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TEACHERS' ATTITUDES AND UNDERSTANDING OF TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING- A STUDY CONDUCTED AT THE FACULTY OF LANGUAGES, CULTURES AND COMMUNICATIONS AT SEEU

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Abstract

The aim of the paper was to investigate teachers' attitudes and understanding of Task-based language teaching (TBLT) at the Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communications. In addition to this, the study aimed to identify positive effects that TBLT have in the classroom and also the reasons why teachers decide to implement this approach in their instruction. As a subcategory of communicative language teaching, TBLT became a very important area of research since the last decade, 20th century and it is used in all levels of education. Nevertheless, the research in Macedonia in this field is very poor due to previous education where teachers used old teaching methodologies.

In this paper we attempt to identify some main issues related to teachers' attitudes and understanding of TBLT and also the implementation of some principles of TBLT. The study participants are twenty teachers who teach

languages at SEEU and have different teaching experiences. The main instrument used was the questionnaire which was partly adapted and modified from Nunan's (2004), a checklist for evaluating communicative tasks, and a teacher interview.

The results obtained from the study instruments showed that participants have a high level of understanding of TBLT principles and they expressed positive views towards its' implementation in the classroom. Finally, the implications of the study may affect teacher practice and also curriculum design at SEEU.

Keywords: Task-based language teaching, teachers' attitudes, task, communicative teaching.

Introduction

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is an approach developed from Communicative Language Teaching. The main focus is on the learner and it starts from what the teachers and a task need to 'do' to get learners motivated to do the task. It has become very popular worldwide and it is believed to foster students' communication skills. In the field of Second Language Acquisition, there are worldwide efforts by researchers to investigate the issue of a better implementation of TBLT. Also, past and present conferences such as in Belgium, USA, England, Canada and New Zealand aim to promote theoretical and practical research on TBLT. Its increasing popularity has encouraged a shift in many educational contexts from the traditional teacher-centered to the learner-centered classroom.

The purpose of this study is to investigate university teachers' attitudes and understanding of Task-Based Teaching at South East European University in Macedonia. Another issue raised will be the positive effects that TBLT can have in the university classroom and also the most frequent reasons teachers implement or avoid using TBLT in the classroom. This is a very important area of study because the results obtained from the study will help the language teachers to understand and implement the main principles of TBLT. Finally, the implications of the study may affect teacher practice and also curriculum design.

Objectives of this study

- To identify teachers' attitudes and understandings of TBLT
- To identify the challenges and possibilities of implementing TBLT
- To make recommendations for further research

Literature Review

The term "Task-based" was developed in the 1980s and 1990s as an approach which was considered as innovation in teaching when people became aware that the learner needed to be at the centre of attention. It is used for teaching children and adults at all levels of education. Educational thinkers of the 20th century such as Dewey, Vygotsky and Freinet and also the interaction researchers such as Barns, Brintton and Torbe (1978), Mehan (1979) and Wells (1978 cited in Van den Branden, Bygate and Norris, 2009, p.5) - quoted here - argued that "the development of complex functional abilities would be optionally stimulated by confronting students with holistic, challenging tasks that they would likely also encounter in real life." What is more, the main focus of TBLT is to foster learners' communicative ability where grammar and translation are not the main focus. As Powers (ND.) puts it, "Task-based instruction is different from other more traditional methods of language teaching. Lessons are constructed according to the language required to perform specific tasks rather than according to the aspects of language such as structures and vocabulary". What is more, "...it appears to blur the traditional distinction between the syllabus, i.e. a statement of what is to be taught, and methodology, i.e. a statement of how to teach" (Ellis, 2003, p.30).

Pedagogically, TBLT has strengthened the following principles and practices:

- "a needs-based approach to content selection;
- an emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language;
- the introduction of authentic texts into the learning situations;
- an enhancement of the learner's own experiences;
- the linking of classroom language learning with language use outside the classroom" (Nunan, 2004, p.1).

