

EFL TEACHER'S PERCEPTIONS OF TBLT AND LEARNING: THE CASE STUDY IN IRAN

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is to explore EFL teachers' perceptions of task-based teaching (TBLT) in Iranian language institutions context. The data for this study were collected through questionnaire from a total of 117 teachers at 40 different language institutions who were at pre-intermediate, intermediate and advance language teaching level. The data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The overall findings of the survey show that the majority of the respondents have a higher level of understanding about TBLT concepts, but there exist some negative views on implementing TBLT with regard to its classroom practice. Implications are proposed based on research findings in order to help teachers and teacher trainers to construct and implement TBLT more effectively.

Keywords: *Task-based language teaching (TBLT), teachers' perceptions, classroom practice.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is not a new approach. Prabhu (1979) used task-based approach with secondary school classes in, Bangalore, India. (Communicational Teaching Project). American Government Language Institutions switched to task-based instruction (TBI) for foreign languages for adults in the early 1980s (Edwards & Willis, 2005). TBLT offers an alternative framework to the PPP (Presentation- Practice- Production) (Edwards & Willis, 2005). Presentation often focuses on a single point of grammar, or the realization of a function, usually presented explicitly in a context. This stage is assumed to develop an understanding of the language point in the learner. Presentation is followed by controlled practice, presumed to enable learners to use and automatized the newly grasped rule or pattern. At the production stage, often called the 'free stage', the learner is expected to reproduce the target language more spontaneously and flexibly, for example in a communication task or a role-play activity. With the advent of communicative language teaching approach in the early 1980s and much emphasis on learners' communicative abilities over the last two decades, the term task-based language teaching (TBLT) came into prevalent use in the field of second language acquisition SLA and EFL in terms of developing process-oriented syllabi and designing communicative tasks to promote learners' actual language use and learners assessment (Skehan, 1998; Ellis, 2003). With the varying interpretations of TBLT related to classroom practice, recent studies exhibit three recurrent features: Given the fact that language acquisition is influenced by the complex interactions of a number of variables including materials, activities, and affective feedback, TBLT has a dramatic, positive impact on these variables. These variables implies that TBLT provides learners with natural sources of meaningful material, ideal situations for communicative activity, and supportive feedback allowing for much greater opportunities for language use. Specifically, in an Iranian EFL environment where learners are limited in their accessibility to use the target language on a daily basis, it is first of all necessary for language learners to be provided with close to real opportunities to be exposed to language use in the classroom. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) proposes the use of tasks as a central component in the language classroom because they provide better contexts for activating learner acquisition processes and promoting L2/FL learning. TBLT is thus based on a theory of language learning

rather than a theory of language structure. TBLT initially emphasized fluency in communication at the expense of other aspects of language like accuracy and complexity. Indeed, TBLT with the focus on form (in the context of meaning) is gathering support from SLA/ EFL research. Long and Robinson (1998), in particular, stress the importance of focus on form in L2 learning by drawing students' attention to linguistic elements, not as discrete items presented to the learner, but as they arise in a meaningful classroom context. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is the strong version of CLT which involves providing learners with opportunities to experience how language is used in communication. The strong version sees tasks as a means of enabling learners to learn a language by experiencing how it is used in communication. In the strong version, tasks are both necessary and sufficient for learning. (Ellis, 2003). Different versions of task-based approaches have been discussed in the literature. Skehan (1996) distinguishes between strong forms of TBLT in which transacting tasks is the main focus and everything else is subsidiary; and weak forms similar to general CLT. Willis (1996) advocates task-based learning (TBL), a strong version of task-based approaches, which provides greater opportunity than weak variations for student choice of language. Task-supported teaching (Ellis, 2003) is a weak version which facilitates the communicative practice of language items that have been introduced in a traditional way.

