

Teaching Modal Verbs: Task-based vs. traditional approaches

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Abstract

Task-based language teaching is considered an effective way to achieve a harmony between grammar and communication. The present study investigates two different ways of teaching modal verbs: task-based versus traditional approaches. To this purpose, an Oxford Placement Test was administered to select 40 homogeneous participants out of a larger population who took this test. The selected participants were randomly divided into experimental and control groups of 20 students each. Those in the experimental group attended an English class six days a week, practicing grammar through task-based approach, while the control group did not receive any task-based work. The OPT was administered at the end of the semester again to see which group could do modal verbs better. A final test of modal verb tasks was also administered at the end of the study to see if all the learners have improved in using modal verbs in the same way/at the same amount through task-based language teaching. The results of this study indicated that there is a statistically significant difference between the experimental group and the control group, meaning that teaching modal verbs through task-based approaches has been more effective than teaching them in traditional ways. It was also revealed that the modal verb *can* was improved much more, while *have to* and *must* were improved less. The results of the study may have a significant implication for teaching modal verbs in particular and language learning in general.

Key words: tasks, task-based teaching, modal verbs traditional approaches

Introduction

The role of grammar has always been an argumentative focus in linguistic field. Grammar teaching has experienced some representative periods. In the 1950s and 1960s, Chomsky's "grammatical competence" claimed that knowing a language equals to knowing the grammar of that language. In the 1970s and the 1980s, with the birth of the concept "communicative competence", Hymes (1972) believed that knowing a language should also include being able to use the language for social and communicative interaction. According to the theory of communicative competence (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), focusing on meaning rather than form does not mean that grammar can be ignored. Instead, it should mean a balance between language system and competence in its use, with an emphasis on meaning (Shumin, 2002).

However, in many countries and contexts, English is being taught as a Foreign Language with a view to enhance international communication. The examination systems in many of these countries often put a premium on formal accuracy and, consequently; teachers often prioritize the teaching of grammar (Willis, J., 2005) as well as Iran's schools because grammar was given priority over other skills. This approach derives from behaviorist learning theories; students are expected to respond using a word or pattern that conforms to the teacher's expectation of the specific form to be used, rather than on conveying meaning or message (Willis, D., 1996). This

approach as previously mentioned is called PPP. Stern (1983) states that most students taught mainly through conventional approaches such as PPP are unable to communicate effectively in English. This problem encouraged scholars to pay attention to the findings from second language acquisition (SLA) and to turn towards holistic approaches where meaning is central and where opportunities for language use are abundant. Task-based learning is one such approach (Willis & Willis, 2007). Most language learners who have been taught by methods that emphasize mastery of grammar, did not achieve an acceptable level of competency in their target language, and this is why task-based language teaching was developed (Shehadeh, 2005).

Thus, for conveying rules of grammar, teachers should think of an effective approach. Task-based approach is an effective way to achieve a harmony between grammar and communication (Sharma, 2011). There are differences between task-based language teaching and structural based language teaching. TBLT focuses on meaning rather than form.

The greater fluency in task-based approach can also be attributed to the lesser cognitive load which this approach places on learners...the lack of accuracy in TBLT might be also attributed to the nature of this approach which focuses on the ability to perform a task or activity without explicit teaching of grammatical structures” (Rahimpour, 2008, P. 57-58).

Thus, why not start with the task, let learners deploy whatever language they have already, and look for ways of building on that, of improving and expanding on their current language capabilities (Willis. D., 2003). Nunan (2004) discussed that task-based teaching is "... the deployment of grammatical knowledge to express meaning” (as cited in Ahmadniay Motlagh, Sharif Jafari ,&Yazdani,2014). Task-based language teaching is learner-centered and this approach can promote the students` interest and confidence in learning (Ahmadniay Motlagh et al., 2014).The classroom activities and the syllabus are determined by tasks (Samuda,& Bygate, 2008). Task-based language teaching promotes learning the tasks in classes in different settings (Branden, Gorp, & Verhelst, 2007; Eckerth ,& Siekmann, 2008; Samuda ,& Bygate , 2008; Branden, 2006 as cited in Chien, 2014).

When the tasks are implemented in a language classroom, teachers should consider some factors including the time for each task, the role of teachers and language learners and the tasks difficulties (Oxford, 2006). Some researchers (Bygates, Skehan ,& Swain, 2001, P. 11) defined tasks as “an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective.”

