Task-Based Language Teaching in Secondary Schools: An Exploration of Iraqi EFL Teachers' Views

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Abstract

Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) has significantly shaped the status quo of English Language Teaching globally. Despite its widespread theoretical foundations and pedagogical practices, little is known about its use in secondary schools in Iraq. This study examines how Iraqi EFL teachers view TBLT in the setting of secondary schools in Iraq. One hundred twenty instructors from 30 distinct middle and high schools in Baghdad completed questionnaires to provide data. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were adopted to collect and analyze the data. Regardless of teaching level and years of experience, the survey's overall results indicate that most participants positively perceive TBLT in fostering speaking ability. Furthermore, based on qualitative data analysis, teachers highlighted the role of TBLT in providing students with Authentic Communication, collaborative learning, task variety, and focus on fluency, which could assist students in promoting their speaking ability. The findings were discussed, and several pedagogical implications were presented to help teacher educators in creating rich training programs to implement TBLT more successfully.

Keywords: *Speaking Skill; TBLT; Teachers' Perspectives*

Introduction

Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) has significantly impacted English Language Teaching globally (Butler, 2011), and Iraq, being an Asian country, is also affected by this dominant trend. Traditional ways of teaching English are being closely examined in many parts of Asia. The conventional instructional approaches can be classified as synthetic techniques, and a common critique of these methods is their failure to aid learners in attaining a high degree of communicative competency. The synthetic technique involves dissecting the target language into its component pieces and presenting them to language learners in a sequential manner. This includes providing grammatical rules, vocabulary,

phonemes, structures, and functions. Instead of using synthetic methods, certain Asian countries have included TBLT in their educational programs.

Communicative language teaching (CLT) has led to the rise of TBLT, which is now an important area of study in second and foreign language acquisition. TBLT focuses on creating syllabi that prioritize the learning process and designing tasks that promote authentic language use among learners (Hismanoglu & Hismanoglu, 2011). TBLT is becoming increasingly prominent in language teaching. Being a learner-centered approach, it views language as a means of communication. The primary goal is to facilitate oral and written communication proficiency by employing learning activities that encourage students to use language naturally, functionally, and with a specific purpose.

Based on this claim, discussing the notion of communicative proficiency may be worthwhile. It is crucial for learners to cultivate their speaking skills in order to achieve effective communication goals. Generally, speaking involves imitating and reproducing language and communication patterns, which enables students to practice them. Oral communication is essential for conveying ideas that are distinct from written ones. These are perceptible through vocal expressions, facial gestures, nonverbal cues, intonation, enunciation, stress, tempo, and pauses. Undoubtedly, individuals who are inexperienced may find it challenging to communicate in the English language. Individuals may face challenges in speaking English, as it is often perceived as more complex than their mother language. Gan (2012) identified several common challenges faced by students, including limited vocabulary, unclear sentence structure, incorrect intonation and pronunciation, little exposure to spoken language, and a lack of curriculum development.

Proficiency in the English language is a prerequisite for fulfilling graduation criteria, participating in job interviews, and taking job promotion examinations in Iraq. Additionally, it is advantageous for fostering a professional trajectory. English is seen as a crucial language to acquire. Nevertheless, even after years of learning, mastering the talent of speaking English is widely regarded as the most intricate and demanding (Stepani, 2016; Mahmud, 2018). The majority of Iraqi students lack proficiency in the language for effective communication. Several factors contribute to students' inability to master English speaking. These include anxiety, lack of exposure, confidence, and motivation, as well as limited time and nervousness. Regarding speaking ability, it is worth considering linguistic anxiety, specifically anxiety related to speaking. Language anxiety refers to a special form of anxiety that is closely linked to the process of learning a language. Moreover, stress can be conceptualized as an adverse emotional state that consists of both temporary and enduring elements. Engaging in classroom activities in the English language can lead to the development of speaking anxiety. Consequently, it has been linked to students' fear of communicating in English. This phenomenon arises when individuals lack full mastery of a foreign language. In addition, this unwillingness reduces students' motivation to speak English, leading to a lack of improvement in their language learning.

