ENHANCING READING COMPREHENSION THROUGH TASK-BASED WRITING ACTIVITIES: AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

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Abstract

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Task-based learning is a popular topic in ELT/EFL circles nowadays. It is accepted by its proponents as a flourishing method that may replace Communicative Language Learning. However, it can also be seen as an adventure just because there are almost no experimental studies to tackle questions concerning applicability of Task-based Learning. In this paper we try to find out whether or not task-based writing activities have a positive effect upon reading comprehension in English as a foreign language. An experimental study was conducted in order to scrutinize implications of Task-based Learning. Two groups of 28 students were chosen through random cluster sampling. Both groups were given a pre-test and a post-test. The pre-test and post-test mean scores of the experimental group, which got treatment through task-based writing activities, were compared with those of the control group, which was taught English through traditional methods. The effect of the treatment upon reading comprehension was analyzed through two-way ANOVA. The results provide a theoretical justification for the claims of the proponents of Task-based Learning.

Theoretical Background

Researchers have been discussing and asserting that the Communicative Language Teaching, a method which has a worldwide use nowadays, has some important drawbacks. Having been based on principles of first language acquisition, it lacks a proper theoretical basis about language learning as a cognitive process of skill acquisition and a clear research about second language acquisition (Klapper, 2003:33-34). It puts much emphasis on 'communication', pair work, information-gap activities, and intensive target language use (Pica, 2000; Richards and Rodgers, 1996). However, teachers and practitioners have encountered some problems while applying it. One of the most important problems was the demotivation of students because of intensive target language use.

Task-based Learning is a flourishing method which can compensate for the weaknesses of the Communicative Language Teaching mentioned above and which is seen as an alternative to it by researchers (Klapper, 2003:35-36). 'Task' is taken as a goal-oriented activity which has a clear purpose and which involves achieving an outcome, creating a final

product that can be appreciated by others (Willis, 1998). From now on, TBL will be used for Task-based Learning throughout the study.

In order to acquire the target language effectively, learners need to engage actively in processing the meanings of whatever they hear and read. A variety of tasks can be designed to motivate and give learners a purpose for processing the meaning and accomplishing a desired end or product (Willis, 1998). Unlike grammar exercises that are focused directly on the structure and comprehension questions that are too boring and monotonous, TBL provides students with both a framework of structures, forms and/or words to be used and a good reason/purpose for doing the activities.

Since the Task-based Learning is a relatively new method, it does not have a literature as wide as that of other methods and approaches. Nevertheless, an outline has been drawn about its theory, techniques and principles (Platt and Brooks, 2002: 365-400; Stone, 1991; Moor, 2003; Klapper, 2003: 35; Ellis, 2003). Task-based materials have been published since early nineties. The task-based structure and format of the international exams such as those of Cambridge University makes it a must to include task-based activities in the foreign language-learning syllabus. Yet, apparently no experimental studies have been conducted about task-based learning to test the claims of its proponents.

Language learning entails both conscious and unconscious acquisition of not only receptive skills such as listening and reading but also productive skills such as speaking and writing. These skills must be well integrated within the course syllabus in order to enable the learners to have a good commend of the target language (Doff, 1998; Nunan, 1998; Woodward, 1991).

Task-based writing activities may prove to be a good means of integrating the four skills and foster effective language learning because such activities are done with the purpose of producing something, reaching a conclusion and/or creating a whole picture of something within a pre-set frame. Although such activities are done in order to improve the learners writing skill, they are expected to help improve the other skills, as well. Of course, these ideas are just theoretical assumptions that wait to be confirmed. Therefore, this study aims to investigate whether or not task-based writing activities have a positive effect upon reading in English as a foreign language.

Techniques, principles and process / product-based applications of TBL and their contribution to foreign language learning and acquisition have been among the hottest topics in the field of foreign language teaching since early nineties (McDonough, 1995; Szymansky, 2002; Klapper, 2003). The number of materials that contain task-based activities is increasing and task-based language assessment is gaining popularity. However, empirical studies that investigate the effectiveness of task-based techniques, principles and activities are seemingly rather scarce and limited in number. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to experiment with task-based writing activities in order to find out whether or not they have a positive effect upon reading in English as a foreign language. Although we take language learning as a whole process, we will investigate for the positive effects of task-based writing activities upon reading comprehension.

