

Teaching Literature Using Task Based Approach in Bangladeshi Tertiary EFL Classroom

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Abstract : This paper provides a review of ideas and research regarding the role of task based approach in teaching literature in the Bangladeshi tertiary level education. Firstly it sketches the position of literature in the 18th and mid 19th century in terms of teaching English as a foreign language and the role of task in academia. Secondly it elaborates the positive effects that could be drawn from the task based system in teaching literature while focusing on learners' ability to develop different interpersonal skills. Finally, this paper draws on a field work that shows the attitude which could be drawn towards the task based approach in terms of teaching literature.

Keywords: Literature, Task Based Approach, Language Teaching

1. Introduction:

Literature is used as one of the main educational methods for teaching language in the 18th and in the mid 19th century [1]. It was taught generally for all sorts of educational and cultural purposes. In most cases, literature in the 18th century education policy was about the perception of certain texts and the appreciation of a literary work in both written form and orally. As Spack describes literature as a means for learning of the classical rhetoric which could lead to enhance learners basic skills like discovery and communication [15]. One of the main purposes of teaching EFL in Bangladesh is to develop students' abilities with the insight of "communicative competence" in the primary, secondary and tertiary level education systems. Though literature was one of the basic methods for teaching language, it is now has been put down from it earlier position. The EFL teaching is now being held up to the point as the means for teaching basic four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

The task based approach is based on activity and drill which is certainly being practice in the EFL in Bangladesh but not in terms of teaching literature. Literature is seen as a distinct subject quite apart from the "fundamental ELT belief", which suggests that it is complex and not worth teaching. However, this extremism can be seen as one of the drawbacks of the English language teaching

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system. This tradition of non-literary environment in the EFL classroom could create a drastic drop in building critical thinking abilities. Nunan confirms that, the use of task in a communicative approach eventually depends on the meaning, not in the form [11]. Meaning making from everyday events, as the researcher finds out, being used by the Bangladeshi EFL teachers, is the outcome of two things. First, the fear of literary complexity and secondly the teachers are not really interested in choosing the right text or to some extent simplified or localized texts. The task based approach, as the researcher finds is common in dealing students with teaching the basic four skills mentioned above but it is never really used in the language classes to teach literature to enhance learners ability to think critically and also to teach the basic four skills which ELT extremely aims to achieve.

The main objective of this research is to find out the scope for task based approaches in teaching literature in Bangladeshi EFL context. This present study will try to find out the obstacles that shackle the teachers down on using literature in EFL classrooms and this research will also analyze the impotence of the existing models for teaching literature in the EFL classroom.

2. Literature Review

The definition of task is not unified; there are number of definitions aim to find out “what task really means”? Khatib, Derkhshan & Rezaei, point out that, task could be defined as terms like, “activity” or “exercise” or “drill” [7]. Breen gives a broad description task as the “springboard for learning work” which is, in the broad sense, a structured way of using knowledge during a communication [3]. Richards and Rodgers explicate that tasks, in terms of language acquisition provide input and output processing unites which are quite indispensable and they are also adequate for critical implication [12]. Nunan also confirms that, a communicative task is a classroom work which is basically concealed with the meaning of the task rather than the form [11]. Skehan defines task as an activity where the meaning is considered as primary, based on real life connections [16]. There is a certain level of priority with the assessment of a task which is quite related to the over all outcome of learners’ conclusion of that task. That is a task is quite directed towards learners’ ability to approach certain task. Nunan again defines task a piece of work directed learners towards comprehending, manipulating ideas into meaningful context and producing communicating act in the target language [11]. This definition is principally focused on meaning rather than context. Another relevant pedagogical definition of task could be found in Van den Branden as he defines a task as “an activity in which a person engages in order to attain an objective, and which necessitates the use of language” [18]. Task based language teaching has now gained its prominence in recent years [4], [11], [13], [18]. The philosophy for task based approach has created two concurrently linked research paradigms: the psycholinguistics approach and the socio-cultural approach where the major concern for these methods is to provide with tasks which are best for learning [4].

Literature is considered as one of the major tools for teaching language in EFL classrooms. Literature as mentioned in Khatib, Rezaei & Derakhshan is the sum of different variables that enhance language learning through critical thinking including motivation, cultural awareness, intensive and extensive reading, sociolinguistics and pragmatic knowledge, grammar and vocabulary knowledge and language skills [7]. Literature deals with some of the activities related to basic personality traits and socio-cultural and interpersonal skills. Literature is authentic due to its structural and language use [6], [14]. Apart from the structural and linguistic complexity, literature could worked it way down to motivation as Maley confirms that literature could be a great way to uphold learners motivation because the learners, tend not to respond to the elements they do not like [10]. Literary texts motivate students into critical thinking. The change in learners' belief system is quite immense because it shapes one's view about the real life activities and moral codes. Tung & Chang believe that, literature and critical thinking wafted up from one source and they basically are emanated from two reasons [17]. First, Literature reading requires skills like, recalling, retrieving and reflecting a subject matter from empirical evidences that constitutes "the meaning" of the text. Reading a literary text alludes to abilities like the ability to separate facts from fiction, to perceive multiple points of views, constituting judgments and distinguishing literal and implied meaning. Second, the subject matter of a text really works it way through the construction of the relationship between the world and the "self" [17].

