

**Beena Anil**  
**pbeenanil@gmail.com**

## **Teachers' Tasks are the Change Makers in an ESL Classroom – Are you Ready?**

### **Abstract**

Teacher's self development programmes have become an essential component for teachers through which prospective teachers gain and prune their knowledge about teaching pedagogy and get practical exposure to convert a normal classroom into experience filled classroom for learners. All teachers have the competence to classes but how many of them can engage with the learners along with their teaching becomes a million dollar question. On the job experiences and continuous learning prepare teachers to contribute for the betterment of learners especially for primary school students. This paper focuses on the importance of teachers' self evaluation approaches to design activities that can be used in the classroom to cater to the need of the English as a second language (ESL) learning community.

### **1. Introduction**

Teachers' impact on student academic achievement is filtered with the significant challenges prevalent in the classroom. The challenges determine the present condition of teachers who are fazed of the exam-mark syndrome. Teachers should be motivated to get a valued based educational outcome in the classroom. Teachers understand their complexities in their job and they should be prepared well before entering the classroom –especially to make a change in the life of each student. The self evaluation process of understanding students and the use of tasks in the classroom from both students and teachers perspective will leave behind a change in students' life.

English as a second language in India enriches one's own language, it enables us to have easy access to modern knowledge and helps us maintain contact and exchange ideas among ourselves within the country and with other countries across the world. English can be taught and

learnt in the classroom if teachers use effective teaching methods which include understanding the classroom behavior, relationship between teacher and students, students and students and the level of motivation required in the classroom. These essentialities in the classroom will develop good learning and teaching atmosphere for both teacher and student respectively.

Teachers are important in the classroom and the real success of teachers is the considerable development in the performance of each student day by day. Developing countries like India, propose many steps to bring innovative teaching methods in the classroom by training teachers at all levels. Teaching English as a second language in the classroom needs a lot of focus as learners are apprehensive while learning the language. It is in the hands of the teachers to instill confidence among young learners to learn English confidently, by the way of introducing and designing tasks in the classroom. Task is an important tool for

teachers and it helps them to evaluate students' interest and introspective approach of learning the language effectively.

New methodologies which emphasize the four language skills should be introduced at all the levels of school education. These methodologies should make students acquire and learn the language in various enjoyable ways.

Another aspect to be noted is the need to change the attitudes of a few teachers towards teaching English as a subject. They should understand that English is not only a subject to be memorized but it is a skill to be developed and used by students in various real and reel contexts. This notion will aid them to accompany them by their preparedness to employ new methodologies, approaches and techniques for imparting the four skills in the classroom.

This paper focuses on how learner-centered concept can be applied by introducing tasks and activities in the English learning classroom. This concept will make students acquire language skills effectively by discovering themselves autonomously.

## 2. Literature Review

Second language learners interact constructively with the learning environment, both internal (Murphy 1989) and external (Stern 1983). The external environment could be considered to be the learning atmosphere. The internal environment includes the learner's knowledge about language, including cognitive experiential level, belief and values, affective states, cultural background that contribute to language learning as a 'hermeneutical' experience (Murphy 1989). Teachers are the backbone of the classroom and they can design various interesting tasks to make learning interesting for students. In the

present era, technology aids teachers to top up their imaginative skills with visual effect. "Media materials can lend authenticity into the class, reinforcing the relationship between the language classroom and the outside world" (Brinton 2001:461). Froehlich (1999) affirms the positive effects of visuals on people, which is also true of present learners:

'Most people prefer and respond more favorably to visual stimuli than to sound only. The learning process today is characterized by being informed and entertained simultaneously through a combination of complementary, easily absorbable signals to our senses... Foreign language education nowadays has to be fun.' (pp. 150-151).

Nunan presumably agrees that tasks are the unit of language teaching as he has called them the 'central curriculum planning tool' (Nunan 2004: 113). Verdugo and Belmonte (2007) promoted effective listening skills through visual, interactive and reiterative nature of digital stories. Emery (2013) suggests that many current teachers of second language learners have had little substantial overall repertoire of classroom activities that are appropriate for teaching English as a second language. The technology assisted teaching should aim to promote both higher order skills and lower order skills (Scrivener 2007). This paper will help teachers to understand the use of tasks and how they can be used in the classroom to teach English to second language learners.

Task-based approach is different from oral-situational and notional-functional approaches, and this approach is not specified to teach the language forms and its related meanings, instead it is taught through 'tasks'. Skehan (1996) defines a task as 'an activity in which: meaning is primary; there is some sort

of relationship to the real world; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome'. Tasks can make teachers and students to believe that language can be learnt through practice and exposure to the language. Krashen (1981) proposed that learners would acquire language when they are exposed to 'comprehensible input' and are motivated to attend to the input. Long (1996) has argued that acquisition is best served when learners participate in the negotiation of meaning (i.e. the process by which two or more interlocutors identify and then attempt to resolve a communication breakdown. However, negotiation of meaning may or may not result in mutual understanding). He also suggested that task-based teaching creates opportunities for learners to 'focus on form' and constitute them to acquire the language.

