

Conference Paper

Proposed Task-Based Materials for Writing Classes: A Case at University

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Abstract

A task-based approach leads learners to focus on meaning instead of form and enhances their personal experiences in learning language. The present study aims to design task-based materials for writing classes at university. The research used a qualitative descriptive design through lecturers and students as respondents, and expert reviews. The research was conducted at a private university in Jakarta. As part of a research and development project, proposed task-based materials were developed based on needs assessment and a set of competencies underpinned by university vision and the graduate profile. The tasks were divided into task types, including pedagogical tasks, language exercises, and communicative activities, particularly for writing skills.

Keywords: task-based materials, university students, writing class

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1. Introduction

Writing is the action of transmitting messages through written language in which other micro skills are included. According to Ur, the activity of writing aims to express ideas and convey a message to the reader [1]. Writing is not a single entity; rather, it involves other aspects, such as mastery of grammar and vocabulary, the social context, and the targeted audience. At this point, writing can be considered both challenging and difficult, particularly in language teaching and learning. With regard to teaching writing at university, for various reasons, it also requires a lot of effort, especially in foreign languages. Meanwhile, writing has become part of the academic requirements at university level [2].

Despite the fact that writing activity as university workload, the students often attend the writing class with inadequate skill to write. Moreover, they find that the topics discussed are unsystematic and beyond their needs and language level. The

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materials and practices sometimes look isolated and irrelevant to real language outside the class. Teaching writing seems more problematic; at the same time, universities have a great opportunity and autonomy to set their teaching system [2]. To cope with this situation, developing suitable and relevant materials for writing classes is both necessary and possible.

The materials or instructional materials, according to Richards, are language input and practices in the classroom [3]. They bring a set of concepts to be taught to accomplish learning objectives. Furthermore, Brown wrote that materials are systematic descriptions of technique and exercises to be used in the classroom [4]. Materials as references are aimed at helping both teacher and learner to stimulate and promote learning in the class. Effective materials bring authenticity to the classroom. They meet the learners' needs, learning objectives, and real-world needs. Moreover, the materials involve communicative activities for carrying out meaningful tasks using real communication. Task-based materials, based on task-based language teaching principles, focus on verbal or nonverbal materials as input when learners perform a task [5].

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is an approach based on the use of tasks as the core unit of analysis, planning, and instruction [6]. Here a task can be defined as a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward, such as painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form, or buying a pair of shoes [7]. This definition seems too general and reflects a linguistic view. More specifically in relation to classroom language, Nunan wrote that a task is a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning [7]. In other words, tasks in real life, called "targeted tasks," are then adapted into pedagogical sequential tasks in the classroom situation to enable students' language skills.

Furthermore, classroom language tasks in language teaching, according to Nunan (cited by Jeon; Mao), require specific components: goals, input data, activities, teacher role, learner role, and settings [5, 8]. The first component of tasks is goals, which cover a broad range of pedagogical objectives from general outcomes through specific ones. Input data are verbal or nonverbal materials that have connections to real-world activities. Here activities refer to what learners will actually do when performing tasks. Activities can also be divided into activity typologies and subject matter to be taught. The fourth component of tasks is roles for both teacher and learners in the classroom. Teachers are expected to act as facilitators, participants, and observers

