



# EXPLORING ‘THE BRAIN IS WIDER THAN THE SKY’ BY EMILY DICKINSON THROUGH TASK-BASED LEARNING IN EFL CLASSES

(EMILY DICKINSON’UN ‘THE BRAIN IS WIDER THAN THE SKY’ ADLI ESERİNİN YABANCI DİL ÖĞRETİMİ SINIFLARINDA GÖREV TABANLI ÖĞRETİM İLE AÇIMLAMASI)

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## ABSTRACT

English as a foreign language is learnt and taught for a variety of purposes over vast territories all around the world. Successful classroom learning derives from productive learning contexts established and organized by language teachers who are well knowledgeable about learning theory, linguistic theory, classroom techniques and different methodological approaches (Chastain, 1998). However, the main challenge lies in incorporating more communicative activities into their classes. Since teachers cannot expect learners to learn to communicate without providing the necessary classroom applications, it is of crucial importance to drag learners into relatively more active roles in language classes, where they have their own responsibility for active participation. In order to involve language learners in language learning process thoroughly, bringing literature, specifically poetry, is a worthwhile endeavor since reading poetry embodies language teachers and language learners alike in collaboratively interpreting and analyzing even during the selection process. Through task-based learning, which highlights its advantages over traditional (PPP) Present- Practice- Produce approach, learners will be free of language control through the procedure stage; thus they will be able to use all their language resources rather than isolating one language item and practicing it. This study focuses on presenting a specific poem of Emily Dickinson through the stages of task-based learning (TBL) with the aim of providing intermediate level language learners with the language that is personalized and relevant to them. Through the stages of the TBL, the study aims to purify the use of poetry in language classes in order to develop an authentic context, in which learners must use all their resources to complete the tasks. A sample lesson plan is also suggested.

**Key words:** Poetry in language classes, task-based instruction, communicative activities.

## ÖZET

Yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğretimi dünya çapında çok geniş bir sahada gerçekleşmektedir. Başarılı sınıf uygulamaları farklı dilbilim teorileri, sınıf içi öğretim teknikleri ve farklı metodik yaklaşımlar konusunda yetkin öğretmenler tarafından öğrenciyi üretken olmaya sevk eden bağlamlar sayesinde gerçekleşmektedir (Chastain, 1988). Ancak, ana sorun bu öğretmenlerin iletişimsel aktiviteleri derslerine dahil etmeleri konusunda ortaya çıkmaktadır. Yabancı dil öğretmenlerinin gerekli sınıf içi uygulamaları derslerinde uygulamadan öğrencilerinden hedef dilde iletişim gerçekleştirmelerini bekleyemeyecekleri için, öğrencileri yabancı dil sınıflarında kendi öğrenmelerinin sorumluluğunu alacakları ve aktif katılımı gerçekleştirecekleri rollere yönltilmeleri hayati önem taşımaktadır. Yabancı dil öğrencilerini dil öğrenim süreçlerine tamamen dahil etmek için edebiyatı, hatta spesifik olarak şiiri yabancı dil derslerine dahil etmek yabancı dil öğretmenleri ve öğrencilerini şiirlerin analiz, yorumlama ve hatta çalışılacak şiirlerin seçimi konusunda dahi ortaklaşa çalışacakları bir sürece yönlendireceği için çok faydalı bir girişimdir. Geleneksel sunu, tekrar ve üretimi dikte eden dil öğretim yöntemlerine karşı birçok avantajı bulunan görev tabanlı öğrenme yaklaşımıyla öğrenciler süreç boyunca dil kontrolü konusunda daha özgür olacakları için dile ait kısıtlı bir maddeyi izole edip, onu tekrar etmek yerine öğrendikleri tüm dilsel kaynaklarını kullanabileceklerdir. Bu çalışma orta seviye İngilizce bilen yabancı dil öğrencilerinin dili kendi hayatlarıyla ilişkilendirip kullanabilmeleri amacıyla Emily Dickinson’un ‘The Brain is Wider than the Sky’ adlı şiirinin görev tabanlı öğrenme yaklaşımının aşamalarıyla analizine odaklanmaktadır. Araştırma, görev tabanlı öğrenme yaklaşımının safhalarıyla öğrencilerin görevleri tamamlamak, gerçekçi bir bağlam sağlamak ve tüm dilsel kaynaklarını kullanabilmeleri amacıyla yabancı dil sınıflarında şiir kullanımı konusunu irdelemektedir. Örnek bir ders planı da sunulmuştur.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Dil sınıflarında şiir kullanımı, görev tabanlı öğrenme yaklaşımı, iletişimsel aktiviteler.

