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TBL (Task-Based Learning) approach and multilingual environment

Abstract

For the last few years multilingual education has become very popular in Georgia. Multilingual classes consisting of Georgian and Azeri or Armenian, or both students have become common at Tbilisi State University. The paper aims at studying the emerged problems related to this issue as teaching English in multilingual classes poses challenges to the teaching approaches, strategies, methods and procedures applied in the multilingual environment. The solution to this problem requires from a certain teacher to find new approaches or adjust the existing well tried methods to teaching English to the students with multilingual backgrounds.

The paper deals with the problem of teaching English in a multilingual classroom. The main focus is made on the application of the TBL (Task Based Learning) method in teaching vocabulary, namely, phrasal verbs compared to the other traditional approaches, in particular, PPP (Presentation, Practice, Production). Analyzing the opportunities of the TBL approach the presented paper highlights the advantages as well as the anticipated drawbacks. The ways of the elimination of these downsides are outlined, as well. Taking into consideration the obstacles in the process of the introduction of the material, then its comprehension and acquisition by the students, the paper attempts to single out the benefits of the TBL approach in multilingual groups. The results of the experiment conducted in the target multilingual groups of ESP students, level B1, has revealed the priority of the TBL *versus* PPP approaches.

Key Words: *Task. Method. Phrasal verbs*

Introduction

In contrast to monolingual classrooms the students of multilingual classes having different mother tongues learn English as the second language. Accordingly, English is the only language of interaction in class. To some extent, this fact may seem to be favourable for the acquisition of a foreign language as well as the development of communicative skills. However, it is overweighed by a

number of drawbacks related to the introduction of new materials, to the development of the communication, comprehension and pronunciation skills, which have been emerged in the process of teaching English in the multicultural environment. We face problems even with assessing the students' performance, as doubt is cast on the learners' ability to perceive the material relevantly.

The multilingual environment, problems and their causal factors

Diverse approaches to the above stated problems have been discussed and studied by various scholars. The most common challenges identified by the present research are as follows:

1. the problems related to the introduction of the new language
2. the comprehension problems
3. the communicative and interaction problems

As revealed by our study, the causal factors of these problems are diverse depending on individual students, their mental ability and learning style. Some learners have difficulty understanding the context through which the new language units such as vocabulary, grammar structures are introduced, due to the fact that they cannot correlate their background knowledge with the newly introduced language units. A number of students faced a problem of finding the right equivalent of the word in their own language, while others find it difficult to intervene in the interaction easily, because they are not sure of their own understanding of the new language. All the above-mentioned hinders the effective learning process, sets serious challenges and problems to be dealt with. All this has shown that the multilingual learners need an immediate assistance demanding from

teachers to use all possible means and methods of teaching.

The paper focuses on the application of TBL (Task-based Learning) approach, as one of the ways of overcoming the obstacles encountered in the process of teaching English to the students with multilingual language background. To be precise, among the wide range of teaching materials on the one hand, and the diverse methods and approaches, on the other hand, the application of TBL method has been singled out in teaching vocabulary, namely, phrasal verbs, which, as defined in the dictionaries, “often having an idiomatic meaning that could not be understood from the meaning of the individual part,” are often confusable for students.

The TBL approach, its advantages, drawbacks, justification of its application

Teachers can creatively apply the TBL method in different ways and through various strategies, procedures and techniques. Out of the two versions of the TBL method suggested by J. Harmer, we applied the version according to which the teacher highlights the language units to pay attention before students perform the task thus “helping the students to understand the task instruction”. (Harmer, 2006). This method is mainly focused on the completion of the task requiring from the learners to use their

background knowledge to reach the aim. Only after performing the task, the teacher can distinguish the specific points of the target language which have been intentionally introduced and “may conduct some form of practice of specific language features which the task has provoked.” (Harmer, 2006). This approach “allows the students to find new language when they want to and to use language experimentally and creatively for real communication” (TKT, 2010). In this way, the students have the opportunity to understand the new language, the meaning of which the teacher elicits from them through the application of various procedures and techniques. As Willis states (Willis, 1996) the TBL provides the learners with natural learning conditions in which people of all intellectual abilities can successfully learn another language. Correspondingly, the relevantly and properly selected tasks and materials (reading or listening texts, situations), provide the learners with the context which along with their background knowledge can help them to infer the meaning of new units of the target language. As it is stated by TKT, this approach puts second language learners in a situation which is quite similar to that in which children learn their first language. Stimulated exactly by this definition the TBL method has been successfully applied by us in multilingual environment.

Despite the different existing versions and strategies of the application of TBL method, the three basic stages (Willis, 1996), which this approach is composed of, are commonly used due to their importance for achieving success. They are as follows:

Stage 1. The pre-task or preparation stage-the teacher ‘explores the topic with the group and highlights useful words and phrases’ (Willis, 1969), thus, facilitates the students’ performance and prepares them for perception of the new language units, such as new vocabulary, phrases, or grammatical structures.

Stage 2. Task cycle- the learners perform the task using the target language and present the results to the class

Stage 3. language focus - The teacher reviews the mistakes made by students at the previous stage, and highlighting the separate parts of the text she attracts the learners’ attention to identifying the new language units that had been used in the task. This stage also implies the practice on the new language units

In methodological literature, the effectiveness of TBL approach is widely debated and a wide range of advantages and disadvantages have been stated. Upon the application of this method, we could determine the following advantages and

disadvantages, most of which coincide with the widely recognized ones.

