

EFL Teachers' Beliefs and Practices Regarding Task-based Language Teaching in the Asian Context

-- Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract: Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has gained prominence in research and practice for the past two decades in the Asian context. This focused review examined teachers' beliefs and practices regarding task-based language teaching in the Asian context. We found evidence of teachers' holding positive views towards the values of TBLT and teachers' commitment (though limited) in response to the contextual constraints. For the curriculum innovation of TBLT to be successfully implemented in the Asian context, this paper recommended taking an ecological perspective when promoting TBLT innovation in the Asian context, given the interplay between the pedagogical principles with the dynamics of social, economic, cultural, and the institutional context it is embedded in. In addition, it is essential to support the professional development of Asian EFL teachers to build expertise in understanding and implementing TBLT.

Keywords: TBLT, Curriculum innovation, Asian Context, Teacher development, Ecological perspective.

1. Introduction

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has gained prominence in research and practice for the past two decades (East, 2016; Littlewood, 2007). Having the primary emphasis on communicative competence, tasks refer to activities that incorporate the following four core features proposed by Ellis (2009), a focus on meaning, the existence of a gap, the demands that learners draw on their own cognitive and linguistic resources to achieve the aim, and specific requirement of the non-linguistic outcome. In line with globalization and the trend of English as lingua franca, TBLT has been extensively advocated as a curriculum innovation in Asia countries for there is a strong need to raise the quality of English language education and achieve students' communicative automaticity in English in these countries (Chen & Wright, 2017). However, the Anglo-American origin of TBLT has led to criticisms and debates when its pedagogic principles are applied in the non-western contexts given the divergent social and cultural backgrounds. For example, in the Chinese Confucian-oriented culture, the "hierarchical relations between teachers and students" (Hu, 2013, p.2) is emphasized and the transmission of knowledge is valued rather than students' cognitive capability to question, criticize, debate, and persuade, which stands in contrast to the student-centered and experiential learning principles of TBLT. The criticism has also been leveled at the adoption of TBLT in other Asia countries such as Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and Thailand where the compatibility of TBLT with the local sociocultural context is questioned (Bryfonski & McKay, 2017). Central to the criticism is evidence from empirical research that points towards how teachers may implement and contextualize the pedagogical principles of TBLT in the authentic classrooms in Asia countries, and whether these adaptations conform to the authenticity of TBLT principles. According to Van den Branden (2016), teachers are regarded as an interlocuter and facilitator in the TBLT classroom and play a central role to elicit learner engagement and support the learners' cognitive development and classroom interaction

during the task performance stage. Furthermore, teachers need to strategically design the tasks in the task planning stage and evaluate performance in the post-task assessment stage in order to exploit the best learning potential of the tasks. Given the significance of the teacher's role in TBLT, this paper aims to provide a literature review of teachers' perceptions and practices regarding TBLT in the Asia English as a foreign language (EFL) context, which might shed light on how the curriculum innovation of TBLT might be successfully implemented in the Asian contexts.

2. Challenges of the Implementation of TBLT in Asia Countries

Originating from the western ideology of social constructivism (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978) and incorporating the educational philosophy of experiential learning and learner autonomy (Liu & Ren, 2021), TBLT views knowledge as being co-constructed between the individual and the surrounding sociocultural environment. A large and growing body of research has investigated the effectiveness of TBLT on the accuracy, fluency, and complexity of the learners' target language (e.g., Robinson, 2001; Willis & Willis, 2007). However, the adoption of TBLT is not a one-size-fits-all approach, and various challenges exist in the contextualization of TBLT in the Asia EFL setting. Previous literature has indicated that three major factors including the institutional culture, classroom teaching, and teacher education initiatives are related to the gap between the advocated curriculum innovation of TBLT and the practices in the authentic classrooms (Adams & Newton, 2009; Butler, 2011). In this part, I will focus on the challenges for adopting TBLT in Asian contexts faced by teachers based on some of the key literature.

