sentences were incorrect. There were many students who had no opinion about it. The researcher finally stated that the first and second sentences were incorrect and the last one was correct, and then explained why those were incorrect.

The researcher then discussed the form and rules of the simple present tense. Most of the students had background knowledge about the tense but most of them did not manage to use the subject and verb correctly. The researcher repeated the discussion as clearly as possible and gave them more sample sentences. In this step, the researcher gave them ten new sentences and asked them to mark whether those are correct or incorrect. They had to mark the part that they considered as incorrect and they were asked to correct it. Majority of the students answered correctly, & the rest, made mistakes again of those ten given sentences.

Closing

At the end of the session, the researcher again asked the students if they had not understood the task, but no students raised any problem. Still, the researcher ensured that the teacher would discuss the same material in the next class, advised them to read at home and mark the part if they had any lack of understanding. Finally, the session was closed with thanks.

Achievement

It is common that learning grammar is very difficult to most of the learners. In their pre-test, it was known that they were often confused and depressed when they joined this class. It was also observed that grammar focuses both rules

and meaning. That is why the researcher tried to use task-based grammar teaching to improve the students' learning condition.

After the application, there were some improvements in the grammar class along with the improvement of both teaching and learning known from the observation and the improvement of their grammatical mastery obtained from the grammar test result.

It was observed that the process of teaching learning was authentic. It means that the researcher provided the students with efforts to make them interested and active with the process of learning grammar, such as, giving clear learning objectives, presenting the materials well, encouraging the students by listening to them, responding, facilitating and monitoring their progress. Observation also shows that the students experienced a new grammar learning experience since task-based language teaching was implemented. It made them more active, enthusiastic, and motivated to learn grammar because they not only learned it theoretically but also applied it directly in spoken or written form. It was found that there was a good improvement of their grammatical knowledge.

The grammar post-test result showed that the students' grammatical knowledge improved from their pre-test, even though not all students could reach the criteria of success. The average score the students reached in pre-test was 65 with the lowest and the highest scores were 31 and 72. Meanwhile the average of post-test result in was 71 with the lowest and the highest 41 and 79. The pre-test shows that there were 16 students who reached the criteria of success, and 18 students from 25 students in the post-test improved.

The findings of this study is in line with the suggestions provided by Ellis (2009) that teachers may use in the post-task phase to focus on form. These are: review of learner errors, consciousness-raising tasks, production practice activities, and noticing activities.

Recommendations

The researcher recommends that the teacher should try to address the problems found in the class. The teacher should keep improving the way s/he

teaches, such as, presenting the material well by giving the clearer explanation because the observation shows that the students asked to review the explanation of the material. It is important to ask the students to write an essay based on their everyday or in-class work. The teacher may ask the students to write a reflective piece, a self-critique about what they accomplished and learned yesterday. They may write an assessment of the others in their study group, of his/her sibling or a new learning mechanism.

In fine, this study may contribute to the course and syllabus design of Bangladeshi schools, colleges and universities. The curriculum developers, syllabus designers and educational practitioners may take help of the findings for constructing educational programs. The findings can be considered as a contribution to the development of alternative method for better EFL learning environment. Students should also be informed and engaged with the tasks and types of activities for effective effort.

Moreover, motivating and encouraging the students by listening to them, responding, facilitating, and monitoring their progress were also recommended. Further, the researcher needed to give the students more questions to arise their background knowledge but not make them feel nervous, give more assigned reading, and also provide them with more exercises to improve their grammatical mastery.

Lochana & Deb's (2006) project in a school run by the Basaveshwara Education Society in India also revealed evidence in support of a task-based approach to language teaching and learning.

Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to explore the impact of Task-based language teaching in teaching grammar. First, the current study's post-test results showed that the students' grammatical performance was statistically significant and different from their pre-test results. It indicates that the TBLT has great impact on students' grammatical performance. Hence, researchers, teachers and policy-makers need to rethink and execute TBLT in Bangladeshi teaching situation.

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