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## **WHY TASK-BASED INSTRUCTION THROUGH POETRY?**

Willis (1990: 14) contends that language learners could gain confidence and satisfaction from poetry activities since they enjoy learning songs and poems by heart. Even adults occasionally feel this helps them to improve their pronunciation, raise their awareness of phonological features. Thus, they will gain a higher degree of challenge, both linguistic and cognitive. McRae (1991:126) suggests that for good language learning to take place, a teacher needs any text that encourages or invites interaction with the world of ideas, a text that 'affirms, confirms and expands the indispensable human capacity to read the world'. It is significant for texts to provide good potential for a variety of classroom activities, in order to give students more chance to gain a genuine familiarity with any work as a whole. Most importantly, the texts should have the capacity to engage the interest of the student (Ainy, 2008). Goodwyn and Findlay (1999) also point out that teachers teach best when they are enthused about a text/topic they are teaching. Moreover, Widdowson (1989) also defends that poetry has characteristics as a use of language which make it especially well qualified in assisting learners with the ability to use language, to put linguistic forms to the service of meaning. Moreover, Maley and Duff argue that poetry is universal among all human beings. The themes in the poems such as love, death, and nature are common to all cultures, and the conventions. Besides, the language of poetry is familiar, which is readily recognizable to foreign language learners from their mother tongue experience.

In an EFL situation language learners often find it difficult to transfer classroom language into real-life situations since the traditional type of language activities tend to eliminate the abstract nature of commonly used language activities. As Prabhu (1987) defends the internal grammatical systems employed by native speakers of a language tend to include a vastly more complex system than that of any syllabus, which could be incorporated into any grammatical syllabus. While some learners are more sensitive to memorization, others could be better at grammar. Therefore, there is an urgent need for language teachers to create natural learning conditions in the classroom, where all learners will learn (Willis, 2009). Moreover, Schmidt (1990) emphasizes the need to notice, process language in the mind in order to make them an integral part of language learners' language system. For this reason, Chastain (1988: 332) defends that it is an important consideration for language teachers to create classroom activities in which context, meaning and function are interwoven. Willis (1996) also argues that task-based learning framework provides considerably valuable opportunities for language learners to experiment with the language, both in oral and written language. Carol (qtd. in Willis, 2009) also acknowledges the need to nullify aptitude differences.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the current ESL /EFL research, task-based learning has been gaining in popularity since the ‘task’ has become a significant component in syllabus design, classroom teaching and learner assessment (Ellis, 2004: 1).

There are various definitions of what a task is. For example for Long (1985: 89) a task is a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Thus, examples of task include painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form, buying a pair of shoes, making an airline reservation, borrowing a library book, taking a driving test, typing a letter, weighing a patient, sorting letters, making a hotel reservation, writing a cheque, finding a street destination and helping someone across a road. In other words, by ‘task’ is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play and in between. On the other hand, communicative purpose is not the focal point within task-based learning (Littlewood, 2004). According to Williams and Burden (1997: 168) a task means ‘any activity that learners engage in to further the process of learning a language’. Additionally, Estaire and Zanon (1994: 13-20) discriminate between ‘communication tasks’ and ‘enabling tasks’. Communication tasks provide learners with the opportunities to focus on meaning rather than form whereas enabling tasks mainly focus on the components of the language such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and functions.

Likewise, Skehan (1998a) suggests that while language learners are involved in tasks, there is some sort of relationship to real-world activities, therefore task completion is emphasized. Learners have to complete the tasks and achieve real goals. Moreover, within the body of task-based instruction meaning is primary as language learners communicate in the target language with an authentic purpose in mind. Willis (1996: 173) also emphasizes language within a communicative task as a tool bringing about an outcome through the exchange of meanings. Skehan (1998b: 268) suggests a four-stage criterion to give a comprehensive definition of what a task is:

1. meaning is primary;
2. there is a goal which needs to be worked towards;
3. the activity is outcome-evaluated;
4. there is a real-world relationship.

