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TEACHERS' AND LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF TASKS: OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOMES[1]

ÖĞRETMENLERİN VE ÖĞRENCİLERİN GÖREV ALGILAMALARI: HEDEFLER VE SONUÇLAR

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ÖZ

Bu çalışma, yabancı dil eğitiminde kullanılan görev temelli dil öğretimi yönteminin öğretmen ve öğrenci tarafından nasıl algılandığını ve her iki tarafın verilen görevlere olan bakış açısındaki benzerlik ve farklılıkları ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Araştırma, aynı zamanda öğrencilerin sınıfta yapılan çalışmaları nasıl yorumladıklarını ve öğretmenin önceden belirlemiş olduğu ders amaçları ile öğrencilerin öğrenme sonuçlarının ne kadar örtüştüğünü belirlemeyi hedeflemektedir. Bu nedenle, üç farklı özel ilköğretim okulunda vaka çalışmaları yapılmıştır. Bu makale, bir ilkokul öğretmeni ve onun dördüncü sınıf öğrencileri ile yapılmış olan pilot çalışmayı aktarmaktadır. Çalışmada kullanılan veriler sınıf gözlemleri ve bunların ardından her ders sonunda yapılan öğretmen ve öğrenci görüşmelerinden toplanmıştır. Çalışma sonuçları, öğretmenin görev temelli dil öğretimi tanımının literatürle örtüştüğünü göstermektedir. Ancak sınıf içi uygulamalarında görevleri yalnızca yapı odaklı, mekanik dil alıştırmalarına indirgemiş olduğu gözlemlenmiştir. Bu doğrultuda öğrencilerin de görevleri bir tekrar aracı, ödül veya ders sonunda oynanan bir oyun olarak algıladıkları saptanmıştır.

Anahtar kelimeler: görev temelli dil öğrenimi, çocuklara İngilizce öğretimi

ABSTRACT

This study analyses teachers' and students' perception of task-based language learning in order to find out the similarities and differences that exist between the understanding of tasks by the two parties.. The overriding purpose of this study is to find out the pupils' interpretations of tasks used in the foreign language classroom and, accordingly, whether there is a match between the teachers' preset objectives and the students' learning outcomes. To this end, a case study was conducted with the 4th grade students of three different private primary schools. This paper presents the results of the pilot study conducted at one of these primary schools. The data in this study came from the classroom observations and the follow-up interviews held with both the teacher and students at the end of each lesson. The findings of the study indicate that the teacher's understanding of task-based teaching matches the definitions in the related literature. Yet, its implementation is limited only to language practice activities focusing mainly on form..It also came out that the students perceive the tasks as a means of revision, prize or game at the end of a lesson as a result of the teacher's practice

Key words: Task-based language learning, teaching English to young learners

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, task-based learning has gained importance in language teaching. It has been widely used in language classes throughout the world. Task-based learning requires students to engage in interaction in order to fulfill a task. It is claimed that the underlying language systems will develop while students focus on the process of performing the task (Skehan, 1994).

Skehan (1998) has investigated the possibility that tasks may be chosen and implemented so that particular pedagogic outcomes are achieved. According to Murphy (2003:353), learning outcomes are a product of three main factors: the contribution of the individual learner, the task, and the situation in which the task is carried out. This means that any pre-designed task will be changed by the way the learner interacts with it. The result may be that the outcome is not consistent with the objectives intended by the task designer, who may be the coursebook writer or the teacher. Similarly, Breen (in Murphy, 2003: 353) also distinguishes between 'task-as-work plan' and the actual 'task in process' and suggests that the two may diverge. Kumaravadivelu (1991) is another researcher who argues that in the context of task-based pedagogy, learning outcome is the result of a fairly unpredictable interaction between the learner, the task, and the task situation. Thus, achievement of success in task-based pedagogy depends largely on the degree to which teacher intention and learner interpretations of a given task converge. Hence, this present study attempts to find out the pupils' interpretations of the tasks done in the classroom and, accordingly, to discover the similarities and differences that exist between the teacher's and students' views of tasks. This research, which is still continuing, draws on qualitative classroom observation data from a case study of three EFL Primary classes in Adana, Turkey. It analyses the issues, concerning the interaction between the task, the learner and the teacher, that emerged during the classroom implementation of task-based learning with young learners. This paper presents the results of our pilot study.