Pedagogical Tasks

The term 'task' can be defined in a variety of ways. Some non-technical and/or non-linguistic definitions run as follows:

A task is:

> *a hard and/or unpleasant piece of work that has to be done* (Hornby, 1989).
> *a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward.* (Long, 1985:89)

Prominent scholar Nunan (1989:6) draws a distinction between 'pedagogic' tasks and 'real-world tasks' and accepts pedagogic tasks to be mainly communicative. He asserts that a task 'should have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right'. He defines a communicative 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* (Nunan 1989:10).

In his critical review of recent trends in ELT, Klapper (2003: 35) defines tasks as "meaning-based activities closely related to learners' actual communicative needs and with some real-world relationship, in which learners have to achieve a genuine outcome (solve a problem, reach a consensus, complete a puzzle, play a game, etc.) and in which effective completion of the task is accorded priority."

In the introduction part of Cutting Edge Upper Intermediate (Cunningham& Moor, 1999), a task is defined as 'an extended oral activity, in which the primary goal is to achieve a particular outcome or product', thus limiting the range and variety of task-based activities and hinting that task-based activities are just oral. This view is thought to be a result of specific purposes of the book.

In the definitions mentioned earlier in this chapter, a task is taken as an activity that is comprised of mainly speaking or communication. Yet, the definition of the term by Willis (1998) shows that it can well be defined without referring to oral applications. She simply puts it as "a goal-oriented activity with a clear purpose".

In another study, Moor (1998b) takes an 'oral task' as "a spoken activity that leads to some kind of recognizable outcome or product" and adds that this definition can be extended to 'written tasks', thus drawing a distinct line between oral and written tasks. He asserts that written tasks can be differentiated from 'projects', in that tasks are completed within 60-90 minute lesson with readily available materials in the classroom.

Criterial features of a task are stated by Ellis (2003:9) as follows:

> *A task is a workplan.*
> *A task involves a primary focus on meaning.*
> *A task involves real-world processes of language use.*
> *A task can involve any of the four language skills.*

A task engages cognitive processes.
A task has a clearly defined communicative outcome.

'Task' is taken as is defined by Willis, Klapper, Moor and Ellis in this study and forms one of the major components of it. However, the range of task-based activities is limited to those comprised of mainly written work. This does not necessarily mean that only the task-based written work will be covered in the experimental course syllabus, though. The task-based writing activities form the base of the course in order to search for the effect of such activities upon language learning without undermining and excluding the oral and even aural work that naturally and interactively takes place during and/or following written work (Yeh, 2003).

Toward Task-based Instruction

TBL is gaining popularity among ELT / EFL researchers and in English teaching circles all over the world. For instance, an online report reveals that teachers of English at China-Hong Kong English School (C.H.E.S., 2003) have been trying the TBL in 'their continuous search for effective, practical and innovative teaching methods'. It is apparent in the report that they employ TBL in the framework of a model comprised of stages such as 'ready to go (warming-up), reading, grammar, real life tasks and writing. It is pointed out that, in their application of TBL, students like the textbooks (which are task-based) and the English lessons better; that their involvement in class activities dramatically increases because they love the topics; that students' communicative abilities and skills are improving and finally that students' willingness to talk in English increases. The report ends with the following questions:

1. With the current language knowledge-oriented exams and matriculations, can TBL really prevail in China? In other words, how should the evaluation system change to really test students' ability to solve real world tasks or problems?

2. While it is easy to conduct TBL in secondary school because secondary school students are quite proficient in English, is TBL also suitable for beginners?

 Concerning the present study, the above quoted questions, which are stated in the report as 'problems', are very important mainly in two ways:

1. The first question applies to the problems teachers/instructors may face while using TBL method in Turkey, as well, because both the exams and the national curriculum are knowledge-based (Vural, 2000).

2. It is not surprising to see that TBL has been successful with proficient users of English. Yet, both the control group and the experimental group nominated in this study are comprised of mainly beginners although they are first grade university students. Only a few students in both groups are proficient in using English, as is obvious in their pre-test grades. This factor may negate pre-set positive hypotheses of the study.