So as it was mentioned, in task-based approach learners can perform second language tasks without receiving any explicit rules for grammar (Rahimpour, 2008). TBLT focuses on meaning more than form and this causes more fluency and complexity. Rahimpour (2008) concluded that TBLT can develop the performance of learners in their oral skills.

Research questions and hypotheses

Based on the above-mentioned statements, the present study aimed at investigating the following research questions and hypotheses:

1. Is there any significant difference between the outcomes of teaching modal verbs through task-based and traditional approaches?
2. Will all the modal verbs improve in the same way and at the same amount through task-based language teaching?

Ho1. There is not any significant difference between the outcomes of teaching modal verbs through task-based and traditional approaches.

Method

Participants

The participants were junior high school students who participated in this research voluntarily. They attended extra English classes for six sessions per week. In order to select participants, the Oxford Placement Test was administered to 70 volunteer female students, and finally according to their proficiency level, 40 students at elementary level were selected. Their mean age was seventeen. They were randomly divided into two experimental and control groups.

Materials and instruments

To address the effects of TBLT, the researchers tried to prepare tasks which made learners able to use modal verbs in their daily communication as well as improve their grammar skills.

For the purposes of this study, two instruments were used and the needed data was collected. First, Oxford Placement Test (OPT 2001), Quick Placement Test version 1, was administered to determine the proficiency level of the students. Then, the second instrument which was prepared by the researchers was employed to assess the participants' performance in both experimental and control groups. It consisted of twenty multiple choice items. It is to be noted that efforts were made to include the same number of items for each modal verb.

Procedure

The way this study was done is similar to what Nunan (2004) proposes as a six step procedure as follows: the first step is schema building. At this step, some topics are introduced to the students, a context is set and the new vocabularies in the task are introduced. In the second step controlled practice are used. For example students could listen and read some conversations and then practice them in pairs. Finally, they practice the conversations again without memorizing it word for word.

The third step involves a lot of listening practice. For example, students should listen and match the conversations with some pictures. At this step some listening from Topnotch and American English file were selected. At this step students faced some authentic conversations. In the fourth step students focused on some linguistics elements. They could listen again to some conversations from step 3 and check intonations, and they could write some questions and answers to focus on grammar points more. In the traditional approach, this language focus would occur as step 1. In the task-based approach, students could see the relationship between communicative meanings and linguistic forms better than in the traditional approach.

In steps 1 to 4, the participants were involved in more controlled practices, but in step 5 they could engage in a more free practice. Some of them could create their own language first. It was like inter-language but overtime they could speak more closely to native speakers. In the last step pedagogical tasks were introduced.

Results

Based on the research questions, it was hypothesized that there is not any significant difference between the outcomes of teaching the modal verbs through task-based and traditional approaches. To compare the differences at the end of the experiment, a reliable test, taken from ITEFL web site, was administered, and a t-test was run too, the results of which appear in table 1 below:

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the experimental and control groups in t-test

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Control	20	14.5500	1.73129	0.38713
Experimental	20	17.4500	1.60509	0.35891

In order to determine the statistical significance of the difference between means on two sets of scores, the researchers did the t-test. As it is shown in table 1, at first the mean score of each group was calculated, then their standard error of the difference between the two means ($S_{X_1 - X_2}$) were estimated. The standard error of difference was 0.52791. This calculation tells us that the difference would be expected through chance. In other words, the value 0.52 is the difference one would expect between the mean performance scores for the two groups. In this study, the researchers expected an average difference of 0.52 through chance under a null hypothesis. However, the real observed difference is 3.10. Is the observed difference sufficiently greater than the expected difference to enable the researchers to reject the null hypothesis? To answer this question, a ratio of the two numbers should be made. In this study the value of the t-ratio is 5.496. It means that the observed difference is 5.496 times as large as the difference expected under a true null hypothesis. Is this difference large enough to reject the null hypothesis at the 0.05 level of significance? To answer this question, the researchers estimated the degree of freedom which was 38 as well as consulting the t-table in a statistics book. Checking the t-ratio against a t-table in a statistics book, the researchers found 2.021 in the corresponding column. It means that under a true null hypothesis and 38 degrees of freedom a t-ratio of ± 2.021 will occur by chance 5 percent of the time. The observed ratio 5.96 is greater than 2.021, which means that the difference between the groups is greater than the value required to reject the null hypothesis at the 0.05 level of significance. The estimated probability of the null hypothesis being true is less than 5 per cent ($p < 0.05$). The evidence is significant enough to conclude that the observed relationship is probably not just a chance occurrence. If the observed t-ratio had been less than 2.021, it would have been concluded that the evidence was not good enough to declare that a relationship exists between different ways of teaching modal verbs and the participants' performance.

