TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING IN VIETNAM: MISUNDERSTANDINGS AND SUGGESTIONS

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Abstract

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has been extensively researched and applied in many education settings due to the belief in its effectiveness in maximizing learners’ language competency. Although this issue is not a new concept in language education, misunderstandings of TBLT do exist, which leads to further misapplications of the pedagogy. Besides, the reality of teaching and learning may not make TBLT a preferred method. This paper therefore takes as its aims the common misunderstandings when applying TBLT in Vietnamese education settings. The author investigates how TBLT is frequently mistakenly perceived by language educators and provides suggestions on how to design language tasks with specific implications of TBLT in an EFL classroom.

Keywords: Misapplications; Misunderstandings; Suggestions; Task-based; Task design.

1. INTRODUCTION

Improving learners’ communicative competence is one of the major goals in language education (Barnard & Nguyen, 2010), and appropriate teaching approaches are essentially in need to transmit the language knowledge to learners and to unpack that knowledge for authentic use. Researching teaching methods to achieve that goal, Harshbarger (2002) and Phuong (2016) claim that Presentation - Practice - Production (PPP) is no longer effective since the chances and possibilities to use the target language for communication and negotiation are very limited, which goes against the goals of the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). Hence, the proposed solution is shifting to Task-based language teaching which is believed to be more efficient in developing
learners’ communicative ability (Barnard & Nguyen, 2010; Harshbarger, 2002; Phuong, 2016).

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has been applied in many language education settings due to its effectiveness in developing learners’ language competency. Emphasizing the popularity of TBLT, Ruso (2007) sees TBLT as the way forward in EFL education which is highly preferred by numerous EFL teachers. Since 1980s, TBLT has been taken into consideration, and literature concerning TBLT has also been extensively brought out in order to provide more insightful evaluation of this pedagogical practice (Ruso, 2007). It is explained that TBLT is greatly concerned about need-analysis and a focus on how learners apply their language knowledge to complete a task which should be authentic to language outside classrooms (Ellis, 2009; Nunan, 2004). Ellis (2009) further supports the usefulness of TBLT, stating that natural use of the target language is the main goal of language learning. However, through his research and observation of how TBLT is applied in language education, he realizes that there are seemingly misunderstandings of what TBLT really means. Explained by Ellis (2009), each educational setting has its own goals and features that may not always accept TBLT as the primary or most effective pedagogy. What is more, teachers who follow traditional approaches may find it impractical and inappropriate to apply TBLT if the course objectives may prioritize accuracy over fluency in which grammar is still of ultimate importance.

Before revisiting definitions of TBLT, I would like to first discuss definitions of tasks. It should be noted that researchers and educators see such controversies in defining a task, which then leads to unavoidable misunderstanding and misapplication in language teaching. Hence, I would list the definitions of tasks as the very first misconception when language educators apply TBLT in their teaching. Following this, other misunderstandings are presented with a cross-reference to language education in Vietnam. This cross-reference is taken into account because it is believed that education is strongly connected with the socio-cultural values of a community (Robertson, 2014). Hence, to gain an in-depth understanding of this TBLT misapplication in Vietnam, the Vietnam educational circumstances should not be ignored.
2. MISUNDERSTANDINGS OF TBLT

In order to explore the difficulties when applying TBLT in EFL education in Vietnam, the first issue is to define what a task is and whether a task is misunderstood.

2.1. What is a task?

Defining a task has been a subject of debate. A pioneering study on language tasks is from Prabhu (1987, p. 24) who sees a task as "an activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process". Willis (1996) also agrees that a task is an activity in which the focus is to thrive learners’ interaction to reach the task outcome. A task, in Nunan (1989, 2004) view, is not solely an activity but any classroom work where the focus is not restricted linguistic features, but meaningful communication. Learners need to use a variety of linguistic features to interact, manipulate, and complete the tasks. The ideas of aforementioned researchers can be combined with the work of others (Branden, 2006; Ellis, 2009; & Skehan, 1998) to point out the consensus when defining a task. A task, in sum, can be seen as an activity or a series of activities which usually contain one or more problems to be solved or an intended outcome, and language use and interaction are involved in order to solve the problems with the primary focus on meaning.