In pedagogy, tasks have been mainly investigated from two different perspectives to language teaching: an interactional perspective and a cognitive information processing perspective. Within the interactional perspective to task-based research, some researchers have focused on the role of interaction in the development of L2 particularly with respect to the negotiation of meaning (Long, 1989; Pica and Doughty, 1985). The main focus of the research in this interactional perspective has been exploring the effect of pair and group-based interaction on the development of L2 learner interlanguage. A second group of researchers, also adopting interactional perspective, have attempted to explore how learners co-construct meaning while they are engaged in interaction (Duff, 1993; Van Lier and Matsu, 2000). The main interest of this group has been to allow participants to shape the task to meet their own needs and to build meanings collaboratively. Although the interactional approach to task has shed light on current understandings of task design and task variability in SLA, LT research has not been able to employ the findings of this body of research mainly because this approach is more related to classroom and pedagogy settings than to LT contexts. Moreover, it is clear that some of the valuable evidence provided by interactional perspective, e.g. variability in performance on the same task on different occasions (Duff, 1993), questions the feasibility of analyzing task design in static way or predicting variability of language performance on tasks. The second perspective to task-based research adopts a cognitive approach to language learning and focuses on the psychological processes that are involved when learners perform tasks. A principle area of interest within the cognitive perspective has been investigating how cognitive demands of tasks affect learners' intentional resources and language performance (Robinson, 2000; Skehan, 1998). Drawing upon the principles of cognitive psychology, Skehan (1998) has proposed code complexity, cognitive complexity and communicative stress as the three important aspects of tasks difficulty. The cognitive approach to task performance has attracted LT researchers' attention because from a language testing point of view, the cognitive information processing perspective can offer a more reliable and promising framework for considering and estimating task difficulty (Fulcher, 2003; Tavakoli and Skehan, 2005). A number of studies have adopted a cognitive approach and researched task difficulty in the light of different aspects of task design.

2. DESIGN

The participants in this study were EFL teachers from northern Iran working at English language institutions. From the 40 different institutions, a total of 117 teachers participated in this survey. They were at three levels of language teaching. Among them, 46 teachers (39.3%) were at pre-intermediate, 47 teachers (40.2%) at intermediate and 24 teachers (20.5%) at advance level. The managers of the institutions were asked to select their teachers at three levels of teaching mentioned earlier. The teachers range in age from their twenties to forties. The number of years they have taught English varied, ranging from less than 5 years, 6 to 10 years, and 11 to 20 years. The instrument, questionnaire, was devised to measure Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of TBLT in classroom setting. The questionnaire, composed of 15 Likert-type items and two open-ended items, was divided into four sections. The first section contains demographic questions in order to gain information about the teachers' teaching levels, gender, age, and teaching experience. The second deals with the basic concepts of task and principle of task-based instruction in order to review teachers' practical understandings of TBLT. The third section, relates to teachers' positions on classroom practice of TBLT, was partially adapted and modified from Nunan's (2004) checklist for evaluating communicative task. In the second section and third section, teachers were asked to respond each item using a five-

point scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. Finally, in the fourth section, teachers were asked to elaborate their own reasons for choosing or avoiding the implementation of TBLT.

The data were collected in this study by questionnaire was devised to measure Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of TBLT in classroom setting. Teachers were asked to respond the questionnaire items which consisted of Likert-type and open-ended items. The questionnaire was administrated directly, and some teachers received the questionnaire by mailing and others by in person. The Likert-type items, which were designed to identify teachers' understanding of TBLT conception and teachers' views on TBLT implementation, were given a numerical score (strongly agree = 1, agree = 2, neutral = 3, disagree = 4, strongly disagree = 5).

Table 4 presents a percentage comparison of teachers' responses to each of the seven items on the key concepts task and TBLT. For the convenience of comparison, the five-point scale responses were merged into a three-point simplified scale (strongly agree & agree, neutral, strongly disagree & disagree).

Table-4: Teachers' understandings of TBLT concepts (n=117)

Questionnaire Items	strongly agree Agree(%)	neutral (%)	strongly disagree disagree (%)	M	SD
1. A task is a communicative goal directed.	Pre 69.5	13.0	17.3	2.13	1.20
	Inter 80.8	10.6	8.5	1.89	.98
	Adv 70.9	8.3	20.8	2.04	1.39
2. A task involves a primary focus on meaning.	Pre 63.0	19.6	17.4	2.32	1.01
	Inter 63.8	10.6	25.5	2.36	1.12
	Adv 62.5	4.2	33.3	2.41	1.24
3. A task has a clearly defined outcome.	Pre 69.6	13.0	17.4	2.36	1.10
	Inter 68.0	12.8	19.2	2.36	1.09
	Adv 62.5	16.7	20.8	2.45	1.21
4. A task is any activity in which the target- language is used by the learner.	Pre 58.7	23.9	17.4	2.34	1.09
	Inter 61.5	10.6	23.4	2.31	1.16
	Adv 58.3	16.7	25.0	2.54	1.25
5. TBLT is consistent with the principles Of communicative language teaching.	Pre 67.4	13.0	19.6	2.30	1.02
	Inter 78.7	12.8	8.5	2.04	.85
	Adv 75.0	8.3	16.7	2.04	1.08
	Pre 67.4	15.2	17.3	2.34	1.07