Moreover, the assessment of oral or speaking proficiency is influenced by various variables, such as complexity, accuracy, and fluency. Enhancing fluency requires a strong focus on developing vocabulary and phonological production skills. Despite having studied English for years, the majority of EFL learners in Indonesia possess only minimal proficiency in speaking the language. Campo (2016) identified multiple variables contributing to the problem: (a) Students lack sufficient opportunities to effectively utilize the target language for expressing their thoughts and engaging in spontaneous interactions. (b) The utilization of the target language is relatively limited. (c) Teaching methods primarily concentrate on exam preparation, leading teachers to prioritize vocabulary, grammar, and verb tenses while neglecting the development of students' communicative skills.

Given the increasing requirements for skills in the future, a significant number of individuals in Indonesia, irrespective of their educational background, are currently making efforts to enhance their proficiency in English communication. Schools must provide students with exceptional communication

skills to effectively integrate into international society. Put simply, EFL teachers in Indonesia have the important task of equipping pupils with advanced English communication skills, enabling them to navigate their future endeavors successfully. Thus, it is imperative for educators to facilitate a proficient learning experience that enables students to actively participate in the development of their expressive abilities throughout classroom sessions.

Despite the longstanding interest of instructors and researchers in TBLT, there have been limited studies on its use in teaching speaking abilities, especially from the viewpoint of EFL teachers. Considering the above research, this particular situation was included in a study that aimed to address a gap in the topic. The study focused on exploring teachers' views on how TBLT improves learners' English communication skills.

Review of the Literature

An Overview of Task-based Pedagogy

TBLT is well-known in the field of learning a language. It is regarded as a highly effective approach employed in the acquisition of a second language (Hasan, 2014). According to Richards (2004), using tasks as the main focus in language instruction seems to be a successful strategy. It offers learners ample possibilities to utilize the target language according to their own requirements, fostering an authentic learning atmosphere. The primary emphasis is on the structure and significance of language in communication, allowing students to utilize the language in suitable contexts effectively (Willis, 2007).

Furthermore, it aids in improving learners' proficiency in using the target. It enhances learners' capacity to apply theoretical knowledge to real-life situations in formal or informal settings (Macias, 2004). It is suitable for use in a classroom focused on speaking skills, as it includes tasks that encourage learners to engage with each other using language (Thomas & Reinders, 2010). The primary objective of learning in TBLT is not solely focused on the task but rather on exploiting it to enhance fluency while still considering correctness. The assignments necessitate students' understanding and capacity to articulate their thoughts purposefully using the desired language. The primary question is not whether the form pupils employ to express their ideas is correct or not. The primary focus should be on fostering pupils' self-assurance and proficiency in verbal communication. Subsequently, precision becomes a crucial aspect in the subsequent phase of acquiring knowledge (Willis, 1996).

In addition, Nunan (2004) explains that when using TBLT, instructors should recognize that the tasks serve as the instructional tool that meets the students' educational requirements. The main challenges in learning should accurately mirror the real-life situations that students encounter and the everyday language they require. Thus, in order to encourage pupils to utilize the language actively, it is essential for classroom instruction to incorporate the target language. Nevertheless, the primary objective is not solely acquiring knowledge of the target language but also deriving pleasure from the process of learning.

It is important to note that the tasks are adaptable to fit the specific goals and needs of the students. Essentially, the pedagogical objective of TBLT is to make learners actively engage in using the language during the learning process, enhancing their motivation and achieving the desired learning outcomes.

It is recommended that the communication work be completed in pairs or groups. Its purpose is to foster connections among students in the classroom and facilitate their spontaneous language acquisition. According to Willis (1996), engaging in a task with a partner or in a group can enhance learners' self-assurance and foster their active involvement in the activity. Moreover, it provides learners with chances

to develop their communication methods, engage in spontaneous contact, interpret interlocutors' expressions, practice the negotiation of meanings, and handle communication challenges effectively.