Following definitions of tasks, Barnard and Nguyen (2010, p.78) then make a very concise definition of TBLT, stating that TBLT refers to the application of “communicative and interactive tasks” which stimulate English language learners to conduct “meaningful communication and interactions”. TBLT emphasizes on the practice of meaning-making based on existing knowledge, inferring that learners are triggered to utilize their linguistic knowledge at most to complete language tasks (Nunan, 2004; Robertson, 2014). Similarly, Bonces and Bonces (2010) review quite a number of definitions of TBLT and conclude that TBLT concerns the communicative goals of language education and provides learners with tasks that stimulate and facilitate their participation in meaningful communication. As a concluding remark, TBLT is the approach in which language tasks are employed to create contexts and opportunities for
learners to use language for meaningful communication. The communication can be done with a diverse use of language features to complete the tasks which are authentic to daily life contexts.

From these definitions, numerous issues can be further investigated since educators who claim that they do apply TBLT in their teaching may mistakenly perceive a task (Ellis, 2009). The misconception of the task is seen by Ellis (2009) as the basis of further misunderstandings and misapplications. The misinterpretations can be seen in relation to misleading focus on restricted grammatical features over meaningful communication and the inappropriate task design which limits learners’ language use for interaction and communication.

2.2. The misleading focus in a TBLT classroom

Language teaching has confronted two contrasting trends of whether the goal or the focus of language education is on communicative competence or grammatical structures. Derived from these two views are the notions of “focus on form” and “focus on forms”. According to Sheen (2002) and Long (1991), the former prioritizes meaning or communication practices in which learners make use of diverse language features for their interactions and communication. The latter, on the other hand, aims at specific language features that learners are expected to acquire. Normally, learners are explicitly taught specific grammar points and practice how to use those. Although Sheen (2002) makes no claims on which approach is more effective, he contends that TBLT is more likely to refer to “focus on form” which allows learners’ engagement in meaning and ensure the naturalness of language use. Referring back to the claim of learning a language for authentic interaction, the “focus on form” approach is concluded to be more appropriate in helping language learners extensively exploit their language competence to complete a task. From this point, arguments occur since many researchers and educators, even those from Vietnam, claim that the educational circumstances in Vietnam do not always have a place for “focus on form” (Hoang, 2013; Le, 2014).

Initiated in varied educational directives, EFL learners are expected to fully develop language competences, particularly communicative competence (Barnard &
However, in many cases, grammar and vocabulary are still the central objectives. EFL learners in Vietnam from elementary to higher education, except English majors, have been oriented to pay for much attention to grammatical structures, reading exercises, and grammar practice exercises (Hoang, 2013; Le, 2014).

Learners are frequently given what Ellis (2009) calls “instructional grammar exercises” as a form-focused activity. A very common question that learners usually see is that “Complete/Rewrite the following sentences using [name of the structure]”. This exercise, in Ellis’ view, can never be seen as a task since it is form-oriented to put learners in a situation that they need to practice the target grammatical structures that they have learned. Unfortunately, Ellis (2009) realizes that those exercises are several times mistakenly viewed as tasks though they do not stimulate any interaction or communication among learners. This focus-on-forms curriculum is in fact so widespread that the majority of teaching refers to explicit clarifications of grammatical points and practice how to use those features (Barnard & Nguyen, 2010; Hoang, 2013). This is seen as teaching for exams, not for skill development; Therefore, it is not relevant to TBLT principle of giving learners opportunities to use language for interactions, and by extension, for future authentic language use. As a concluding remark, TBLT does not completely ignore need to help learners acquire linguistic features, teaching the target language should not be explicitly stated in the instructions (Bonces & Bonces, 2010; Ellis, 2009). Otherwise, learners will be restricted to a certain number of features and ignore other possibilities of language use to complete the tasks. Only when the target language is completely ignored may teachers provide some directions, but still in an implicit manner (Ellis, 2009).

2.3. Learners’ inadequate interaction and language proficiency

Barnard and Nguyen (2010), when researching TBLT, put interactions using the target language as one of the foremost elements in TBLT. The two researchers believe that if learners are meant to develop their communicative competence, using the target language for communication and interaction should be highly encouraged. In other words, TBLT with diverse language tasks creates contexts for learners to utilize what they have
learned without emphasizing on or being limited to a particular form of language. Bachman (1990) and Ellis (2009) name this as interactional authenticity, indicating that the contexts of language use in classroom settings effectively reflect what learners encounter in their real-life interactions. However, the problem occurs because opponents of TBLT say that a majority of language learners are not proficient enough to complete language tasks and the further question on the possibility of using the target language as the means of communication in TBLT (Hoang, 2013; Le, 2014; & Nguyen et al., 2014).

