

Research Article

The Effect of Task-Based Language Teaching on Iranian EFL learners

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Abstract

This study strived to determine whether or not the adoption of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) would be a more effective means of increasing the students' reading comprehension achievement scores when compared to the traditional teaching method of the English language that involves prompting and drilling of students. This study also explored to gain issues and insights that accompany the application of TBLT through constant comparison and contrast with those that accompany the traditional teaching method. A pretest and posttests for collecting quantitative data was used, and classroom observation and researcher log for collecting qualitative data. The study involved 122 participants divided into treatment and control groups. The treatment group has received ten weeks of English language instruction via the TBLT method while the control group has received ten weeks of English language instruction via the traditional teaching method. The independent variable is the use of TBLT in the classroom and the effect/dependent variable is the students' reading comprehension achievement scores. By analyzing the data, the findings showed that teaching via the TBLT method has significantly helped students increase their reading comprehension achievement scores more than that of the traditional teaching method of the English language. The findings also suggest that the TBLT method, as a constructivist practice, is a better way for English language teaching and has involved practices that are desired in a modern educational context when compared to the traditional teaching method of the

English language.

Keywords

Task-Based Language Teaching, Traditional Teaching Method, Reading Comprehension

1. Introduction

Since Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is the treatment of this study, it is crucial to introduce it to the reader. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) uses meaningful, inquiry-based, real world activities(1). Many researchers view this method as emerging from Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (2). Others see it as a new approach to English language teaching and learning (3). In TBLT, priority is placed on the completion of tasks that are assessed in terms of outcome (4). Also, students pass through three stages when adopting TBLT in an English language lesson. In the first stage, groups of students engage in real life situations that are similar to the task they will perform in the classroom (pre-task stage). In the second stage, groups of students perform the main task of the associated lesson or content (running task stage). In the third stage, groups of students display or provide an indicator that they have successfully completed the task for the purposes of assessment and evaluation (task completion stage).

Cognitively, the task is a means of carrying topics into classrooms, setting the discourse motion, and encouraging students to produce an output (3). socioculturally, tasks are designed to provide students with dialogic interaction that can provide a “window for viewing the cognitive processes the learner is internalizing”(1) . Some teachers, the author among them, believe that one reason for families’ dissatisfaction with English language learning and teaching in intermediate schools is related to the existence of the traditional way of English language teaching in schools. This traditional way of teaching includes instructional practices that are collectively referred to as ‘prompting’ because they involve the prompting and “drilling” of students. These practices are also described colloquially as “drilling and killing”, “memorizing”, “answering and not questioning”, “checking and not correcting”, “individual learning” (as opposed to group work learning), “teachers are the sources and producers of knowledge, ‘students are the recipients,’ and ‘leaving no place for much thinking and understanding.’ Due to research scope purposes, this study assumes that the traditional way of English language teaching does not help students better comprehend English when the emphasis is placed on reading comprehension.

2. Methodology

This chapter outlines the steps necessary to answer the following questions:

- 1) Is using the TBLT method more effective than using the traditional method in English language teaching?
- 2) What insights and issues can be gained about implementing TBLT in this research setting?

2.1 Participants

This study targets high school (16-17-year-old students) in governmental schools of Arak city. English language curriculum for high school in Iran is highly standardized across the country—all follow the same curriculum and use the same textbooks for teaching the English language. Students' final assessments in all subjects, including English, are based on standardized tests that are supervised by the ministry of education and administered by the schools. Because the processes and the tests are the same country-wide, the findings of this study are potentially relevant for all high school students and English teachers in Iran. This will help to establish an acceptable level of external validity, especially when the study is replicated in different parts.

Students (participants). A total of 122 students, participating in the study, mostly from the middle class, and share similar characteristics in terms of socio-economic status.

Teachers (participants). Two English language teachers are included in the study. One has taught the treatment group and the other one has taught the control group. The treatment group teacher is the researcher since he is the most familiar with the treatment method of instruction. The other teacher has been teaching the control group through the use of the traditional method and who has been assigned by the school.

2.2 Data Collection Tools

To gather data, the study uses: (a) a pretest—to document the level of students' English language reading comprehension they have at the beginning of the study; (b) observation of the treatment group (researcher log) and control group (classroom visits); and (c) posttests—to evaluate particular areas of student study.