Empirical Studies

In relation to TBLT, other scholars have conducted studies on a similar topic. In a study conducted by Hismanoglu and Hismanoglu (2011), the function of TBLT was emphasized as an effective technique for optimizing teaching. TBLT is regarded as a method that utilizes tasks as its main instructional tools for organizing learning. They discovered that TBLT is clearly superior to Communication Linguistics because of its common instructional principles. Both parties concur that engaging in real-life communication activities is crucial in the process of language acquisition. They also believe that utilizing language to complete meaningful tasks can significantly enhance the acquisition of language skills.

In addition, Nget et al. (2020) carried out a study examining the impact of TBLT on speaking abilities of ninth-grade students and their level of satisfaction with this instructional approach. The study had a total of 78 students. The data were gathered by using speaking tests and administering a questionnaire to assess students' happiness. The results demonstrated that the TBLT method considerably enhanced the speaking abilities of the experimental group as a whole, including all sub-skills. Furthermore, Chen (2019) conducted another study to assess the impacts of technology-mediated TBLT tasks. In order to enhance their English-speaking abilities, students are required to work together in an EFL course. For this study, a cohort of 25 students was divided into groups consisting of four to six individuals each. The results showed that the exercises effectively improved students' proficiency in spoken English. Analysis of students' Facebook posts and classroom observations indicated a predominantly favorable disposition toward the task of producing videos utilizing technology resources.

Albino (2017) conducted a study to evaluate the progress in speaking fluency of ninth-grade students at PUNIVCazenga, a high school in Luanda, who were learning EFL. The study focused on the effectiveness of a TBLT technique. During an eight-week case study, learners' speech was captured before and after training as they performed picture description tasks. Recasts and prompts were used as feedback mechanisms. According to the findings, learners improved their ability to speak fluently by increasing the speed at which they produced speech, improving their grammar accuracy, making longer statements, and using language to connect with others. According to the survey results on the learners' opinions of TBLT instruction, they were motivated to speak, had the confidence to use the target language, expanded their vocabulary, and highly acknowledged the practicality of the TBLT. Nunan's (2003) study, which involved interviews with teachers, teacher educators, and ministry representatives, found that TBLT emerged as a key concept following a comprehensive examination of curricula and syllabi across the Asia-Pacific region. An initial review of the literature on TBLT shows that, despite its advantages in promoting interactive learning, it has not been extensively studied or empirically proven in terms of its application in school settings (In-Jae Jeon, 2005). The objective of this study is to examine the attitudes of EFL Iraqi teachers on TBLT and their opinions on the use of TBLT.

The current study examined teachers' perceptions of TBLT and their views on its role in fostering speaking skill of learners. Given the aim of the investigation, the subsequent research inquiries were put forth:

1. What are Iraqi EFL teachers' views toward implementing TBLT in speaking classrooms?
2. What is the role of TBLT in fostering speaking skills of students based on Iraqi EFL teachers' perspective?

Method

This study was undertaken as a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design in order to thoroughly investigate the subject.

Participants

The study's participants included Iraqi EFL instructors who were employed in secondary school. There were 120 teachers that participated in this survey, representing a total of 49 schools. The 120 participants consisted of 79 middle school teachers (65.83%) and 41 high school teachers (34.16%). Out of the total number of teachers, 97 (80.88%) were female, and 23 (19.16%) were male. The teachers had varying levels of experience teaching English: less than five years (15.83%), five to ten years (20.0%), ten to twenty years (44.17%), and more than twenty years (20.0%). A request for participation resulted in the recruitment of five participants for the qualitative phase. All of the volunteers who agreed to take part in the interviews had completed teacher preparation courses and had experience instructing students at various skill levels.

Instrument

TBLT Questionnaire

The data were collected by a Likert-scale questionnaire adapted from the studies of Hismanoglu and Hismanoglu (2011) and Campo (2016). In the first section of the questionnaire, teachers were requested to provide information on their gender, age, and teaching experience. Section 2 focuses on seven questions that explore the perceptions of teachers toward TBLT. The Likert scale consisted of a five-point range from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The scale demonstrates strong reliability in the present study, as indicated by Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient data (0.86).