A Framework for TBLT

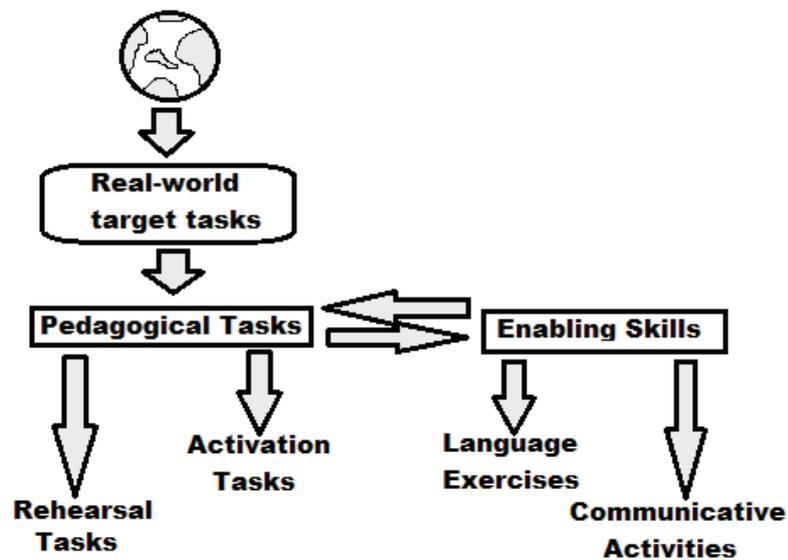


Figure 1: Framework for TBLT by Nunan (in Ahmed RZ, Bidin SJB) [12].

in the communicative process, while learners act as initiators. In classroom settings, learners are assigned to perform the tasks in individual, pair, small-group, and whole-class mode.

In relation to relevant research, studies about task-based language teaching have been widely conducted in the area of language skills. The application of TBLT was applied by Mao in designing a reading class [8]. The stages of reading tasks are all used to achieve learning goals effectively. Kumara et al. proved that students who were treated by TBLT achieved better reading comprehension [9]. Through action research by Widayanti and Kusnawati, a task-based approach has increased students' ability in understanding the writing process and in the quality of news and journalism and writing skills [10, 11]. Moreover, Ahmed et al. also found that TBLT affected significantly the writing skills of university undergraduates in Malaysia [12]. In addition, a few years before those studies, Chaudron et al. developed task-based needs analysis of Korean language program to create a module using the principles of TBLT [13]. However, research regarding the development of task-based materials, especially for writing skills at university, is still limited. Indeed, materials based on authenticity and learner needs are a necessity in the language learning process.

2. Methods

The present research aims to develop task-based materials for writing classes at university. The research was carried out using a qualitative descriptive design at a private university in Jakarta. As part of research and development, it took 92 university students and four lecturers from writing classes as respondents and expert reviews with a questionnaire and interviews as instruments in the stage of needs assessment.

In developing materials, the researchers followed the steps in the design and development of a task-based syllabus proposed by Long and Crookes (cited in Tabar & Alavi: 1) a comprehensive need analysis; 2) diagnosis of learner needs; 3) identification of target tasks learners are prepared to carry out; 4) classification of target tasks into task types; 5) development or selection of pedagogical tasks for classroom use; and 6) sequencing of pedagogical tasks to form a task-based syllabus [14]. From tasks in relation to a syllabus, as part of the development project, the materials for writing classes emerged and led the learners in performing tasks.

3. Results

This study purposes designing task-based materials for writing classes at university. After conducting the steps of materials development, the results of the research can be divided into: a) learner needs in writing classes based on needs assessment (NA); b) identification of targeted tasks for writing classes and classification of targeted tasks into task types; and c) selection and sequencing of pedagogical tasks for writing classes.

3.1. Learner needs in writing classes based on needs assessment

In the needs assessment stage, several aspects of writing performance were carefully selected and gathered as base data. These were current writing performance, and the importance and difficulty and orientations of a writing course.

The first aspect is students' writing performance, which includes micro writing skills, such as sentence composition, punctuation, spelling, using conjunctions, developing paragraphs, and essays. Based on self-assessment, the scores ranged from 2.9 to 3.4 that can be named as "somewhat true of me." This shows that the students feel quite good about their writing performance. They are quite certain they are able to write in spite of some errors, inaccuracies, and ineffectiveness. This is consistent with the

survey conducted by Floris, which reported that the participant students believed they had a fairly good language proficiency level [15]. Moreover, the most challenging and difficult activities in writing classes are developing sentences in correct patterns and with accurate grammar. This may be support what Murray and Christison said, that there is no evidence that simple sentences are easier to understand than compound and complex ones [16].

From the students' worksheets, the conclusion can be drawn that the topics the students choose are various and attractive. However, they have some weaknesses in S-V agreement, sentence patterns, tenses, word selection, and mechanisms. These results are similar to those from the study by Abdullah, who found that the most frequent errors are S-V agreement, tenses, parts of speech, and vocabulary in essay writing by TESL college students [17]. In terms of the importance and difficulty in writing classes, both lecturers and students agree that all micro writing skills are important and significant to learn in writing classes, except for the lecturer's opinion of the unimportance of creative writing in terms of orientation.