Pretest. The primary purpose of the pretest is to function as the main covariate. It is used to provide a baseline for the students' current English language reading comprehension levels so this study can examine the effect of treatment, relative to initial English language proficiency. The pretest also helps increase the power of the study by reducing the error that can be attributed to prior differences among students and its relation to the outcome. It is not used to place students in certain levels or groups. Two reading passage practice tests were used and which were developed by Ohio Department

There are two reasons that justify the choice of this particular test; one is that this reading test has met the criteria of validity and reliability (5). The second reason is that this reading test is the most appropriate placement test as it specifically designed to measure the reading comprehension of the students and, hence, is compatible with the posttest (both of pre and posttests measure students' reading comprehension). Based on the identified characteristics of the participating students (age, English language level), those two reading passages are appropriate. The two reading passages have a total of 22 questions that measure reading comprehension. Test scores are going to be based on a retelling rubric.

Observation. This study places great emphasis on this data collection tool and is aware that field notes gathered are going to represent the eyes, ears, and the perceptual senses of the reader(6).The form and

notes provides insights and issues about implementing both of the TBLT and traditional methods in the control and treatment groups in this research setting. Among the techniques used when taking field notes is the usage of direct quotes, paraphrases, description of the context, and description of any behavioral experience that take place in the classroom (3).

2.3 Procedural Details

Treatment. As described in chapter one, TBLT is a method of language instruction that uses a problem-solving approach to meaningful, real world tasks. In this method, priority is placed on task completion and tasks are assessed according to outcome (7). Students pass through three stages in a TBLT lesson: (a) groups of students engage in real life situations that are similar to the task they are going to perform in the classroom (pre-task stage), (b) groups of students do the intended goal or task of the lesson (running the task stage), and (c) groups of students display or provide an indicator that they have successfully completed the task for the purposes of assessment and evaluation (task completion stage).

2.4 Data Analysis

To answer the two research questions for this study, data are collected from three sources: a pretest, posttests, and through observation.

Research Questions	Pretest	Observation		Posttest	
	(Placement Test)	Researcher Log	Classroom Visits	RPA (Retelling)	TET
Q 1: Is using the TBLT method more effective than using the traditional method in English language teaching?	*			*	*
Q 2: What insights and issues can be gained about implementing TBLT in this research setting?		*	*		

2.5 Analysis of Pre and Post Test Scores

Analysis involves entering the collected pre and posttests data into an SPSS data file with multiple accuracy checks. Analysis will also provide descriptive statistics, such as frequency tables, means, and standard deviations for all the variables in the study. The descriptive statistics helps identify any abnormalities in the collected data, such as missing values and outliers and help assess some of the assumptions needed for testing hypotheses related to the first research question.

As a primary tool to analyze the data for this study, a Two-Factor Split Plot ANOVA with a covariate involves one between subject's factor (Teaching method) and one within subject's factor; the repeated

measure of the subjects five times over the duration of the study. The first is to control for the effects of the students' prior knowledge of the English language reading comprehension and which could be related to the outcome variable. This control helps level the ground for the two groups we are trying to compare by eliminating the pre-existing effects of such covariates on the outcome variable before comparing the effectiveness of the treatment group to the control group. This process helps boost the internal validity of the study by eliminating some feasible alternatives to the results. The second benefit is to achieve higher power when comparing the treatment and control groups. Introducing the pretest as a covariate to the model helps explain some of the inconsistencies in the outcome variable that otherwise summed under the error variance. Thus, reducing the error variance leads to a more powerful test of the intended null hypothesis. To address the research question stated earlier in the chapter, the analysis will test the following:

The null hypothesis: There is no overall significant difference in students' achievement between the TBLT teaching method of the English language and the traditional teaching method.

$$H_0: \mu_{TBLT} = \mu_{Traditional}$$

The alternative hypothesis: There are significant differences between the TBLT method in teaching English compared to the traditional method, with higher means demonstrated by the TBLT method.

$$H_A: \mu_{TBLT} > \mu_{Traditional}$$

In addition to the above main hypothesis, the following are also tested: The null hypothesis: there is no interaction effect between treatment type and the repeated measures across time.

$$H_0: \mu_{TBLT_i} = \mu_{Traditional_i}$$

The alternative hypothesis: There is an interaction effect between the treatment type and the repeated measures across time.

$$H_A: \mu_{TBLT_i} \neq \mu_{Traditional_i}$$

Where i is equal to 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 teaching units defined by two weeks' period.