6. TBLT is based on the student-centered Instructional approach.	Inter	63.8	21.3	14.9	2.36	.98
	Adv	58.4	8.3	33.3	2.66	1.27
7. TBLT includes three stages: pre-task, task implementation and post-task.	Pre	71.8	19.6	8.7	2.13	.95
	Inter	83.0	12.8	4.3	1.97	.73
	Adv	70.8	16.7	12.5	2.20	1.06

Note: Pre= pre-intermediate teacher, Inter= intermediate teacher, Adv= advance teacher, M= mean score, SD= standard deviation. The five scales are S= Strongly agree, A= Agree, U= Undecided, D= Disagree, Sd= Strongly disagree.

Teachers' views on implementing TBLT (n=117)

Questionnaire items		strongly agree/ Agree (%)	neutral	strongly disagree/ disagree (%)	M	SD
8. I have interest in implementing TBLT in the classroom.	Pre	71.8	8.7	19.5	2.23	1.15
	Inter	76.6	14.9	8.5	2.02	.89
	Adv	79.2	12.5	8.3	1.79	.97
9. TBLT provides a relaxed atmosphere to promote the target language use.	Pre	58.7	21.7	19.6	2.34	1.07
	Inter	65.9	21.3	12.8	2.29	.90
	Adv	58.3	29.2	12.5	.97	2.45
10. TBLT activates learners' needs and interests.	Pre	56.6	26.1	17.4	2.56	1.04
	Inter	70.2	19.1	10.6	2.29	.88
	Adv	62.5	25.0	12.5	2.41	.97
11. TBLT pursues the development of integrated skills in the classroom.	Pre	63.0	26.1	10.9	2.34	.92
	Inter	74.5	17.0	8.5	2.10	.86
	Adv	66.6	16.7	16.7	2.33	1.09
	Pre	47.8	39.1	13.1	2.54	.93

12. TBLT gives much psychological burden to teacher as a facilitator.	Inter	60.1	34.0	14.9	2.14	.92
	Adv	50.0	20.8	29.2	2.62	1.09
	Pre	65.2	15.2	19.6	2.54	1.14
	Inter	57.4	21.3	21.3	2.66	1.05
13. TBLT requires much preparation time compared to other approaches.	Adv	54.2	8.3	37.5	2.79	1.35
	Pre	43.5	30.4	26.1	2.86	1.22
14. TBLT is proper for controlling classroom arrangements.	Inter	48.9	29.8	21.3	2.65	1.02
	Adv	50.0	29.2	20.9	2.58	1.10
	Pre	58.7	19.6	21.7	2.41	1.39
	Inter	74.5	19.1	6.4	1.93	.91
15. TBLT materials should be meaningful and purposeful based on the real-world context.	Adv	75.0	12.5	12.5	1.87	1.19
	Pre	43.5	30.4	26.1	2.86	1.22

Note: Pre= Pre-intermediate teacher, Inter= Intermediate teacher, Adv= Advanced teacher, M= Mean, SD= Standard deviation.

In response to whether or not teachers implement TBLT in the classroom, while 82 teachers (70.1%) among a total of 117 respondents answered they were currently using task-based methods or techniques in their classrooms, 35 (29.9%) responded negatively. There are 5 reasons that teachers decided to implement TBLT. TBLT promotes learners' academic progress, which is the first choice, was selected by 13.7% of teachers in different levels. The second choice which is TBLT improves learners' interaction skills, was selected by 27.8% of teachers. TBLT encourages learners' intrinsic motivation. This is the third choice which was selected by 18.8% of teachers regardless their teaching level. TBLT creates a collaborative learning environment. This is the fourth choice which was selected by 28.2% of teachers at all levels of teaching. And the last choice is that TBLT is appropriate for small group work which was selected by 11.5% of teachers at all levels. Of course, there are some other reasons that teachers decided to implement TBLT, e. g. TBLT improves fluency and accuracy, TBLT is interesting. The writer decided to cut some of them and selected the major decisions.