In terms of current writing activities and practices, developing isolated sentences and paragraphs through the writing process is mostly applied. Here, the writing activities preferred by most students and lecturers are writing stories and take-home writing assignments. In relation to the writing mode, individual work is considered better than pair and group work. This is not in line with the research by Tutyandari (cited by Cahyono & Widiati), which showed that pair or group work in writing classes was useful for encouraging passive students to be more active in writing activities [2].

In terms of writing orientation, academic writing with a small portion of other view is selected for the writing course program. The content must be adaptive and relevant to global and national issues. In other words, the writing course program is orientated toward having meaningful and long-term benefits for students. It is not only aimed at creating skilled writers in the classroom but at helping them to face real language use outside the classroom. Moreover, local values and culture need to be included as content materials. As Gunantar wrote in her study, local cultural content has become the purpose of EFL teaching, combined with foreign cultures [18]. This is also consistent with Crystal's opinion that English is spoken by more than 1.5 billion people around the world from different countries and cultures [19].

3.2. Identification and classification of targeted tasks into task types

Developed tasks-based materials are grounded by tasks component by Nunan (in Mao) [8]. Based on needs assessment, it can be concluded that the goal (learning outcomes) of writing classes at university is to develop students' writing skills in terms of producing various written texts with a clear, appropriate, and effective logical structure in the form of sentences, paragraphs, and essays creatively and confidently. In regard to input, it is mostly in written language, and nonverbal materials include model texts and audiovisual materials, such as video, pictures, and photos taken from many written resources as authentic materials.

In relation to activities, the activity types are constructed from three principal activity types proposed by Prabhu (cited by Jeon): information gap, reasoning gap, and opinion gap activity [5]. Meanwhile, the subject matters to be taught or activity themes, based on the learners' needs, interests, and abilities on the NA, consist of three levels of users, i.e. basic user, independent user, and proficient user. Moreover, the language focuses discussed and practiced are phrases, conjunctions, pronouns, and transitional signals. Furthermore, the settings of the activities in performing tasks are variously applied in individual, pair, small-group, and whole-class mode.

3.3. Selection and sequence of pedagogical tasks

After identifying and classifying targeted tasks, the tasks are then sequenced based on the time order and the functions of each task. The framework is derived from the task-based lesson of Ellis in the phases of pre-task, during task, and post-task [20]. Here is a sample of sequential materials from Book 3: Writing an Essay on Chapter 4 discussed about comparison-contrast essay.

The pre-task phase introduces students to the subject matter to be discussed and motivates them to do the main tasks. This phase involves question and answer, and describing a picture, as called information-gap activity. After that, the task cycle or "during task" phase gives time to the students to perform the required tasks monitored by the teachers related to the fluency, accuracy, and complexity of the use of the target language. Finally, the post-task phase functions to repeat the task and give reflections or feedback.

TABLE 1: Sample of Phases of Task-Based Materials for Materials for Writing Classes

Phase	Functions	Sample Descriptions
Pre-task	Framing the activity Preparing students to perform the task Whole-class activity Interaction through question-answer type	Giving “warm-up” activity in each chapter as introduction to the topic by delivering lead-in questions, for example: What kind of business would you like to own?
During Task	The actual performance of the task Access to the input (model texts) Consisting of language focus and communicative activity	Presenting model texts discussed including grammar and writing practices
Post-task	Repeating performance of the task	Giving “top-up” activity to strengthen student performance in writing texts

4. Conclusion

The aim of the current study is to develop task-based materials for writing classes. As part of the research and development, the task-based materials are based on the principles of task-based language teaching starting with conducting needs assessment to set the goal and discover the learners’ needs. Then the task types can be classified into information gap, reasoning gap, and opinion gap in the form of sentences, paragraphs, and essays. The selected input consists of written language, nonverbal, and audiovisual materials. The tasks are divided into task types including pedagogical tasks, language exercises, and communicative activities particularly for writing skills. Materials are grouped into three levels of writing skills. Finally, the tasks are put in the sequence of pre-, during task, and post-task phases.

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Conflict of Interest

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in this research.

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