STUDY
Aims of the study

This study primarily aims to explore the pupils' interpretations of the tasks used in the foreign language classroom and, accordingly, whether there is a match between the teacher's preset objectives and the students' learning outcomes. In our study, we seek to answer the following research questions:
1. What does 'task' mean to the teacher who participated in this study?
2. What are the students' interpretations of the task done in the classroom?
3. Do the teacher's intention and the students' interpretation of a given task converge?
4. Is there a match between the teacher's preset objectives and the students' learning outcomes?

Güden İlin
Jülide İnözü
Hülya Yumru

Eğitimde Kuram ve Uygulama
Journal of Theory and Practice in Education
2007, 3 (1):60-68

Method of the Study

A pilot study was conducted at a private primary school with an English language teacher implementing task-based teaching in her own beginner level classroom with students aged 9-10. The teacher was selected as she was considered to be open to change and innovation. She was a young teacher in her twenties and she was willing to take part in the study. Action can be best understood when it is observed in the context in which it occurs (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). This is why a case study was chosen as the investigative technique. It was believed that it would give the researchers the opportunity to study the implementation of tasks in depth in the classroom setting. Cases can be very vivid and illuminating (Miles and Huberman, 1994) to get an overall understanding of the insiders' views on the issues in question. In order to interact with the participants in a natural, unobtrusive and non-threatening manner, data collection methods preferred for this study comprised classroom observations and follow-up interviews. These tools enabled the researchers to know clearly what is going on and how things are proceeding so as to understand and explain why things occur as they do (Bernard, 1988). A total of ten classroom hours were observed and lesson transcriptions and field notes were collected. The researchers acted as non-participant observers in the study, sitting at the back of the classroom taking notes on the verbal and behavioral exchanges between the teacher and the pupils as well as among the pupils themselves. These field notes mainly consisted of a written record of what happened in the classroom. Following each observation, unstructured interviews, both with the individual students and the teacher, were held in order to probe the issues arising from the classroom observations. For the analysis of the field notes and the interviews, content analysis was done. For reliability purposes, the data were cross-checked by the researchers until final agreement was reached on interpretation of the issues that emerged in the field notes and interviews for the observed lessons.

FINDINGS
1. Teacher's perception of task

Before the observation, the teacher was asked to define and explain to us what she understands from the notion of task. She described "tasks" as follows:

> "Task is an activity. It is learning English without being aware of the fact that you are learning structures. Students involve in the tasks and use the language when they interact with each other."

Nunan (2004) defines "task" as a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form. In this sense, we believe that the teacher seems to have developed a sound understanding of task-based learning and has touched on some key elements such as 'focus on meaning' and 'learner involvement'.

2. Classroom Episodes

Classroom episodes illustrating the main issues emerged in the lessons under discussion and the interview data are used to provide further perspectives on those issues.

Episode A
Description of the Task:
In this episode, dealing with a letter sent to a TV program, the teacher and the students first talked about their favorite television programmes. Then the teacher asked them whether or not they ever send a letter to any of the television programmes. Some of the students told that they do and talked about what things they may write in a letter to a television programme. Then the teacher announced that they were going to listen to a letter written to a television programme, "Kids Club". After the students listened to the text twice, the teacher created two teams and organized a quiz show about the content of the listening text, expecting that it would generate discussions and negotiations among pupils thereby giving an opportunity for an extended and meaningful dialogue.

