Using Task-Based Learning Approach and Drama to Improve Communicative Competence for Students at Pibulsongkram Rajabhat University

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Research Article

Communicative competence is a linguistic term, first brandished by Dell Hymes, that is used to assess a person's capability in using a language. Task-based learning is a student centred methodology that is sporadically used at tertiary levels across Asia. This paper aims to investigate the combination of using task-based learning and drama and its effects on student's communicative competence and to examine student's perceptions towards learning English by using task-based learning and drama. Students endured 8 weeks of drama lessons under the task-based framework and assessed under a rubric, questionnaires and interview. The findings revealed that students' communicative competence significantly increased and a positive perception was attained by using task-based learning and drama. The findings of the study provide researchers and teachers with theoretical and practical information and approaches that can assist further research and teaching approaches.

Key words: task-based learning, drama, communicative competence, students

การใช้การจัดการเรียนรู้แบบเน้นภาระงานและการละครในการพัฒนาความสามารถ
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ความสามารถในการสื่อสารเป็นเรื่องของภาษาศาสตร์โดยผู้คิดค้นคนแรกคือ เดล ฮายเมส ซึ่งใช้ในการประเมินความสามารถในการใช้ภาษาของบุคคล การเรียนรู้แบบเน้นภาระงานเป็นวิธีการที่เน้นผู้เรียนเป็นศูนย์กลาง ซึ่งใช้กันเป็นระยะๆ ในระดับอุดมศึกษาทั่วภูมิภาคเอเชีย วิจัยฉบับนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อสำรวจการผสมผสานของการเรียนรู้โดยเน้นภาระงานและการละครและผลของความสามารถในการสื่อสารของนักศึกษา และตรวจสอบการตอบรับของนักศึกษาเกี่ยวกับการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษโดยเน้นภาระงานและการละคร ผู้เรียนต้องเรียนจบบทเรียนภายใน 8 สัปดาห์ ภายใต้กรอบงานและการประเมินตามเกณฑ์ โดยผ่านทางแบบสอบถามและการสัมภาษณ์ทั้งก่อนและหลังการเรียน ผลการวิจัยพบว่าความสามารถในการสื่อสารของนักศึกษาเพิ่มขึ้นอย่างมีนัยสำคัญและมีการตอบรับในเชิงบวกจากการเรียนรู้โดยเน้นภาระงานและการละคร ข้อค้นพบของการศึกษานี้ให้ข้อมูลแก่นักวิจัยและครูเกี่ยวกับข้อมูลและแนวทางเชิงทฤษฎีที่ช่วยในการวิจัยและการสอนเพิ่มเติมได้

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Introduction

In the past few decades, English has emerged as a superior language for international communication. It is regularly described as a global language and is the official communicative language for the ASEAN country members (Muttaqin, 2015). However, it is widely recognised that Thailand has problems appertaining to English language teaching and learning with levels subsiding below other ASEAN country member according to the British Council (Israngkura, 2013). Thailand, in recent years has been striving to implement more communicative language teaching methods as opposed to grammar translation and audio-lingual methodologies within classrooms. The researcher had observed communicative problems from students using the English language and considered numerous potential causes. Communicative competence has been widely investigated by researchers applying various teaching methodologies; however, the task-based learning methodology is relatively new in certain Asian countries. Furthermore, there is modest research on using drama and task-based learning to investigate communicative competence. The component of strategic competence was selected with attention to cognitive, communicative and educational compensatory factors. The researcher wanted to compare the students' communicative competence before and after using task-based learning and drama for English major students at Pibulsongkram Rajabhat University and further insight to student's perceptions about learning under a task-based framework in conjunction with drama.