However, Breen (1987: 161) defines task-based syllabus as an approach which tend to be directly associated with communicative knowledge as a unified system wherein any use of the target language will require the learners to constantly match preferences from their linguistic repertoire to the social requirements and expectations governing communicative behavior and to meanings and ideas they wish to share. Similarly, Nunan (2004: 2) acknowledges the fact that task-based instruction is inherently non technical and non-linguistic since it describes the kinds

of things that language learners in real world would say if asked what they were doing.

Task-based instruction offers some advantages since it involves learners in brand-new mental and linguistic processes as that manage their own conversations, exercise discourse and transfer what they have learnt into target language (Lightbown & Spada, 1993). Firstly, learners have more chances to use the target language with each other while they are being involved in different tasks. Besides, they use these chances not only to practice forms, but also to achieve real ends. Second, task-based instruction will help learners to take part in authentic and complete interactions where they will have the chance to be motivated. Moreover, within the body of task-based instruction there is a removed teacher domination since the learners have more responsibility of their own learning, get chances to start and finish conversations, interact naturally and perform various things such as asking someone to do things and checking what have been completed (Willis, 1996: 18).

The procedure of task-based instruction is distinguished from the traditional Present- Practice- Produce (PPP) approach in that the framework consists of three stages: pre-task, task cycle and language focus. The components within each stage of the framework provide a naturally flowing sequence; however, these components could be focused on differently and they can be adapted to suit the framework to the learner needs (Willis, 1996). Whereas pre-task cycle aims to introduce the topic and the task, task-cycle embodies helping learners to shape their meanings and express more exactly what they would like to say. Therefore, the need to complete the task helps learners to develop fluency in the target language and strategies for communication (Willis, 1996).

In this study, a poem of Emily Dickinson 'The Brain is wider than the Sky' is presented through task-based learning. Such an approach to TBL would portray how context, meaning and functions of language interrelate, how they combine and contribute to the language learning processes. The aim of this study is to describe the way poetry is exploited in the classroom; thus the interaction of the learners throughout the learning process is considered. The methodology of the research is descriptive and it includes an in-depth analysis of the learners' interaction with the task the teacher presents. Specifically one research question will be addressed within the body of this study:

1. Does task-based learning through poetry contribute to effective second-language acquisition?

The question will be answered on the basis of the theoretical constructs of task-based learning.

## **METHOD**

In order to investigate the research a classroom situation is to be constructed in which Emily Dickinson's poem is discussed within three main groups. Therefore,

the methodology is based on small group discussion framework. For this specific study, the participants will read, and discuss each stanza of the poem in groups of four. Lon and Porter (1985) also emphasize the fact that individual learners tend to talk more in their groups than in their teacher-fronted classrooms. For this reason, within the body of this study, the discussions of the poetry allow the learners to avoid verbalizing all their thoughts. Additionally, learners will be freer in terms of cognitive load since they will have the opportunity to negotiate their ideas in a more flexible way.

### **Participants**

Learners from intermediate level and onwards can participate in this study. All the participants are native Turkish speakers enrolled at a state university, all from preparatory classes. Their ages range from 18 to 20 years. All the participants are enrolled in a pre-intermediate level EFL language courses before moving onto intermediate level. None of the learners have degrees in Turkish or English literature. The way they study specific poems is limited to the poems they study in their course books.

### **Materials**

A single poem by Emily Dickinson is used as a sample within the study (See appendix). The poem is ‘The Brain is wider than the Sky’ (Dickinson, 1924). The poem can be photocopied for classroom use. This poem can be chosen since it is well-suited to the level of the learners. Moreover, the theme of the poetry mentions the complicated relationship between the mind and the outer world, which is intended to catch the learners’ interests since the potentiality of the brain is a focal point in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the mind plays a remarkable role. The complex relationships between the brain, the outer world and the God are revealed as the learners are involved in tasks. Therefore, the tasks challenge the learners to understand the hard language of Dickinson.