In another study conducted in Hong Kong (Carless, 2003), it is stated that task-based teaching was introduced in Hong Kong as part of a so-called Target-Oriented Curriculum

(TOC) reform. The definition of task within the framework of TOC includes five elements below:

- a *purpose* or underlying real-life justification for doing the task, involving more than simply the display of knowledge or practice of skills
- a *context* in which the task takes place, which may be real, simulated or imaginary
- a *process* of thinking and doing required in carrying out the task, stimulated by the purpose and the context
- a *product* or the result of thinking and doing, which may be tangible or intangible
- a *framework of knowledge, strategy and skill* used in carrying out the task (Carless, 2003: 485-500).

In the same study, it is asserted that the implementation of task-based teaching in primary schools can be defined as the `weak' approach to task-based learning, with tasks roughly comparable to the production stage of a Presentation–Practice–Production method. This weak approach is believed to be more feasible in Hong Kong, especially with 6–7 year old young foreign language learners, than a strong approach where tasks are the prime organizational focus and the language to be used emerges from these tasks.

TBL is not covered in the course syllabuses of ELT departments of universities in Turkey in neither undergraduate nor graduate programs. Consequently, almost no task-based instruction takes place at elementary, secondary and high schools. The knowledge-based exams are among the most important factors that lead to non-task-based instruction.

However, a need for a more effective method of instruction is obvious to the teachers and researchers. Researchers recommend a shift of focus from traditional teacher-centered methods to student-centered ones. TBL is not the term they use for such methods, though. Terms such as active learning, effective learning, cooperative learning, constructivist approach and problem solving are used instead (Akyel, 2002; Açıkgöz, 2002; Demirel, 1999; Saban 2002).

Theoretical Framework of Task-based Learning

TBL is simply defined as 'learning by doing' or 'active learning' in the field of education in general but it has certain specific implications singular to ELT / EFL. Projects, group work, problem solving, workshops and constructivism are some other related instructional applications. In some way, these can be accepted to be task-based, as is seen in definitions of these terms by Wallace (1991) quoted in the first chapter. Therefore, it is clear that there are no clear-cut distinctions between TBL and the terms mentioned above.

Cohen et al. (1996:152-153) accepts that active learning is task-based and states that in active learning, the teacher assumes the additional role of expert and allows discussion and mutual help between learners, adding that active learning has a co-operative structure. However, according to Cohen et al, there is no hierarchical structure in task-centered learning. The role of the teacher in task-centered learning is that of a wise and experienced member of the group.

 Recent investigations of learning challenge the idea separating of what is learned from how it is learned and used. The activity, in which knowledge is developed and

deployed, is not separable from or ancillary to learning and cognition. Nor is it neutral. Rather, it is an integral part of what is learned. Situations might be said to co-produce knowledge through activity. Learning and cognition are fundamentally situated. It is this important principle that allows the constructivist theory of learning to acknowledge that individuals are active agents who engage in their own knowledge construction by integrating new information into their schema and by associating and representing it into a meaningful way (Morrow & Potter).

Willis (1998) says that at the end of a workshop on using task-based approach to language teaching teachers commented that "task-based learning is like an adventure--learners surprise you by coming up with all kind of things". She accepts that TBL may entail elements of risk that can make things quite scary for teachers and offers a principled use of a task-based learning framework in order to show how to minimize such a risk and to help teachers create tasks that will prove fulfilling and challenging but not too risky.

Although a huge amount of theory has been produced about second language acquisition (SLA), the area is still problematic (MacDonald, Badger & White, 2001). However, it is clear that the type and amount of interaction is the determining factor in SLA (Lloret, 2003). TBL brings about the effective interaction desirable for acquisition through structured tasks, collaborative output and relevant feedback. Interaction cannot be achieved effectively in second language classrooms without first determining the forms and structures to be used. Students take part in interactive activities willingly only when the task is defined, that is when they are told what to do and how to it. Both the 'creation' process and the 'product' are invaluable tools for student-student and teacher-student interaction, which is essential for acquisition (Ellis, 2001:60).

Learners of a second language feel quite restricted while trying to communicate because they feel they must say what is appropriate to the context in a coherent way. The need for interpersonal acceptability poses constraints on them (Batstone, 2002). Therefore, most of them are naturally unwilling to risk the danger of seeming stupid. The most effective way of overcoming such difficulties and inhibitions is to define and limit tasks for second language learners and give them clear instructions about forms they can use. In TBL, learners are also given time for thinking and planning, which is another principle that may erase psychological barriers.