Task-based learning

Task-based learning is a methodology which coincides with communicative language teaching although seldom administered in Thai classrooms. Traditional teaching methods are still being deployed despite government initiatives to apply more student centred approaches (Thongthew, 2008). Traditional teaching methods that incorporate rote learning create negativity amongst learners, (Thamraksa, 2004) and stifle debate as well as critical thinking skills (Khanarat, & Nomura, 2008). Globally, scholars and educators alike have expressed favourable comments about using the task-based learning methodology at tertiary levels in education. Students are free from language control as opposed to traditional presentation, practice and production methods (Nunan, 1989; Harmer 2001; Willis, 2007). Tasks should assist learners to become language users, in a situationally authentic manner and or with interactional authenticity (Ellis, 2003). For the purposes of this study, Willis's framework for task-based learning was implemented and used in the lesson plan construction.
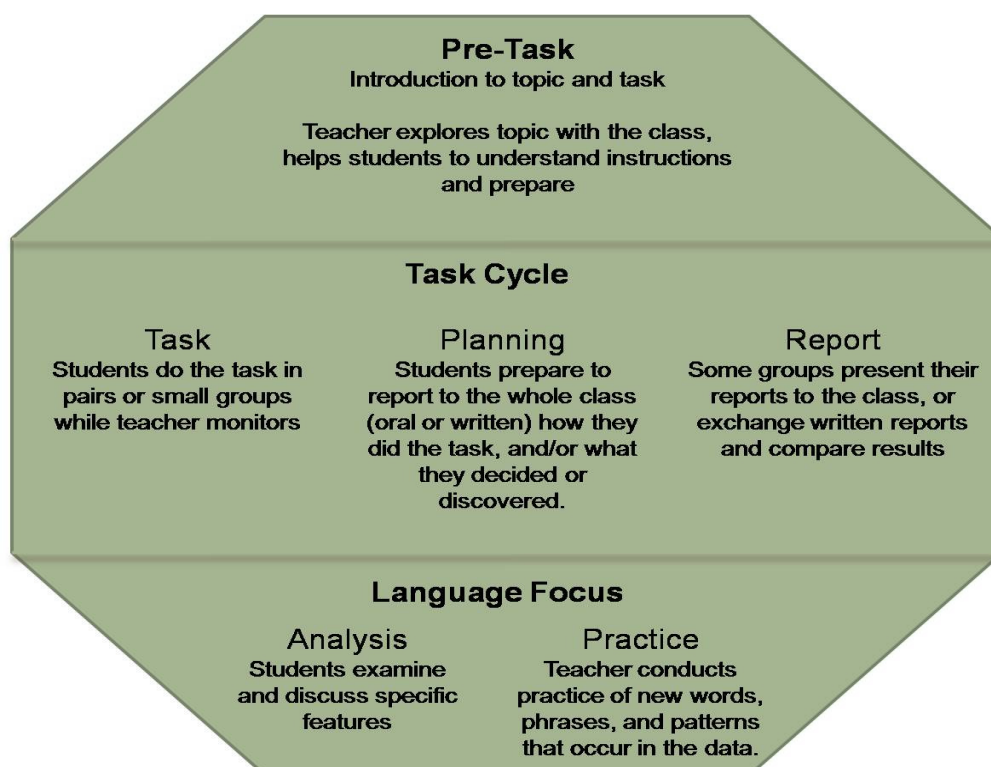
Figure 1   (Task-based framework, Willis, 1996)

Drama

Drama in language terms can be a genre or a style of literature. There are a multitude of benefits to incorporating drama in English language teaching and perhaps even more so in EFL and ESL classrooms. Teaching English through drama sets a meaningful communicative context for listening and speaking and generates students to apply their language resources necessary to stimulate their linguistic skills (Trivedi, 2013; Fabio, 2015). Using drama within the language classroom appears to be a credible method to stimulate both situational and interactional authenticity in language practice (Stern, 1980; Healy, 2004; Ryan-Scheutz, & Colangelo, 2004; Dalziel, et al., 2011). A study by using the combination of drama and task-based learning revealed positive feedback from the participants and reported inhibitions to use English diminished whilst being engaged in drama tasks (Carson, 2012). Moreover, these finding coincide with Krashen's hypotheses appertaining to second language acquisition that the learner's 'affective filter' is impacted by numerous psychological variables, for instance, self-esteem and levels of stress and apprehensions (Krashen, 1981). The compulsory course of English through drama at Pibulsongkram Rajabhat University has a course outline designed to provide language training for students by having them act in dialogues, scenes, and plays. The course stresses the potential for using drama in language teaching; speech improvement

is the purpose. Students will direct skits or scenes with their peers as well as games and activities with dramatic potential.

Communicative competence

Communicative competence is linguistic terminology that incorporates a multitude of components such as a user's grammatical knowledge of syntax, morphology, phonology and so forth. The four main components are usually categorised by educators into grammatical, strategic, discourse and sociolinguistic competence. In this research the focal point was on the strategic competence of communicative competence. Strategic competence was defined as a person's compensation for lacking in some language field by verbal or non verbal means (Canale, & Swain, 1980). This area of communicative competence is often neglected by educators in language teaching (Dornyei, & Thurrell, 1991).

Method

Participants and procedure

A total of 34 third year English major students from the Faculty of Education at Pibulsongkram Rajabhat University were selected by purposive sampling. The group consisted of 7 male and 27 female students. The group was selected as the researcher taught the specific subject of English through drama at the university and every English major student in the Faculty of Education must complete this course. The participants endured an 8 week program of English through drama with each lesson lasting 200 minutes under the task-based framework. At the outset of the study, the participants were given a pre-test drama task to test cognitive, communicative and educational compensatory aspects of communicative competence and a questionnaire to assess student's perceptions towards learning drama under a task-based framework. For the pre-test drama, the students broke into 9 groups. Questionnaires were distributed to each of the 34 participants. The post test mirrored the pre-test drama task and questionnaire procedure. Additionally, a semi structured interview was included to illicit further information about students' perceptions learning English through drama under a task-based framework.