2.1. Teachers' Reliance on The Traditional Way of Teaching

One major inhibiting factor for the implementation of meaning-focused TBLT approach is teachers' reliance on the traditional teacher-centered grammar translation or the Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) approach. Though primarily meaning-focused, TBLT offers a range of means of attending to grammar in the task-based cycle. For example, in the post-task phase, teachers could provide consciousness-raising activities that focus learners' attention on language forms that students incidentally come across during the task performance phase (Fotos & Ellis, 1991). However, empirical research found that teachers tended to be accustomed to deliver the grammar instruction in a predetermined order to maintain control over the classroom and reduced the uncertainty (Van den Branden, 2006). Analyzing the suitability of TBLT in the Hong Kong context based on semi-structure interviews, Carless (2007) claimed that secondary school teachers believed in the need to provide learners with direct grammar instruction and their teaching style remained teacher-centered and non-interactive despite the fact that task-based learning had been adopted in the official syllabus since mid-1990s. In the same vein, exploring the understandings and implementation of TBLT of three Chinese secondary school EFL teachers in Mainland China, Zheng and Borg (2013) revealed that the wider persistence of deep-rooted beliefs about grammar could impede the implementation of the curriculum innovation of TBLT by inappropriately mediating the curriculum recommendations. Similarly, despite being aware of the merits of TBLT in motivating the learner to experiment with tasks in an "achievement orientation", most Korean secondary school teachers in Jeon and Hahn's (2006) study regarded TBLT inappropriate for learners due to the teacher-centered pedagogical practices in the Korean context. Sato (2010) also claimed teachers' overall negative evaluation of the effectiveness of TBLT at the enacted curriculum level in the Japanese EFL setting given the Japanese students' expectation of the grammar-oriented teaching approach. Based on Aliasin et al.'s (2019) empirical finding which states that teachers' teaching philosophies in TBLT positively correlate with their overarching teaching style, teachers' fixation with the traditional approach will predict an authoritative teaching style, giving rise to the gap between theory and practice in the adoption of TBLT.

2.2. Teachers' Misinterpretations of TBLT

Different interpretations of TBLT emerge along with the use of tasks. An attempt was made by Ellis (2003) to distinguish between a strong form of TBLT which "employs task as the unit of analysis at all stages in the programme design, implementation, and evaluation" (Long, 2015, p.3), and a weak form of TBLT in which task is utilized as a way of providing communicative practice for language items. They are referred to as task-based and task-supported teaching respectively. Ellis (2003) argued that tasks in the weak form of TBLT functioned as language exercises in the practice phase of a traditional PPP approach, which was not commensurate with the underlying principle of employing tasks to achieve learner's communicative automaticity. According to Butler (2011), TBLT tends to be adopted in its weak form, namely, in the task-supported approach, in the Asian classrooms. Drawing on classroom observations and interviews with teachers, Carless (2004) demonstrated that

despite the attention being drawn to the principles of planning and implementing tasks, teachers were using TBLT in the task-supported way and adapted TBLT to their traditional way of teaching. In their analysis of the teachers' confusion towards TBLT, Zheng and Borg (2013) identified that the implicit definition of tasks in the curriculum guideline made it difficult for teachers to differentiate tasks from non-task activities, resulting in the concomitant risk of misinterpretation of tasks. In their case study of secondary school teachers' beliefs regarding TBLT in mainland China, Chen & Wright (2017) also claimed that most teachers demonstrated an understanding of the role of tasks as a communicative add-on to the conventional grammar-focused teaching. Furthermore, teachers tended to hold narrow and constrained views of tasks, strongly associating them with oral communicative activities and putting too much emphasis on the oral production (Carless, 2007; Chen & Wright, 2017; Zheng & Borg, 2013), whereas in Ellis's (2003) conceptualization, all the four dimensions of listening, speaking, reading, and writing were included in the tasks. Ellis (2009) attributed teachers' lack of autonomy in delivering task-based lessons in the EFL contexts to the driving factor of exam-based tests where explicit metalinguistic knowledge was emphasized.