In his study on producing / developing task-based materials, Moor (1998a) outlines a 'model-planning/rehearsal/input-task' cycle in the figure below and suggests that any non-task-based material can be modified into task-based activities. He proposes activities such as 'giving short talks, conducting surveys and questionnaires, designing posters or texts to be stuck on the wall and writing or recording class magazines and videos'.

Task-based Activities

Moor (1998b) states that worthwhile task-based activities should have the following characteristics:

 1. Intrinsic interest (personal anecdotes, favorite stories, discussions where there is a problem to be resolved, etc.)
 2. The existence of an outcome or end product (records, videos, posters, etc.)

3. Provision for language input (from the teacher, reference books and fellow students, etc.)
4. Opportunities for silence, spontaneous speech and prepared speech (time for planning)

Willis (1998) hints that almost any topic can lead to various task-based activities and classifies types of task-based activities, among which she includes problem solving and project work. She also states that each type of tasks involves different cognitive processes. In her article on task-based material development Willis (2000) proposes a number of activities that range from 'traditional practice exercises to learner-centered, consciousness-raising activities which involve different kinds of operations, including identifying patterns or usages classifying hypothesis building and checking, cross-language exploration, deconstruction and reconstruction of text, recall, and reference activities'. The following activities are examples she gives for conscious raising activities. They entail classification and reconstruction.

- *Identify, from the transcript and the written text, two or three ways of introducing advice on cultural matters.*
- *Find, in the spoken transcript, eight phrases containing the word I and try to classify them according to their function in the interaction.*
- *Find seven phrases containing words ending in -Iy. Write down any five phrases but miss out the -Iy words. See if your partner can read your phrases out loud putting back the right -ly word. E.g., That's funny because the other day... (the word actually is missing).*
- *Find, in the written text, phrases with one verb followed by another verb in +ing, e.g., ..it's better to stop talking. Can you find in the text five different verbs which come before a verb ending in -ing? Can you think of two more?*

In another study, McKinnon & Rigby (online) state that the primary focus of task-based classroom activities is the task and language is the instrument that the students use to complete them. According to them, 'playing a game, solving a problem or sharing information or experiences' can be considered as relevant and authentic tasks. They argue that in TBL, neither an activity in which students are given a list of words to use nor a normal role-play if it does not contain a problem-solving element can be considered as a genuine task.

Writing as a Tool in Language Learning

Writing has been one the most important research topic in the field of second language learning. However, relatively little research has been conducted about the role of writing in second language learning and acquisition. According to Harklau (2002) 'few L2 writing researchers seem to explicitly relate their work to the question of how students use writing *to learn a second language*, tending instead to address the issue of how students *learn to write* in a second language'. For instance, a study by Tarnopolsky (2000) focuses on how to make teaching writing in the target language more enjoyable without referring to its implication for second language learning and/or acquisition.

An article by Harklau (2002) reveals that writing has a more prominent role in classroom-based studies of second language acquisition. In her study on the role of writing in second language acquisition, Harklau suggests that it is important to analyze how students learn a second language through writing.

Writing provides invaluable opportunities for 'noticing' which is an important cognitive process in second language acquisition. Noticing means being aware of linguistic stimulus and thus enhances acquisition. Moreover, Qi & Lapking (2001) suggest that noticing as a result of producing the target language (writing in the target language) has important roles in L2 development and acquisition. Qi & Lapkin's study, in which they scrutinize the relationship of noticing, (both in the composing stage, and the reformulation stage) to the improvement of the   written   product, reveals that while composing and reformulation promote noticing, the quality of noticing is different for learners with different levels of L2 proficiency. They argue that while promoting noticing is important, promoting the quality of that noticing is a more important issue in writing.

In a recent study, Guterman (2003) studies the effect of a written Metacognitive Awareness Guidance which is comprised of a set of open questions given to students before they perform a reading assessment task. The study concludes that the written open questions task raises their metacognitive awareness, prepare them for dealing with the task and affords them the opportunity to 'engage in higher order operations: to test their knowledge, discover new links, anticipate, raise questions, suggest possible answers, etc'. This study verifies that a conscious-raising writing task facilitates learning and improves effective reading skills.

