



Task-based learning approach on the academic performance of students in reading comprehension

Njoku Ihuoma¹, Dr. Ofonime F Ndioho², Dr. Onyinyechi Ochuba³

¹⁻³ Department of Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology, Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Abstract

This study investigated the task-based learning approach on the academic performance of students in reading comprehension with the use of discussion teaching method compare it. The sample for this study was 2 students in Government Schools, they comprise the experimental and control groups. The design of the study was a quasi-experimental design. The reliability of the instrument was determined with the test-retest method using the Pearson coefficient at 0.75. Three intact classes were used for this study, which comprised 170 students in all, 84 males and 86 females. The instruments used for the study was the Reading Comprehension Achievement Test (R.C.A.T.), it was used to test the students' performance in reading comprehension. The research findings showed that task-based learning could improve the reading comprehension of the students more. The students' achievement test in task-based learning approach from pre test to post test scores were 98% and 141% respectively while those of discussion method in pre test and post test were 81.11% and 96.34% respectively. Based on the research findings, the researcher concluded that task-based learning approach enhances the performance of students in reading comprehension more than the discussion learning approach and therefore, recommended that students should improve more on their reading comprehension skills with the application of task-based learning approach.

Keywords: speaking, reading comprehension, task-based

Introduction

Reading is one of the skills used by people to ascertain if a person is literate or not. The English reading ability is the most crucial element of English performance particularly in an academic setting. It is seen as an instrument for obtaining knowledge from all subjects and every book. Ituen (2004) ^[7] defines reading as the course of getting information from print, i.e. information stored in written materials (books, newspaper, magazine, etc.). Also, Azikiwe (1998) ^[1] defines reading as a set of distinct skills which include eye movement, speech, comprehension and vocabulary.

Reading comprehension is the capability to read texts, process it and recognize its meaning. This recognition comes from the communication between words that are written and how they generate knowledge outside the text/message. Comprehension involves creating meaning that is sensible and precise by linking what has been read to what the reader previously knows and thinks about all of the information until it is understood.

Comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading. Reading is the process of understanding and creating meaning from text, (Brown, 2007) ^[4]. From the foregoing definitions, reading must be accompanied with understanding else nothing has been achieved. One of the tasks that confront the secondary school teachers of English is how to employ the right technique in teaching their students of varying ages and levels, of skills to read with comprehension, the reason been that the students might have been unlucky to be deficiently taught reading comprehension in primary schools. They have been taught reading comprehension the erroneous way which according to McGregor (1971) ^[11] is unprepared reading skill course books and textbooks, with each child in class reading a paragraph while the rest listen. He concludes that in such a reading class, the children mostly listen to mistakes and poor reading.

Students require excellent reading skill for attaining

understanding and learning new information, majority of these students are unable to do so, because most of the teaching in English language classroom still emphasize teacher-centeredness, teacher-discussion instruction, which involves text explanation, vocabulary illustration, grammar instruction and intensive drills on language form, (Willis, 1996) ^[20], (Jin and Cortazzi, 2004) ^[8]. Quality readers are most habitually tactical readers. They apply a number of strategies to get meaning from texts. One of the major challenges for learners and instructors of English is to find ways of improving reading comprehension. Fortunately, task-based learning is one of the methods suitable for this challenge.

Task-based learning approach started in the 1970s when scholars argued that language instructions should teach both grammar and meaning. (Richard and Rodgers, 2001) ^[17] defined task as a venture carried out as the product of understanding language. It involves learners in understanding, operating, producing, or communicating in task learning while they centre on meaning instead of form. (Willis, 1996) ^[20] defines task as an action where task learning is used by the learners for an interactive purpose in order to acquire an outcome. It emphasizes on assigning meaning with a planned outcome where learners can study and perform the forms of tasks learning while paying attention to meaning. From the foregoing definitions, task-based learning is centred mainly on meaning, where the students derive meaning from the content read and less practice on the form.