Other researchers (e.g. Ellis 2003) have suggested that task-based learning is needed to ensure the development of inherent knowledge. Thus, this approach to teaching has gained momentum on a variety of theoretical perspectives. Howatt (1984) has termed it as a 'strong communicative approach'. This approach aims learners to involve and expose to the language so as to involve them in communication in varied situations.

Task based learning (TBL) provides a logical structure that allows students to learn language through tasks. Task based language teaching and learning was originally inspired by Prabhu (1987) in Bangalore, Southern India. It began as a research for teaching English to students in India, for whom English was a second language regardless of the fact that English is an official language used in India for public purposes.

Richard and Rogers (2001:224) have stated that 'language learning

is believed to depend on engrossing students not simply in 'comprehensible input' but tasks make them to negotiate meaning and keep in naturalistic and meaningful communication'. This claim strengthens the argument that task-based language teaching (TBLT) is an approach that distinguishes tasks as the main constituent of the teaching/learning process, allowing the center of the process to be on the task, explaining the pressure that usually lies on the language itself, letting young learners use the language to communicate and perform the task. Willis and Willis (2001) have argued that task-based language teaching (TBLT) is naturally resulted from the communicative language teaching movement because it is based on similar principles. Beale (2002) has also recommended that Communicative Language Teaching has been an influence in second language teaching for many decades. He emphasizes the importance of communication in the process of learning a language.

Willis (1996) has explained, TBLT should not be considered as mere tasks; on the other side, it should be observed as the core part of a structure to assist researchers and teachers systematize their lesson planning and teaching. This structure consists of three elements: the pre-task, the task cycle and the language focus, which is briefly presented here.

The pre-task phase occurs when the teacher is selecting the topic and the task itself. At this stage, the teacher will introduce the language needed for the task. The type of activities that can be done in this part of the structure vary widely, from recordings of other students while performing the task, power point presentations, written texts to audio stories. All of the above mentioned, intend to, as Willis and Willis (2007) have explained to allow

learners to feel prepared for the task particularly as far as language needed is concerned. The task cycle phases are divided into three sections – the task, planning and report. Learners, in pairs or groups, engage in a task. The task cycle gives learners the chance to use the language, as the teacher only observes the task performed by the learners.

The learners exchange their results and findings with their classmates, as a result a good rapport and opportunity is created to exchange their ideas in their second language. It is during the task cycle that three important conditions for learning a language are set – “exposure, use and motivation” (Willis 1996:40). By this, learners will experience the language as a whole and can develop their language knowledge process. The language focus is the last part of the structure. For the language focus, teachers may record the performance of the learners on the mobile for further development of the communicative skills of their wards. In task based activities, teachers are considered as facilitators for learners in the language learning process. For many decades, the support behind using tasks in the classroom is not meant to learn only the language, but also applied to develop other mechanisms like competence, performance, motivation, attitude, societal responsibility socializing ability, etc.,

### **3. General Reasons for Introducing Task Based Language Learning**

Tasks are helpful as a negotiated syllabus for both teacher and student and also help them to built a healthy interaction. Tasks are very clearly a bonding structure between the teacher and students. Tasks are essential because they

- are the reflection of oneself and others

- mirror the society and the real world
- are the part of syllabus to develop LSRW of the learners
- are learner centric with many value added benefits
- are helpful to explore and observe the situation and learning process in an SLA condition
- make learners to analysis their power of knowing and understanding
- create a mutual understanding between the teacher and students and student with each student
- help learners to have a collaborative learning
- develop active participation even from introvert students

There is no single methodology to teach students especially English as a second language in the classroom. Introducing tasks in the classroom that are laced with real world activities help students to take up social responsibilities and develop their essential LSRW skills. Activities should be interactive in the classroom as they make students to think, write, speak and listen to other students for a better learning atmosphere. This paper focuses on how tasks are helpful for students to use in the language learning and teaching process in the classroom. The researcher conducted a study by using the self- designed tasks with the primary level students as a part of this research.

### **4. Significance of the Study**

The study is conducted to address the importance of tasks in second language learning classroom and it offers an insight into an expanding and interesting conceptualization of English language learning behavior of primary level students. It also offers the possibility of identifying tasks

after examining the level of students' interest, motivation and observation of the surroundings. It is imperative for teachers to update their understanding according to the students' milieu as they are exposed vastly.

