

Implementing Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) to teach Grammar to First Year English-Majored Students at Dong Nai Technology University, Dong Nai, Vietnam

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Abstract:

Grammar teaching and learning play important roles in English acquisition. However, Vietnamese educational system still favors grammar written tests to evaluate students' English proficiency. Therefore, students tend to learn more about language forms rather than meaningful language use. This has no doubt resulted in students' poor communicative ability. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is a suitable teaching approach, if applied to teach grammar for students, it will not only promote their communicative ability but also instruct them to use grammar correctly and comprehensively. In other words, teachers use TBLT to balance the learning process in which learners both fulfill meaningful communicative tasks and comprehend linguistic forms. In spite of the benefits brought to learners by TBLT, they are still in theory. Therefore, in order to bridge the gap between theory and practice, it is essential to conduct a study which can prove the effectiveness of applying TBLT. The objective of this work can only be achieved by collecting and analyzing data, so choosing research methods has to be done accurately and carefully. Therefore, the current paper aims to present the implementation of Task-based Language Teaching in teaching grammar for English majored freshmen at Dong Nai Technology University. A mixture of both quantitative and qualitative methods applied in the paper would be presented. This section is for concluding the proposal information rather than assuming the results for the study.

Index Terms: Teaching English grammar communicatively; Task-based Language Teaching; TBLT

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I. INTRODUCTION

The importance of English teaching and learning has been increasingly realized in Vietnam. Specifically, English has become one of the compulsory subjects since 2010 right from the third graders, which means that primary school students are taught English. Although there are some changes in the way curriculum and textbooks are designed to serve the purpose of developing students' communicative ability, it is a shame to know that the majority of students who graduate from high school cannot use English for even simple communication. This situation is not too surprising because of the fact that grammar written tests are still mainly used to evaluate students' English proficiency in school system. Therefore, students tend to learn mostly about language forms rather than use English for meaningful communication and teachers still favor Grammar Translation Method which is dry, and focuses only on building up grammatical knowledge in order to help students remember and master grammar rules with the only purpose of passing exams. This has no doubt resulted in students' inability to communicate in English. Realizing the imbalance in learning English, an increasing number of students are finding new ways to both master grammar competence and improve communicative ability.

The study was conducted at a university where participants are freshman. They are very active in their real life but passive in their English learning. Also, they are very good at

grammar, but fail to use grammar for oral communication. This concerns the author on every day of teaching. Although the author tried to minimize teacher's talking time and provide the students with pattern drills in order that they can practice speaking with their classmates, students seemed not to engage in lessons and sometimes they failed to reply spontaneously when being asked something outside the textbooks. If the author does not find an appropriate way to enhance her students' communicative ability, then the students will not be fully equipped with the ability to communicate in English. And if this situation is generalized throughout the country, then what would happen to young generations of Vietnam, especially in the age of globalization. Therefore, teachers need to provide learners a learning environment in which learners are offered opportunities to use English for meaningful communication. As a result, it is important to conduct a research about improving Vietnamese students' communicative competence

Research Questions: How do students respond to grammar learning with TBLT?

Sub-questions

1. How are communicative tasks integrated in grammar lessons?
2. How do students change their point of view about grammar learning after trained with TBLT?

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II. A RATIONAL FOR INNOVATION RESEARCH TBLT

In the light of TBLT, grammar is conveyed through completing communicative tasks which let students experience English grammar from meaning to form. In other words, students are introduced meanings, functions of a certain grammar point first, and then either teacher or students themselves explore the form. This way of teaching and learning has never taken place before, so it is hoped that students experience it in a very positive way.

Task-based language teaching (TBLT), if applied correctly to instruct grammar, will balance communicative competence and linguistic forms.

1. The characteristics of TBLT

There are a number of studies conducted to explore TBLT. Though every study pursues its own belief of TBLT, in general, they gain same outcomes. Specifically, TBLT engages students in active learning process in order to meet a specific task' target. (Hashemi et al, 2011). Also, Hadi (2012) cited that, TBLT let learners participate in meaningful communication which promotes actual language use.