Aim and objectives of the study

The aim of this study was examined to probe the effect of task-based learning approach on the academic performance of students in reading comprehension. In specific terms, the study;

1. Examine the effect of task-based learning approach and discussion learning method on the students' academic

- performance in reading comprehension.
2. Ascertained the effects of task-based learning approach and discussion learning method on the academic performance of male and female students in reading comprehension.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to guide the study:

1. What are the effects of task-based learning approach and discussion learning method on the academic performance of students in reading comprehension?
2. What are the effects of task-based learning approach and discussion learning method on the academic performance of male and female students in reading comprehension?

Hypotheses

To answer the research questions, the following hypotheses formulated were used at 0.05 level of significance.

Ho₁: There is no significant difference in the effects of task-based learning approach and discussion learning method on the academic performance of students in reading comprehension.

Ho₂: The effects of task-based learning approach and discussion learning method on the academic performance of male and female students in reading comprehension do not significantly differ.

Task-based language learning has its origins in communicative language teaching and is a subcategory of it. Educators adopted task-based language learning for a variety of reasons. Some moved to task-based syllabus in an attempt to make the language in the classroom truly communicative, rather than the pseudo-communication that results from classroom activities with no direct connection to real-life situations. Others, like Prabhu (1987) ^[16], thought that tasks were a way of tapping into learners' natural mechanisms for second-language acquisition, and were not concerned with real-life communication.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is an educational framework for the theory of teaching foreign or second languages. Breen (1987) ^[3] sees Task as any structure of language learning endeavour which has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedural and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the task. Task is therefore assumed to refer to a range of work plans which have the overall purposes of facilitating language learning from simple and brief exercise type to more complex and lengthy activity such as group problem solving or simulations and decision making.

Task is a piece of work undertaken for one's self or for others, freely or for some reward, (Long, 1985). In Task-based learning, the basic aim of second language teaching is to enable learners to use the target language for social functional action and situational communication, (Branden, Bygate and Norris, 2009) ^[2]. Unlike the form-based teaching approach, task-based language learning is a meaning-based learning approach that enables students to communicate in a meaningful way and the tasks employed in the lessons may be based on real-life circumstances.

One of the main features in task-based learning is that the learners are free of language control rather than the language being decided by the teachers, (Willis, 1996) ^[20]. The task meaning is like a language problem to solve in relation to

real-world situations. A speaking task can develop students' ability to speak fluently and accurately when communicating with their peers, (Nunan, 2004) ^[14]. In other words, in TBLT, the basic aim of second language teaching is to enable learners to use the target language for social functional action or situation in communication, (Branden, Bygate and Norris, 2009) ^[2]. According to the different levels of the students and the different target language items, the tasks can be adapted flexibly to authentic, practical and functional use of language for meaning.

Willis (1996) ^[20] sees a task as a goal-oriented activity which has a clear purpose and which involves achieving an outcome by creating a final product that can be appreciated by others. Breen (1987) ^[3] suggests that language tasks can be viewed as a range of work plans, from simple to complex, with the overall purpose of facilitating language learning. He sees all materials for language teaching as compendia of tasks. Such Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) is believed to promote language acquisition by providing learners with opportunities to make the language input they receive more comprehensible, furnishing contexts in which learners need to produce the output which others can understand, and finally making the classroom closer to real-life language situations.

The role of the teacher in task-based learning approach shifts away from some traditional method of the teacher roles in language teaching (Nunan, 1989) ^[14]. In TBLT, the teacher will decrease the proportion of the time spent on communicative processing. The main role of the teacher in TBLT is monitoring and giving feedback. The teachers are responding not only to the students' fluency but also their accuracy. Furthermore, for large parts of the actual task, the teachers spent more time giving background information.

Task-based learning approach is a learner-centered teaching approach (Willis, 1996) ^[20]. The learners' role is the main aspect of language processing. The main characteristics of the learners' role in TBLT are: the learner is a negotiator, capable of giving as well as taking; the learner is a performer and listener, with little control over the content of the learning; and the learners should take responsibility for their own learning.