The above hypotheses are tested with a probability of controlling type one error (alpha level of significance) at $\alpha .05$. Previous research such as Gass, Mackey, and RossFeldman (6). have shown that the chosen alpha level of significance (.05) with the given sample size and study design, provides an acceptable level of power.

3. Analysis and Results

Results of the Quantitative Analysis of the First Research Question:

- Is using the TBLT method for teaching English as a second language for male, third-grade students in intermediate schools in Iran more effective in the acquisition of the English language, in terms of students' achievement on reading comprehension, than using the traditional "prompting" method?

The statistical analysis needed to address this research question was the Two Factor Spilt-Plot design. The Two-Factor Spilt-Plot design is often called a mixed design and that is due to the combination of the characteristics of the One-Factor Repeated Measures and the Two-Factor Fixed-Effects models

(5). In this study the repeated measures (within-subject factor) is the posttest and the treatment (i.e., TBLT and Traditional teaching method) represents the between-subject factor.

Variables included in the design are:

1) Pretest measure of students' initial level of the English language reading comprehension. This measure is used as the covariate in the design to help control for students' differences in their initial knowledge of the English language. The covariate will also increase the power of the analysis by explaining some of the variability in the posttests scores that is attributed to differences in students' initial level of the English language rather than the TBLT treatment effect.

2) Treatment factor with two groups. The treatment group consists of students taught the English language with emphasis on reading comprehension through using the TBLT method. The control group consists of students taught the English language with emphasis on reading comprehension through using the traditional method. The treatment factor is the between-subjects factor in the design.

3) Each student will be tested over time using five sets of posttests measures administered two weeks apart after introducing the two treatments (teaching with TBLT and traditional methods). Each set of the tests consists of one standardized test and one researcher-prepared assessment. Both tests are intended to measure students' reading comprehension in the materials covered during the preceding two weeks. Standardized posttests are the traditional tests used in all the intermediate schools in Iran. To accommodate the use of the TBLT teaching method of the English language, this study recognizes the need to develop another test (researcher-prepared assessment) to assure a valid assessment of students reading comprehension. The multiple posttests over time represent the within-subject factor of the design.

Results of the Qualitative Analysis of the Second Research Question:

- What insights and issues can be gained about implementing TBLT in this research setting?

Data for this research question were gathered through two data collection techniques. The first one was *observation* for both of the control and the treatment groups. This data collection provides observational data about the control and TBLT groups. The second data collection technique was *researcher log* where notes were written down as recalled after each time the treatment teacher (researcher) taught the treatment group. Data from both types of data collection techniques took the form of written notes. The following presents the analysis and results for the second research question from both qualitative data collection techniques.

Observation of the Control and Treatment Groups

The study focused on nine categories to be considered when writing down observational notes. The first one was (1) *setting the stage* which described what the teacher mainly did to create a desired atmosphere for starting the lesson he had planned such as having the students sit on groups or pairs and also introducing the lesson at hand. The second category of observational notes, (2) *engaging the students*, were interested in showing how the teacher and the students got involved in the main goal of the lesson such as linking the content of the lesson to something the students already knew in their

daily lives. The third one, (3) *running the task*, described how and what both of the teacher and the students did to learn the targeted content (achieve the main goal of the lesson). The fourth one, (4) *task completion*, provided notes that describe how both of the teacher and students ensured achieving the main goal or content of the lesson. The fifth and the sixth categories of observational notes described the attitudes of both of (5) the students and (6) the teacher throughout the entire the lesson. The seventh category of observational notes emphasized (7) the difficulties that faced both of the teacher and the students for achieving the main goal of the lesson. The eighth and ninth categories of notes stated (8) the advantages and (9) disadvantages of the teaching method used while teaching the lesson. Between the control group, which had been taught using the traditional teaching method, and the treatment group, which had been taught using the TBLT method.

4. Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

As the nature of the study has a mixed-method design (quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques), it is easier for the reader to discuss each type of findings by itself. The discussion of the findings attempts to make connections to some of the existing educational issues including teacher-centered vs. student-centered.

Quantitative findings were mainly obtained from two data collection tools that included conducting a pretest and five posttests for 122 students divided into two groups (i.e., control and treatment). The pretest primarily aimed at measuring students' initial level of the English language reading comprehension. Pretest scores showed that there were no statistically significant differences between the treatment group (students taught by the TBLT method) and control group (students taught by the traditional teaching method) suggesting that the two groups' initial level of the English language reading comprehension before administering the treatment was about the same. The finding of equivalence between the control and treatment groups prior to the application of the experiment validates attributing any positive or negative change that occurs on the students' reading comprehension achievement (posttest scores) to the effect of the method of teaching (TBLT vs. Traditional), especially when known that similar learning conditions were ensured for both of the treatment and control groups.

Posttests aimed at testing students over time using five measures administered two weeks apart after introducing the two treatments (teaching with TBLT and traditional methods). Each set of the tests consisted of one standardized test and one researcher prepared assessment resulting in ten sub-tests (five standardized and five researcher prepared assessment tests). Both sets of tests intended to measure students' reading comprehension in the materials covered during the preceding two weeks. Reasons for adopting two formats of posttests included having an accurate and comprehensive assessment of students' reading comprehension as researcher-prepared assessment complements standardized posttest in the assessment of students' reading comprehension. The treatment teacher (researcher) as well as the control group teacher graded both types of posttests. The grading process showed a very low level of disagreement (i.e., less than.03%).

Posttest scores showed that there were differences between treatment and control groups across all the posttest measures in favor of the treatment group, with the exception of the third posttest. Across the first, second, fourth, and fifth posttests, students in the treatment group significantly scored higher than students in the control group. In the third posttest, neither group scored significantly higher than the other one. That is, the control group scored a little bit higher than the treatment group in researcher prepared assessment part while the treatment group similarly scored a little bit higher than the control group in the standardized part.

One reason that might help explain why students' test scores did not have significant differences in the third posttest between the treatment and control groups is *history*. History in this context refers to the situation when unanticipated events occur while the treatment is being conducted and participate in changing participants' behavior (8). Those events become alternative explanations for the changes in participants' behavior rather than treatment. During the third posttest time for the treatment group, it happened that the school had had an open day. (Note 1) Students in the treatment group had to finish their third posttest before they could join their colleagues and have fun in that open day.

Knowing some of the common characteristics and needs of students at this age may explain why students in the treatment group did not score significantly higher than students in the control one as they had done in the first, second, fourth, and fifth posttests. During the application of the third posttest, some students in the treatment group were most likely thinking of their colleagues who were having fun outside of the class. Other students might have wanted to finish as soon as they could so as not to miss much fun of the open day. Thus, it is possible that the effect of history interacted with the third posttest had led to no significant differences. This is to say that students in the treatment group could have done better and might have scored significantly higher than students in the control group if there were no open day during the time of the third posttest. This means that students in the treatment group's not scoring significantly higher than that of students in the control group should not be attributed to the treatment effect but to the effect of an outside event (the open day) known quantitatively as history. This claim is supported by the other four posttests in which students in the treatment group have scored significantly higher than students in the control group.

The findings of the pretest and posttest scores together answered the first research question. The pretest results, as mentioned earlier, showed equivalence of students' initial level of the English language reading comprehension before the application of any of the two teaching methods (i.e., TBLT vs. traditional) in both groups. The average scores of both types of posttests (researcher-prepared assessment and standardized text-established tests) of the control and treatment groups were significant in favor of the treatment group. That finding meant that the application of TBLT method in this research setting helped increase the students' achievement scores in English language reading comprehension more than that of the traditional teaching method. Equivalence of both groups attained prior to the application of the treatment and reporting significant differences from two data sources (researcher-prepared assessment and standardized text established tests) increased the validity of the

findings.