Task-based writing

In his article on task-based oral work, Moor (1998b) agrees that the problem with oral work is that the learners cannot remember what was spoken earlier and they cannot see whether there is a progress in their speech or not. He proposes recording the conversations for future check and study. Accepting that the learners may find giving talks in front of the class and recording their voice quite daunting, Moor proposes pressing them to do this 'gently'. However, 'a gentle pressure' is unnecessary if oral work is preceded by task-based writing activities.

Task-based writing activities have the advantage of enabling the learners to see their progress since their own hands shape the 'end-product'. They have the opportunity of reviewing the 'end-product' and doing necessary corrections on it whenever they want.

Li (2000) studies syntactic and lexical complexity and grammatical accuracy of students' task-based e-mail writing and finds out that there are significant differences. Li observes that audience interaction is an important factor in task-based writing and states that students produce syntactically and lexically more complex texts in e-mail writing tasks when there is an audience interaction and when they select topics and content themselves. However, complex sentences and diverse vocabulary causes grammatical inaccuracy. According to Li, such problems in the students' e-mail writing indicate the complexity of the second language writing process.

Li assigns students to complete the pre-structured writing tasks and circulate their work through e-mail in order to provide them with the opportunity of both observing and checking other members' work and being observed and checked by others. Li's study shows that the presentation part of tasks, which is the last cycle of task-based activities defined by Willis as 'report', has psychological implications in that it motivates students to write sentences that are more complex and use richer vocabulary. The idea of creating some piece

of work and presenting it to others is appealing to learners and forces them to try to do their best.

Grammatical inaccuracies, which are also mentioned in Li's article, are not fully avoidable. Yet, an emphasis on the form and structures to be used during the preparation phase and, in Willis' words, some 'language advice' by the teacher may lessen grammatical mistakes.

As stated before, task-based writing activities can be used interactively with other skills. Writing can take an effective form of pre-reading activity that prompts learners to think about and speculate on what they are going to read (Knutson, 1998). Task-based writing activities can follow a reading activity, as well.

Task-based Assessment

Another important issue related to TBL is the task-based language performance assessment (TBLPA). A shift of focus from more traditional form-based and knowledge-based assessment towards performance-based assessment has been established nowadays. Task-based assessment is not only affected by the researches in the field of task-based instruction but also affects such researches and creates a need for task-based instruction (Byrnes, 2002). International language examinations such as TOEFL (1998) and IELTS (1998) contain a substantial number of task-based items, which are mostly based on authentic material.

The idea that task-based assessment can be used to make predictions about performance on future language use outside the test itself underlies the claims of advocates of TBLPA. According to Mislevy et al. (2002) in task-based language assessment, language use is observed in settings that are realistic and complex. Therefore, the use of authentic material and real-life language is an important feature of task-based assessment.

However, Bachman (2002) claims that there are several problems with the idea of making predictions about future language use through task performance, among which are task selection, generalizability, extrapolation and complexity and diversity of tasks in most real-life domains. Bachman (2002: 469) makes the following suggestions to overcome these difficulties:

1. Conceptualize tasks as sets of characteristics, rather than as holistic entities.

2. Clearly distinguish among three sets of factors that can affect test performance:

- *characteristics inherent in the task itself ...*
- *attributes of test-takers; and*
- *interactions between test-takers and task characteristics.*

3. Conceptualize interactions as interactions.

Significance of the Study

Task-based learning (TBL) is a flourishing method in the field of second / foreign language instruction. It is believed that it has the potential of becoming an alternative to the Communicative Approach (Klapper, 2003) or that at least it can be integrated into more traditional methods (Nunan, 1989; Pica, 2000).

Task-based assessment is becoming increasingly widespread all over the world. Test items of international examinations are mostly task-based because task-based language performance is believed to be more relevant to future use of the foreign language in real-life situations. However, this is a problematic issue, which needs to be further investigated (Bachman, 2002: 453-476; Byrnes, 2002: 419-437).

Almost all the course books that are published nowadays contain some task-based activities. Yet, their educational value is usually underestimated because whether they work or not has not been fully studied. The present study is expected to find out how effective the task-based writing activities are in language learning.