2.3. The Washback Effect of Examinations

In the Asian context, teachers regarded the effects of high-stakes examinations on learning and course materials as one of the challenges of enacting TBLT curriculums (e.g., Carless, 2004, 2007; Lin & Wu, 2012; Liu et al., 2018; Zhu, 2020). For example, Zhu (2020) claimed that teachers had exam anxiety and were obsessed with the target structures in the mandatory textbooks to help students achieve better exam results in the Chinese primary setting. As recommended by East (2012), to realize the revised curriculum through the lens of TBLT and attend to meaning and grammar simultaneously, teachers could deconstruct students' noticed grammar and provide explicit metalinguistic explanation to the grammar rules after students' engagement with the communicative activity. However, according to Butler et al. (2018), tasks constituted a small source of activities in the mandatory textbooks which did not offer sufficient guidance to help teachers incorporate tasks into their curriculum design. As a result, overloaded with teaching and extra responsibilities, teachers may choose to minimally adopt the curriculum innovation of TBLT and stick to their examination-oriented syllabus, which was substantially different from the envisioned enactment of TBLT. Besides the basic education, the association between examination and textbook materials was also found salient at the tertiary level. Against the backdrop of revising College English Curriculum Requirement and compiling new English textbooks aimed to achieve students' communicative competence and autonomous learning ability in China (MOE, 2007), Feng (2021) conducted a systematic analysis to evaluate the communicativeness of college English textbooks. Based on five versions of the most popularly adopted English textbooks in the Chinese tertiary education, there was compelling evidence that the textbooks were overall compiled in the form-focused manner, aiming to help students firmly grasp the explicit metalinguistic knowledge needed to pass college English tests (CET). In contrast, the meaning-focused tasks which were cognitively more demanding and took into consideration students' pragmatic ability and individualized

learning were less emphasized. These findings echoed Hu's (2004) assertion of one of the dominant goals of English language teaching (ELT) to help students grasp the grammar and vocabulary knowledge to pass English tests. Regarding the direct relationship between examinations and TBLT, it is important to note that the effects of examinations to impede the implementation of pedagogical guidelines of TBLT might be over-stated. Carless (2007) argued that the external public examinations in Hong Kong were moving towards being integrative and task-based, which had positive potential for enhancing classroom interaction. In other words, teacher beliefs and school practices might play the more influential role as barriers to task-based pedagogy. Carless (2007) also called our attention to investigate the extent to which task-based examination affected the task-based instruction.

Besides the above-mentioned factors, other identified barriers to successful implementation of TBLT in the Asian context include large class sizes, mixed ability level of students, teachers' lack of proficiency in English, and problems with task-based assessment (Butler, 2011; Carless, 2007; Skehan & Luo, 2020; Zhu, 2020). This is consistent with the notion put forward by Littlewood (2007) that TBLT is especially difficult to be implemented in large classes due to the logistical issues. In addition, students who have low English proficiency as well as those who are accustomed to the conventional teaching approach may be reluctant to speak in class, undercutting the value of tasks for language acquisition. The teachers' own language proficiency level is another area of concern given the quality of classroom discourse during online interaction and negotiation of meaning.

Just as Adams and Newton (2009) stated, until teachers' own communicativeness competence has been enhanced, little conscious enactment of tasks could be expected in the classroom. In a nutshell, teachers are confronted with challenges at the conceptual, classroom teaching, and sociocultural institutional level when adopting the pedagogical guidelines of TBLT. Despite this, empirical studies show that a great number of EFL teachers in Asia tend to hold positive perspectives on the rationale of TBLT. In the following session, I will discuss the positive views of TBLT held by teachers.

3. Positive Perceptions of TBLT

In spite of the challenges faced by the teachers, there is promising evidence that teachers are moving toward the learner-centric ideology and embedding task-based approaches in their classroom. Several studies have adapted and employed Jeon and Hahn's (2006) questionnaire to investigate EFL teachers' views of TBLT in terms of their knowledge of TBLT and their attitudes towards this teaching approach (e.g., Aliasin et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2018; Liu & Ren, 2021). The results revealed that most teachers held a positive perception of TBLT. For example, Jeon and Hahn pointed out that most Korean teachers in their study understood the advantages of TBLT but were not in favour of incorporating it due to logistic and acquisitional reasons. Liu et al. (2018) drew on questionnaires and interviews to explore college EFL teachers' views of TBLT in China. They concluded that most of the college EFL teachers in the study held positive perceptions on the rationale underpinning TBLT and claimed a high frequency of implementing TBLT, even though most participants were not confident in their