Observed data help in explaining reasons related to having better quantitative results (posttest scores) in favor of the TBLT group. These data hypothesize that characteristics and procedures associated with TBLT help students, as reported quantitatively, increase their reading comprehension achievement scores more than those associated with the traditional teaching method. TBLT procedures and characteristics include teacher's role as a facilitator, group work, students' roles within group work, the type of activities in which students are involved, complexity of tasks, and lesson plan.

Yet all these procedures and characteristics of TBLT work in harmony and complement the work of each other, three elements of TBLT seem to make the greater difference from the traditional teaching method. First, the structure of the lesson that divides the duration of the lesson into three phases (*pre task, running the task, task completion*) accompanied by what this study would describe as a *unity of mechanism* that requires interrelation of these three phases where every phase is built upon the other.

Second, the type of activities in which students are involved does imitate their daily lives. Third, the greater amount of space (time) that students have in groups to discuss, negotiate meaning, and share responses. (More details about how these elements work in classroom are elaborately discussed under Chapters I and II).

The above quantitative findings show a desired or better learning outcome achieved when applying the TBLT method. Better learning is always a primary common aim of learning theories and which strive to describe how learning occurs and, consequently, what practitioners and learners should do towards having better learning and teaching. Careful examination of the TBLT principles and characteristics and those of the constructivist learning theory reveals strong connections between the constructivist learning theory and the TBLT Practice. These connections are addressed later on this chapter under the pedagogical context of the TBLT method.

Quantitative findings emerging out of the application of TBLT in this study are supported by findings of other studies that implemented TBLT in other teaching and learning settings. Connection between the findings of those studies and the findings of this study is seen through the significant results of the positive effect of TBLT when it is applied in various teaching and learning settings. For examples, students who were taught via task-based instruction learned more than those who were taught via presentation (8). A significant interaction is found between achievement (acquisition of language) and the use of task in teaching (9). TBLT helped students know far more language through activities (tasks) than what they exhibit in response to classroom drills (10). The application of TBLT has motivated students, improved their speaking skills, and helped them use grammar and pronunciation correctly(11). Teaching students via TBLT helped them increase their knowledge of advanced grammatical rules (12). Such positive findings about TBLT in other research settings provide further validity and reliability to the findings of this study.

4.1 Qualitative Findings

Qualitative findings were mainly obtained from two data collection sources that included observation

and researcher log. Qualitative findings helped explain or visualize the surroundings of the application of the traditional and TBLT teaching methods in this research setting. Discussion of the qualitative and quantitative findings shows that they are in agreement; both types of findings suggest that when emphasis is placed on English language reading comprehension, TBLT is a better way of instruction than the traditional teaching method.

4.2 Implications

This section of the chapter discusses how the reported findings speak to the related educational context of the study. Benefited educational issues from this context include English language teaching method, English language teacher education, educational policies related to designing the English language curriculum, and recommendations for future research. Before discussing any of these educational issues, it is crucial to remind the reader that continuous development, some of which have become effective during data analysis of this study, has been taking place since the past seven years in various educational institutes. This movement of development increases the chances that implications out of this study find parties involved directly and indirectly in the educational process who will appreciate these implications and work towards adapting constructivist learning and teaching.

Recommendations for Future Research:

At this point of a study, typical researchers would look back at what they have found, learned, and make decisions on what they would want to do differently in future studies. This critical phase in research often implies a researcher's self-critique, can influence other colleagues' research interests through guiding them to investigate a certain topic, and can provide hints about a researcher's line of inquiry. The following presents some research ideas and recommendations to consider in future studies. Hopefully, there would be a chance in the near future to investigate the application of TBLT in other aspects related to English language teaching and learning such as and not limited to listening comprehension and writing quality (semantically and syntactically). It is going to add greater value to the major theme of this study (TBLT) when finding out whether or not the findings out the study would be similar if applied on girls rather than boys or when the study is applied in different parts of Saudi Arabia.

Replication of this study in different settings will increase the reliability of the findings. Due to the tremendous work involved, one recommendation for colleagues who would like to further investigate this study in different settings or any of the above suggested research topics related to the application of TBLT in educational settings is to have more than one investigator in the design of the study. This is also going to enhance the quality of work and increase the validity of the findings. This should be true in most research areas and, especially, in experimental ones.