Instruments

Lesson plan: The researcher constructed a series of 8 lesson plans under Willis's task-based learning framework (Willis, 1996). Each lesson design was for 200 minutes and aimed for students to construct and fulfill tasks as well as critic tasks generated from their peers. The entire lesson plans were scrutinised and authenticated by 5 PhD university lecturers for

appropriateness and quality. The experienced PhD lecturers were from the Faculty of Education and Humanities Faculty at Pibulsongkram Rajabhat University. The lesson plans indicated numerous objectives in both verbal and non verbal communicative tasks. The first lesson included basic greeting and introduction tasks in small groups to enable confidence to speak amongst peers in language that is relatively simple in its construction. A non verbal lesson plan proceeded after the first lesson to allow students to understand and accomplish non verbal tasks. Subsequent lesson plans were created that allowed students to use communicative language in real life and fantasy situations. All lesson plans were constructed for group work.

Questionnaires: A set of questionnaires were compiled and distributed before and after to the participants of the study. The questionnaires consisted of 10 closed questions rated on a 1 to 5 Likert scale to establish students' perceptions towards learning English by using task-based learning and drama. Moreover, the questionnaire contained 4 open ended questions where students could elaborate further about their perspectives. Prior to distribution, the questionnaires were inspected by 5 experienced PhD university lecturers for appropriateness and quality. The questionnaires were constructed with the purpose of obtaining data of students' perceptions towards learning task-based learning and drama.

Observation test: A rubric was devised to assess students' communicative competence. The rubric consisted of 3 strategic competence indicators. Cognitive, communicative and educational compensatory indicators were constructed to test student's strategic competence. Each of the indicators was rated from 1 at the low level to 5 at the high level. Cognitive indicators depicted little or no response in communication for 1 score. Long pauses in communication for a 2 score, slight delays in response for 3 score, good response speed for EFL for 4 score whilst native like retorts received a 5 score. Communicative indicators were assessed by a 1 score for continued break downs in speech acts and always failed to complete utterances, a 2 score was given for numerous breakdowns and often failed to complete speech acts, a 3 score represented some break downs and sometimes failure to complete speech acts. A score of 4 was given for good levels for EFL learners for completed utterances whilst 5 showed continued speech acts in a native like manner. Educational compensatory indicators were represented by a 1 score for low levels of non verbal strategies with inappropriateness or lack of understanding, 2 was given for non verbal strategies with errors, 3 represented a moderate amount of non verbal strategies, 4 indicated a range of non verbal strategies for EFL learners, whilst a 5 score

showed native like non verbal strategies. The rubric was inspected for validity by 5 experienced PhD lecturers at Pibulsonkram Rajabhat University.

Data analysis

The first research objective aimed to investigate the effect of using task-based learning and drama for students' communicative competence. The data was collected from the pre and post tests and installed into a Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test for analysis.

The second research objective investigated student's perceptions towards learning English by using the task-based learning method and drama. Data was collected from the 34 questionnaires before and after the 8 week course and computerised for analysis using t-test.

Results

Table 1: Comparison of Pretest and Posttest scores (N=9)

Indicator	Pretest		Posttest		Wilcoxon	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Value	Prob
Cognitive	3.11	.601	3.67	.707	-1.890	.059
Communicative	3.11	.333	3.89	.333	-2.646	.008
Educational Compensatory	2.44	.527	3.78	.441	-2.585	.010
Average	2.89	.373	3.78	.333	-2.719	.007

Table 1 indicated that 9 groups assessed from rubric scores in both the pre and post tests students had improved their overall communicative competence after the 8 week period of using task-based learning and drama. Strategic competence indicator scores had increased after the treatment with 7 groups in the positive ranks and 2 remaining indifferent. Educational compensatory levels also increased with 9 groups in the positive ranks. Nevertheless, cognitive indicators revealed 1 group in the negative ranks, two indifferent and 6 in the positive ranks. An average pre-test mean score of 2.8889 increased to 3.7778 in the post-test average mean scores   indicating an overall significant difference to student's communicative competence.