The most prominent characteristics of TBLT, agreed by most famous scholars such as Nunan (2005); Murphy (2003); Little Wood (2004); Richard & Rogers (2011); Ellis (2003), are highlighting learner-centeredness, using meaningful oral tasks instead of linguistic tasks.

TBLT is employed because the interaction is not teacher-student only anymore, but learners will interact with their classmates in a cooperative learning environment, then learners' use of English will be enhanced .

2. How Grammar is taught with TBLT

Effective grammar teaching with TBLT is mainly decided according to communicative tasks which have to be designed not only to improve learners' communicative ability but also require them to address a particular grammar point. (Nunan, 2007, as cited in Rama, 2012). Thompson (2012) also highlights linguistic competence due to the fact that learners have problem with grammar use though reach a goal of meaningful communication. Since Vietnamese students still have to take written grammar tests, they have to maintain grammar learning while develop their speaking skill at the same time.

A well-designed task has to or should cover meaningful oral interaction, and focus on form (Jiuhan, 2010) and (Thompson et al, 2012).

With TBLT, teachers usually follow a three-stage lesson which has pre-task; task-cycle and language focus (Willis's Task-based learning framework, 1996, as cited in Thompson et al, 2012). In the pre-task stage, teacher and learners draw out vocabulary of the theme of the main task, prepare for the main task. The task-cycle includes task, planning and report. Students do the tasks with their team members, and then they plan to report. Language focus involves students in first analyzing a specific language form or the forms that proved problematic to students and second practicing the previously analyzed grammar structures.

Pre-task plays a crucial part of guiding students through lesson. Students have to approach the meaning at the beginning or else will be confused and the lesson goes for nothing in the end.

Grammar learning needs to be accurate. Therefore, teachers need to introduce language form to learners at the first place. Teachers can communicate with students as a hint. For example, teacher might use "be going to" to ask about students' plan for weekend.

III. IMPLEMENTING THE INNOVATION

1. Research Preparation

The researcher should be and is familiar herself with TBLT in order to teach grammar communicatively first. Then, the researcher has to observe the class process at the same time with teaching, then draw conclusion of experimenting this new teaching method.

There needs to be 2 groups of students participating in the experiment, one is controlled group, the other is experimental group.

Not all of the lessons will be applied with TBLT, the researcher will decide what topics, and grammar points, what day of week can be integrated. Students will study in 8 weeks, 3 days a week and 90 minutes for each day. Here is the timetable for the experiment lessons

Week	Topic	Grammar points
1	Daily routines	Simple present tense
2	Frequency of activities	Adverbs of frequency
3	Present and future arrangement	Present continuous
4	Last vacation	Simple past (regular verbs)
5	Story telling	Simple past (irregular verbs)
6	Ability, permission	Modal verbs (can, could)
7	Giving advice	Modal verbs (should, should not)
8	Review	All

No matter how good lesson plans are prepared, if the thing that students do not cooperate will spoil everything. The problems anticipated here are participants might be tempted to speak their mother tongue during discussion time if they cannot express their ideas in English. Also, learners might not want to work with other members in the group. Although it is difficult to prevent these problems from happening, there are ways to minimize the drawbacks. Specifically, teacher needs to provide learner with intensive instructions which are coherent, responsive to their need as well as let students choose their group members so that they feel comfortable during tasks.

2. Research setting

The classroom where the researcher conducts the study is of medium size. Teacher usually divides participants into 3 to 4 groups of 4. Each group will form a circle at each corner of the classroom, so that they have enough space for group discussion without distracting other groups. There is a big white board on the wall, which teacher and students usually draw mind map or big circle to brainstorm ideas at the pre-task as well as at the report stage, students might be asked to present their outcome on the board. Next to the board, is an international pronunciation poster hung to help students pronounce

correctly vocabulary when teacher find out they have trouble. The color of the classroom is white and orange, bright and young colors are very suitable for engaging students to compete among groups.

IV. METHODOLOGIES AND METHODS

Qualitative and quantitative are found as two main approaches for conducting researches. Quantitative research is conducted to evaluate and produce data related to numbers. Also, it measures the frequency of observation (Hoe et al, 2012). Otherwise, Qualitative research is employed to explore deeper understanding of human behaviors and experiences (Hoe et al, 2012) and produce written data about relationship and conversation between researchers and participants whose voices can be heard. This also helps reveal the meaning behind pieces of numerical results.