### **Task**

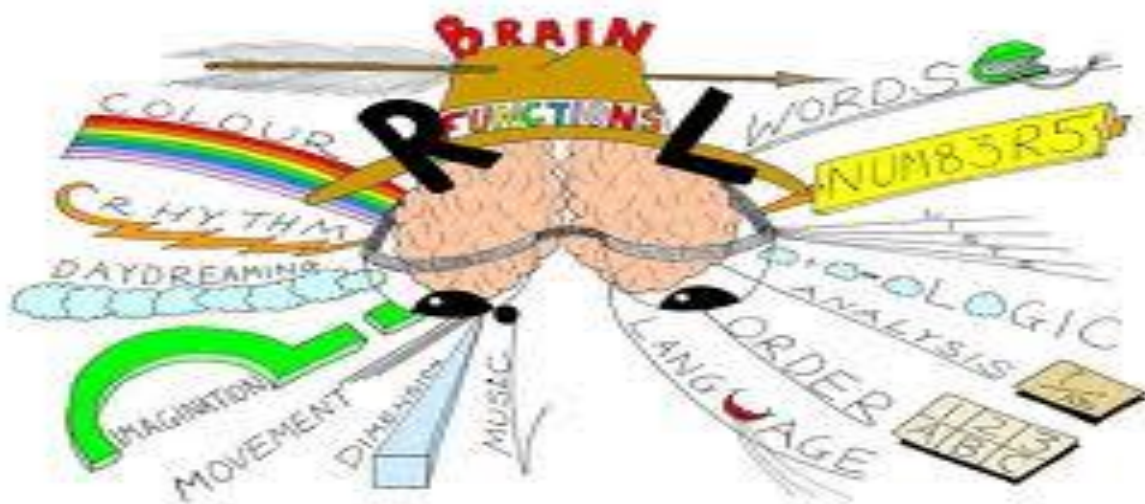
The participants are presented with a poetry-reading task in small group format. They are allowed to form their groups and the teacher only acts as a facilitator. The learners were seated next to one another at their desks. The researcher presents them with the photocopy of the poem as well as the paper which gives them the instructions to complete their tasks. The teacher helps learners to understand the instructions and learners’ clarification requests are answered attentively. During the class the researcher observes the groups and takes notes and remains silent so as not to intervene with their discussion. However, if the learners do not speak and there is a silence of more than a few seconds, the researcher prompts the participants with some questions.

## PROCEDURE

### Pre-task Stage

#### Introduction to the topic and task (10 minutes)

- Teacher shows some photographs a brain, the sky, and the sea and asks learners to make an association among these pictures. Are they comparable? Why? Why not?



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-Teacher presents some quotes about brain for classroom discussion in groups. Students agree or disagree with the quotes.

1) The brain is a wonderful organ; it starts working the moment you get up in the morning and does not stop until you get into the office (Robert Frost).

2) The chief function of the body is to carry the brain around (Thomas A. Edison).

3) Any man who reads too much and uses his own brain too little falls into lazy habits of thinking (Albert Einstein).

4) The brain is wider than the sky (Emily Dickinson).

5) I'm a visual thinker, not a language-based thinker. My brain is like Google Images (Temple Grandin).

- Teacher pre-teaches the words ‘ease’, ‘absorb’, ‘syllable’, ‘to heft’ and ‘to differ’.
- Students brainstorm ideas about how they can compare brain to different parts of the nature. They explain their reasons why they think these aspects are comparable.
- Students are formed in groups and they jot down as many ideas as they can in order to remember moments from their lives which include scenes of the sea and the sky. They tell about their experiences and explain how they felt.
- -Students think about the quote – ‘Biology gives you a brain. Life turns it into a mind’- and teacher inquires students on the difference between *the brain* and *the mind*.

### **Task-cycle**

#### **I-) TASK:**

##### **Step-I**

- Teacher presents the poem ‘*The Brain is wider than the Sky*’ (through an overhead projector) with some words missing.
- Teacher has students pay attention to meaning in each stanza and asks students how a brain can be wider than the sky or deeper than a sea.
- Teacher inquires which theme is mainly emphasized throughout the poem.
- Dickinson describes what a brain is in various ways throughout the poem. Teacher divides the classroom into three groups. Each group is responsible for answering the questions teacher poses. Groups discuss these questions and take notes.