Researchers' Reflections on the Observation:
As can be understood from the exemplified interaction between the teacher and the team members transcribed below, students preferred to respond with either 'yes' or 'no' individually without discussion. Thus the teacher's previous expectation of collaboration and communication among group members was not realized. The following extract below exemplifies the situation:

```
T:   Where does he leave?
S1:  He lives in a flat in York.
T:   Has he got two sisters?
S2:  No
T:   Does he collect dolls?
S3:  No.
T:   Has he got a pet?
S4:  Yes, it is a dog.
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Follow-Up Interviews:
In the interviews after the observation, we asked the teacher her objective in this activity. She stated that her aim in conducting this activity was

Güden İlin
Jülide İnözü
Hülya Yumru

Eğitimde Kuram ve Uygulama
Journal of Theory and Practice in Education
2007, 3 (1):60-68

to practice and revise 'Simple Present Tense'. We also held interviews with students and we asked them what they did in that lesson. Like their teacher, they also said that they had practiced and revised 'Simple Present Tense'. This shows us that they were aware of the purpose of the task done, which, we believe, means that their focus was on form rather than meaning while doing the task. According to Littlewood (2004), tasks have two dimensions that are crucial. The first dimension is the continuum from focus on forms to focus on meaning. The second is the degree of learner involvement that a task elicits. Regarding the first dimension, it can be said that although this task was originally planned as a quiz show, where the focus of the students should have been on the content of the questions (meaning), in practice it turned out to be 'question and answer' practice, in which the teacher asked questions to which everyone knew the answer. Thus, although there was a match between the teacher's intention and the students' interpretation of the task, the way the students handled it, in fact, diverted from its original objective (task objective). Therefore, despite the fact that the teacher calls the activity a 'task', we believe the term 'exercise' (Ellis, 2000) better describes what the teacher did in the classroom. As for the second dimension, that is, learner involvement, we can say that the task failed to involve all students because only volunteer students participated in the lesson and their language production was very limited, no more than 'yes' or 'no'. Carless (2002) says if one assumes that one of the aims of task-based learning is for pupils to produce English language to undertake a given task; then the extent of pupil use of English is a factor in the implementation of task-based learning. In line with this idea, we can conclude that the planned and executed learning activities and the learning outcomes did not match.

Episode B
Description of the Task:
In this episode, the learners played a card game, in which the students worked in groups and chose a card in turn and then read it aloud and did whatever was written on it. For example, under a picture of a kitchen, it says 'where is this?', or on another card students were asked to draw a spider. The teacher announced that the group who completed the missions first would be the winner and then started the game.

Researchers' Reflections on the Observations:
During the game, as most of the students carried out the task in Turkish, the teacher very often stopped the discussions and asked them to speak in English. We observed that the amount of target language used was quite small and the teacher had to focus more upon the process than on the product in language learning. The extract below illustrates the issue:

T:	Please speak in English.
S1:	What are we going to do now? (uttered in mother tongue)
T:	Don't speak Turkish. Work in groups. Choose a card. Read and do it.
S2:	Read the question.
S1:	What is this? What is it in English? (uttered in mother tongue)
S3:	Sofa.
S4:	Sofa. (uttered in mother tongue)
T:	In English please.

Follow-up Interviews:

After the observation, the teacher was asked the purpose of the task. She said that the language focus was 'imperatives' and at the same time, it was also aimed to review previous vocabulary. When the students were asked what they did in the lesson, they said that they checked whether they could understand what they had read correctly (actually, what they meant was whether they could understand the instructions or not). Thus, the interview data with teachers and students show us that the task successfully serves its purpose. In other words, it can be said that the objectives intended by the teacher were well understood by the learners. We might say that the students' interpretation of the task matches the teacher's intention. However, in Nunan's definition of task (see introduction), the students attention should be focused on meaning rather than form. By "task", what is meant is an activity which involves the use of language but in which the focus is on the outcome of the activity rather than on the language used to achieve that outcome (Willis, 1990; Seedhouse, 1999). In this piece of classroom work, the opposite was observed. Moreover, when we analyze the task in terms of the students' learning outcomes, the field notes clearly show that this task offers minimal language use and in some activities, it does not involve the students in any target language production at all. Instead, students preferred using their mother tongue. In her study, Rosa (2004) questioned the applicability of task-based learning to young learners of English as a foreign language. This is, as the researcher states, due to the fact that children's competence in their mother tongue is quite sufficient for them to share meaning with their peers. Furthermore, it is difficult for young learners to understand why they have to express themselves in a language which is not theirs in a classroom where everyone is able to speak the same language without any difficulty. Therefore, students tend to slip easily into their mother tongue during a game or an activity. The above episode, we believe, illustrates this issue very well.

Episode C
Description of the Task:
In this episode, the teacher started the lesson talking about her friend, and then she wrote sentences about her friend on the board using 'simple present tense'

and 'can'. Next she called a student and asked her questions such as "Do you watch cartoons?", "Can you swim?", and "Do you live in a flat?" Then, she told the students to work in groups of four, name a friend, write what she/he collects, where she/he lives, what she/he watches, and what she/he can do, and ask each other to check whether they are right or wrong in their guesses.

Researchers' Reflections on the Observation

Originally, the task was intended as a survey activity in which learners are expected to use recently taught language structures ("simple present tense" and "can") in order to ask a partner for information. The students were supposed to focus on the factual information to be able to make correct guesses about their friends. However, it was observed that in order to avoid making mistakes, the group members were very cautious when asking questions, and very often they cooperated with each other in order to make grammatically correct language structures.