Some approaches found in task-based learning is that; students develop a language system through attempting to use meaning-based language. The teacher designs opportunities for the students through meaningful, authentic and interesting activities, Ellis (2003) ^[5]. The students have a much more varied exposure to the language and all of the language issues that they need. Learners spend a lot of time communicating during the task, Hammer (1999) ^[6]. In TBLT, specific language forms will never be considered; instead, the learners are allowed freely to make meaning in any way they like. The tasks provide learners with outcomes that can be assessed. Using tasks is based on building a syllabus design for both sequence lessons and assessing the students' outcomes in communicative purposes, (Richard, 1999) ^[18].

Long and Crookes (1992) ^[10] have classified three different types of task-based approach. The first is the procedural task, whereby the teacher designs the procedure of the task and learners complete it. Designed tasks are more accessible for learners and more manageable by teachers than real-world tasks. The second is when the teachers and learners decide together what task to do. It is project work but connects to the real-world and distinctive enough, with special consideration of the project's world. The third type of approach is when

learners engage in TBLT drawing strong attention to the language as needed. These tasks can be adapted flexibly according to the different levels of the students and the different target language items.

The process of task-based learning itself teaches important skills. Students learn how to ask questions, how to negotiate meaning and how to interact in and work within groups. Within this group work, they are able to observe different approaches to problem-solving as well as to learn how others think and make decisions, these are all skills that our students will need in order to be successful in the real world, regardless of which language(s) they use there.

In addition, task-based teaching provides students with the linguistic components they will need to accomplish these real-world tasks. These include: How to introduce themselves, how to talk about themselves, their families, their interests, their likes and dislikes, their needs, etc. in the right socio-cultural context, by moving the focus away from mechanical drills—although such drills do still have their place even today in language teaching, especially when teaching highly inflected languages task-based teaching focuses on communication and interaction, using appropriate language at the correct time.

Three basic types of tasks, Prabhu (1987) ^[16]

- **Information gap activities:** They are those activities that involve the transfer of information from one person to another, from one form to another or from one place to another. For example, two students might have different schedules, but they want to find time to get together to have tea. They need to get relevant information from each other to determine when they are both free, as well as when the available times coincide with when a tea house is open. This type of activity allows students to request information, ask for clarification and negotiate both meanings, particularly when misunderstandings occur, and appropriate conclusions to the task.
- **Reasoning gap activities:** They are those activities in which you ask your students to derive some information from that which you give them. They are required to comprehend and convey information, much as in an information gap activity, but the information that they are asked to convey is not exactly the same that they comprehend. They are asked to use reason and logic to decide what information to convey and what resolution to make for the problem at hand. For example, you might ask your students to make a decision between speed and cost or cost and quality, given a certain situation and various constraints.
- **Opinion gap activities:** They are those activities in which students are asked to convey their own personal preferences, feelings or ideas about a particular situation. On a higher level, the teacher might ask them to take part in a discussion or debate about a political or social issue. On a lower level, you might ask them to complete a story. In these types of activities, there is no right or wrong answer, and, therefore, there are no objective means by which to judge outcomes, outside of whether what the students do or say addresses the task at hand. You might require them to speak or write for a certain amount (words or time) and you might ask them to use certain constructions. Otherwise, the assessment is subjective rather than objective.

Discussion teaching method is described as being teacher-oriented. Lessons are usually taught by the teacher introducing skills using a blackboard accompanied by a verbal explanation or lecture. Practical work for students is then assigned, followed by feedback from the teacher.

Discussion teaching method is concerned with the teacher being the controller of the learning environment. Power and responsibility are held by the teacher and they play the role of instructor and decision maker. They regard students as having knowledge holes' that need to be filled with information. Discussion learning approach teacher is of the view that it is the teacher that causes learning to occur, (Novak, 1998). Learning is chiefly associated with the classroom and is often competitive. The lesson's content and delivery are considered to be the most important and students master knowledge through drill and practice (such as rote learning). Content need not be learned in context, (Theroux (2001), Johnson and Johnson (1999)). The most common sitting arrangement used in the discussion teaching method is rows.

