The Impact of Task-Based Learning Approach on Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Oman

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Abstract*: The main focus of this essay is to explore the extent to which adopting Task-Based Learning (TBL) model can help teach English as a foreign language at the tertiary level in Oman. The data of this paper are mainly derived from the author's professional teaching experience and underpinned by trustworthy published research in the field of TBL, which is then critiqued, synthesized, and contextualized to provide a more in-depth insight into the TBL and its relevance for teaching English language in the Oman education setting. The results of this paper indicate that the TBL approach has positive effects on L2 learners' fluency, motivation, classroom management, and teachers' confidence; however, it might undermine accuracy in a few cases. Also, embracing merely TBL without considering other factors such as teachers' perspectives, carefully chosen tasks, high-stakes test policy, and teachers' experience is unlikely to improve the desired students' language.*

Keywords: CELTA, CLT, EFL, ELT, TBL Approach, Teaching English

Introduction: from Traditional Teaching Style to TBL Approach

The author has been teaching the English language to adults in Oman for about ten years, where both English for general purposes approach (EGP)and English for specific purposes approach (ESP) have been employed. Like most Omani English teachers, throughout his undergraduate study at the College of Education at Sultan Qaboos University, he came across distinct methods of teaching, namely Total Physical Response (TPR), the student-centered approach, the grammar-translation method, the audio-lingual method, and communicative language teaching (CLT). At those times, he focused on fostering a school of thought that suited his disposition and tendency.

During the first two years of teaching English to elementary-level learners, his lessons were premised on teaching rather than learning. In other words, there seemed to be a gap between how the author was teaching and how students were learning or perhaps not learning. Although the author worked so hard in the classroom explaining the grammar rules and the meanings of vocabulary items for about 100 minutes in each lecture, the annual report of students' evaluation for teachers was shockingly disappointing, and many areas were required for improvement. This unexpected student feedback acted as a spur to trigger the author to seek more effective methods of teaching. There was, therefore, a definite need for taking CELTA qualification (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults), which is an extensive course offered by the University of Cambridge, where TBL(Task-Based Learning) approach was introduced for the first time for the author through Jim Scrivener's book *'Learning Teaching.'* Since then, TBL has become the author's frontrunner mode of teaching instead of the traditional stereotype of teaching, which was overwhelmed by mechanical drills. Hence, it is hoped that critiquing the author's personal experience of using TBL approach will contribute to providing a new insight into EFL (teaching English as a foreign language).

Stages of TBL Lesson

The author has noticed that adopting TBT entails following specific steps while designing the lesson plan. Initially, the teacher must devise a meaningful, authentic task that will enable students to use language pragmatically, considering that language is only seen as the instrument to accomplish the task (Ellis, 2003).Another crucial matter that the author considers is that the task necessarily offers an opportunity for

students to practice real communication (Willis, 1996). At the beginning of embracing this trajectory in teaching the English language, the author perceived finding tasks relevant to students' needs, interests, and levels, a primary facet of TBL (Ellis, 2017), as burdensome. A considerable amount of literature alsohas been published on how to plan a task-based lesson (e.g.,Estaire & Zanon, 1994; Lee, 2000; Prabhu, 1987; Skehan, 1996; Willis, 1996). Although researchers proposed various patterns of TBL lesson plans, the author has undertaken the typical phases.

The Pre-Task Stage: In the first stage, 'pre-task,' the teacher is expected to set the context, elicit vocabulary, urge students to brainstorm a list of ideas related to the task, and provide clear guidelines to direct students throughout the task (Lee,2000). This view is advocated by Dornyei (2001), who points out that the pre-task stage in TBL is to provide the main requirements for learners to complete the task successfully. Unlike advanced and intermediate levels, the teacher has to use pre-teach vocabulary activities in some instances with beginners at this stage. Nunan (2006) argues that applying the task-supported teaching model can undermine the integrity of TBL approach. According to the author, this particular measure is imputable to the lack of language input, learners' autonomy, and exposure in countries where English is taught as a foreign language. Neglect is more likely to result in a communication breakdown in the classroom.

Besides, Newton (2001) claims that targeting unfamiliar words in the pre-task phase will not only tackle the linguistic demands of a task but also disallow struggling to get in the way of learners. In the same vein, the author has become aware of this step's importance when preparing a lesson. Instead of presenting the target language from the first minutes to learners and elaborating using teacher-led classroom interaction, the pre-task stage creates a good condition for learners to communicate effectively throughout the lesson (Ruso, 1999). Again, owing to the limited input available from the environment outside the classroom, the author has been compelled sometimes to provide a model to Omani students before requiring them to perform the task. This premise is underpinned by both Skehan (1996) and Willis (1996); they believe that showing a written or oral text promotes the performance of the task.

