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INTRODUCTION

Most Thai university students have studied English for eight years before they begin their tertiary education, where they normally take two to five compulsory English courses in their first and second years. Some also take a few elective courses after they have finished the compulsory ones. Even with considerable study of English most of them feel disappointed that they do not satisfactorily acquire the desired competence.

From my teaching experiences, I realize that one cause of the students' failure is that traditional teaching practices do not sufficiently provide conditions for the target language (TL) learning as suggested by second language acquisition research (Long & Crookes, 1992). My stance is that in order to increase the efficiency of English language teaching (ELT) in Thai university English language classrooms, it would be valuable to implement a task-based approach to instruction since it can provide better conditions for language learning. In this article, I will first discuss the theory and rationale behind such an approach. Then, I will discuss the advantages and possible constraints of implementing this approach in the specific curriculum area.

THEORETICAL BASE BASIS FOR THE TASK-BASED APPROACH TO INSTRUCTION

The task-based approach to instruction was developed by a group of second language theorists including Candlin (1987), Prabhu (1987), Long & Crookes (1992), Skehan (1996), and Willis (1996) who proposed that "language teaching should be organized around the task as the unit in syllabus design" (Skehan & Foster, 1997, p. 186). A task is defined as:

> *an activity in which meaning is primary; there is some communication problems to solve; there is some sorts of relationship to comparable real world activities; task completion has some priority; the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome* (Skehan, 1998, p.95)

According to this definition, reading news, advertisements, articles and novels; writing letters and essays; having a conversation and orally presenting a report; listening to songs, and radio programs are examples of tasks, while doing grammatical exercises, or practicing control oral drills are not. Tasks are supported by second language (L2) acquisition theory as a unit of learning that has potential in promoting second and foreign language (FL) acquisition (Long & Crookes, 1992). Foster and Skehan (1996) explain the benefit of tasks as "pushing toward interlanguage* development because the demand that tasks make will engage the

process that leads to acquisition" (p.300). Long and Crookes (1992) point out that traditional teaching approaches are inferior to the task-based approach to instruction because "they assume a model of language acquisition unsupported by research findings on language learning in or out of classroom" (p.30). " First, research shows that people do not learn isolated items in the L2 one at a time, in additive, linear fashion, but as parts of complex mappings of groups of form-function relationship. Second, SLA research offers no evidence to suggest that nativelike situation are meaningful acquisition units, or they are (or even can be) acquired separately, singly, in linear fashion." (Long & Crookes, 1992, pp.33-34). The task-based approach to instruction is seen to have more potential to promote L2 acquisition.

Skehan (1996, 1998) and Willis (1996) propose frameworks for task-based instruction that rely on the assumption that task-based language teaching in combination with a focus on form has high potential in promoting L2 acquisition (see Table 1 and 2). Skehan's framework consists of three phases: pre-task, during-task, and post-task. The pre-task phase has two main purposes: 1) to teach, or raise students' consciousness of the language need for the task, and 2) to lessen the cognitive load that students may encounter when they actually do the task. The first goal can be achieved in two ways: the teacher may predict what language will be needed for the task and explicitly or implicitly pre-teach it to students, or let the students do a pre-task activity that will provide them the language they need. The second goal may be reached by showing videos, playing tapes, or providing transcripts of similar tasks to students, and then introduce pre-task planning activities to the students. In the during-task phase, students do their tasks and the teacher acts as a monitor. At this phase, the teacher should emphasize the appropriate balance between fluency, accuracy, and complexity. In the post-task phase, the students will re-do their tasks to the class, and their performances may be videotaped so that they can be played back for analysis purposes. This practice will motivate the students to pay more concern to the goals of complexity, accuracy, and fluency. Finally, the students may repeat the tasks or do parallel tasks in order to strengthen their accuracy, complexity and fluency in doing the tasks. Willis's (1996) framework for task-based instruction consists of three phases: pre-task, task cycle, and language focus. The pre-task phase aims to make students familiar with the topic of the task and understand task instructions, and to provide the students the language needed for doing the task. The task cycle phase consists of three stages: task, planning (for public report), and report. The task stage aims to make students gain fluency and confidence in using the target language. At this task stage, students do the task and the teacher acts only as a monitor. The planning stage aims to "gives students the time and support they need to prepare for the linguistic [and communicative] challenge[s] of going public" (Willis, 1996, p.64). At this planning stage, students will prepare to report to class how they did the task and what they discovered, and the teacher will act as an adviser. The report stage aims to "give students a natural stimulus to upgrade and improve their language" (Willis, 1996, p. 64). At this report stage, the teacher may give feedback on content and form. The language focus phase consists of two stages: analysis and practice. The two stages aim