A very rich research topic would be about the extent English language teachers in Iran schools are satisfied with their current teaching practices and current teaching and learning policies. Another beneficial research idea suggested for future research, which can also provide researchers with a great number of research topics and research questions, is to survey and interview English language teachers,

students, and families about issues related to teaching and learning the English language in schools. Some of these issues include what they want out of learning and teaching English, how they want to learn or teach English in schools, what is missing in learning and teaching English, and what should be done differently while learning and teaching the English language in schools.

5. Conclusion

This study has taken place in Iran, where education, in general, and the teaching of English, in particular, receives considerable attention from the Ministry of Education, business leaders, and families. This study has involved the application of Task-Based Language Teaching TBLT into the existing curriculum. The study has strived to find out whether or not the TBLT method can help the students better acquire the English language through increasing their achievement scores on reading comprehension and also seek for insights or issues that can be gained about implementing the TBLT method in this research setting.

Literature reviewed has shown that the TBLT method is theoretically framed by the constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes the role of social interaction in cognitive development (3). and is also informed by Dewey's (13) notion of learning through activities. Tasks in language learning and teaching have developed across time. Literature has also presented other practices in other disciplines of knowledge that share similar characteristics and principles of TBLT which include *Developmental Appropriate Practice* from Early Childhood, *Whole Language* from Literacy, and *Continuous Progress* from Educational Leadership.

The study has examined the effect of TBLT on reading comprehension in two intermediate schools in Iran through a time frame of ten weeks. The treatment group is compared to the control group on the outcome after controlling for the students' pre-existing knowledge of the English language as a covariate. The study has had a mixed-design (quantitative and qualitative) where quasi-experimental analysis with pre and posttests represent the quantitative part and synthesis of observational data from classroom observation and researcher log represent the qualitative part.

The statistical analysis that has addressed the quantitative part (the first research question) is the Two-Factor Split-Plot design. Findings out of the pre-test have shown that students in both of the treatment and control groups are equal in terms of their prior knowledge of reading comprehension of the English language. Findings out of the posttests have shown that students in the treatment group have scored significantly higher than students in the control group suggesting that the TBLT method has helped students increase their reading comprehension more than that of the traditional teaching method. Qualitative analyses for the second research question have been through *Grounded Theory* for data obtained from researcher log and through a set of procedures to compare and contrast data obtained from classroom observation. Findings out of the qualitative data have shown that the TBLT method has helped students develop desired attitudes towards the learning situations and has involved practices and roles of students and their teacher that go along with the constructivist learning theory.

Qualitative findings have also shown that the traditional teaching method has not helped students develop desired attitudes towards the learning situations and involved practices and roles of students and their teacher that went along with the behaviorist learning theory. Both of the quantitative and qualitative findings have provided support and evidences for the findings presented by each set of data. Discussion of the findings of the study has shown that the major theme of this study (TBLT) falls in a constructivist pedagogical context. Discussion of the findings has also shown that learning and teaching via TBLT is *student-centered* while learning and teaching via the traditional teaching method is highly *teacher-centered*. Reviewed literature of classroom communication has even provided further merits to teaching and learning via TBLT over that of the traditional teaching method suggesting that the application of TBLT encourages or goes along with most of the desired characteristics of effective classroom communication. Methodological limitations have included the presence of only one (statistically) controlling variable for determining equivalence of the control and treatment groups, the non-random selection of sample, the duration of data collection, and the implementation of a constructivist practice (TBLT) into an existing standardized curriculum

At last but not least, implications have addressed some aspects related to how the study's educational context can benefit from the findings presented by the study. Benefited educational issues in this context have included English language teaching method in Iran, English language teacher education, recommendations for educational policies related to English language teaching and learning, and recommendations for future research. At last, efforts invested in this study are rewarded with findings discovered and, hopefully, help interested educators in Iran and around the world to pursue beneficial education for themselves, students, and their societies.

Abbreviations

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)

Task-Based Teaching (TBT)

Task-Based Assessment (TBA)

Task-based assessment (TBA)

Task-based teaching (TBT)

Developmental Appropriate Practice (DAP)

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Note

Note 1. In an open day, the school cancels all classes, gathers all students in one place, and do fun activities.