Barnard and Nguyen (2010), and Le (2014) review an extensive amount of literature concerning TBLT in Vietnam in relation to learners’ language proficiency. It is unfortunate that the shift from traditional Grammar-Translation and Audio-Lingual methods to a more communicative learner-centered approach like TBLT is not easy and applicable in many settings due to the issue of learners’ limited language levels. Explained by these researchers, EFL teachers frequently claim that learners may not be proficient enough to carry out the tasks. However, this excuse for not applying TBLT as the result of learners’ being unable to use language for interactions is contended by Ellis (2009). He clarifies that interactions in TBLT do not only exist among advanced language learners. In fact, higher levels of language proficiency allow learners to collaborate with much more complicated language use and more effective task completion, but it is not the basis without which there would be no interactions. With limited language resource, beginners are still able to interact based on their strategic competence (e.g. raising questions, using synonyms). He takes the example of the meaning of the word dot. In a conversation, a learner being unaware of its meaning may simply raise the issue by asking what that word means, and the peer uses other words like a small point to clarify its meaning. All of these are still counted as interactions, and it is also potential for acquisition. Eventually, interactions among language learners at a low level still exist though limited. Ellis (2009) further explains that limited-proficiency learners exploit their linguistic resource to complete a language task in different ways. The result of this is the acquisition or development of language, though at a low level.

Therefore, the point that Ellis (2009) implies in his argument does not entirely refer to the matter of language proficiency, but it is the task design that should be
compatible with learners’ language proficiency. He indicates that language educators when designing language tasks may not take a look back at their learners’ proficiency to avoid the gap between the level of task difficulty and language competency, leading to unsuccessful task completion.

3. CHARACTERISTICS OF A TASK

In order to effectively design a task, Ellis (2009) recommends some elements that a task should obtain. Those ideas are significant because numerous researchers have also come to an agreement on what has been proposed by Ellis. Researching TBLT in Vietnamese context, Barnard and Nguyen (2010) also propose quite numerous issues to consider in designing language tasks.

Firstly, the focus on a task is on meaning-making, so there should be no attempt to focus on practicing a particular grammatical structure. In fact, structures and other language utterances are more likely to be means for semantic and pragmatic indication. Talking about focus on forms, Ellis (2009) classifies tasks into two categories, focused and unfocused tasks. In his words, unfocused tasks are designed with an aim of creating contexts for using language for general communication, which means there is no restriction to any types of linguistic features. The focused tasks, on the other hand, do aim at providing learners with chances to use language for interactions, but there is an aim to focus on certain types of linguistic features. However, it is strongly advised that the target language feature must be hidden or without any explicit indication on using that target language in the instruction or task requirement. Since TBLT is associated with learner-centered approach, the goals in designing tasks should focus on students’ needs and performances (Nunan, 2004).

Secondly, a gap in TBLT is encouraged since it motivates learners to employ their language competency to fill in that gap in a language task. An example of this can be a problem-solving task in which learners need to convey conversations to find out solutions to a specific problem (Barnard & Nguyen, 2010; Nunan, 2004).
Thirdly, there is an expectation that learners need to base on their own linguistic resources to complete a task. In other words, learners are expected to use whatever they have, either linguistic or non-linguistic resource, to participate in a task (Bonces & Bonces, 2010). Full exploitation of linguistic resources can help learners strengthen their language skills and fluently use those resources for authentic interactions.

The three criteria above are related to what Nunan (2004) calls active learning. Stated by Nunan (2004) and Ellis (2009), TBLT aims to create an environment where learners can use the target language at most. Therefore, when designing a task, teachers should keep this principle in mind so that he/she can stimulate learners’ language use. Nunan (2004) also reminds that teachers may provide some input so that learners have the basis for task completion, but they should not force learners to follow a particular way or set up a model for learners to follow. Otherwise, it will become a situational grammar exercise.