The Cognitive Development theory refers to the capability of the learners to build up conscious individual organization ability that helps them to manage what they think, say or do according to their genetic maturation and experience. Jean Piaget was one of the prominent researchers in the area of developmental psychology during the 20th century. Piaget's (1936), theory of cognitive development is about how a child creates a mental representation of the world.

Piaget was the foremost psychologist to formulate a systematic study of cognitive development. The aim of cognitive development theory is to elucidate the mechanisms and processes by which infants, and then the child (the learner), grows into an individual who can reason and think via hypotheses.

To Piaget, cognitive development is a development restructuring of mental processes as an effect of biological maturation and environmental experience. Children build an understanding of the world in the region of them, then, experience inconsistency between what they already know and what they notice in their environment.

Lastly, cognitive development theory centres on child's advancement processes, this is essential because children are triumphant learners when they are in control of their own learning environment, this they do by limiting and directing their own actions towards their learning objective.

Research Design

The research utilized in this study was quasi-experimental, pretest, posttest group design.

Population for the Study

The population for this study comprised the four Government senior secondary schools two (SS 11) students in Oyigbo Local Government Area of Rivers State. As at the time of the study, there were six hundred and eighty-eight students in all the senior secondary schools.

Sample and Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was used to select Oyigbo Local Government Area of Rivers State. Simple random sampling was used to select three government senior secondary schools, out of the four, in Oyigbo Local Government Area of Rivers State.

Instrument for Data Collection

Only one instrument was used for this study, which is, the Reading Comprehension Performance Test (R.C.P.T.). It was used to assess generally the lessons carried out on the students, in reading comprehension classes as at the time of this study.

Validity of Instrument

Face and Content validity was employed to check the Validity of the Instruments.

Reliability of the Instrument

The reliability of the instrument was determined through test-retest method, for a measure of its stability. It was tested using 20 students each for the methods, from the other school that was not selected. Copies of the instrument were administered to the students, after being taught the lesson, with the request from the researcher that the students should answer the questions in the instrument as honestly as possible. After an interval of three weeks, the same instrument was re-administered to the same sample to respond to, as usual. The initial and the re-test scores of the sample were correlated separately for each section of the instrument as well as for the entire instrument using the Pearson Coefficient. It was used to calculate the reliability of the instrument at 0.75.

Method of Data Collection

Copies of the Reading Comprehension Performance Test (R.C.P.T.) were administered directly to the students by the

researcher with the help of a research assistant. Instructions guiding the answering of the questions were thoroughly explained to the students. The copies of the Instruments were collected from the respondents on the spot by the researcher and research assistant.

Method of Data Analysis

The data collected for the study were analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions while Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to test the hypotheses.

Findings

In this Section, the results of the research questions and their corresponding null hypotheses earlier stated were presented. The presentation of each research question was followed with that of the corresponding null hypothesis, and the discussion of findings.

Research Question 1: What are the effects of task-based and discussion learning approaches on academic performance of students in reading comprehension?

Research Question 2: What are the effects of task-based and discussion learning approaches on academic performance of students in reading comprehension based on their gender.

To answer this research questions the students' scores in reading comprehension were subjected to mean and standard deviation based on their gender, the results obtained for the two research question are presented is the same table 1.

Table 1: Mean and standard deviation of the score of students exposed to task-based and discussion learning approaches based on their gender.

Group	Gender	N	Pre test		Post test		Mean Gain
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Cooperative	Males	31	50.00	436	72.16	7.78	22.16
	Female	25	48.92	5.04	68.84	929	19.92
	Total	56	49.52	437	70.68	8.84	21.16
Discussion	Males	22	43.18	832	5035	7.22	7.37
	Female	28	37.93	10.07	4539	9.90	726
	Total	50	40/4	9.62	4728	8.57	7.64
Total	Males	53	47.17	7.18	63.19	13.10	16.02
	Female		43.11	935	56.66	14.92	1335
	Total	106	45.14	836	59.92	14.35	14.78

Table 1, showed that the pretest and posttest mean scores for students exposed to task-based learning approach were 49.52 and 70.68 respectively. This indicates that the students after exposure to task-based learning approach gained a mean score of 22.16. Thus the task-based learning approach was effective on the academic performance of students in reading comprehension.