> not to perfect students' production of the target language and make it automatic, but to draw their attention to the surface forms realizing the meanings they have already become familiar with during the task cycle, and so help students to systematize their knowledge and broaden their understanding " (Willis, 1996, p.64)

Figure 1: Framework for task-based instruction (Skehan, 1996)

PRE-TASK

Teacher explicitly and implicitly teaches new forms, do consciousness raising activities, or introduce pre-task planning activities. Students observe similar tasks, and/or plan linguistically and cognitively.

DURING TASK

Students do the task. Teacher emphasizes the appropriate balance between complexity, accuracy and fluency.

POST TASK

Students re-do their tasks to class, and the performance will be videotaped for analysis purposes. After that they do parallel tasks to strengthen their complexity, accuracy and fluency in doing the tasks. Teacher raises students' consciousness for a focus on form.

Figure 2: Framework for task-based instruction (Willis, 1996)

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Teacher explicitly and implicitly teaches new forms, do consciousness raising activities, or introduce pre-task planning activities. Students observe similar tasks, and/or plan linguistically and cognitively.

DURING TASK

Students do the task. Teacher emphasizes the appropriate balance between complexity, accuracy and fluency.

TASK

Students do the task, in pairs or small groups. Teacher monitors from a distance, encouraging all attempts at communication, not correcting. Since this situation has a "private" feel, students feel free to experiment. Mistakes do not matter.

PLANNING

Students prepare to report to the whole class (orally or in writing) how they did the task, what they decided or discovered. Since the report stage is public, students will naturally want to be accurate, so the teacher stands by to give language advice.

REPORT

Some groups present their reports to the class, or exchange written reports, and compare results. Teacher acts as a chairperson, and then comments on the content of the reports. Learners may now hear a recording of others doing a similar task and compare how they all did it. Or they may read a text similar in some way to the one they have written themselves, or related in topic to the task they have done.

LANGUAGE FOCUS

ANALYSIS

Students examine and then discuss specific features of the text or transcript of the recording.

They can enter new words, phrases and patterns in vocabulary books.

PRACTICE

Teacher conducts practice of new words, phrases, and patterns occurring in the data, either during or after the Analysis. Sometime after completing this sequence, learners may benefit from doing a similar task with a different partner.

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At this language focus phase, the teacher will guide students to analyze and practice language form. After the analysis and the practice, students may re-do the task or do parallel tasks.

From the comparison, it is evident that task-based instruction consists of three main stages. In the first stage, students should be exposed to examples of similar tasks done by others, and they should be given time to plan before they do the task, since the preparing time will promote accuracy, fluency, and complexity of language use. Second, both of them seem to agree that the report stage is important because it encourages students to balance the three learning goals: accuracy, complexity, and fluency. In the last stage, both recommend language analysis activities and parallel tasks.

However, the frameworks also have three differences. First, Willis suggests only implicit teaching of language in the first stage, while Skehan suggests both explicit and implicit teaching of language in the first stage. Second, while Skehan suggests that a teacher may predict what language will be needed in the task and what should be explicitly or implicitly taught to students, Willis argues that "although it may be possible, with experience, to predict some of the forms that may occur in closed tasks, in more open tasks, it is virtually impossible to do so" (Willis, 1996, p.33). Third, while Skehan puts the public report and the language analysis activities in the post-task phase, Willis places the public report in the second phase of her framework, and places language analysis in the third phase of it. Furthermore, she adds the practice stage in the language focus phase. The discrepancy and efficiency of the two frameworks need to be justify by future research.