The final suggestion is that a task is designed with a purpose or a defined outcome. It needs to be noted here that the purpose is not the use of certain target language but the aim of the activity. Similar ideas have also been proposed by a number of researchers who attempt to identify how to design an effective task to assist language teaching and language development. Nunan (2004) agrees that when designing a task, there should be a goal. However, goals of a task are referring to not only language but also other issues. To illustrate, a goal can commonly fall into any of the following, but not limited to, categories (1) communication focusing on information exchange and negotiation on general topics or solving a problem, (2) socio-cultural issues focusing on topics of everyday life of a particular community or individuals where the conversation is undertaken, (3) learning-how-to-learn purpose referring to negotiation for work or how to achieve objectives, and (4) language and cultural awareness emphasizing on the investigation of a language system and how it works in relation to the cultural contexts of that language.
4. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS ON TASK DESIGN

In this section, I will employ an example to see how to meet the four previously-mentioned requirements. The topic of the example is ordering food at a restaurant with a visual aid of the menu.

The implementation of TBLT in EFL classrooms has been extensively investigated by researchers with numerous strategies and guidelines. Two of the models that are widely talked about are Ellis (2003) three stages of pre-task, during task, and post-task and Willis (1996) three-staged model including pre-task, task cycle, and language focus. Despite being named differently, the stages in these two models share many common views. In this section of the paper, I will provide suggestions on how to design a task and how that task fits what researchers (Bonces & Bonces, 2010; Ellis, 2009; & Nunan, 2004) require.

![Figure 1. The example menu](http://handameslfoodunit.weebly.com/lesson-3.html)

4.1. Pre-task

Ellis (2003), Rozati (2014), and Willis (1996) define the pre-task stage as an entry to the main task which gives learners guidance on how to perform the main task. This
stage implicitly prepares learners for the main tasks by developing learners’ vocabulary, ideas, other language features, or just initial thoughts of the topic of the main task. The activities that can be used in this stage include brainstorming ideas or words of the topic, using visual aids (e.g. pictures, videos) to create the awareness of the language used for a particular topic, or providing learners some questions related to the topic to elicit some ideas for that topic.

Referring to the specific scenario in a restaurant and suggestions made by Ellis (2003), Rozati (2014), and Willis (1996), activities suggested for the pre-task stage can be varied.

### Table 1. Suggested activities in the pre-task stage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-task</th>
<th>Task principles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Option 1:</strong> Discussions: Teacher can provide students some questions about eating in a restaurant to help familiarize them with the main task</td>
<td>This stage matches what Barnard and Nguyen (2010); Ellis (2009); and Nunan (2004) suggest on giving learners chances to use their language to solve the problems implied in a task. In this case, learners can use their language resource to (1) make conversations based on guided questions, (2) point out relevant words from pictures, and (3) figure out how language is used on the particular case of food ordering through the video.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you usually eat in a restaurant?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your favorite restaurant?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What food do you usually eat in a restaurant?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching vocabulary through pictures: Teacher shows a number of pictures about food, staff, and activities in a restaurant and elicits the answers from students.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Option 2</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priming through video: Teacher shows a video about eating and ordering food in a restaurant, followed by some questions about the video concentrating on the food, the language use, and some structures.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4.2. Task cycle

After the pre-task stage, it is advised that students come to the main task with chances to interact with peers to complete the task. Willis (1996) clearly divides this stage into three steps in Table 2.
Table 2. Steps in the task-cycle stage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task cycle</th>
<th>Task principle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1: Preparation</td>
<td>In this step, students are divided into pairs or small groups. In each group, some students will play the roles of customers, and others will be waiters or waitresses. The “customers’ students make a plan of what they are going to order and may negotiate with peers on how to use language for ordering purpose. The “waiters” groups will make a plan of what they need to do to serve the customers and what language features may be used for that purpose. Teachers will go around to facilitate but not to assign a specific structure for students. Students will have a look at their list of ideas, words, structures and allocate the roles for their group members. It should be ensured that all students are involved in the conversations and upcoming report. Students are allowed to ask teachers for clarifications. Teachers can check students’ work by looking at their notes, providing feedback on any points in the notes. Accuracy should also be paid attention to. Teachers need to make sure that students know what to do and have their roles in the report.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2: Planning to report</td>
<td>Students will be allocated in groups including both customers and waiters. They will make conversations based on their notes to have the food ordered properly. The conversations happen with various settings such as asking for menus, asking about food, ordering food, tipping, and giving feedback on food. Teachers listen to the conversations and take careful notes on students' performances for feedback after the presentations. Questions are also encouraged in this step.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3: Reports</td>
<td>This stage of completing the main task is what researchers (Barnard &amp; Nguyen, 2010; Ellis, 2003; &amp; Willis, 1996) highly encourage, namely the use of language for interaction and communication to complete a task. In this stage, learners need to use whatever language resource they have to conduct meaningful communication with peers. This also matches the idea of active learning of Nunan (2004) who focuses on creating an environment where collaboration is stimulated and communication is of high importance. Referring to the second principle on language gap (Barnard &amp; Nguyen, 2010; Nunan 2004), during this stage of high volume of interaction, learners will realize the gap in their language competency which prevents them from successfully completing the task. They will then fill in that gap with facilitation from their peers or teachers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3. **Language focus**