Interview

In order to bolster the quantitative phase, secondary data was gathered through a semi-structured interview with five specifically chosen individuals. The semi-structured interview style was selected because it facilitates open-ended discussions between participants and the researcher while ensuring that the interview remains focused and consistent for future analysis. The five participants were selected based on their perceived expertise in implementing TBLT.

Procedure

The research questions were addressed by adopting a sequential mixed-methods design. At the beginning, the participants completed a survey using a self-report scale for the quantitative phase. The online questionnaires were created utilizing the Google Docs platform to enhance administrative simplicity. Subsequently, the online survey was transformed into a booklet questionnaire format and sent to English teachers using various online platforms and channels, including WhatsApp and Telegram. The participants were instructed to fill out the initial section of the booklet, which inquired about their personal information, including gender, age, educational history, and teaching tenure, before moving to the items on the scale. The respondents were also provided with the guarantee that their data would be kept confidential and utilized solely for research objectives. In the qualitative phase, a group of randomly selected instructors participated in five semi-structured interviews. The study selected interview candidates until the point of theoretical data saturation was reached. Put simply, the researchers determined that collecting additional data would not yield any fresh understanding of the challenges related to TBLT in Iraqi settings. The interviews were recorded and transcribed exactly as spoken, with the interviewees' informed consent.

Data Analysis

Initially, the first step of the study involved gathering and analyzing data using a quantitative research methodology. One hundred twenty surveys were distributed to EFL teachers, specifically targeting their ideas and perceptions of TBLT. Subsequently, the data was inputted using SPSS. First, the reliability of the data was established using Cronbach's alpha. Following that, a sequence of descriptive analyses was conducted using the scale. Subsequently, the interview data were analyzed through a thematic analysis. The transcribed interviews were initially analyzed using theme coding to determine the primary subjects concerning the instructors' perspectives on TBLT. Consequently, axial coding categorized the emerging themes according to their connections. Ultimately, each group was given labels based on the shared codes among those groupings with similar major themes. The aforementioned processes employed a bottom-up, iterative approach. Subsequent discrepancies were examined and resolved.

Result

Teachers' Views of TBLT and Promoting Speaking Skill

Table 1 displays the mean and standard variation of answers from instructors on questionnaires about the implementation of TBLT in speaking classes.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of teachers' perceptions of TBLT in promoting speaking skill

Item	N	Mean	SD
I am interested in applying TBLT in the context of the speaking classroom.	120	3.4	0.2
TBLT is suitable for managing classroom groupings in speaking classrooms.	120	3.1	0.2
In TBLT, any activity that requires learners to utilize the target language is considered a task.	120	3.2	0.4
The tasks undertaken in TBLT prioritize the simultaneous emphasis on both meaning and form in speaking.	120	2.9	0.5
The tasks in TBLT are aligned with the objective of promoting effective communication and achieving specific goals to promote speaking.	120	3.1	0.5
The tasks in TBLT possess a distinctly delineated outcome in speaking.	120	3.1	0.3

The first item indicates that all the instructors are enthusiastic about implementing TBLT approach in their speaking classrooms, with a mean score of 3.4. They assert that it is a suitable and efficient approach to enhance speaking proficiency. Furthermore, by implementing tasks in TBLT, teachers have the ability to establish a classroom environment that actively involves students in the process of acquiring knowledge.

Furthermore, the teachers discovered that the activities in TBLT assist the students in directly practicing the language in their communication (M = 3.2). Since the target language has a communication aim, students can immediately feel it because they do not need to conceive the circumstance but rather to be in the specific ambiance of the given situation (M = 3.1). It helps individuals become accustomed to using the language and helps them control the flow of communication.

Moreover, most educators believe that TBLT enhances accuracy and fluency (M = 2.9). Nevertheless, communication activities yield far greater fluency than accuracy. In the meantime, educators stress that accuracy is more important than fluency and that it cannot be ignored because it will help pupils speak more eloquently. As a result, they focus more on their accuracy when assisting and monitoring pupils during their speaking practice. It may be said that the instructors' attitudes toward applying TBLT were constructive. They disagree, nevertheless, over what ought to come first in practice and instruction.