Table 2. Summary of the t-test for the experimental and control groups in final test

	Levene's test for equality of variance		T-Test for Equality of Mean						
	f	sig.	t	df	sig	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	%95 Confidence	
								Lower	Upper
Post test	139	.712	-5.493	38	.00	-2.90000	.52791	-3.96869	1.83131

The second hypothesis of this study states that modal verbs do not improve the same through task-based approach. In order to investigate this hypothesis, all students in the experimental and control groups took the final exam consisting of 18 items in which 6 modals (can, could, might, should, have to, and must) were tested; for each modal verb 3 items were

included in the questionnaire. Table 3 below illustrates a summary of students' performance in final test for modal verbs.

Table 3. Frequency and percentage for modal verb

	frequency	Valid percent	percent	Cumulative percent
Can	39	50.0	50.0	50.0
Could	18	23.1	23.1	73.1
Might	9	11.5	11.5	84.6
Should	6	7.7	7.7	92.3
Have to	3	3.8	3.8	69.2
Must	3	3.8	3.8	100.0
Total	78	100.0	100.0	

As the results show, %50 of the students in the experimental group could answer modal verb *can* much better than the other ones. Other modal verbs such as *could*, *might*, and *should* were improved respectively through task-based approach, while modal verbs like *have to* and *must* were not improved as much. A conclusion that can be drawn from these statistics is that the participants can improve their modal verbs use through task-based approach.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate the two different ways of teaching modal verbs; task based versus traditional approaches. It was stated in the first null hypothesis that there is not any difference between the outcomes of teaching modal verbs through task-based and traditional approaches. So, a t-test was used to compare the progress of both groups in language learning after teaching modal verbs through task-based approach on the experimental group and the results indicated that though both groups were at the same level of language proficiency and their pre-test scores were not significantly different from each other, their post-test scores were significantly different. It showed that teaching modal verbs through task-based approach had a positive effect on language learning. Concerning the second research question, "Will all the modal verbs improve in the same way and at the same amount through task-based language teaching?", the analysis of the data showed that the participants can improve modal verbs of ability and possibility much better than necessity through task-based approach.

The findings of this study are in line with some researchers like Newmark (1966) who mentioned that grammar teaching interfered with language learning and the language analysis. Ainsworth (2014) noticed the positive effects of task –based language learning on business French students. Chien (2014) in a study showed that under task-based language teaching learners can learn TESOL issues better because the tasks were comparable to the activities in the real world. Han (2014) also showed that task-based language teaching can promote learners' awareness and their writing competence. He argued that this approach is effective for the learners' writing activities. Shabani's and Ghasemi's (2014) study on Iranian intermediate ESP learners also indicated that task-based language teaching had a significant effect on learners' reading comprehension. Language learners can understand texts without conscious focus on the language forms. In fact, learners focus on the content of the language and teachers activate their background knowledge to complete the tasks.

As it was mentioned, task-based language teaching (TBLT) is an approach which offers students material which they have to actively engage in order to achieve a goal or complete a task (Skehan, 1998). Much like regular tasks that people perform everyday such as making the tea, writing an essay, talking to someone on the phone, TBLT seeks to develop students' interlanguage through providing a task and then using language to solve it. TBLT provides favorite situations for developing the second language (Robinson, 1995, 2001, Rahimpour, 1995a, 1995b, 1997, 1999, 2001a, 2001b, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d). For example, teachers aim to stimulate their learners' ability to understand and give road instructions, they should confront them with functional tasks in which the students are asked to produce and understand road instructions. As such, the traditional distinction between syllabus i.e. what is to be taught, and methodology i.e. how to teach, is blurred in TBLT because the same unit of analysis (task) is used (Long, 1985). While carrying out communicative tasks, learners are said to receive comprehensible input and modified output, processes believed central to second language acquisition and which ultimately lead to the development of both linguistic and communicative competence (Doughty & Williams, 1998).

However, the present study indicates that some of the modals were learned better than others through applying tasks in classroom. As Leaver and Kaplan (2004) found, and as the results of the present study indicate, with task-based instruction and authentic materials, learners make far more rapid progress and are able to use their new foreign language in real-world circumstances with a reasonable level of efficiency after quite short courses. They are actually able to operate an effective meaning system, that is, to express what they want to say, even though their grammar and lexis are often far from perfect.

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