A theoretical framework has been formed for TBL. However, many of its assumptions, or at least those related to writing in ELT / EFL instruction have not been experimentally tested. Therefore, trying to find out whether or not task-based writing activities have a positive effect upon vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension and learning the structures of the target language is the main aim of the present study, which is experimental. The experimental group will be subjected to task-based writing activities three hours a week for about a time span of three months. The results of the pre-test and post-test will be compared through statistical means in the fourth chapter of the study.

The Sources of Task-based Course Syllabus

Most of the task-based activities that will be covered in the course syllabus were borrowed from Velioğlu and Kandiller (1998). Some other writing activities were adopted from Writing 2 (Littlejohn, 1991), Guided Course in English Composition (Jupp and Milne, 1988) and Open Doors Workbook 1 (Macfarlane and Whitney, 1995) (see Appendix B for activities covered in the course syllabus).

We assume that all the activities that will be done by the experimental group are task-based. This assumption is based on both the fact that they are claimed to be so by the authors of the course books and that they were studied and assumed to be task-based.

Research Design

This study has an experimental pre-test / post-test control group research design. It aims to find out whether or not task-based writing activities have a positive effect upon reading comprehension in English as a foreign language through two-way variance analyses of the results of the pre-test and those of the post-test. Both the control group and the

experimental group were given the pre-test prior to the presentation of task-based writing tasks to the experimental group.

It is essential to control conditions that may hinder the effects of the independent variables upon the dependent variables. Cohen & Manion (1994) argue that this is almost impossible for experimental studies in educational sciences and that most of such studies are in fact quasi-experimental, in which the experimental group and the control group are not equivalent. Of course, the validity of experimental designs may not be as high as that of such designs in, say, physics because of the huge number of elements that may influence the experimentation process in educational sciences. However, it is also accepted that "a good control can be achieved through random sampling" (Ekmekçi, 1997).

Research Population and Sampling

The population of this study is comprised of the first grade students of a faculty at a university in south east of Turkey (about 90 students). Within the framework of the study, a cluster random sampling was planned before the arrival of the students. Thirty students were to sign up for each of the departments of Physics, History and Turkish Language and Literature. Thinking that all the students would have similar characteristics, for they had similar educational backgrounds, the awaited students of the Department of Turkish Language and Literature and those of the Department of Physics were randomly chosen to form the experimental group and the control group respectively. None of the students could get high grades to pass the National University Entrance Examination (ÖSS) and apply for the departments they really wanted in the first place and they would apply for the above-mentioned departments with low grades as a last resort. Because of their similar low grades and the educational system of Turkey, none of the students were expected to have been graduated from any of either Science High Schools or Anatolian High Schools, where English is taught intensively or from the foreign language sections of general high schools.

Twenty-eight students applied and signed up for each of the two departments. However, it happened that the Department of Turkish Language and Literature (experimental group) had five Anatolian High School graduates and the Department of Physics had three. As was planned beforehand, both the experimental group and the control group were given the pre-test in the first week after their arrival.

Data Collection Instrument

The reading part of a sample Cambridge Key English Test (KET) (UCLES, 1996) was given to samples as the pre-test. This part of the test was also used as the post-test at the end of the course. The test, which is comprised of eight parts, was chosen because of the fact that it contains task-based assessment items and because it is believed to be valid and reliable since it is prepared by testing experts to be used professionally all over the world. The explanation part of the sample test shows that it matches well with the aims of the present study as a data collection tool. The explanations and a close analysis of the test items showed

that most of the items are formed of authentic material and are task-based. It is also apparent that the items are well constructed.

The grades obtained from the pre-test and post-test for each of the above mentioned parts were analyzed through two-way ANOVA to find out whether or not the task-based instruction has a positive effect upon reading comprehension in English as a foreign language. That is, test results were compared to see whether it would enhance reading comprehension.

Procedure, Data Collection and Analysis

The control group received instruction through traditional methods and techniques as was planned beforehand. That is, the students in the control group were taught grammatical structures of the target language. The course, which lasted for ten weeks and during which the control group was taught three hours a week, covered short reading passages and exercises, as well. The control group had a course book to follow, namely Full Steam Ahead (Çakır et al.), a grammar book prepared especially for university students.