The advantages singled out in the framework of the present study are as follows:

1. The students can use their background knowledge and experience of the target language in the whole process.
2. TBL approach provides the students with the relevant context to infer the meaning of the new language- lexis or grammar- themselves.
3. TBL approach provides the development of communicative skills
4. TBL approach is centered on students

As for the downsides, the following ones have been revealed:

1. TBL approach is less convincing – teachers may cast a doubt on students' understanding of the material.
2. Less attention is paid to the accuracy
3. The students may not study any new language unit
4. The students' level of knowledge should be taken into consideration for the successful use of TBL at any level, as background knowledge of the target language plays a great role.

As mentioned above, the paper deals with the application of TBL method in teaching vocabulary in multilingual classes. Our choice could be justified by illustrating how

and to what extent this approach can contribute to minimizing the obstacles. For this reason, I would like to highlight the correlation between learning in multilingual classes and TBL method.

- 1 Upon applying TBL approach, students can use their background knowledge and experience of the target language in the whole process – accordingly, multilingual learners do not need to use their native language, they only need to have the relevant knowledge of the target language;
- 2 TBL approach provides the students with the relevant context, similar to a real situation, for the purpose of inferring the meaning of the new language themselves – thus, multilingual learners can be provided with the situation which” is quite similar to the one in which children begin to speak their mother tongue”.
- 3 “Student- to- student communication concerning the lesson concept promotes language learning“ (Krulatz & Abney, 2015) TBL is considered to be a strong communicative approach – thus, multilingual learners have a chance to develop their communicative skills.

The drawbacks and anticipated problems of TBL approach having been emerged in multilingual environment can be solved by considering the students' diverse learning style, proficiency level, their sphere of interests as well as the degree of complexity

and content of the language units. In addition, the widely-used and commonly acknowledged teaching procedures, strategies and techniques can be transformed and applied for specific goals of the lesson. In order to avoid the above mentioned problems the following ways have been distinguished within a scope of the present research

1. Neither the context introducing the vocabulary, nor the task should be difficult, it should be selected considering the learners' level of knowledge.
2. In monolingual classes TBL approach suggests completing of the task by a pair of stronger and weaker students. This facilitates the learners involvement in the learning process. Likewise, the 2nd stage is performed in pairs or groups. Preferably, the pairs should consist of the students with different language backgrounds so that when fulfilling the task they have to speak only the target language.
3. The comprehension of the text is provided by duly conducted pre-task. As for the communicative and assessment problems they can be dealt with at the 3rd stage by performing different types of practice exercises.

Experiment

In order to distinguish the difference between TBL approach and other traditional methods, e.g. PPP (Presentation, Practice, Production) approach, we conducted the experiment in two multilingual target groups. The same material (phrasal verbs) was introduced applying the two of above mentioned approaches

The extract cited below is from the sample text, introducing the new phrasal verbs in the context.

“... He argued that if we grew our own food instead of buying it, we wouldn't throw the third of it away while millions around the world go hungry. So, Mark *gave up* his job and decided to prove that we don't need money to survive,[...] He *moved into* an old caravan in the countryside, *put in* solar panels for power and started growing his own food and washing in the river.”

The stages of Task-Based Learning method were presented in the following way:

1. Pre-task – the topic of discussion related to the material of the task: currently existing acute issues (environment problems, poverty, charity); The new language units-phrasal verbs.
2. Task performance –the students read the text – “A Chance for the Better”,
 - a. pair work – brainstorm your ideas and preferable option for the further improvement of the situation
 - b. tell the class your results.

3. Post-task – a. match the phrasal verbs in bold with the definitions; b. match the phrasal verbs in bold with their synonyms; c. fill in the gaps with the phrasal verbs; d. make up the sentences using the phrasal verbs in bold.

The stages of the PPP (Presentation, Practice, Production) approach was presented as follows:

1. Presentation – the introduction of the phrasal verbs through definitions

	Points of experiment	TBL	PPP
1	comprehension	high	average
2	students' activity	high	average
3	interaction	unlimited	limited
4	motivation	average	average

The best results were revealed in comprehension, interaction and students' activity. As for the lower degree of students' motivation, it was conditioned by the performance of weaker students despite their language background.

Conclusion

Admittedly, the paper contributes only a bit to solving the challenges facing teaching a foreign language to students with multilingual and multicultural background. However, based on the study conducted by us the following conclusion could have been inferred:

2. Practice- a. match the phrasal verbs in bold with their definitions; b. match the phrasal verbs in bold with their synonyms; c. fill in the gaps with the phrasal verb

3. Production – a pair work: a. express your opinion on the text; b. your preferences, the ways of dealing with the issues.

The results of the experiment were as follows:

The significance of TBL method applied in multilingual classes is conditioned by:

- a) its function to make the environment like the one children learn their mother tongues;
- b) its advantages;
- c) its correlation with multilingual settings.

It's worth noting, that distinguishing TBL (Task-based Learning) approach does not mean underestimating of other traditional approaches. Only properly selected teaching methods and their creative application for the relevant language units as well as considering learners' level of knowledge and the complexity of new material provide the efficient learning process.

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