Table 2: Students' perceptions towards learning through TBL and drama

items	Pretest		Posttest		t
	$\overline{X}$	S.D.	$\overline{X}$	S.D.	value
overall speaking ability using the English language	2.47	.748	3.32	.638	6.685*
ability to respond to a person speaking in English	2.09	.753	3.26	.710	8.611*
ability to continue a flow of conversation in the English language	1.91	.668	3.06	.736	8.535*
ability to use nonverbal strategies in the English language	2.85	.925	3.50	.749	3.973*
ability to use small filling words or expressions in order to keep the flow in English	2.38	.652	3.00	.778	4.221*
overall pronunciation ability using the English language	2.68	.806	3.21	.641	3.919*
overall confidence to speak in front of your peers using the English language	2.29	.676	3.44	.860	6.764*
ability to collaborate with your peers using the English language	2.47	.706	3.38	.853	5.907*
ability to search and construct new vocabulary using the English language	2.26	.751	3.24	.855	6.260*
ability to use the appropriate language in certain real life and fantasy situation	2.47	.788	3.38	.817	5.907*

*statistical significant at 0.05

Table 2 showed the data analysis of the two sets of questionnaires given before and after the use of TBL and drama lessons. Ten closed questions rated on a Likert 1-5 scale to determine student's perceptions towards learning. The mean scores to all 10 questions increased in the analysis of the two questionnaires. Standard deviation was less than.9 in both scores. Furthermore, the 10 questions revealed a significant value of .00 to all questions. The results from the data analysis indicate that the students thought their communicative competence was significantly higher than before the treatment; moreover, students increased their positive perceptions at a high level towards learning through task-based learning and drama.

Discussion

The research revealed numerous results appertaining to the participant's practical abilities by using task-based learning and drama as well as their mental attitude towards the learning process.

Firstly, the pre-test practical observational assessment under the rubric divulged that students lacked aspects of communicative competence. Students showed long pauses between utterances, displayed inappropriate non verbal strategies in relation to the task,

certain aspects of shyness were apparent and a general lack of strategic competence. The pre-test data showed that the participants displayed between fair and good levels in the communicative competence indicators. The post-test practical observation assessment under the rubric signified an improvement after the participants had encountered the task-based learning and drama treatment. Students displayed more fluency in their utterances, completed speech acts and had a greater understanding of appropriate non verbal strategies in relation to the task and an overall increase of strategic and communicative competence.

A study by Bang (2003) for developing communicative competence through drama activities in an EFL classroom revealed similar findings and that the students obtained a significant improvement in communicative ability after taking an oral proficiency test. In this research, despite the signified positives in the majority of components in the observation process, the post-test data revealed an insignificant level of change from the cognitive indicators. There are possible factors as to why cognitive indicators were not significantly different. Some participants of the study reported elements of pressure from each task due to their time constraints, pressure for their course work scores and anxieties that they could lower the scores of their group if mistakes were frequent. Furthermore, it could be said native speakers tend to be more critical on the flow of language rather than the accuracy according to Skehan (Skehan, 2009). Ganta (2015) also indicated time as affecting cognitive indicators stating that difficulties in understanding the task, requires more time or more attention and resources. Communicative indicator scores increased significantly after the 8 week course with students showing less break downs in speech acts and an improvement in completed utterances. A recent study after using task-based learning for EFL students also indicated improvements in communicative acts and increases in fluency were recorded (Albino, 2017). Educational compensatory indicator scores increased after the 8 week program. Students improved their use of nonverbal strategies.

Secondly, the participants of the study improved their perceptions of using drama and task-based learning. The comparison between the first and second set of questionnaires showed increases in students overall speaking abilities, responses to communicative tasks, improved fluency, and greater use of nonverbal strategies as well as enhanced confidence. Additional comments from interviews revealed more positivity towards learning drama and task-based learning. In comparison, a recent study regarding drama techniques to enhance speaking skills and motivation in the EFL secondary classroom revealed a study group's motivation had been enhanced, as well as their speaking level (Fabio, 2015).

In conclusion, students increased numerous aspects of language learning after learning task-based learning and drama. Increases in confidence, improved language construction, development of critical thinking and analysis skills and collaboration were all reported by the students and observed by the researcher. Furthermore, task-based learning improves communicative competence (Ganta, 2012).

Implications

The research disclosed certain findings that could be used for teaching an EFL or ESL classroom and investigations for further research.

Teachers may benefit from the research by interjecting aspects of using task-based learning and drama into English lessons to promote confidence, language building, collaboration, and critical thinking and analysis skills. Lesson plans devised for drama activities in this research may be used in EFL and ESL classrooms to stimulate lessons that coincide with Thailand's educational objectives of communicative language teaching. The lesson plans created using the 6 steps of task-based learning may be used to teach drama or role-plays to students although teachers should be aware of time management issues due to freedom that task-based learning and drama creates. The lesson plans constructed may yield similar results if applied to the English classroom and help students improve fluency, verbal and non verbal skills as well as improving communicative competence.

For researchers, this study could be used for further research to find the effects of using task- based learning and drama, to seek if its effects are positive. The data collected in this research focused on elements of strategic competence by using task-based learning and drama. However, further research studies using the task-based framework and drama could be investigated by focusing on other elements of communicative competence such as sociolinguistic or discourse competence. The results from the research yielded overall conclusive and positive results although in the component of cognitive indicators for the pre-test and post-test group task in drama, the results indicated an insignificant value. Moreover, further research may be conducted to find if such data values are replicated.

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