Since the use of the Task-based approach in teaching is challenging, language instructors should be encouraged to use TBLT and meet the challenges imposed by the reforms in systems of education and teaching methodologies. After all, these changes in teaching approaches should be made explicit to teachers, so that they can understand the rationale behind the implementation of TBLT and are aware of the inefficacy of the other approaches and the need to develop their knowledge and methodologies in adopting TBLT (Hui, 2004,p.15). For this reason, the investigation of teachers' attitudes towards Task-based Teaching and learning is very important because their way of thinking influence their teaching practices.

Defining a Task

According to many dictionaries, a task is a piece of work assigned but “tasks when used in the context of language education refer to activities that qualify as tasks only if they have potential to involve learners in meaningful language use” (Müller-Hartman and Schocker-von Ditfurth, 2011, p.22). There are several definitions of the “task” (Long 1958, Richards et al 1986, Breen 1987, Skehan 1998, Willis and Willis 2001, Ellis 2003) but the most comprehensible one is provided by Nunan (2004) who emphasized that “a pedagogical task is a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, in which the attention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form” (p. 4).However, Bygate et al (2001 cited in Hui 2004 pg. 12) “still thinks it is necessary to define task as broadly as possible as it has a very limited range of applications, so it is important that task should be defined more clearly and applied to different contexts”. He further states that “A task is an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective, and which is chosen so that it is most likely to provide information for learners which will help them evaluate their own learning” (Bygate el al, 2001 cited in Hui 2004, pg.12).

There are several criteria that a good language task should fulfill. First of all “the task should have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, middle and an end” (Nunan 2004, p.4). It is the teachers' responsibility to select an appropriate classroom task because not all tasks can be meaningful and appropriate for different groups of learners. “The tasks that are appropriate to develop intercultural

communicative competence are therefore different for different groups of learners. This is why the teachers will have to adapt and to select tasks that meet their particular learners' language learning needs".(Müller-Hartman and Schocker-von Ditfurth and, 2011, p.25)

The teacher's role in TBLT is that of a facilitator and the selector of tasks. On the other hand, the learner role is a group participant, monitor, risk-taker and innovator. Therefore, choosing a meaningful task is the most important issue in the classroom and "Tasks are one the most important methodological tools for teachers who try to provide a rich learning environment for their learning".(Müller-Hartman and Schocker-von Ditfurth, 2004, p.44).

Implementation Challenges

One of the most difficult issues that teachers face in implementing TBLT in their classes is how to organize task stages. Willis (1996) also concludes that "the hardest thing for the teacher to do is to stop teaching during the task stage and just monitor" (p.227). According to him, there are three phases involved in the Task-based teaching. Figure 1 shows a model pre-task, task cycle and language focus.

Pre-task: Discuss topic and situation Teacher sets written task which could be based on a reading text
Task: Students discuss the task in pairs or groups Planning 1: notes, discussion, first draft and exchange of drafts Planning 2: redraft, check, improve, and make the draft ready for the audience Report: Pieces of writing read by all. Class discussion and findings. Summing up.
Language focus: the teacher explains unfamiliar words and phrases.

Figure 1: A pre-task and task cycle (Taken from Willis 1996, p.138)

Another area that is a challenge for teachers is curriculum design, particularly assessment of TBLT. Good assessment practice traditionally involves validity, reliability and objectivity. "The traditional concepts of reliability and validity are restrictive though when it comes to task-based assessment because traditional testing has always strived to control the variables such as the context and the role of the tester". (Schocker-von Ditfurth and Müller-Hartman, 2011, p. 241). "Task-based tests require candidates to perform an activity which simulates a performance they will have to engage in outside the test situation"(Nunan 2004, p.145). In addition Nunan suggests that "any pedagogical task can be used for assessing learner progress. The main difference lies in how the task is set up. And

how learner language is recorded and analyzed” (2004, pg.154). All in all, different researchers such as Brindley 1989;Genesse and Upshor 1996;Grunder and Bohl 2001;Kolb 2007 (cited in Müller-Hartman and Schocker-von Ditzfurth, 2011) agree with Kolb that “different assessment tools .. can be used for task-based assessment such as observation, portfolios, conferences, journals, questionnaires, interviews, informal discussions, learner self-assessment procedures, teacher and learner journals and others” (pg.243). The literature review clearly shows that doing task-based teaching in the classroom is a complex issue which should be planned very carefully.