The experimental group got three hours of task-based instruction each week besides the three-hour grammar teaching. This group, too, studied Full Steam Ahead during the grammar course. The task-based instruction was mainly comprised of writing activities. The TBL framework proposed by Willis (1998) was adapted and kept in mind while doing the activities. That is, after the presentation of a similar task, useful words and phrases, the students were asked to study the sample and write about the topic given to them. The reporting stage, which was oral, would follow the writing task and the forms, structures and patterns would be analyzed. The writing task was the most important part of the lesson. The students worked mostly in pairs and sometimes in larger groups.

Both the control group and the experimental group were given a pre-test before the treatment for the experimental group. The results of the pre-test were analyzed immediately through t test to see whether or not there was a statistically significant difference between the mean grades of the two groups, which demonstrated that there was no significant difference. Both groups were given the same test as a post-test just after a ten-week task-based instruction, which was comprised of task-based writing activities, to the experimental group.

The mean scores of the pre-test and the post-test for both groups were analyzed through two-way ANOVA to see whether or not there was a significant improvement on behalf of the experimental group and thus to understand whether or not task-based writing activities had a positive effect upon reading comprehension in English as a foreign language. The f values were analyzed at 0, 05 sig. level (p).

Effect of Task-based Writing Activities upon Reading Comprehension

The control group and the experimental group had to be at the same level of language proficiency before the application of task-based writing activities to the experimental group in order to reach reliable conclusions. Of course, this is not a must for pre-test / post-test control

group research design, since a statistical comparison is possible even if the two groups have different levels of proficiency. Yet, the level of proficiency could be one of the factors that could affect the results and thus be taken as one of the variables. Actually task-based instruction may have better results with proficient learners of foreign language than with beginners. The present study is based on the research question that whether or not task-based instruction to beginners has a positive effect upon reading comprehension in English as a foreign language. Therefore, it was important to see that both the control group and the experimental group had almost the same level of proficiency.

	N	Mean	sd	t	p
Control Group	28	15,21	10,67		
Experimental Group	28	15,6	10,45	0,13	0,89

Table 1 Pre-test mean scores, standart deviation, t and p values for the control group and the experimental group

Analyses of pre-test scores revealed that there was no statistically significant difference between the control group and the experimental group before the study (t = 0,13; p > 0,05) The lack of a significant difference between the mean scores of the control group for the pre-test and post-test despite the grammar instruction they received through traditional methods may be a result of unfamiliarity of test items, which were mainly task-based and the unfamiliar instructions for each part of the test (Table 1).

The main hypothesis of the study was that task-based writing activities have a positive effect upon reading comprehension. Comparing the experimental group's pre-test mean score with its post-test mean score, it is easily observed that learners have done the section related to reading comprehension in the post-test far better than they did in the pre-test (Table 2).

Source of Variance	Sum of Squares	df	Mean of Square	F	p
Between-Subjects					
Intercept	1784,009	1	1784,009	170,577	.000
Group	55,723	1	55,723	5,328	.025
Error	564,768	54	10,459		
Within-Subjects					
Pre-test x Post-test	16,59	1	16,59	9,876	.003
Group x Test	55,723	1	55,723	33,335	.000
Error	90,268	54	1,672		

Table 2 Variance analysis of mean scores for the reading section of the test

It is obvious in Table 2 that the hypothesis of the study is verified. That is, task-based writing activities have a positive effect upon reading comprehension (F = 33,335; p < 0,05). This means that there has been a substantial change in the independent variable, that is, in this case in reading comprehension.

Discussion of the Results

Comparing the pre-test and post-test mean scores of the control group and the experimental group through two-way ANOVA, it was observed that there was a statistically significant difference. That is, the treatment (the application of task-based writing activities) affected the dependent variable (reading comprehension in English as a foreign language). Thus, the hypothesis of the study was verified, which means that task-based writing activities have a positive effect upon reading comprehension.

Actually, a significant increase in the post-test mean grade of the control group was also expected, since during the same period of instruction the control group has been taught English through traditional methods. Of course, such an increase would not mean that the main hypothesis of the study was negated. If there were a significant difference on behalf of the control group, then again, the post-test mean scores of both groups could be compared and a reliable conclusion could be drawn.