##### **Group 1:**

- How is the brain larger than the Sky? What does the poet hint?
- Explain what Dickinson is trying to suggest through the lines in the first stanza:

*‘The one the other will contain  
With ease—and You—beside’*

##### **Group 2:**

- How is the brain deeper than the sea? What does the poet hint?
- Explain what Dickinson is trying to suggest through the lines in the second stanza:

*‘The one the other will absorb—  
As Sponges—Buckets—do’*

##### **Group 3:**

- How is the brain the weight of God? What does the poet hint?
- Explain what Dickinson is trying to suggest through the lines in the third stanza:

'And they will differ—if they do—  
As Syllable from Sound'

- Teacher asks students to reflect on their remarks and gives clues by talking about the fact that how a brain can be so significant.
- Teacher inquires students about the functions of the brain and the mind. Students state their opinions. (They can refer to the pre-task stage for the pictures if needed).
  
- Teacher inquires students about the techniques Dickinson uses to create her images. Teacher further explains that despite their thematic simplicity the metaphors Dickinson uses makes poems memorable. She creates such poems by closely observing details of the nature and the physical world and by vividly generating new images in the mind. All the examples from the poem are abstract; however, the language she uses and the metaphors she employs make her stanzas memorable.
- The definition of metaphor is presented by the teacher through an example sentence (*The typical teenage boy's room is a disaster area*) and students try to explain the metaphor with their own words.
- Students work in pairs and state the comparisons in the poem. After this, they are expected to find all the adjectives used as tools of making comparisons.
- Students use these adjectives 'wide', 'deep' and teacher presents the use of these adjectives through various examples (lexis focus)

Step II-)

- Students check their sentences with the help of the teacher within groups.
- After that students discuss how a brain can be wider than the sky, deeper than a sea, and just the weight of God as a whole class activity. Teacher writes their opinions on the board.
- They also discuss the main idea the poem expresses.
- Teacher presents a 'choose the correct option' exercise by using the overhead projector. Students read the stems and circle the correct adjective for that sentence.
  1. The river is more than fifty yards *wide / deep / tall*.
  2. We'll take the boat out into *wide / hefted / deep* water where we can dive.
  3. The language course is *hefted / weighted / deep* towards language skills.
  4. Those who drink *large / wide / deep* amounts of coffee face the risk of increased level of stress.

## II- Planning

- The students study individually at this stage.
- Teacher shows a photo of a scene from the nature which includes a night in which the stars make their appearance.
- Students try to write a stanza-poem by selecting and using the adjectives (twinkling, wondrous, fabulous, bright, huge, shallow, trivial, glorious etc...)



among some alternatives given by the teacher in order to describe the picture they see.

- Teacher encourages peer editing and use of dictionaries at this stage.
- Teacher suggests some phrases when students need and also corrects their language through some questions which they find tempting to go on composing their poems.

### III- Report

- Students exchange their poems and compare the themes of their poems.
- They reflect on the metaphors they used.
- They read different students' poems and try to polish them by adding new words from the box if they like.
- Teacher chairs and comments on the content of their poems and asks about their feelings towards a night with a lot of stars.

### Vocabulary Focus

#### I- Analysis

- Students try to find the target words presented by the teacher by examining the poems of others. If they can replace the words with others from the list, teacher writes them down on the board so that the rest of the class can notice the new uses of the adjectives.
- Teacher inquires the students about the tone of the poem, the feelings expressed in the poem. Is the speaker hopeful, woeful, discouraged, delighted?
- Students explain how they understand those feelings.

#### II- Practice

- Teacher presents the new words in contexts and students find the synonym which could replace the underlined words.