Empirical Study

Research questions

For the purpose of this study, the following questions will be addressed:

1. What are the teachers’ attitudes and understandings of TBLT?
2. What are the most frequent reasons why teachers use or avoid using TBLT in their instruction?
3. What positive effects can TBLT have in the language classroom?

Participants

The research took place at SEEU and there were 20 teacher participants who completed the study. There were also 8 teachers, male and female, drawn from the total sample who were interviewed. Only some of the teachers involved in the study had actual experience with TBLT. The teachers had different educational background and also different teaching experiences but they all hold either PhD or MA degrees. All teachers teach at the Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communications at SEEU, in Albanian. The participants of the study were advised about the purpose of the research before it started.

Instruments

For the purpose of gathering information from respondents, the study used two instruments: a teacher questionnaire and a teacher interview (Appendices 1 and 2). The Teacher questionnaire aimed to find out teachers’ attitudes and understanding of Task-Based language teaching. It contained thirty items and it has three parts, A, B and C. The questionnaire was partly adapted and modified

from Nunan's (2004), a checklist for evaluating communicative tasks. The teacher interview on the other hand, contained ten questions related to teachers' familiarity with TBLT.

Study results

Questionnaire results

During phase one of the research, 20 teachers filled out the questionnaire. The aim was to find out teachers' understanding of TBLT and some main principles, their views of implementing TBLT in the classroom, and the reasons teachers use or avoid using TBLT in their instruction. It consisted of a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree and strongly agree and it measured teacher responses to the questionnaire items.

Table 2 shows the results obtained for the first part of the questionnaire, teachers' understanding of TBLT.

No	Questionnaire Items	SD	D	N	A	SA
1	A task is a primary means of communication	/	/	2	8	10
2	A task involves a primary focus on meaning	4	4	/	5	7
3	A task has a clearly defined outcome	3	3	1	6	7
4	A task is any activity in which the target language is used by the learner	/	/	4	4	12
5	TBLT is consistent with the principles of communicative language teaching	/	/	4	11	5
6	TBLT is based on the student-centred instructional approach	1	/	2	9	8
7	TBLT includes three stages: pre-task, task implementation and post-task	/	1	2	10	7

Table 2: Teachers' understanding of TBLT

In response to items 1 to 3 which asked the participants for some key concepts of TBLT, the majority of respondents (10) understood that it is goal directed, the primary focus is on meaning (7) and that a task has a clearly defined outcome as stated by 7 respondents. In response to item 4, the majority of the respondents (12), strongly agree that it is an activity in which the target language is used by the learner. Finally, the responses to the items 5 to 7 show that the respondents to some extent are aware that TBLT is consistent with the principles of communicative language teaching, it is based on the student-instructional

approach (8 respondents) and TBLT includes three stages: pre-task, task implementation and post- task (7). This shows that teachers are familiar with the main principles of TBLT and this might result in its' successful implementation. It seems that the respondents (5 of them strongly agree and 11 of the respondents agree) identify TBLT with the principles of communicative language teaching which is based on the student- instructional approach and it includes three stages.

Table 3 presents teachers' views on implementing TBLT in the classroom.