Ellis (2003, 2009) agrees that TBLT has the primary focus on language use for meaningful communication. Hence, the target language or certain language features need to be emphasized in some ways to help learners acquire that target features for specific use. Willis (1996) includes a stage called *language focus* to remind the analysis of grammatical and lexical features as constituents of meaningful communication.
Table 3. The language-focus stage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language focus</th>
<th>Task principle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language analysis</td>
<td>Teachers may ask students what words or phrases were used in a particular part of the presentations. Or, teachers may simply repeat the phrases used by students in the presentations. Then, if errors occur, there should be corrections on those. Besides, an analysis on the use and forms of certain words and structures is done by the teachers to help the students acquire those features. In doing this, the teachers emphasize on not only how the language is used but also what cultural and behavioral aspects the students need to keep in mind as their life experience. Teachers can assign homework to students. The homework, suggested by Rozati (2014), can be any kinds of activity to get students to practice what they have been instructed. So, in this particular case, teachers can ask students to write a report on their eating-out experiences. Guided questions can be provided.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice</td>
<td>Similar to the previous stage, teachers’ eliciting linguistic features from students’ performances will help students recognize their language gap and fill that gap. Besides, Nunan (2004) emphasizes on not only language development through task completion but also cultural awareness. Since there will be explanations on behavioral aspects in a restaurant in different settings, teachers will be able to introduce certain cultural points related to eating out in other cultures to students.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


5. CONCLUSION

Reminded by Bonces and Bonces (2010, p. 174), “there is only language learning if students are using language to reach their communicative purposes”. Hence, although there are still existing misunderstandings about TBLT and the exam-oriented influences of some educational circumstances, TBLT should be highly recommended to improve learners’ language ability and communication skills, which are the goals of EFL education. There should be an innovation in curriculum design, assessment, material development, and teaching methods that can provide spaces for TBLT to fit in EFL education. In other words, there should be materials that contain various language tasks instead of grammatical exercises which require repeated practice of specific structures. Besides, since TBLT concentrates on the use of language for effective and meaningful communication, learners should be assessed based on the ability to use language to complete communicative tasks without concentrations on a particular structure. The paper has reviewed the definitions of tasks and TBLT as well as pointed out common misunderstandings and misapplications of TBLT in EFL education in Vietnam. Although
there has been a suggestion on how to design a task, there is still the need to apply that task into a real-life teaching context to see how TBLT is implemented and whether more issues exist when applying TBLT.

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**Lịch sử bài báo**
Nhận ngày 14 tháng 08 năm 2017
Chỉnh sửa lần 1 ngày 22 tháng 10 năm 2017 | Chỉnh sửa lần 2 ngày 02 tháng 11 năm 2017
Chap nhận đăng ngày 03 tháng 11 năm 2017

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**Tóm tắt**

Phương pháp học dựa trên những nhiệm vụ thực tế (Task-based language teaching) từ lâu được nghiên cứu và ứng dụng rộng rãi trong giảng dạy tiếng Anh với những lợi ích trong việc phát triển năng lực ngôn ngữ của người học. Dù phương pháp này không còn mới mẻ nhưng vẫn còn tồn tại nhiều khó khăn khi ứng dụng phương pháp này trong giảng dạy do những hiểunham về phương pháp này. Bài nghiên cứu tổng quan nay sẽ phân tích những hiểunham thường gặp khi ứng dụng Phương pháp học dựa trên những nhiệm vụ thực tế tại Việt Nam. Bài viết sẽ tìm hiểu những hiểunham biệt chưa thỏa đáng về phương pháp học dựa trên những nhiệm vụ thực tế và đề xuất giải pháp để thiết kế các nhiệm vụ thực tế có hiệu quả trong dạy và học tiếng Anh.

**Từ khóa:** Ứng dụng sai; Hiểu nhiệm; Các đề xuất; Nhiệm vụ thực tế; Thiết kế nhiệm vụ thực tế.