As the research questions aim at exploring how students respond to a new teaching method, specifically their ideas and experiences toward it. Then, qualitative research is no doubt the ideal approach which offers a number of advantages such as exploration, detail, access, sensitivity... (Maria Smith et al, 2010)

The two methodologies above have differences in data gathering outcomes. Therefore, it could not be better if researchers mix them together in order that qualitative and quantitative data support each other.

1. Experimental teaching design

The purpose of conducting experimental lessons is to examine whether TBLT results in better grammar learning in which students both study grammar forms and use grammar for meaningful communication. In order to answer the research questions, all of the factors such as TBLT lesson plans, classroom activities, and students' responses and performances...should be taken into consideration. Therefore, an experimental mixed method design in which the experiment goes along with collection and analysis of qualitative data is needed (Lee, 2012).

Validity in experiments needs to be guaranteed. When conducting the experiment, a controlled group is a must because it helps recognize whether TBLT influence participants' performances at the end of experiment. Also, a pre-test is demanded to guarantee the similarity between the experimental group and the controlled group before the experiment. In addition participants in the controlled group do not know information about TBLT because then their performances in post-test might be considered invalid (Lee, 2012).

2. Methods of data collection

In order to have reliable answers for research questions, it is important for researchers to determine the information needed. In this research, the researcher would like to know how students respond to learning grammar communicatively. Therefore, two kinds of information needed are students' performance in term of grammar and speaking and students' opinions, responses toward grammar learning in TBLT.

The experimental design will employ interview, observation in order to gain deeper understanding of participants' responses to TBLT. In addition, pre-tests and

post-tests are used to evaluate participant's ability in term of grammar and speaking before and after applying TBLT.

3. Tests

Participants of two groups will have to take 2 pre-tests with grammar and speaking separated. The pretests will be taken at the first week of the course and last 15 minutes for grammar. In order to test grammar accurately, the researcher will use a cloze test and sentences re-write and avoid multiple choice because students might choose answers unconsciously when they get stuck. In term of speaking pretest, the participants will take part in oral interviews. The posttests will have the same structures with the pretests, and will be employed in the last week of the course.

4. Interview

One of the most crucial kinds of qualitative data is a description of participants' experiences. Specifically, "using an interview would garner individual responses about personal preferences or dislikes" (Maria Smith, 2010). Therefore, the researcher feels confident in employing interview as a tool to listen to and understand students. Among a variety of interview types, the researcher decides to use semi-structure interview in which "the researcher asks some predetermined questions but allow interviewee time and opportunity to explore other areas they think relevant" (Hinchey, 2008). Confirming and extending question types are designed to explore participants' personal information and opinion toward TBLT.

Because participants in the experiment are of small size, they will be interviewed individually and interviews are audio recorded and analyzed afterward. Interviews will be conducted from mid-course because at that time, participants have some ideas of learning grammar with TBLT, also this let the researcher chances to adjust any changes needed. However, the researcher is not going to interview her students due to the fact that some of them might probably not be giving the true answers. Therefore, some colleagues will be asked for interviewing the students. Each student will participate in a 5 to 7- minute talk with interviewers. It is mandatory to get participants' acceptance through informed consent form. When participants understand the purpose of the study, they will accept the researcher and the data collected will be precious (or important).

Here are some of the questions that will be used to ask students in experimental group

- How long have you been studying English?
- What is your final result in the previous course?
- What do you think of the teacher's instructions for pre-task?
- What do you think of the pre-task activities you did in class?
- What about the task? Do you enjoy speaking English with your friends?
- Do you use the grammar you studied that day to communicate with you group?

- Do you think you have more chances to interact with friends when studying in group?
- Do you finish task successfully?
- Do you speak Vietnamese during the task?

5. Observation

Notes taken from observation can be quantitative when researchers observe the frequency of something, as well as qualitative when detail, meaning of participants' behaviors are explored (Maria Smith, 2010). As cited in Hinchey (2008), if researchers take notes during observation, "immediacy often helps preserve accuracy". It is true that memory can be lost, and then notes are invaluable in reconstructing events.