No	Questionnaire Items	%	SD	D	N	A	SA
8	I have interest in implementing TBLT in the classroom	1	3	2	5	9	
9	TBLT provides a relaxed atmosphere to promote the target language use	1	1	/	9	9	
10	TBLT takes into account learners' needs and interests	3	3	1	3	10	
11	TBLT pursues the development of integrated skills in the classroom	1	3	5	5	6	
12	TBLT gives much psychological burden to the teacher as a facilitator	3	4	3	5	5	
13	TBLT requires more preparation time compared to other approaches	2	2	1	2	13	
14	TBLT is proper for controlling classroom arrangements	2	3	5	5	5	
15	TBLT materials in textbooks are meaningful and purposeful based on real-world context	3	3	6	4	4	

Table 3: Teachers' views on implementing TBLT

In response to items 8 to 10, the majority of the respondents have a positive view of TBLT in terms of its' implementation in the classroom, but a few respondents, 6 of them, either strongly disagree, disagree or are neutral about this issue. 18 respondents either strongly agree or agree that TBLT provides a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom which takes into account learners' needs and interest as reported by 10 respondents who strongly agree and 3 of them agree. Regarding item 11, 6 respondents strongly agree and 5 of them agree that it pursues the development of integrated skills in the classroom. On the other hand, 5 respondents feel neutral about this issue and 4 of them either strongly disagree or disagree with this statement. Item 12, on the other hand, gives more balanced results because 10 participants either strongly agree or agree that TBLT gives much psychological burden to teacher as a facilitator and 10 other participants either strongly disagree, disagree or are neutral related to this statement. Finally,

in response to items, 13, 14 and 15, the respondents have different opinions. 15 respondents strongly agree and agree that TBLT requires much preparation time compared to other approaches while only 5 of the respondents strongly disagree, disagree or are neutral about it. This shows that teachers are aware about the preparation time before using TBLT. Also, for item 14, TBLT is proper for controlling classroom arrangements, half of the participants (10) either strongly agree or agree and half of them (10) strongly disagree, disagree or are neutral. In the end, 8 respondents either strongly agree or agree that TBLT materials in textbooks are meaningful and purposeful based on real-world context but 12 participants strongly disagree, disagree and are neutral about this statement. All in all, it seems that teachers have positive attitudes towards TBLT and having positive views towards certain approaches increases learner success.

Table 4 presents the findings of the teachers' beliefs about the reasons for using TBLT in the classroom.

No	Questionnaire Items	%	SD	D	N	A	SA
16	TBLT is appropriate for small group work	2	1	1	8	8	
17	TBLT improves learners' interaction skills	1	1	3	5	10	
18	TBLT encourages learners' intrinsic motivation	2	2	2	6	8	
19	TBLT creates a collaborative learning environment	2	2	2	4	11	
20	TBLT promotes learners' academic progress	1	2	2	2	13	

Table 4: Teacher's beliefs about the Reasons for using TBLT in the classroom

In response to items 16 to 18, 8 respondents strongly agree and 8 others agree that TBLT is appropriate for small group work, it improves learners' interaction skills (15 respondents) and it encourages learners' intrinsic motivation (14 of the respondents either strongly agree or agree). It is known that intrinsic motivation influences learners' success. Finally, for item 19 and 20, 15 respondents strongly agree and agree that it creates a collaborative learning environment while 5 of them strongly disagree, disagree or are neutral about this issue. A

majority of the respondents, 13 strongly agree and 5 agree, that TBLT promotes learners' academic progress but there are also teachers, 5 of them, who either strongly disagree, disagree or are neutral about this. Overall results of this part

of the questionnaire show that teachers believe that TBLT it is suitable for doing small group which improves learners' interaction skills and promotes learners' academic progress.

Table 5 shows the main reasons why teachers avoid using TBLT in the classroom.

No	Questionnaire Items	%	SD	D	N	A	SA
21	I have very little knowledge of task-based instruction	9	3	4	2	2	
22	I have limited target language proficiency	18	2	/	/	/	
23	I have difficulty in assessing learners' task-based performance	17	3	/	/	/	
24	Learners are not used to task-based learning	10	5	3	2	/	
25	Materials in textbooks are not proper for using TBLT	/	/	2	3	15	
26	Large class size is an obstacle to using task-based methods	5	5	3	4	3	