There are 6 reasons which teachers regardless their teaching level disagree to implement TBLT in their classroom. The first one is students are not used to task-based learning. 16.3% of teachers selected this item as disagreement. Materials in textbooks are not proper for using TBLT. This item was selected by 31.6% of teachers regardless their teaching level. This indicates that many teachers who disagree on implementing TBLT selected this item as the most significant reason. Large class size as an obstacle is another item which 25.5% of different level teachers selected. The item 4, teacher's difficulty in assessing learner's performance, is another reason not to be implemented by respondents. 10.2% of teachers selected this item. Limitation in target language proficiency is item 5 which was selected by 9.2% of teachers. The last item is teachers' knowledge of TBLT instruction. 7.1% of teachers selected this item regardless their teaching level. There are other reasons not to implement TBLT in classrooms by teachers, e. g. TBLT students cannot get good grades in international exams such as: IELTS, TOEFL. Students' accuracies are not good enough. The writer decided to select the major reasons which were ordered according to teachers' view.

3. RESULTS

The findings of items 1 through 7 shows that teachers has a clear understanding of the linguistic features of the task, thus approving of the pedagogical benefits of task in second language learning classroom. More importantly, the writer believes that teachers, regardless of teaching levels, convey a considerable amount of practical understanding about the key concepts of TBLT. This could be resulted from TTC classes or teachers' theoretical background of English language teaching. The finding of items 8 through 15 indicated that despite the higher-level understanding of TBLT concepts, some teachers actually hesitated to adopt TBLT as an instructional method in classroom practice. This may result from the fact that most Iranian EFL teachers still use the traditional lecture-oriented methods, which are accustomed to, and more than that, they disagree with materials in textbooks for using TBLT. In relation to task participants' roles and classroom arrangements, it might be true that Iranian EFL teachers have become accustomed to working in teacher-centered classrooms, thus adopting a one-way instruction method rather than two-way interaction. A teacher, however, needs to be flexible and dynamic in controlling the language learning environment, because the nature of language learning substantially demands that learners actively participate in language use activities.

The findings of the two open-ended items revealed that teachers may have different reasons for choosing or avoiding the implementation of TBLT. While some teachers decided to use task-based methods as a basis for group work, or because of its motivational potential, others had fears of being confronted with problems on account of a lack of knowledge and confidence. Yet many problems that teachers face in implementing TBLT can be successfully reduced when teachers make an effort to understand its pedagogical benefits and increase positive attitudes toward TBLT as an instructional method. In the light of this, it is first of all necessary for teachers to have the opportunity to learn both the strengths and weaknesses of a task-based methodology, and understand its basic principles, as well as its various techniques.

Now let's turn to the challenges teachers may encounter in trying to use task-based methods. Most teachers answered that materials in textbooks were not proper for TBLT, and avoid using task-based techniques in their classrooms. This indicates that these teachers were not aware of the current EFL TBLT textbooks in institutions settings. All books in the settings follow the principles of the communicative theory of language learning and reflect the task-based syllabus which chiefly concerns communicative skills and social interaction. In Iranian context, *NEW INTERCHANGE SERIES*, and *CONNECT* textbooks were designed according to TBLT. Materials in these books are based on principle of TBLT. It, however, is necessary for teachers to redesign individual work-oriented materials in textbooks in accordance with the principles of promoting interaction and collaborative learning. For large classes, which have often been considered to be problematic with regard to disciplinary situations in task-based group work, the teacher needs to take group formation and presentation procedure into consideration. Basically task-based techniques can be used the same way in large classes as in small ones, except that large classes need more time and preparation. For learners not trained in task-based learning, one of the reasons they avoid participating in task-based activities may be related to a lack of confidence in performing tasks. This is why it is necessary for the teacher to help learners build confidence by encouraging them to learn how to deal with tasks and use collaborative skills in task-based performance. Once task participants realize that learning in tasks is only one of several ways of learning in the class, they will be able to overcome such challenges as fear of assessment, competition, and difficulty of the task. Thus, the improved confidence of less assertive learners may lead to more equal participation and sharing of workload (Burdett, 2003). Given the fact that difficulty in assessing learner's task-based performance is one of the reasons teachers avoid implementing TBLT; attention needs to be given to performance assessment. In relation to assessment for group work, for example, awarding equal grades to all members of the group may serve as one of the crucial weaknesses for ensuring a level of fairness in assessment, particularly in high achieving learner groups. Therefore, the teacher needs to consider both inter-group and intra-group evaluations together in terms of enhancing the participation and quality of involvement in task-based cooperative work (Lourdusamy & Divaharan, 2002). While the inter-group assessment involves using the group's products as part of the course evaluation and thus given equal grades to all members of the groups, the intra-group assessment involves individual evaluation.