interpretation of TBLT. Chen & Wright (2017) also reported that the majority of teachers in their study were aware of the positive role of TBLT in ELT as a preferable teaching approach, but the positive perceptions didn't translate into their practice. Evidence on the role of teacher agency in coping with the multi-layered challenges in TBLT implementation is gaining our attention. In Zheng and Borg's (2013) case study, while highlighting the challenges encountered in implementing TBLT due to large class sizes, the youngest teacher demonstrated a commitment to align with the principles of TBLT in the enacted curriculum even though doing so generated problems such as uncertainty and loss of classroom control. In Peng and Pyper's (2019) study, teachers devoted efforts to depart from the conventional teaching approach and incorporate task-based pedagogies in teaching Chinese as a second language in a Chinese university despite being confronted with constraints and challenges from the localized educational contexts. Another important study carried out by Newton and Bui (2017) in the Vietnamese context allows us to explore the role of positive beliefs in exerting a powerful influence on teachers' enactment of TBLT. Believing that TBLT could enhance the collaboration and interaction among students, the Vietnamese primary school teachers went beyond the mandatory textbooks which were compiled in the PPP style and fostered a more task-based approach in their EFL classroom. Furthermore, in contrast to typically regarding various contextual factors as impediments to the implementation of TBLT in the Asian context, these teachers identified the benefits of TBLT as increasing learner's pushed output, enhancing peer scaffolding, and eliciting learner engagement after their implementation of the task-based lessons. These studies revealed that teacher beliefs and knowledge in the value of the principles of TBLT outweighed the constraints from local contexts and played a significant role in helping teachers achieve pedagogical objectives.

To summarize, against the backdrop of curriculum innovation, EFL teachers in the Asian context seem to hold positive views towards the implementation of TBLT, and highlighted various advantages of the adoption of meaningful tasks. As regard authentic implementation, some teachers nevertheless struggled with translating it into the real classroom and continued with the conventional teaching due to contextual constraints (Lin & Wu, 2012; Liu et al., 2018). The significant role played by teacher agency were highlighted in coping with the tensions during enactment of curriculum innovation of TBLT (Xu & Fan, 2021).

4. The Feasibility of Implementing TBLT in Different Institutional Contexts

In his seminal paper on the role of teachers in task-based education, Van den Branden (2016) pointed out that "for teachers the implementation of TBLT is a gradual process of learning, which needs to go through repeated cycles of trying out, reflecting, and trying out again..." (p. 175). This indicates that only by trying and reflecting on the pedagogy can teachers develop the professional expertise to master and exploit the learning potential of the TBLT approach (Norris, 2015). Exploring the feasibility of TBLT in the Taiwanese junior high school context, Lin and Wu (2012) reported that although most teachers perceived TBLT as a good teaching approach, a small number of them agreed that TBLT was

feasible in the Taiwanese context due to various practical constraints. This finding was in line with the above-mentioned studies (Carless, 2004, 2007; Jeon & Hahn, 2006; Littlewood, 2007), identifying the issue of feasibility of TBLT.

Teachers' opinions differ regarding feasibility of TBLT for learners of different age groups. Taking young learners as an example, teachers in Carless' (2004) study regarded TBLT unsuitable for primary school students and highlighted three problems of implementing TBLT: indiscipline in the classroom, overuse of learners' L1, and low quantity and quality of learner output. In contrast to this pessimistic depiction, Newton and Bui's (2017) study demonstrated the viability of task-based approach in the Vietnamese primary school context and highlighted the positive engagement of the learners. EFL teachers at the tertiary education generally believed in the compatibility of TBLT with university learners since the adult EFL learners possessed the prerequisite linguistic and cognitive resources to accomplish a task (e.g., Liu et al., 2018; Liu & Ren, 2021). With the popularity of new media, adult EFL learners could explore the collaborative and interactive environment of Web 2.0 to optimally promote their target language development (Liu & Ren, 2021). Furthermore, TBLT were employed by teachers at the university level in EAP/ESP courses to strengthen learners' subject knowledge and language proficiency simultaneously (Hasnain & Halder, 2021).

5. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

This focused review examined teachers' beliefs and practices regarding task-based language teaching in the Asian context. We found evidence of teachers' holding positive views towards the values of TBLT, and teachers' commitment (though limited) in response to the contextual constraints. Given this potential, this part will discuss how the curriculum innovation of TBLT might be successfully promoted in the Asian context.

Commenting on the instructional practices in the EFL classrooms in China, Hu (2005) noted that teaching methodologies like communicative language teaching (CLT) were fundamentally "shaped and constrained by contextual influences" (p. 635). There is a need for taking an ecological perspective when promoting TBLT innovation in the Asian context, given the interplay between the pedagogical principles with the dynamics of social, economic, cultural, and the institutional context it is embedded in. Drawing on the sociocultural settings of Asia, the "situated task-based approaches" (Carless, 2007), or in East's (2012) words, the "principled eclecticism" of TBLT principles which is context sensitive, might promote the feasibility of TBLT in Asia. I would suggest some of the features of the situated task-based principles based on the previous literature. Considering the dimensions of the forms-meaning-form trichotomy, teachers could deliver explicit grammar explanation in the pre-task phase of a task-cycle or adopt more comprehension-based tasks or consciousness-raising tasks which are less cognitively demanding and privilege explicit metalinguistic explanation (Adams & Newton, 2009). During the task-performance phase, teacher could co-construct with students and produce the "directed noticing" (East, 2012) of the grammar points which need further instruction in the post-task phase. This "directed noticing" is commensurate with the inductive approach of learning and takes into account students'

different levels of language proficiency. As regards examination requirements, it might be feasible to take the formative assessment incorporating the task-based in class assessment with high-stakes examination system. Such combination of examination system could give teachers autonomy over their task-based instruction, which is vital to the successful implementation of TBLT. Furthermore, tasks highlighting the reading and writing proficiency could be included alternative to the oral communicative tasks involving pair and group work (Liu et al., 2018). As previous literature indicates, the role of Confucian-oriented Chinese culture in impacting the adoption of TBLT has been over-emphasized and that Chinese students are not passive learners intrinsically (Littlewood, 2007; Liu et al., 2018), it is significant for teachers to inform the learners of the rationale, outcome, purpose, and utility of the tasks in the pre-task phase to optimally ensure the engagement of students and drive the task-cycle forward.

As an innovative pedagogical approach advocated by the governments in the Asian context, TBLT continues to be promoted at primary, secondary, and tertiary educational levels. It is therefore important to support the professional development of Asian EFL teachers to build up expertise regarding understanding and implementing TBLT. As Adams and Newton (2009) reminds us, teacher development initiatives limited to enhancing teachers' awareness of TBLT would not necessarily lead to teachers' implementation of TBLT in the authentic classrooms. Inservice training programmes combining theoretical training in response to the teachers' needs and practice-oriented ongoing support, could influence teacher practice and motivate teachers to develop professional competence congruent with TBLT principles (Van den Branden, 2006). The data-based teacher development recommended by Zheng and Borg (2013) sheds light on the teacher education initiatives which explore the potential of teacher reflection and awareness raising based on the transcripts of teacher lessons. Meanwhile, involving teachers as action researchers through task evaluation and critical reflection could help teachers address the theoretical and contextual concerns when incorporating the pedagogical guidelines of TBLT (Zhu, 2020).

As Lai (2005) points out, research in TBLT needs to make a shift from identifying challenges in the implementation of TBLT to exploring how to "push the field forward both in terms of the adoption of TBLT in Asian contexts and in terms of how research in Asian contexts can contribute more to the general field of TBLT" (p.13). Taking an ecological perspective and supported by teacher education initiatives, teachers could create powerful language learning environment consistent with the local conditions to optimally raise the learning potential of TBLT.

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