The main objective of this research study is to examine the relationship between learning and performing tasks. The study aims to throw light on the English learning aspects of students through tasks and the study addresses one important research question which is

How tasks aid the English language learners to learn English as a second language at the primary school level

## 5. Research Design

This study employed quantitative and qualitative approaches involving classroom observations, and questionnaires. Observations, and questionnaire were used with the aim of seeking answer to the above research question:

### 5.1. Research Methodology and Sampling

Fifty respondents were taken for the study from a semi-urban school, Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu. All the respondents were from Class VIII and they could write and read English as a subject but none of them was confident to use English as a language. The purpose and significance of selecting this school is that this institution is situated on the outskirts of the city and it houses 85% first generation learners. Classroom language enhancing tasks, and questionnaire were used to find out the use of tasks in learning English as a second language in the classroom.

### 5.2. Classroom Language Enhancing Tasks

The researcher conducted this study with a period of two months with the help of the English teachers employed

at the school. Before the distribution of tasks, the respondents were given proper instruction and made the respondents to be comfortable in the classroom. The teachers helped the researcher to make students understand the process of learning English as a skill and not as a subject. The researcher used the following tasks in the classroom and understood that the tasks reaped a good dividend on the respondents' front.

#### 5.2.1. Task in Pairs or Groups

Teachers can decide whether students should work in pair or group or individual performance in the classroom. Tasks help students to learn English in a motivational and experimental way. The researcher has listed a few tasks that help teachers to modify or improvise according to the structure of the classroom.

#### 5.2.2. Find your Pair

- select pictures from newspaper or magazine that have conceptual implication
- cut all the pictures into two pieces and mix them in a bowl
- Instruct each student to take one piece of a picture from the bowl
- After taking half of a picture of their choice, tell them to move around the class to find the other pair of their possessed picture.
- While searching for the other piece of picture, the searcher should ask questions starting with Why, how, what, which, do, can, etc.
- This task helps students to develop questionable skill explicitly.

#### 5.2.3. Fair the Pair

- Teacher should write the name of animals, places or birds on two cards.

- Make pair cards as much as possible
- shuffle all the cards and instruct each student to take one card each
- Instruct each student to write two sentences about the select card
- After writing two sentences about the card, instruct students to move around the classroom to find his/her partner with similar card
- Once students find their pairs they will discuss with each other about the sentences they have written
- They collaborate their points and be ready to narrate the item on the paired card for a minute

#### **5.2.4. Toss the Ball**

- ASR students to form a circle and ask for a volunteer to hold a ball
- Tell students that they play the game of antonyms.
- Now ask the volunteer to say a word 'friend' and then toss it to someone else in the circle
- This someone should answer 'enemy or foe' and toss the ball to another person with another word like 'happy'
- If the ball is missed or the answer is wrong, just go back to the last person who did catch the ball with the correct answer or get help from other students in the circle.

#### **5.2.5. Ease the Tense**

- Teacher should divide the class into group of two each
- Use a projector or a card with words denoting tenses (decide present tense or past tense for the first round)
- Two students of a team should stand but not facing each other

- One student of the team should view the projector screen and the other member should be facing the opposite side
- Time can be set. Within one minute ten (present tense) words should be called out by the student who is facing the screen. One after another the partner should give the past tense of each word within the stipulated time
- The team which gets the highest score is declared the winner.

#### **5.2.6. A Word at a Time**

- This task helps students to develop pronunciation and vocabulary
- The preparation of the task is 5 – 10 minutes
- File commander on a Smartphone can be used to perform this task
- The teacher can record five words every day with the synonym of the each word
- The recorded words can be sent to the group that is created by the teacher on social media with private settings
- The teacher can instruct students to copy the words
- Teacher can instruct students to keep these words as their parent/ own mobile caller tune
- After a month of practice, students can list out the words to the teacher with correct pronunciation and meaning
- This task will enhance the observational skill of the students
- It will help to improve students' pronunciation and lexical skill

#### **5.2.7. Direct the Movie**

This task is interesting but will take

few hours for the teacher or student to make as it requires a Smartphone and movie maker application. The visual impact makes students to involve in learning in a different way.