Applying task based approaches into literature described by Khatib, Derkhshan and Rezaei as the combination of three different phases: pre-task, during task and post-task activities [7]. Tasks are a sum of different critical approaches to literature like, the critical literary approach, the stylistic approach, new criticism, critical literacy, reader response and language based instructions for literature. According to Khatib, Derkhshan and Rezaei tasks should have a sense of completeness which could be done through the improvisation of literary texts of different degrees [7].

3. Methodology

This research is mainly informed by descriptive and ethnographic paradigm consists of a theoretical framework and interviewing of tertiary level university teachers from East Eest University, Stamford University, South East University Bangladesh, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh and Northern University Bangladesh. All the Participants names are kept undisclosed due to professional honesty. Most of the participants are experienced in teaching more than two universities before settled down to their current positions. All of them are well acquainted with courses like Basic English, Public Speaking, Reading and Writing, Advanced Reading and Writing, Advanced Speaking Skills and other departmental literature and Linguistics courses to Undergraduate and Masters.

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3.2 Theoretical Framework

The research was carried out focusing on Marzieh Bagherkazemi and Mino Alemi's essay, *Literature in the EFL/ESL Classroom: Consensus and Controversy* [1]. In this essay the authors try to show the positive impact that literature could carry out in terms of language teaching. The essay advocates models for teaching literature in the EFL classroom which the researcher found quite practical. Likewise, Van believes that studying literature in any language classroom can have positive effects on students for developing vocabulary stocks, cultural awareness and most importantly critical thinking [18]. The use of literature inside a language classroom can work as a ground for the genuine exploration of the target language and culture [5], [9]. Literature also is responsible for emotional intelligence (EQ) along with self-awareness, self-motivation, empathy and social skills [8].

3.3 Setting and Sampling

The study was done between October and November 2013 and followed a qualitative research design. Data analysis started as soon as the data was collected. In other words, data analysis was concurrently done during data collection. The Setting of this research plays an important role due to the participants' reluctance in talking to their work spaces so the most of the interviewees were conducted outside the academia. The survey was conducted in a non academic atmosphere where the researcher interviews faculties of different private university teachers (See Appendix B). The participants were first of all asked biographical information regarding their education and work (See Appendix A). The role of private universities plays a crucial role in this research because private universities, as the researcher believes face more problems in teaching English as foreign language rather than the public universities for number of reasons. First, most of the private universities do not follow any admission system which means a student with a bad CGPA can be eligible for admission where the public universities have a strict admission policy. Secondly, the students, as most of the interviewees confirmed that the students of private universities are not serious about their improvement whereas in case of public universities, the hunger for improvement is found intensively. The data was collected through a number of interviews with each participant from time to time.

4. Findings and Discussion

The first stage of this research was the challenge to link up the theoretical framework with the transcription found from the ethnographic study. The interviewees felt that, implementing a task based system is quite a necessary for literature teaching because a task has a definite conclusive end point. Students are supposed to find a conclusive result while a task is given. One interviewee felt that, implementing a task could distract the possibility to the critical part of

the whole idea of studying literature. Answering to that another interviewee thought that, a task based system could be a real help for the students to overpower their thoughts into group discussions.

Excerpt 1

I think a task is really a help if you...ah....want your students to something inside a literary class. Group discussions and presentations are always helpful.

A classroom based on task is really helpful as the participant agrees; it could cause an environment that helps students to engage more inside the classroom. It is also a matter of concern that in most occasions, literature classes are basically teacher oriented and a student's role in the class is more or less passive. They only perceive what their teachers tell them to do or learn.

Excerpt 2

You need to change the way of your teaching if you want to apply a task based system. I do agree with you. It is a better way to teach. I mean it sounds alright. I want my classes to be active. It is quite symptomatic in literature classes, but it is also obvious that we need to change this existing system from the scratch.

Perhaps the basic problem is with the co-existing systems running concurrently in the EFL context: the traditional teacher oriented classroom and the communicative approach. A task based approach could be the cause of a partial abolition of the teacher dominated classroom because as long as task based approach goes, it works fine when there is a both way of communication between the teachers as well as the students.

Excerpt 3

I believe you can argue on both. The traditional approach has its loop holes as well as good implications. You need to consider that, a task based approach is time consuming. The reality is, in a semester system, we are on the run all the time. A task based literary class needs more time than regular classes.