```
S1: Do you like music?
S2: Yes.
S1: Can you…..?
S2: Swim?
S1: Yes. Can you swim?
S2: Yes.
S1… (silence)
S2: Ask where do you live? (uttered in mother tongue)
S1: Where…..
S2: Do you live in a house?
S1: Do you live in a house?
S2: Yes.
```

As the above extract shows, the students' focus, as in episodes A and B, was on form. Therefore, during the implementation of this task, language production was mainly restricted to certain individuals who were more proficient than the others. We believe this issue is directly related with how students view the task.

Follow-up Interviews

The interviews with the individual students just after the observation reveal that students perceive this task simply as a 'question and answer' cycle between themselves and their friends. When they were asked to comment on the lesson, they said that they asked each other questions and answered them. It can be said that although these questions are personalized questions, they do not communicate new information. As these students know each other well, there is no unpredictability in this task. This might cause students to lose their focus on meaning and redirect it to form. So, as it was the previous episodes, the students perceived the task as language practice.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

From the observations and follow-up interviews, we concluded that the teacher is aware of what task-based learning means. However, the tasks in the classrooms we observed were mainly language practice activities where the students consciously focused on form rather than meaning while fulfilling the tasks. Luyten, Lowyck and Tuerlinckx (2001) say task perception is considered to be the subjective translation of objective characteristics and demands of the task. Thus, the students' perception represents a potentially powerful variable that should be taken into account. The interviews reveal that the students who participated in this study were accustomed to being involved in tasks at the end of a lesson when a new language item was presented. The reason behind this might be the fact that, as the teacher stated in the interviews, she considers tasks more suitable for revising vocabulary and structures learned. In this sense, we agree with Crookes and Chaudron who argue that tasks apply to a separate element of a lesson that is primarily geared to practicing language presented earlier, usually involving students working with each other, to achieve a specific objective (in Rosa 2004: 212). Therefore, in our opinion, task-based learning is not a relevant description of what was going on in the classroom we observed in our study. For his own task-based approach context in Hong Kong, Carless (2004) suggests using the term "task-supported teaching", which refers to a weak version of task-based instruction that facilitates the communicative practice of language items that have been introduced in a traditional way (Ellis, 2003). We believe this term might suit our context well too. The findings of this study may throw light on the current situation in our country concerning the use of task-based language teaching methodology. The above discussions might imply the need for in-service teacher development programmes focusing on teachers' experiential understanding of newly introduced English language teaching methodologies. This, in turn, might result in practices where the teachers' and the students' culture for teaching and learning match with each other.

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Güden İlin
Jülide İnözü
Hülya Yumru

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