- The teacher can take photos with concepts on her/his mobile phone.
- After taking required photos, the photos should be arranged and connected in a meaning sequence.
- The teacher can instruct students to interpret the movie in their own way i.e., humorously or socially
- This task helps students to develop their creativity and observational skills
- It will improve their interpretational skill by analysing the movie
- The sentence formation capacity will be improved and teacher's assistance will scaffold their ability to narrate the movie

### 5.3. Observation of the Tasks

The respondents performed all the tasks with interest and curiosity. The researcher observed the respondents individually and maintained a reflective diary to understand their progress. The frequency of occurrence of the strategies shows that cognitive 'contextualization' and memorization were the most frequently used strategies in connection with the acquisition of vocabulary. The distribution of cognitive factors (resourcing, repetition, interference) shows that apart from 'being active', formal practice, were high for learning English as a second language at middle school level. Meta cognitive factors show that monitoring others and planning were high in the learning process. The researcher was surprised that a considerable proportion of the respondents could display atleast one of the language skills successfully. A

few respondents took longer time to understand and imbibe the concept of the tasks. However, difference in performing time is not necessarily a disadvantage, since research has shown that such difficulties are normal and that with sufficient help from the teacher, students could improve their performing and learning skills. Only 3 respondents expressed their opinion off record that they found tasks to be obstacles to learn English in the classroom. The other respondents felt that tasks could be their stress buster and filled with a fun quotient.

The researcher observed that the respondents were emboldened to learn experiment, ask questions, interact, think, accept, socialize, and create while they perform the tasks with their classmates in the classroom. Further the researcher observed that the respondents were

- Focused on the process rather than the result
- Engaged in their act and were determined to interact with their group mates
- Observed others to communicate with their existing knowledge of vocabulary and meaning
- Able to connect to the real situation and express their notion on various social issues especially while performing the task 'Direct a Movie'.
- Clear about their level of understanding the tasks and the level of difficult to be eroded by seeking help from their counterparts

### 5.4. Distribution of Questionnaire

After making respondents to perform the self-designed tasks, the researcher distributed a questionnaire (to the same set of 50 respondents) with a five-point Likert scale to understand students' perspective in using tasks in the

classroom.. The questionnaire helped the researcher to find out the mentality of the respondents regarding tasks with survey statements by selecting SDA (strongly do not agree), DA (do not agree), N (neutral), A (agree) and SA (strongly agree). The questionnaire was piloted to ensure that the language was

easy to understand for the respondents. The researcher cleared the doubts of the respondents, whenever they required.

The questionnaire consisted of 10 questions. The result of the responses was analyzed and presented here. A five point Likert Scale was used to analyze the score of the respondents.

**Table 1:** Using tasks in English learning classroom

Item	No	SDA	DA	N	A	SA
Using tasks is helpful in learning English in the classroom	50				7	43
Teacher should create innovative tasks for students to think and express their ideas in english	50			5	10	35
Teacher should have affinity while designing tasks	50				6	44
Tasks should be performed to improve thinking and creative language skills	50			5	10	35
I gain confidence to speak in English when I perform the task successfully.	50			3	10	37
Interesting and relevant tasks will allow me to think widely	50				4	46
Tasks should be focused on varied issues and topics not only related to subject.	50	10	10	07		23
Critical thinking and conceptual related tasks are helpful to develop the thinking process in ESL	50	2	1	2	10	35
Media is helpful to develop English and making me to think widely	50				6	44

This section highlights that the respondents’ attitude towards usage of tasks in the classroom was appreciative.

### 5.5. Analysis of the Questionnaire

The 50 respondents answered the questionnaire after performing a series of tasks. This group, the experimental group, aimed to find out the effective factors of using tasks at the middle school level. The respondents were allowed to think, raise questions, find solutions, and analyze external information that helped them to create

a reflective thinking. Reflective thinking facilitated the respondents to develop their basic language skills. The tasks helped the respondents to enhance their learning abilities and competency in language generation. It is evident that school students are capable of developing their critical thinking within the appropriate context, and capable to engage in complicated and complex



processes while performing the tasks. Students wanted their teachers to motivate them and encourage them while using English in the classroom. Teachers are seen as facilitators, coordinating all factors involved in the learning process. Teachers should function as guides and act as feedback providers in order to help the learners to improve their self-assessment ability.

The analysis of the questionnaire has proved that media has become an autonomous learning tool and helped the respondents to adapt to this learning process. The data analysis of the questionnaire has proved that in the present world, mobile and internet has helped this generation students to learn language skills.

## 6.Recommendation

Teachers are aware that technology is important in making good learning atmosphere and improvised intervention outcomes. Despite this awareness, they know that in the absence of technology, it is possible to work collaboratively and innovatively to inspire the young

learners for improving the assessment and intervention practices.

Integrating technology in the class room required different approaches, though the role of teachers is getting changed time by time. Tasks are helpful for imparting education for all level of students. The exchange of ideas and discussion should be encouraged between teacher and students, as a result, a revolutionary approach towards the learning process will happen which will lead to curiosity of learning among learners.

## 7.Conclusion

Authentic tasks help students to have interaction and develop confidence for learning the language. Teachers can create a well equipped learning atmosphere by designing tasks according to the ability and interest of students. To create a holistic education, teachers are the torch bearers who have uniqueness, subtle thinking, flexibility and a mission to attain success along with their students.

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