L2 research seems to suggests that there are at least six conditions that promote second and foreign (L2/FL) acquisition: (1) comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985); (2) comprehensible output Swain, 1985); (3) communicative language use (Long and Crookes, 1992); (4) simultaneous development of language skills (Hornburger, 1989); (5) focusing on form (Long, 1988b); and (6) affective variables (Selinger, 1977).

In the following sections traditional teaching practices in Thai university English Language classrooms and the task-based approach will be examined to compare how the six learning conditions are met in each approach, and to show that the task-based approach provides better conditions for L2/FL learning.

1.   Sufficient access to comprehensible input

Krashen (1985) claims that people acquire language by receiving sufficient comprehensible input, input that is a little beyond the current competence of learners. Most input that Thai university students are exposed to is found only in their English classes or in the general educational environment where they must read a number of English academic textbooks. In English classes, students are usually exposed to

restricted, unreal and unspontaneous input such as tape-recorded conversations and textbooks. Teachers' talk seems to be the only real interactive input the students are exposed to; however, the teachers tend to have tight control over the input. The students rarely have opportunities to modify any incomprehensible input to make it comprehensible. In contrast, the task-based approach exposes the students to a larger amount of input that is rich, real and spontaneous (Willis, 1996). Under this approach, the students process language in use. They work in pairs or groups with the help from their teacher to do tasks. Thus, they get a large amount of real, rich and spontaneous language input from both their friends and teacher. These interactive situations also allow them more opportunities to modify some input to make it comprehensible.

2.   Comprehensible output

Notwithstanding the perceived benefits of comprehensible input, there is an argument that the mere provision of comprehensible input may not be sufficient for language development. Swain (1985) argues that simply understanding the message may not sufficient to develop a high proficiency in learners' target language (TL). She then proposes that comprehensible output is another essential factor that contributes to L2/FL development. Learners need to be encouraged to produce comprehensible output in order to progress in their TL development. In Thai university EFL classrooms, students normally do not produce much output, or produce only sentence-level output, or they produce output with an aim to practice specific language features rather than to convey real communicative meaning. The students usually produce output in a clumsy (artificial) fashion since they try to integrate newly taught language features into their output. This process of producing output and the output itself tends to have limited potential to promote their TL development.

The task-based approach, on the other hand, guides students to produce output beyond sentence-level with an aim to convey real communicative meanings and encourages them to "use whatever language they have to communicate" (Willis, 1996, p.50). The students can choose language features that they have fully or partially acquired at the moment, and benefit from producing the output. Subsequently, their interlanguage will be promoted (Willis, 1996).

Skehan (1998) proposes that output will have most potential in developing students' interlanguage, when the students produce output that has an appropriate balance of fluency, complexity and accuracy. Thus the students' interlanguage will be more effectively promoted under the task-based approach because it guides them to balance the fluency, accuracy and complexity of their output, whereas the traditional teaching in Thai university EFL classrooms guides the students to put the main focus on the accuracy of their output at the expense of fluency and complexity.

3.   Communicative language use

Second language researchers such as Brumfit and Johnson (1979), Long and Crookes (1992), and Skehan and Foster (1997) proposed that "interlanguage development will come about, not through control

and practice, but through the meaningful use of language and the engagement of more naturalistic acquisition processes" (Skehan and Foster, 1997, p.186).

Under the traditional teaching approach, Thai EFL university students rarely have opportunities to use the target language for real and meaningful communication. In classes, they ordinarily use the target language with the aim of practicing language features rather than to communicate real meanings. Activities in class usually do not create real needs for the students to communicate, but just an "appearance of communication which is actually subordinate to the need to display required forms" (Willis, 1996, p.50).