Table 5: Reasons teachers avoid using TBLT in the classroom

In response to items 21, 'I have very little knowledge of task-based instruction', only 4 of them either strongly agree or agree and 16 respondents strongly disagree, disagree and are neutral about it. For items 21 and 22, 'I have limited target language proficiency' and 'I have difficulty in assessing learners' task-based performance', none of the participants strongly agree or agree. Regarding item 24, 'Learners are not used to task-based learning', only 2 participants agree and other 18 either strongly disagree, disagree or are neutral. It is interesting that only 2 participants are neutral about item 24, 'Materials in textbooks are not proper for using TBLT', 18 other participants strongly agree or agree with this statement. Finally, 7 respondents strongly agree and agree that 'Large class size is an obstacle to using task-based methods', while 13 of them either strongly disagree, disagree or are neutral about this issue. Overall, it can be concluded that teachers have solid knowledge about TBLT, they have high language proficiency but materials in textbooks are not always appropriate for using TBLT in the classroom.

Interview results

In phase two of the research, there were 8 respondents interviewed. They were drawn from the total sample of 20 teachers of the Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communications at SEEU. They expressed their opinions regarding TBL, its implementation in the classroom, some factors that can influence its successful implementation, and the resources which should be used. Below are some excerpts taken from the teachers' interviews:

R = Researcher

P = Participant

Excerpt 1:

R: What are your comments and reflections concerning any aspect of the implementation of TBLT at SEEU?

P2: I have used it personally a lot in the Skills classes since the books were task-based. SEEU has the necessary equipment to implement TBLT but it requires more preparation.

P7: This is an approach that requires a lot of work both on the part of the teacher and the student.

Excerpt 2:

R: Do you consider the implementation of TBLT a challenge for you? If yes/no, why?

P6: No, it is more a pleasure than a challenge.

Excerpt 3:

R: Can you use TBLT with all levels of students? If yes/ no, why?

P3: Yes, of course. It just needs to be adjusted to the students' proficiency and age level.

Excerpt 4:

R: What do you think are the crucial factors for the effective implementation of TBLT in your teaching context?

P4: One of the main factors is teacher belief and attitude toward TBLT on how the approach is implemented in the classroom. Another factor is different cultural approaches to learning. Some prefer to follow textbooks more and some not.

P7: Training and equipments.

P8: Appropriate tasks, clear instruction, assessment and feedback.

Excerpt 5:

R: Do language teachers need a special training in using TBLT? If yes, why? If not, why not?

P6: Definitely. There are teachers who scarcely use TBLT because they lack skills and training.

P4: That is the most important thing.

Based on the interview results, the majority of the respondents believe that this is an approach that requires a lot of work both on the part of the teacher and the student but it increases student motivation a lot. The respondents consider implementing TBLT more as a pleasure than a challenge and the majority of them believe that it can be used with all levels of students as well. Nevertheless, the tasks should be simplified according to their level of proficiency.

Regarding the crucial factors for the effective implementation of TBLT, the respondents have listed: teachers' beliefs and attitude toward TBLT, student culture because different cultural groups approach learning in different ways, training, equipment, appropriate tasks, clear instruction, assessment and feedback. Finally, all respondents strongly believe that special training on TBLT is necessary in order to prepare teachers to better implement the principles in the classroom. The interviews were conducted in English and there was no need to be translated.

Conclusion

The results of the study reveal that the majority of participants have a high level of understanding of TBLT principles and they expressed positive views towards its' implementation in the classroom. In addition, one of the main reasons for using TBLT in the classroom is that it promotes overall academic progress and promotes collaborative learning. However, the respondents strongly believe that TBLT requires much more preparation time compared to other approaches. Despite a high level of understanding of TBLT concepts, having positive views about it, some respondents retain some fear of adopting TBLT as an instructional method because they believe that the textbooks that are being used at the Faculty are not appropriate for using TBLT. Only a few of the respondents (3) strongly believe that large class size is an obstacle to use task-based methods. It seems that teachers believe that TBLT can be applied with large classes as well but

certainly more preparation is needed.