It was also shown in table 1, that the pretest and posttest mean scores of students exposed to discussion learning approach on reading comprehension were 40.24 and 47.88 respectively. Their pretest and post mean score indicates that after exposure to discussion learning approach they gained a mean score of 7.64. This meant that discussion learning approach was also effective on the students' performance in reading comprehension. However, considering the gained mean scores of the task-based and discussion group it was inferred that task-based was more effective on the performance of students in reading comprehension than the discussion approach by a difference of 13.52 in the gained mean.

In table 1, it was also shown that when gender was considered alongside learning approach that the male students exposed to task-based learning approach had the mean scores of 50.00 and. 72.16 in their pretest and posttest respectively, this gave a gained mean of 22. 16.

For the females their pretest and posttest mean scores are 48.92 and 68.84 respectively which gave a gained mean of 19.92, considering the gained mean of the male and female students exposed to task-based learning approach, it was clear that the approach favoured the male students than their female counterparts.

Furthermore, table 1, showed that the male students who were exposed to discussion learning approach had the mean scores of 43.18 and 50.55 respectively for the pretest and post-test. Thus a gained mean of 7.37 was made by the male students in this group.

Then the female students who were also exposed to the discussion learning approach had the mean scores of 37.93 and 45.79 respectively for pretest and post-test, which gave a gained mean of 7.86. Considering the gained mean of the

male and female students who were exposed to discussion learning approach, it was clear that this approach favoured the females more than the males with a difference in gained mean of 0.49.

Again disregarding the learning approach table 1, show that the mean scores of the male were 47.17 and 63.19 respectively for the pretest and posttest with a mean gain of 16.02. On the other hand, the female had the mean scores of 43.11 and 56.66 respectively for pretest and posttest with a gained mean of 13.55, on the basis of their gained mean it was clear that the male students irrespective of their learning approach they were exposed to, had a higher academic performance in reading comprehension than their female counterparts.

Hypothesis 1: The effects of task-based and discussion learning approaches on the academic performance of students in reading comprehension do not differ significantly.

Hypothesis 2: The effect of task-based and discussion learning approaches on the academic performance of the male and female, students in reading comprehension do not differ significantly.

To test these null hypotheses 1 and 2, a two-way analysis of covariance was employed. To execute it, the score of male and females students in reading comprehension based on their learning approaches were used. The results of the analysis for both null hypotheses are presented together in table 2.

Table 2: Summary of the two-way analysis of covariance on the effect of task-based and discussion learning approaches in reading comprehension based on their gender.

Source of Variations	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	P-value
Pretest	1770.21	1	1770.21	31.35	0.000
Group	5618.47	1	5618.47	99.49	0.000
Gender	123.95	1	123.95	2.20	0.142
Group & Gender	5.70	1	5.70	0.101	0.751
Error	5703.57	101			
Total	21635.40	105			

In table 2, it was shown that the calculated F-value obtained for learning approaches (group) 99.49 was obtained at degrees of freedom of 1 and 101 at 0.000 level of significance ($P < 0.05$). So since the p-value of 0.000 was lower than the 0.05 the chosen alpha level, the null hypothesis 1, was then rejected. The rejection of this null hypothesis indicated that the effects of task-based and discussion learning approach on students' academic performance in reading comprehension differ significantly in favour of task-based.

Again table 2, showed that the calculated F-value for gender 2.20 was obtained at degrees of freedom 1 and 101 at 0.142 level of significance ($p > 0.05$). The null hypothesis 2, was accepted because the p-value of 0.142 was greater than 0.05, the chosen level of significance. Thus the effects of task-based and discussion learning approach on male and females academic performance in reading comprehension did not differ significantly.