Qualitative Analysis of Interview Data

TBLT and speaking skills are like two sides of the same coin. While they may appear separate, their relationship is deeply intertwined, creating a powerful synergy for language acquisition. This qualitative data analysis explores the crucial connection between TBLT and speaking skills, highlighting how teachers believe this approach empowers learners to become confident and proficient communicators.

At its core, TBLT emphasizes authentic communication through real-world tasks. This approach moves away from traditional grammar-focused exercises, encouraging learners to use language in meaningful contexts. Students naturally develop fluency, accuracy, and communicative competence by tackling tasks that require them to interact, negotiate, and problem-solve. The following are the main themes extracted from the interview data:

Authentic Communication: TBLT tasks encourage authentic communication, mimicking real-world scenarios where language is used for a specific purpose. This exposure to natural language use helps learners develop an intuitive understanding of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation in context.

Teacher 2: *I think TBLT is a game-changer for speaking. It creates a natural environment where students have to communicate to achieve a real goal. It's not just about practicing grammar or vocabulary; it's about using language to solve problems, share ideas, and collaborate. I see my students becoming more fluent, confident, and spontaneous in their speaking.*

Focus on Fluency: TBLT prioritizes communication over perfect grammar. Students are encouraged to take risks, experiment with language, and focus on communicating their message. This fosters fluency and confidence in speaking, allowing learners to reduce their fear of making mistakes. This is manifested in the following excerpt:

Teacher 1: *TBLT is essential for developing speaking because it provides students with meaningful practice of language in real-life contexts. By communicating to achieve specific goals, students can improve their fluency and confidence in speaking.*

Collaborative Learning: Many TBLT tasks involve group work, encouraging learners to collaborate, negotiate, and share ideas. This collaborative environment provides opportunities for students to practice speaking in a supportive and low-pressure setting, improving their fluency and communication skills. This is highlighted in the following quotation:

Teacher 3: *TBLT often involves pair work or group work, which fosters interaction among students. By working together to complete speaking tasks, students engage in meaningful conversations, negotiate meaning, and learn from each other's language use. This collaborative aspect of TBLT enhances students' speaking skills through interaction.*

Task Variety: TBLT offers a wide range of task types that cater to different learning styles and preferences. From role-plays to problem-solving tasks, students can practice speaking in diverse ways, which helps them develop a range of speaking skills.

Teacher 1: *Through performing tasks, students have the opportunity to practice speaking in different ways that suit their individual strengths and interests. This variety helps students develop a range of speaking skills effectively.*

In conclusion, the relationship between TBLT and speaking skills is dynamic and mutually beneficial. By engaging learners in meaningful tasks, encouraging authentic communication, and providing opportunities for collaborative learning, TBLT empowers students to become confident and fluent speakers. However, it's essential to remember that TBLT should be used strategically, alongside other teaching methods, to create a comprehensive and effective approach to language acquisition.

Discussion

According to Willis (2007), language acquisition aims to provide learners with the ability to effectively utilize the target language and generate meaningful and suitable sentences. Put simply, in the EFL learning paradigm, learners are required to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the English language and effectively engage in communication using English. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that students' proficiency falls well short of the desired level. English may be perceived as uncommonly used both outside and inside the classroom. Students often experience timidity and lack the self-assurance to engage in verbal conversation using the language. Hence, tasks facilitate the learners' utilization of the target language. The students are motivated to apply their language skills in practical situations with the supervision of the teacher.

This study found that instructors have a favorable response to TBLT because it improves their teaching effectiveness and helps students reach their communicative competency goals. This aligns with East's (2012) assertion that TBLT is a widely accepted method for learners of a foreign language to enhance their communication ability. However, when it comes to the characteristics and criteria of implementing TBLT, obstacles also arise due to the pupils' diverse backgrounds.