When it comes in term with classroom management, a task based system is more or less could be appended in to the teaching of literature. When students are given a certain amount of task, they will apprehend the task with innate curiosity due to the association of a task and the concept of completion of a task. An instructor needs to be concise about time management inside the class because generally in the tertiary level classes are mostly ninety minutes long. Activities like pre-task, post-task and during task could be done with attention.

Excerpt 4

I really support task based approach. I like my students to talk freely in the class. I like them to think critically inside the classroom. Yes, I apply them in my language and literature classes. The problem is, I think,

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sometimes you need both the ways. The traditional approach is needed at the initial stages of teaching. I mean.....ah.....like the introductory courses should be taught in traditional ways. We can also mix both of the methods simultaneously.

With regard to the combination of both, literature teaching is absolutely dependent on the delivery from the instructor and personal “charisma” also plays a good role while teaching literature. Teaching of literature is also linked with students’ response as well, because in most cases, the students tend not to respond. They are in most occasions “glued up” in their chairs and not respond to what the teacher is talking about. A task based approach could be a solution to that problem.

Excerpt 5

Generally I love the traditional way because I grew up with it. While teaching I feel comfortable with it. It gives me the power to control the discourse in the class.

The knowledge power nexus is one of the basic barriers of applying a task based approach in a literature class. Teachers enjoy traditional respect and certain amount of pride in the class which is not so bright in developing skills like critical thinking and reason making.

Almost all the participants agreed on one point that, a group work is the best way to practice brainstorming and to produce valuable insights. In another way, some of the interviewees put on a contrast against the traditional way of teaching literature. In a traditional way, the students are quite reluctant learners who are not ready to get the knowledge the instructor has to offer. The whole system learning is based on one way learning. The teacher owns the soul proprietor of all the possible meanings. In most cases, the voices of the learners are unheard. This scenario is an also found in their scripts.

5. Recommendation

It is quite evident that, the implementation of task based literature teaching is not practiced in most academic scenarios. Some times even if the respective instructor tries to do that in personal level but the whole purpose of literary learning still follows the “traditional” practice of teacher oriented classrooms. In the academia, the main problem in the private universities is money. The universities basically run through money and they tend not to expose or prefer experimental teaching methods which this research groundwork has found out. Task based system is naturally applied in the language courses but the out come it generates is quite unsatisfactory which is found in the field research. The task based system does not proved to be a viable solution to the problem where the situation is depended on language learners who are not necessarily good

thinkers. If the learners are not good thinkers, then the whole motive of applying a task based system into literature learning could be a failure.

It is true that task based approach is never emphasized in terms of teaching literature and it would be a new thing for the instructors who have embraced the traditional way of teaching literature. The teachers could always play a vital role in terms of applying a task based method that consists of three task activities consist of pre-task, in classroom task and post task activities. These activities can elevate the possibility of students' active participation in discussion, critical thinking and speech production.

6. Conclusion

Literature teaching in a teacher oriented classroom and task based teaching is quite a different concept. The academic condition of Bangladesh, especially in the private university sector the use of task based system in terms of literature teaching is never really improvised due to the love for the traditional approach. The universities should come with the intention to change the overused literary teaching system, which needs to be changed. Now the scenario is: the universities are not really ready to embrace the new over the old.

The universities should come forward to embrace the task based system in order to engage students into activities like thinking, brain storming and cognitive response. Without students' involvement, the whole process of learning would be a failed project. It is quite alarming that, the "scholars" produced in the tertiary level education is more or less unaware of the fact that, they are not quite ready to produce anything new which should be the major concern for the intellectual development of the country. So, students should be introduced to problem solving which can be ensured by scaffolding them by collaborating into a task based system.

Appendix A

1. Tell me about yourself
2. Your academic background
3. Did you teach anywhere before?
4. How many institutions you have taught?
5. Have you been abroad? Where? How long?
6. Your family and their significant roles in your academic life
7. What motivated you to become a English Language Teacher?
8. What are the courses you are currently teaching?
9. How do you feel about teaching Literature?
10. What do you think was the main reason of your success in learning English?

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Appendix B

1. How long you have been teaching Literature/Language?
2. What are your observations regarding teaching literature/Language?
3. While teaching Literature, do you think, you are not given much time making students think critically?
4. Do you prefer or teach in the traditional system of teaching?
5. Do you think is it necessary that a new system of teaching is necessary?
6. Is your class a teacher dictated or students' response oriented?
7. Do you appreciate students challenge you inside the classroom?
8. Is task based literature teaching, according to you is necessary in Bangladeshi EFL context?
9. What is your opinion regarding controlling a class by using a task based approach to literature?
10. What is/are your ideas(s) on implementing a task based literature teaching?

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