A critical observation on table 2 also revealed that a calculated F-value 0.101 for the interaction effect between learning approaches (group) and gender on student performance in reading comprehension was not significant. This was because the F-value was obtained at degrees of

freedom of 1 and 101 at 0.75 1 level of significance ($P > 0.05$). Which was greater than 0.05 the chosen level of significance.

Conclusion

Task-based language learning approach on student's academic performance in reading comprehension was necessary for this study, in the sense that, it helped in a better way of teaching reading to promote comprehension. It also, provided some practical means of improving reading, because, from this study, it was revealed that teaching was traditionally based on students following the rules of English language only and waving the practical side of it. The conversations in class were based on either teacher to student or vice-versa, as it was in the case with the discussion teaching method and of teaching reading comprehension. Student to student interaction was rare since the mindset of teachers was seen only as students acquiring knowledge from them and not from their fellow students.

From this study, it can be seen that task-based approaches motivate the students in their teaching and learning processes. It enhanced interaction, communication and practical work amongst students and on the side of teachers as guides, facilitators and motivators and stresses the autonomy and centrality of the students in the classroom. The researcher advocated in this work that task-based approach of teaching reading should be encouraged in order to provide a better understanding and greater performance in reading comprehension rather than sticking to the teaching of reading through discussion learning method.

Recommendations

1. Task-based language learning should be introduced in the teaching of reading comprehension in senior secondary schools.
2. Students should enhance their comprehension of reading by working together in the class, raise problems from their textbooks and arrive different answers to solve the problems.
3. Teachers should help students in extracting some new vocabularies and ask them to get their meanings by using synonyms and antonyms.

References

1. Azikiwe U. Language teaching and learning. Nsukka, Nigeria. Africana-First Publishers Limited, 1998.
2. Branden DVK, Bygate M, Norris MJ. Task-based language teaching. Netherland: John Benjamins Publisher, 2009.
3. Breen M. Learner contribution to task design. In Candlin, C. N. and Murphy D. (eds), language learning tasks. Lancaster Practical Papers in English Language Education. Vol. 7. London: Prentice Hall. International (UK) Ltd. And Lancaster University, 522.
4. Brown HD. Principles of language learning and teaching. Hong Kong, NBER Working Paper, 2007.
5. Ellis R. Task-based language teaching, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
6. Hammer J. The practice of English language teaching. Harlow: Longman Publishers, 1999.
7. Ituen SAU. Reading, writing and analysis of short stories. Abigab Associates Ltd: Uyo. Akwa Ibom State, 2004.
8. Jin L, Cortazzi M. Reflections on speech language. Journal of Language Disorder, 2004, 39.

9. Johnson DW, Johnson RT. Learning Together And Alone: Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999.
10. Long M, Crookes U. Three-Approaches to Task-based Syllabus Design. *Tesol Quarterly*, 1992.
11. McGregor GP. English in Africa: A Guide to the Teaching of English as a Second Language with Particular Reference to Post-Primary School Stages. London & Paris: Heinemann/UNESCO, 1971.
12. Novak J. Learning, creating and using knowledge: New Jersey, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc. New Jersey, 1998.
13. Nunan D. Designing tasks for the communicative classroom. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
14. Nunan D. Task-based language teaching. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press, 2004.
15. Piaget J. Origins of intelligence in the child. London: Rutledge & Kegan Paul, 1936.
16. Prabhu NS. Second language pedagogy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.
17. Richard JC. Teachers maxim in language teaching. *Online Reading. Tesol Quarterly*. 1999; 30(28):1-296.
18. Richard JC, Rodgers TS. Approaches and methods in language teaching. (2^{ed}) Cambridge. New York- Cambridge University Press, 2001.
19. Theroux P. Comparing traditional teaching and student centered, collaborative reading. *Online Reading. Url*, 2001, <http://shaw.ca/priscillatheroux/collaborative.html>.
20. Willis J. A framework for task-based learning. Harlow: Longman, 1996.