The During Task Stage: As opposed to the previous teacher-directed lessons methodology the author adopted, the TBL approach has considerably shifted teaching to student-centered classrooms. Candlin (1987) states that the second stage should emphasize the process rather than the outcome. In doing so, a teacher can only facilitate, monitor, and take notes on errors to correct later and encourage learners while working in pairs or groups to complete the task relying substantially on their prior knowledge and linguistic resources. Consequently, the author has noted that teacher talking time (TTT) has reduced dramatically in the classroom, whereas natural learning has emerged gradually among his students. In contrast to Lee (2000), who argues that time should be surely restricted during the task stage, Yuan and Ellis (2002) insist that performing the task under time pressure would impede accuracy to take place in the sense that students need sufficient time to revise their speeches.

A broader perspective has been taken on by the author, who infers that it is better not to limit the time when the primary purpose of the task is to achieve fluency; however, merely specific minutes must be allotted for learners to prepare the task when it comes to accuracy. Additionally, the author has observed that when students work on the task, they tend to borrow target words from the input data instead of producing the formulation from their own aptitude. Nevertheless, Joe (1998) reports that borrowing is not deemed to be a hindrance to language acquisition. Admittedly, even though treating the language as a tool and learners as language users are regarded as central principles of TBL (Barnes, 1976), the author sometimes feels disappointed when he observes limited classroom communication due to students seeming to be so concentrated just on finishing the task. Seedhouse (1999) maintains that this undesirable practice is attributable to the design characteristics of functions and the process of conducting them. In general, therefore, it appears that the During Task Stage is so crucial on the ground that it plays a significant part in steering the whole lesson and ensuring spontaneous interaction.

The Post-Task Stage: Data from several studies suggest that there are three leading pedagogic goals of this phase (e.g., Willis, 1996b; Skehan & Foster, 1997; Nunan, 2006). One fundamental cornerstone of this process is allowing learners to repeat the task publicly. From the author's perspective, games and competitions are effective techniques to motivate Omani students to speak in front of the class. Similar to Bygate (2001), Lynch and Maclean (2000), who indicate that the second performance can be conducted in a group, the author underscores the teacher's accountability to ensure all group members are involved. Based on the author's experience, in this stage, it is customary to see Omani students focus more on grammar and use a formal style owing to the stress that public performance is likely to cause if learners have not been prepared psychologically. The same finding was revealed by Candlin (1987), whose study implies that the post-task stage might give rise to fluency reduction. However, having fun and establishing a good rapport with students have overcome this challenge in the author's classroom. Even if, to date, best of the author's knowledge, there is no empirical evidence to confirm the direct relationship between these two strategies and students' fluency, it seems they can work meaningfully in the Omani context.

Furthermore, the other two essential purposes this stage aims to achieve are reflecting on the task and focusing on the form (Estaire & Zanon, 1994). Willis (1996) concludes that asking students' feedback about their performance is highly recommended for language learning. Thus, learners are required to present a report explaining how they completed the task and how they might enhance their performance (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). For the author, this practice is crucial for student language proficiency improvement and a golden opportunity for teachers to involve students in evaluating the task, whereby teachers can prepare more interactive lessons and understand how students learn best. By adopting the TBL model for several years, student-based evaluations of tasks can be done promptly and fruitfully through 'Mentimeter' or 'Khahot' online applications.

At the closing step of the post-task stage, it is worthwhile to address the critical language features on the board to the class. In calming this, two key concerns arise from paying attention to the target forms. The first question is, which forms should the teacher select and based on what? Loshcky and Bley Vroman (1993) declare that 'useful' or 'natural' forms students cannot use correctly need to be considered and expounded. The second concern is how a teacher should tackle this issue. In fact, implementing the peer-correction method in this phase has ensured that it can profitably deal with Omani students' errors. For instance, when the author was teaching adults how to write business emails as part of Technical Writing Module themes, he witnessed that groups felt so excited to spot errors in each other after swapping emails. This assumption is supported by various studies which have assessed the efficacy of peer-correction on EFL learners (e.g.,Itmeizeh, 2016; Aghajani & Zoghipour, 2018; Najogi & Adnan, 2019; Gómez Argüelles et al., 2019).

Overall, the result of investigating the framework of TBL Lesson indicates that, in general, these methodological procedures can be applied in the Oman education context even though English is taught as a foreign language. This critical reflection also strengthens the idea that employing TBL methodology aids in creating a better communicative environment in a classroom. In addition, since TBL lesson plan is required a different mindset from traditional methods, ensuring appropriate training and support for teachers should be a priority for policy enactment actors at English language centers in Oman.