On the other hand, the task-based approach creates a real need to communicate and to use the target language. It "confronts students with language problems which demand an intelligent and creative response" (Willis, 1996, p.50). Students do tasks that are comparable to real world tasks. They have opportunities to process the target language for communicative purposes both as receivers and producers when they do the tasks in pairs or groups, when they report to class, and when they apply their intelligence and creativity in the target language uses.

4.   Language skills development

Hornburger (1989) suggests that there is a misguided belief about the development of the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The belief seems to be that receptive skill development should come before productive skill development and oral language development should come before written language development. These beliefs may come from the illusion that learners need input in order to produce output and the observation that children, when they acquire the first language, speak before they read and write (Freeman & Freeman, 1994). However, children develop oral language first because it is the kind of language that most immediately meets their needs. In reality, research shows that some learners learn written language through oral language, and some gain productive skills before receptive ones (Hudelson, 1984). Hornburger (1989) proposes that "the development of receptive-productive skills, and oral-written language skills occurs along a continuum, beginning at any point, and proceeding, cumulatively or in spurts, in either direction" (p. 281). The four language skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing, are usually taught separately in Thai university EFL classrooms. Their English curricula normally consist of general English, speaking, and writing courses. General English courses put the main focus on developing reading skills and downplay the development of other skills. The writing course normally comes as the last compulsory course. The students are expected to practice intensive speaking skills after they have finished all the compulsory courses by taking extra elective speaking courses.

According to Hornburger's (1989) argument on the development of the four language skills, the traditional practice in Thai university EFL classrooms that teaches each skill separately and promotes written language before oral language will not benefit the students because they need to develop all the four skills simultaneously in order to effectively progress in their TL development. Unlike the traditional approach, the task-based approach puts students in a position to experience real language use. As a result, they have more opportunities to develop the four skills meaningfully and simultaneously.

5.   Focusing on form

L2 research also shows that form-focused instruction is necessary for L2/FL acquisition (Celce-Mucia, 1985; Harley, 1989;Lightbown & Spada, 1993;Long, 1988b; McLaughlin, Rossman, & McLeod, 1983). The research has supported the view that form-focused instruction provided within the context of communicative programs is more effective in promoting L2/FL learning than programs which are limited to an exclusive emphasis on explicit linguistic knowledge on the one hand, or an exclusive emphasis on meaning on the other.

English language teaching in Thai universities tends to follow two teaching models: the first model is an approach that relying on the belief that learners can develop their L2/FL solely by being exposed to the target language. The teachers who follow this model will not provide any activities that will guide students to notice language forms. The second option adopts the Presentation, Practice and Production (PPP) paradigm which is based on the assumption that "language forms - a grammar structure, particular function, or notion, can be presented to learners in a series of neat packages" (Willis, 1996, p.50). A lesson in their classes will start with teachers presenting a grammar structure, pattern sentences, or dialogues. Then the students do controlled practices on the language features taught, and finally they will be encouraged to use the practiced language features in communicative activities. This practice, however, has a weak point. Since the teachers choose language features for the students to learn, the practice will benefit only students who are ready for them. Long and Crookes (1992) proposed that teaching should guide students to focus on form in general rather than specific forms because learners have to pass through a fixed developmental sequence and instruction cannot change the sequence.

The task-based approach offers an alternative to the current teaching models in Thai university EFL classrooms. It allows a focus on forms to arise naturally from the needs of the students while they are doing the task so that students' different developmental sequences can be effectively catered to and accommodated (Willis, 1996). The students have opportunities to notice useful language features both by themselves and by consciousness raising activities set up by teachers. In a lesson, each student will learn at her/his own pace different language features that comply with her/his developmental sequence and needs.

6.   Affective variables

Seliger(1977) proposes that affective variables such as learning motivation and positive self-confidence can promote learners' interlanguage development. He gave an explanation of some learners' poor progression toward the mastery of the target language in spite of being exposed to comprehensible input. Affective variables, such as low motivation, low self-confidence and high anxiety, produce high affective filters in students; in such a case, comprehensible input will not be effective.