A 90-minute experiment lesson for each time is observed and taken notes taken after that to answer the questions which help the researcher understand the whole picture of the research. Since the researcher has to maintain her responsibility as a teacher during lessons, then using a check sheet or observation form to keep tract of occurrences would be a good idea. A check sheet makes the procedure manageable. The observation notes will be divided into 2 main parts: part 1 will describe setting and activities, part 2 reflect the researchers' thought, concern.

One of the main purposes for using observation is to evaluate students' performance during the experiment. Specifically, the researcher intends to use Role-play as a tool to examine students' responses toward TBLT. Through role play, researcher can know how learners' using grammar for oral communication. Moreover, role play is also a communicative task which seems to be interesting and engaging, then students feel comfortable and involved more. In the study of using role play to motivate Students, Liu (2010) proved the effectiveness of using role play to promote students speaking.

Here is a check sheet used during observation, this one is for description.

Classroom activities	Yes	No
1. Students enjoy pre-task		
2. Pre-task explicit students' vocabulary		
3. Pre-task explicit students' grammar		
4. Students understand pre-task		
5. Time for pre-task is enough		
6. Task's instruction is clear		
7. Students interact with friends		
8. Students speak Vietnamese while doing task		
9. Students keep silent		
10. Time for planning is enough		
11. Students use grammar when discussing with friends		
12. Students explore grammar points themselves		
13. Students report well		
14. Students practice the grammar form		
15. Students perform play role well		

The researcher also needs a reflective check sheet in order to caption any moments unplanned

Observation Proforma	
Lesson taken by : _____ Lesson observed by : _____ Date: _____	
Goal:	
Focus:	
What will I be looking for?	Observations - What did I see / hear / find?
 Classroom organisation Student engagement Classroom management Explicit teaching	
 Teacher/student interactions High level questioning Feedback Support and praise Student questioning	
Other observations, comments, suggestions:	

6. Ethical consideration

Ethical issues are considered as a very important part in any research. First of all, a formal meeting was held to inform clearly the purpose of this research to all participants. Meanwhile, all the participants completed consent form to make sure that they took part in this research without any force. In this way, the collected data was valid and reliable. At the same time, it is necessary to ask for the permission of the Vice Dean of Faculty of Foreign Languages so that this study could be handled freely. Additionally, all students were told about how the paper was implemented, and in what way the result could support their further learning. Next, participants' confidentiality was guaranteed so that the respondents felt comfortable and confident when joining the study. This means their private information was kept in secret, and the findings were just used for the aims of this paper. Besides, the environment was also important to make the participants relax because Garbarino & Holland (2009, p. 20) stated that respect, principles, and justice were the core of each research. The researcher had to not only respect participants' feedbacks, opinion, and feelings, but also be interested in listening to respondents' answers without any critiques. Moreover, the research data must be reported and analyzed truthfully due to the fact that it was considered unethical if the data were presented differently for research's purposes. Thus, the continuous section will clarify how the data were analyzed in this research.

V. DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected are quantitative data and qualitative data. The former is scores of pretests and posttests. The latter is students' responses in the interviews and observation.

Firstly, the average score will be computed from the results of all participants. Mean scores help indicate no significant difference between participants in both controlled group and experimental group. The t-test is employed to compare the means of the controlled group and experimental group in order to see any changes of the latter group as a result of the TBLT.

Secondly, results are analyzed using descriptive statistics for the observational data, and qualitative coding and transcribed for the interview data so that the researcher can find common theme, then reflect thoughts.

1. Limitation

The study is conducted in a very small scale with the purpose of developing the researcher's teaching career. Also, due to some reasons, time for conducting is limited to 8 weeks; this might be a problem when reflecting students ability long-term.

VI. CONCLUSION

Task based Language Teaching, if applied correctly to teach grammar; it will not only enhance student's communicative competence but linguistic competence as well. This section is for concluding the proposal information rather than assuming the results for the study. Results and findings will be reported in the next unit. Therefore, the researcher needs to examine the effectiveness of applying TBLT. In order to achieve the objectives, the researcher has to follow seriously methods to collect data needed and then data collected and analyzed provides a complete picture of applying TBLT in teaching grammar for adolescents communicatively

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