The researchers discovered that teachers have favorable attitudes toward introducing TBLT in the speaking classroom. The teachers expressed their desire to adopt TBLT, despite the diverse requirements of the learners. The individuals recognize that TBLT is a highly effective and successful instructional approach that enhances students' speaking skills by offering communicative activities.

TBLT places a greater emphasis on the active generation of language. The teachers acknowledged that children often use the language without consciously considering the grammatical structures. Nevertheless, it does not imply that it is disregarded. It becomes the teachers' responsibility. The instructors oversee and direct the pupils in order to generate an accurate linguistic structure without exerting excessive control over the conversation. Individuals have the opportunity to delve into self-discovery while acquiring linguistic skills (Willis, 2007).

Including communicative tasks relevant to real-life circumstances effectively captivates students and enhances their participation in learning a language. Nunan (2004) stated that the fundamental ideas of TBLT revolve around tailoring the learning to meet the specific needs of students. This approach strongly emphasizes the practical application and active use of language and fosters interaction among learners to complete tasks successfully. Another crucial aspect is that the communicative activities should consist of genuine materials that are directly connected to the students' real-world experiences and practical application. Given that the participants in this study were both college students and workers, it is evident that they held distinct expectations regarding the materials.

The instructor ought to create a communication assignment that is more substantial in substance and accurately mirrors the real-world setting of university or professional environments. The advantage

obtained in this situation is that students can exchange and acquire extra information about the current global situation, thereby enhancing their vocabulary in certain areas of interest.

Furthermore, according to Willis (1996), engaging students in group or pair work when completing tasks is recommended, as this allows them to share and discuss their thoughts using language. Additionally, it will enhance learners' self-assurance in generating the language through the completion of communicative tasks. When students are actively involved in activities that capture their attention, they will derive pleasure from the process of learning without realizing that they are acquiring knowledge (Willis, 2007). TBLT promotes student engagement in communicative tasks, facilitates the use of the target language, reduces anxiety, and enhances satisfaction in learning.

Nevertheless, aside from the advantages acquired, speaking classrooms pose four obstacles that teachers must address due to the students' diverse educational backgrounds and learning expectations. First and foremost, teachers are occasionally perplexed when it comes to devising communicative tasks due to the classroom context. The learners' abilities and demands of each student should be considered, as Nunan (2004) recommended. Furthermore, the content should be directly applicable to real-life situations that reflect the students' experiences. This implies that the instructor must possess the ability to create or modify assignments that address the diverse requirements of students in their day-to-day lives. It is recommended that the teacher create tasks that put into practice the learners' prior knowledge and skills.

Given students' varying levels of enthusiasm, the teacher should be cognizant of those who may exert a dominant influence during discussions. The distribution of students in a group needs to be equitable in order to facilitate practical discussions and allow the teacher to maintain control over the process. Therefore, teachers must have a comprehensive understanding of their students in order to be acquainted with their individual capabilities.

The third factor influencing students' wants and expectations is their diverse interests and experiences. Teachers must possess specific expertise to maintain the learning flow and cater to the students' learning demands. For example, there are occasions when students inquire with the teacher about specialized language that is uniquely relevant to their respective fields, such as economics, medicine, or law. This poses a difficulty for the teacher, since they must adequately prepare themselves for such unpredictable questions.

Conclusion

TBLT has become a popular approach in language acquisition, particularly in the context of developing speaking skills. The teachers also recognize and affirm it, as they react favorably to its execution. They acknowledged that it aids them in effectively teaching and fostering a pleasant classroom environment, as well as facilitating authentic learning through task implementation. It enhances students' participation in the educational process, helps them acquire knowledge, and enhances their oral communication abilities. Additionally, students are advised to utilize the target language while doing the assignments in order to familiarize themselves with it and enhance their self-assurance. Moreover, the students frequently use their native language throughout their interactions.

Future studies working on comparable themes are advised to investigate students' perspectives on the implementation of TBLT based on the findings of this study. In order to obtain more comprehensive findings, researchers may need to expand their study by incorporating a larger number of EFL teachers. This will enable them to obtain more representative results. Furthermore, the perspectives of students on this matter can be utilized as a valuable source of research in the future.

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