Under the traditional teaching approach the students' motivation tends to be lessened by their failure to achieve the desired competence, their feeling that learning English is difficult, and their limited

experiences of successful use of the target language for authentic purposes. The task-based approach will more effectively promote the students' learning motivation and self-confidence. The students' different interlanguage will be more effectively catered for and they can proceed at their own rate. The students will feel their learning is more manageable, and they will more effectively gain competence in the target language. They will have opportunities to apply their intelligence and creativity in doing tasks and find learning activities challenging and interesting. Their motivation and self-confidence will be heightened by the satisfaction of successfully doing something real with the target language.

In conclusion, the task-based approach is superior to the traditional teaching in Thai university EFL classrooms in providing the six optimum conditions for the target language learning.

ADVANTAGES OF IMPLEMENTING THE TASK-BASED APPROACH

By providing a learning environment, which optimizes the six conditions, the main advantages of implementation of the task-based approach in Thai EFL university classroom are:

1. The students' English language learning and competence will be more effectively developed. Their rate of target language development will be accelerated, and their level of attainment will be raised (Willis, 1996).
2. The students will be well prepared for real language use. There is high probability that they will be able to transfer experiences from the classrooms into real communication (Willis, 1996).
3. The students' learning motivation and self-confidence will be heightened.
4. The students will become competent learners and users of the target language.

POSSIBLE CONSTRAINTS

Implementing the task-based approach in Thai EFL university classrooms may encounter some constraints. The crucial ones are: (1) greater burden on the teachers and their expertise; (2) students' expectation of learning; (3) students' learning habits and learning styles; and (4) the assessment system. Implementing the task-based approach in Thai university EFL classrooms inevitably creates more work and challenges for the teachers. To implement the approach successfully the teachers need to understand thoroughly the rationale behind the approach. Their work will be more demanding than under the traditional approach since they need expertise in "selecting and sequencing tasks, setting up optimum conditions for learning, recognizing quality learning opportunities and judging when and how to intervene and when to move learners to the next phase" (Willis, 1996, p.137). They also have to prepare to respond appropriately to learners' divergent language needs. Not being native speakers of the target language means that they have to prepare more than their native English speaking counterparts do. In addition, they have to change their beliefs about language learning and their roles. They have to unlearn their beliefs that

all students should learn the same grammar or language features, and use them in their productions at the end of each lesson. They have to lessen their control over students and "stand back, have faith and let learners get on with their own learning" (Willis,1996, p.61). Though the burden and challenges seem overwhelming, it will be rewarding since the teachers will find their teaching more interesting and satisfying.

Students, like teachers, come to class with some expectations about language learning (Willis, 1996). Since Thai university EFL students are not used to being active in English classes, and lack experiences using the target language for real communication, the task-based approach that encourages them to be active, to think by themselves how to communicate, and to experiment and take risks may alienate them. Willis (1996) suggests that to overcome this constraint the teachers need to provide a clear explanation to make the students understand the principles behind the task-based approach, the purpose of each activity in the teaching and learning process, and how the approach will benefit them. "Once learners are used to a task-based approach and become aware of the learning opportunities it offers, they develop both as learners and language users, achieving greater fluency and confidence" (Willis,1996, p.60). Both the teachers and the students also need to adapt to a new assessment system. The present assessment system for Thai university EFL students usually has not gone beyond paper-pencil tests that assess only linguistic competence, and assess each language skill separately. Ordinarily a test consists of three parts, listening, reading and writing that have no relationship to each other. The Speaking skill is rarely evaluated due to impracticality. The task-based approach will require a performance test and all the four language skills will be evaluated. It will take some time to change the assessment to accommodate task-based teaching approach.

CONCLUSION

The task-based approach to instruction has potential in promoting Thai university EFL students' competence in the target language because it sufficiently provides the students with optimum conditions for learning as suggested by second language acquisition theory. Though there may be some possible constraints on its implementation in Thai EFL university classrooms, the students' ambition to achieve competence in the target language and the teachers' intention to help them will encourage both to work cooperatively to overcome the constraints.

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