Overall statistical analysis of results showed that there was no statistically significant improvement on behalf of the control group. A closer and more detailed analysis revealed that there has been some change, though. There has been a significant improvement in the scores obtained at sections related to reading. It is obvious that traditional instruction of grammar of the target language has brought about an improvement in the sections related to reading comprehension.

The findings and analyses above demonstrate that task-based learning is quite applicable and fruitful with even beginners. The question "While it is easy to conduct TBL in secondary school because secondary school students are quite proficient in English, is TBL also suitable for beginners?", which is raised at the end of the C.H.E.S. report (2003), is thus answered positively in some way. Obviously, none of the sub-skills of language learning is favored over others in C.H.E.S. report and task-based activities covered necessitate use of all four major language skills; that is listening, speaking, reading and writing, whereas the present study focuses on task-based writing activities and searches for the effects of task-based writing upon reading comprehension. It can well be argued that age factor must be taken into account in task-based writing applications since although the research samples of this study were beginners; they were 19/22-year-old first-year university students. Nevertheless, findings of the present study are parallel to those put forward in C.H.E.S. report in that in the application of TBL students like the English lessons better and that their involvement in class activities increases because they love the topics and the pre-defined writing tasks.

The research findings may also lead to the idea that TBL may easily prevail in countries like Turkey and China, where the evaluation system is quite traditional and the exams are knowledge-oriented and thus be accepted as a partial answer to another question concerning the applicability of TBL in a knowledge-oriented evaluation system, which also takes place in C.H.E.S. report. Actually, the research samples had no prospect of taking a task-based exam or even any type of exams before the post-test, since they were freshmen and certainly were not told about the ultimate aim of the task-based course syllabus.

Contrary to Carless's assertion (2003: 485-500) that the `weak' approach to task-based learning is more feasible, than a strong approach, TBL applications of the present study can

be taken as a strong approach and can be claimed to be quite effective when the results are taken into account. Here again, 'age' may be the determining factor. The weak approach "with tasks roughly comparable to the production stage of a Presentation–Practice–Production method" in Carless's words, may produce better results with 6–7 year old learners, whereas the strong approach, "where tasks are the prime organizational focus and the language to be used emerges from these tasks" may be more effective with older students as is implied in this study.

Conclusion

The main aim of this study was to find out whether or not task-based writing activities have a positive effect upon reading comprehension in English as a foreign language. A directional hypothesis was formed in order to be able to draw overall conclusions about the effectiveness of TBL upon language learning.

An experimental pre-test / post-test control group research design was adopted to check whether the hypothesis was verified or not. Students were randomly chosen to form the experimental group and the control group respectively. Each department had 28 students. Both the control group and the experimental group were given the pre-test prior to the presentation of task-based writing tasks to the experimental group. Following the application of task-based writing activities to the experimental group, both groups took the post-test.

The reading part of a sample of Cambridge Key English Test (KET) (UCLES, 1996) was chosen as the data collection tool. The same test was used for both the pre-test and the post-test, believing that the time span between the application of both tests was long enough to minimize the effect of familiarity to the test items upon scores. The main reason for choosing KET was the fact that it contained task-based assessment items and that it was highly valid and reliable since it was prepared by assessment experts to be used professionally all over the world.

Statistical comparison of the scores of both groups taken at the pre-test the post-test formed the core of the study. First, scores of the experimental group and the control group taken at the pre-test were compared and it was found out that both groups did almost the same with the mean scores of 15,6 and 15,2 respectively, which did not show a statistically significant difference.

The mean scores of the pre-test and the post-test for both groups were analyzed through two-way ANOVA. The f values were analyzed at 0, 05 significance level (p). Two-way variance analyses of post-test results verified that there is a statistically significant improvement on behalf of the experimental group.

Future studies can be based on research about the effect of other kinds of task-based activities upon foreign language learning. Task-based reading, listening and speaking activities can be taken as separate entities and the way they can be used effectively in line with parameters of TBL can be subjected to further research.

Research about each of the four stages of TBL (pre-task, task, planning and report) proposed and defined by Willis may provide insights into the essence of TBL. Student-student and student-teacher interaction during TBL process can also be observed and analyzed through research techniques such as discourse analyses. Teacher role during TBL course process is an important issue that waits to be studied, as well.

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