Another important point of the study findings is that the respondents believe that the main factors in implementing TBLT in the classroom is teacher belief and attitude toward certain instructional approaches, different cultural approaches to learning and also teachers' preferences in using textbooks. Definitely, all respondents are of the opinion that teachers who use TBLT in the classroom should receive training, use different equipment, choose appropriate tasks, give clear instructions and plan assessment carefully.

Based on the overall findings, three important implications for teachers, teacher trainers and curriculum designers are proposed:

- Since the teachers' attitudes towards certain instructional approaches influence the way they teach, having positive attitudes towards TBLT is very important because it will be implemented more successfully. This was also shown when the teachers reported that TBLT promotes learners' academic progress and creates a collaborative learning environment.
- Given the research finding that a majority of interviewed teachers consider that training on how to implement TBLT in the classroom is necessary for its successful application, it is considered that a training program on TBLT would be very useful for teachers. The training should deal with both the strengths and weaknesses of TBLT.
- Finally, when taking into account that one of the major reasons teachers avoid implementing TBLT is that materials in textbooks are not appropriate for using TBLT, teachers should use textbooks which contain different pedagogical tasks or adapt the materials found in traditional textbooks to fit the principles and procedures of TBLT or make their own from 'real life'.

Even though, more fine-tuned instruments are needed in order to obtain more reliable results on the issue, we strongly believe that this pilot study will raise teachers' awareness about the positive effects that TBLT can have in the classroom and strengthen students' communicative skills.

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APPENDIX 1

TEACHER QUESTIONNAIRE

Items <u>Understanding Task-Based Teaching (TBLT)</u>	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. A task is a primary means of communication.					
2. A task involves a primary focus on Meaning.					
3. A task has a clearly defined outcome.					
4. A task is any activity in which the target language is used by the learner.					
5. TBLT is consistent with the principles of communicative language teaching.					
6. TBLT is based on the student-centered instructional approach.					
7. TBLT includes three stages: pre-task, task implementation, and post-task.					
Views on Implementing Task-based teaching	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
8. I have interest in implementing TBLT in the classroom.					
9. TBLT provides a relaxed atmosphere to promote the target language use.					
10. TBLT takes into account learners' needs and interests.					
11. TBLT pursues the development of integrated skills in the classroom.					
12. TBLT gives much psychological burden to teacher as a facilitator.					
13. TBLT requires much preparation time compared to other approaches.					
14. TBLT is proper for controlling classroom arrangements.					

15. TBLT materials in textbooks are meaningful and purposeful based on the real-world context.					
<u>Reasons Teachers Use TBLT in the Classroom</u>	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
16. TBLT is appropriate for small group work.	/	/	/	/	/
17. TBLT improves learners' interaction skills.					
18. TBLT encourages learners' intrinsic motivation.					
19. TBLT creates a collaborative learning environment.					
20. TBLT promotes learners' academic progress.					
<u>Reasons Teachers Avoid TBLT in the Classroom</u>	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
21. I have very little knowledge of task-based instruction.					
22. I have limited target language proficiency.					
23. I have difficulty in assessing learner's task-based performance.					
24. Learners are not used to task-based learning.					
25. Materials in textbooks are not proper for using TBLT.					
26. Large class size is an obstacle to use task-based methods.					

APPENDIX 2

TEACHER INTERVIEW

Interview questions
1. How would you define Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)?
2. What are your comments and reflections concerning any aspect of the implementation of TBLT at SEEU?
3. Do you consider the implementation of TBLT a challenge for you? If yes/no, why?
4. Can you use TBLT with all level of students? If yes/ no, why?
5. What do you think are the crucial factors for the effective implementation of TBLT in your teaching context?
6. What resources should be used when using TBLT in the classroom? Why?
7. What do you expect our students will achieve if you frequently use TBLT in your classroom?
8. Is your student culture important when using TBLT with them? Why, or why not?
9. Do you believe that TBLT increases student motivation? If yes, how? If not, why not?
10. Do language teachers need a special training in using TBLT? If yes, why? If not, why not?