4. IMPLICATIONS

Based on the findings, three important implications for teachers and teacher trainers are proposed. First, since teachers' views regarding instructional approach have a great impact on classroom practice, it is necessary for the teacher, as a practical controller and facilitator of learners' activities in the classroom, to have a positive attitude toward TBLT in order for it to be successfully implemented. Second, given the research finding that teacher's lack practical application knowledge of task-based methods and techniques, teachers should be given the opportunity to

acquire knowledge about TBLT related to planning, implementing, and assessing. To this end, it is suggested that teacher education program, which aim at in-depth training about language teaching methodologies, should properly deal with both the strengths and weaknesses of TBLT as an instructional method ranging from basic principles to specific techniques. Third, when taking into account that one of the major reasons teachers avoid implementing TBLT is deeply related to a lack of confidence, much consideration should be given to overcoming potential obstacles that teachers may come across in a task-based classroom. It is also recommended that teachers consider alternative solutions for classroom management such as leveled tasks, peer assessment, and a variety of various task types including two-way information gap activities as well as one-way activities, such as simple asking and answering.

5. CONCLUSION

In the Iranian EFL context, in which learners don't have much contact with native speakers of English, the focus of language teaching has been placed on changing the classroom practice from the traditional passive lecture to more active group learning so that learners can be more easily expose to target language use. Thus, many teachers have had an increasing amount of interest in using TBLT as an instructional method, chiefly because they believe task-based learning has specific benefits for increasing learners' communication skills and interaction. The findings of this study revealed that despite a higher level of understanding of TBLT concepts, many Iranian EFL teachers retain some fear of adopting TBLT as an instructional method because of perceived disciplinary problems related to classroom practice. It also turned out that teachers had their own reasons to use or avoid implementing TBLT.

6. REFERENCES

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Appendix

Teacher Questionnaire

This questionnaire is designed to examine Iranian EFL teachers' beliefs of task-based language teaching with reference to classroom practice. Please answer all of the questions as best as you can. Your answers will be kept confidential. Thank you for your cooperation.

Section I. General and Demographic Information

-
- Teaching level pre-intermediate intermediate advanced
- Gender male female
- Age 20-29 30-39 40-49 50 +
- Total number of years
teaching English less than 5 years 5 to 9 years 10 to 20 years more than 20 years
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Section II. Teachers' Understandings of Task and TBLT

For each of the following statements, please answer by putting V in a box, according to the following scale: SA (strongly agree), A (agree), U (undecided), D (disagree), SD (strongly disagree).

Questionnaire Items	S	A	U	D	SD
1. A task is a communicative goal directed.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. A task involves a primary focus on meaning.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. A task has a clearly defined outcome.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. A task is any activity in which the target language is used by the learner.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. TBLT is consistent with the principles of communicative language Teaching	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. TBLT is based on the student-centered instructional approach	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. TBLT includes three stages: pre-task, task implementation, and post-task.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Section III. Teachers' Views on Implementing TBLT

The following statements address teachers' views on implementing TBLT in the classroom.

Please answer by putting V in a box that matches your position most, according to the following scale: SA (strongly agree), A (agree), U (Undecided), D (disagree), SD (strongly disagree).

Questionnaire Items	S	A	U	D	SD
8. I have interest in implementing TBLT in the classroom .	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. TBLT provides a relaxed atmosphere to promote the target language use.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. TBLT activates learners' needs and interests.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. TBLT pursues the development of integrated skills in the classroom.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. TBLT gives much psychological burden to teacher as a facilitator	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. TBLT requires much preparation time compared to other approaches.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. TBLT is proper for controlling classroom arrangements.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. TBLT materials should be meaningful and purposeful based on the real-world context .	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Section IV. Reasons Teachers Choose or Avoid Implementing TBLT

Do you use TBLT in your teaching? YES NO

If yes, please put V any reasons that you decide to implement TBLT.

- TBLT promotes learners' academic progress.
- TBLT improves learners' interaction skills.
- TBLT encourages learners' intrinsic motivation.
- TBLT creates a collaborative learning environment.

TBLT is appropriate for small group work.

If you have other reasons, please write them down.

If no, please put V any reasons that you avoid implementing TBLT.

Students are not used to task-based learning.

Materials in textbooks are not proper for using TBLT.

Large class size is an obstacle to use task-based methods.

I have difficulty in assessing learner's task-based performance.

I have limited target language proficiency.

I have very little knowledge of task-based instruction.

If you have other reasons, please write them down.