1. Her eyes were hurting from the bright lights. It made impossible for her to see the road clearly.

- |          |             |
|----------|-------------|
| a. shiny | c. glorious |
| b. dark  | d. gloomy   |

2. The room has fabulous views across the lake. You should definitely take a photo!

- |              |             |
|--------------|-------------|
| a. fantastic | c. deep     |
| b. wide      | d. ordinary |

3. It will be easy to welcome the guests at that hall. As far as I know a doorway is two metres wide.

- |         |           |
|---------|-----------|
| a. deep | c. hefted |
|---------|-----------|

- b. spacious                      d. tall

4. The tunnel led deep under the mountains, so it was too hard to move forward.

- a. wide                              c. shallow  
b. buried                            d. twinkling

5. Sue's feelings for Simon seemed trivial by comparison. Angelique adored him in fact.

- a. deep                              c. wide  
b. minor                            d. hefted

## CONCLUSION

When the procedure of Task-based Learning is considered, it is clear that there is a continuum between the focus on forms and the focus on meaning for learners. The challenge within task-based learning lies in choosing, sequencing and implementing tasks in productive ways so as to contribute to learners' interlanguage (Foster, 1999). The components of the procedure of task-based learning highlight the connection between 'outside-classroom reality' and 'inside classroom pedagogy' (Littlewood, 2004: 324). Indeed, the poem 'The Brain is Wider than the Sky' by Dickinson provides the interface with in-class pedagogy and learners' outside reality. The more the learners are involved in the communication tasks in each step of the approach, the more the tasks help them to reflect their needs, interests, and experiences. Research findings suggest that learners do not grasp the target language in the order it is presented regardless of how well it is presented or how carefully it is organized. Therefore, language learning is considered to be a developmental and organic process that has its own way (Foster, 1999).

When the sample lesson plan is implemented, it is very clear that the framework of task-based learning is purposeful. Es Ellis (2000) maintains task-based learning does not only provide a very clear structure for the lesson, but it also provides variety for the classroom and enhances the creativity of the learners. The presentation of a task is of vital importance for the pre-task stage (Dornyei, 2001). Besides, task-based learning focuses on bringing learner-based texts into the classroom in order to encourage the learners to engage in the learning process along with social practices. Problems are created via the texts and these problems are resolved through involving learners in shaping and controlling the discourse practices (Breen, 1998). This allows the teacher to give content-focused feedback to the learners. This means that the content of the classroom derives from learner produced utterances. Task-based learning is based on the premise that tasks give learners the chances to interact and transact instead of learning passively. This means learners are involved in meaningful contexts, which provide them with the opportunities to solve problems, discuss or narrate things (Foster, 1999).

A ‘task-based unit’ has been presented here as a flexible syllabus tool, which might provide a large pool of materials for teachers. The framework is thought to be fruitful since it does not impose a strict and linear syllabus for the teachers, yet the procedure is cyclical and provides flexibility for the decisions about the balance between focus on meaning and focus on form. It will be the teacher who will make the final decision on how much of content will be used in a particular learning context. Poems on separate pieces of worksheets are simple tools for classroom use and they can be adapted and modified by various teachers according to the needs of their learners’ needs and interests. Teachers all around the world can design alternative units by making use of different poems that match their own styles.

Within the study, it is clearly observed that when the lesson plan is considered by taking all factors into account (such as input, focus on meaning, opportunities for learners to interact etc.) learners are encouraged to reflect on the meaning of the messages as well as on form. They may also take on different roles in order to perform the tasks, which enhance their flexibility. The teacher can also adopt different roles while helping learners to conduct tasks. Therefore, a task-based learning context may prove prolific in terms of learner-led group work, teacher-led performances and group work. Thus, interaction within the classroom occurs at all stages.

There can be some challenges in implementing task-based learning at initial stages; however, as the tasks become the central units of classes, also well-supported by learners, they will play a major role in enhancing real interaction opportunities within the classroom.

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**APPENDIX****The Brain—is wider than the Sky**

The Brain—is wider than the Sky—  
For—put them side by side—  
The one the other will contain  
With ease—and You—beside—

The Brain is deeper than the sea—  
For—hold them—Blue to Blue—  
The one the other will absorb—  
As Sponges—Buckets—do—

The Brain is just the weight of God—  
For—Heft them—Pound for Pound—  
And they will differ—if they do—  
As Syllable from Sound—

**by**

**Emily Dickinson**