The Extent to Which TBL Impacted the Author's Classroom Performance

Students' positive comments and improved performances helped the author realize TBL's value. He found that learners have become more motivated to learn English. This finding can be implied by attending classes regularly, participating actively, and engaging in tasks passionately. In a similar case in Turkey, Ruso (1999) identifies that fostering TBL has contributed significantly to encouraging student involvement. Almost every paper that has been written on the effectiveness of TBL (e.g. Leaver &Willis

2004; Edwards & Willis 2005; Van den Branden, 2006) have pointed out that carefully chosen tasks render students share their thoughts and express themselves openly with classmates, and this promotes motivation. In terms of learning, TBL in the author's lessons is viewed as a catalyst that sparks learners to concentrate on the subject matter and accordingly learn. This is exemplified when the author asks students to write exam questions for their classmates or to complete song lyrics. By so doing, they need to read the text in depth to prepare a difficult test and listen carefully to fill in the gaps. Additionally, one more personal gain of undertaking the TBL approach is the remarkable increase in the author's self-confidence in teaching, which stems from preparing daily lesson plans. This means that the well-structured stages of TBL enable teachers to move and teach step by step in a detailed way.

Likely, Waters (1988) states that a uniform lesson plan is crucial to successful learning. The author believes that further benefits have been associated with espousing TBL. For instance, managing the classroom has become easier for him, and the class atmosphere has turned out to be enjoyable. However, to provide adequate language practice opportunities for learners and to ensure independent learning is taking place in the classroom, it is imperative to employ diversified tasks throughout the semester. Lingley (2006) argues that in teaching EFL (English as a Foreign Language), engaging learners in various tasks is intrinsic to generating communicative language learning. Although speaking skill is considered one of the indispensable components of communication in EFL teaching and teachers should pay special attention to it (Shumin, 1997), the author acknowledges that his traditional teaching philosophy overlooked this notion. On the other hand, the author argues that seeing EFL learners' oral abilities improving through practicing role-plays based on TBL has validated the theory of the influence of TBL on upgrading EFL students' speaking aptitudes. The empirical evidence that Aliakbari and Jamalvandi (2010) present through their experiments on 60 Iranian students supporting this idea.

The findings of this paper complement those of earlier studies which have indicated the positive effects of TBL on acquiring L2 naturally. They also recommend that Omani English teachers consider TBL a potential approach to enhance English language proficiency in classrooms.

The Challenges of Implementing TBL Approach

It would be biased to ignore the impediments that make practicing TBL difficult in the EFL context. At first, when moving from theory to practice and on the grounds of lacking experience in exercising TBL mode, the author had to confront some challenges. It is not unusual to see inexperienced teachers preparing a task emphasizing pragmatic meaning at the expense of semantic meaning. Widdowson (1993) claims, as a result, students' language accuracy might be declined gradually. In contrast, Ellis (2009) suggests that teachers need to think of a context that requires attention to both lexis and performance to conquer this barrier and bring about natural language production. The author, for example, has realized that by showing students ongoing housework activities, students can learn present progressive tenses impliedly. However, textbooks designed to encompass the critical precepts of TBL are scarce, signifying more efforts are expected from EFL teachers; what is more challenging is changing the role of a teacher who is unaccustomed to this kind of education and unwilling to leave the comfort zone.

EFL teachers know that to foster an effective TBL environment, they must create a culture of collaboration and interdependence among learners, which means taking more responsibilities and accepting less control. Moreover, although English language teachers in Oman are granted sufficient autonomy for choosing methods of teaching, the great weight given to test scores in tertiary education in Oman has deprived many colleagues of adopting TBL pattern. Out of 100 marks, only 20 percent are allocated for continuous assessment in Oman's different English language levels. These standardized achievement tests determine whether a student can continue with undergraduate studies. Hence, the test-based learning policy could be interrupted as a primary factor for Omani English teachers' resistance to

pursuing this pedagogical trend. Another possible rationale beyond it could arise from the lack of awareness and paucity of research on the effects of TBL, particularly on Omani students.

One of the more significant findings to emerge from this study is that the current Omani English language teacher's agency and the EFL context structure in Oman are unlikely to allow TBL approach to diffuse on a national scale. Therefore, further qualitative studies should be carried out to explore the Omani teachers' perceptions of TBL and additional research to investigate the extent to which the high stake exams blueprint prevent TBL from prevailing in the Oman education setting. It can, accordingly, be assumed that more inductive analysis attempts are required to unfold ways to reduce the obstacles to TBL.

Conclusion and Implications

This study set out first to assess the degree to which TBL framework can be useful in teaching Oman English as a foreign language and how its lesson stages are superior to the traditional methodological procedures. The second aim of this study was to investigate the influence of TBL and the potential barriers to executing it nationwide by critically analyzing the author's personal experience and scrutinizing over thirty research papers. The author's ten-year journey of teaching EFL has identified that to render students master L2competently, teachers have no choice but to prompt TBL model in classrooms. Notwithstanding this paper reveals that undeniable avails can result from adopting TBL, causal factors leading to resisting implementing TBL among FEL teachers in Oman remain speculative. Thus, this study lays the groundwork for future research into this area. Besides, unless the author's college management embarks upon new policies to impose teachers to take TBL seriously, provide professional training courses taught by experts in the field and change the assessment system, it might not be possible to see TBL model widespread in tertiary education. Finally, as traditional classrooms are still dominant in Oman, how far the stakeholders are satisfied with graduates' English language proficiency is unclear. This would be a fruitful area for further work too.

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