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Teachers' Understanding and Attitudes towards Task-based Language Teaching in an Islamic Junior High School in Indonesia

Abstract

Take-based Language Teaching (TBLT) is an approach to foreign or second language teaching designed to involve learners through communicative tasks in an interactive and authentic language. Although many studies have been conducted in recent years on TBLT in English as a foreign language (EFL) in the Indonesian setting, few have dealt explicitly with investigating teachers' understanding and attitudes towards this approach. Therefore, this study was intended to explore the understanding and attitudes of EFL teachers towards TBLT in their context. The study used a case study design, and it involved four teachers in an Islamic Junior High School in Indonesia. Data of the study were gathered through face-to-face interviews. Then the results were analyzed thematically. The results reveal that most teachers had a positive understanding and attitude concerning TBLT, but their understanding and attitudes were inconsistent with their pedagogical activities. Based on these findings, it is recommended that the Indonesian government review its teacher training curriculum for trainees to acquire appropriate knowledge and skills to implement the TBLT approach effectively.

Keywords: teacher's understanding, attitude, Task-based Language Teaching, Islamic Junior High School

INTRODUCTION

With the introduction of the communicative language education approach in the early 1980s, task-based language teaching became popular in second language acquisition. This approach was pioneered by Prabhu, who released the Bangalore research report in 1982, which further developed the concept of this approach in second language teaching (Wei, 2004). Researchers participating in task-based approaches have integrated language research, language learning research, and research into foreign language acquisition and mature. The students were highly praised and recognized for their function and value in building learner-centred classrooms and language learning contexts, boosting the ability of students to communicate and interact and use their target language to solve communicative challenges (Lin, 2009).

This approach in class frequently brings real-life work that enables all linguistic talents to be practised. It encourages students to discover various communication changes within and beyond the classroom that promote language practice through tasks that are intimate or relevant to daily life. In addition, Kurniasih (2011) pointed out that TBLT aims to improve language use as a tool to focus on genuine learning. It is vital to encourage practical tasks that enable students to meet their language requirements to attain this purpose. The four language abilities should be blended to enhance the learners' skills and learning of the language.

TBLT is designed to make students work purposefully and meaningfully with the target language and the significance of negotiations (Chen, 2008). It focuses on tasks. Nunan (1989) defines a task as a workpiece in the classroom, where students understand, manipulate, produce and engage in the target language. In contrast, their concentration is primarily on significance rather than form. Samuda and Bygate (2008) say that a task is a comprehensive activity that involves languages to attain a non-language result while responding to a linguistic challenge and aims to promote

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linguistic learning through processes and products. It is essential to emphasize meaningful, holistic language practice in a task-based course to fulfil the challenge of learners listening, reading, speaking or writing (Adams & Newton, 2009).

It is also believed that TBLT places a more significant cognitive strain on students. According to Skehan (1998), some tasks require students to work out solutions to tasks online (cognitive processing), whereas others require them to access packaged solutions to tasks (cognitive familiarity). Doyle (1983) also classified academic tasks into four categories: memory tasks, routine or procedural tasks, understanding or comprehending tasks and opinion tasks. He argued that each of these categories was distinct in the cognitive activities necessary to execute the tasks contained within. In short, different types of tasks resulted in various kinds of cognitive demand (Foster & Skehan, 1996). As a result, TBLT should be used more effectively to help students develop their communicative competence and their ability to manage complex and authentic language tasks in real-life situations.

Teachers' superficial understanding of TBLT influences their implementation as well. This was the primary reason why many Korean teachers were hesitant to engage in task-based activities (Jeon & Hahn, 2006). It also hampered the implementation of task-based curricular innovations by school teachers in Hong Kong (Adams & Newton, 2009), Mainland China (Zhang, 2007), and South Korea (Li, 1998). Nguyen, Le, and Barnard (2015) discovered that Vietnamese teachers lacked a thorough understanding of TBLT, causing them to focus on forms rather than meaning. Van Loi (2011) found that the Vietnamese EFL instructors in his study manipulated tasks to concentrate students' practice on specific linguistic forms targeted in their lessons.

The practical implementation of TBLT in English classrooms is highly dependent on teachers' attitudes toward the approach. According to Banda (2015), numerous factors can influence a teacher's choice of classroom methods. This phrase implies that the teacher has the authority to choose the approach or method he or she believes is most appropriate for delivering a lesson. As a result, we can conclude that the methods and approaches proposed by the curriculum are not legitimate, as the teacher is allowed to decide which strategies to utilize. Teachers' attitudes are crucial in implementing TBLT, as several years of teacher training traditional methods like the audio-lingual method. Teachers' attitudes may be the source of the mismatch between TBLT theory and practice (Karavas-Doukas, 1995).

Empirical research indicates that EFL teachers, in general, have positive attitudes toward TBLT in various contexts. Teachers were favourable to TBLT, firmly committed to its effectiveness, and thoroughly understood the TBLT concept (Liu & Xiong 2016). Similar results in terms of positive attitude and high understanding have been found by Mahdavirad (2017). On the other hand, Mahdavirad (2017) suggests that in-commerce teachers were unwilling to use TBLT themselves in the actual classroom. This understanding reflected on the difficulties experienced by in-service teachers during TBLT study in China and Korea. Liu & Xiong (2016) and Jeon and Hahn (2006) explained that TBLT, in response to the paradigm shift suggested by their educational institutions, had moved theoretically to practice in Asia and created many challenges among teachers.

This paper presents the findings of a qualitative case study in which data from various sources was collected from a sample of four English teachers working in an

Islamic junior high school in Indonesia. The paper focuses on teachers' understanding and attitudes toward TBLT in their context. This is a critical area of research because the findings will assist language teachers in understanding and implementing the fundamental principles of TBLT. Finally, the study's findings may have an impact on teacher education.

METHOD
Respondent
Four English teachers from the Islamic Junior High School of Demak 3 (MTsN 3 Demak) in Indonesia participated in the study. All of the teachers were men who had been teaching English in schools for at least 15 years. They were all Indonesians with a Bachelor's degree in TEFL and were fluent in English.

Research Context
The research was carried out at MTsN 3 Demak, an Islamic Junior High School in Demak. Demak is a city in the Indonesian province of Central Java. The students of the school studied English as a foreign language. The EFL curriculum for those students includes the four enabling skills and is referred to as "integrated courses." The curriculum is referred to as "Kurikulum 2013." This type of curriculum is used in all Indonesian schools. As a result, all EFL teachers must take part in the implementation of the EFL curriculum. After decades of using various methods or approaches to teaching English, TBLT and TBLT are now the primary concerns at the secondary school level in Indonesia.

Research Questions
The following research questions were proposed in light of the study's goal: (1) how did teachers understand Task-based language teaching?, and (2) what attitudes did teachers hold towards Task-based language teaching approach?

Instrument
Interviews were undertaken as an essential data retrieval process with these four research participants to acquire the data for this study. All participants have been presented with a list of open questions that address the various TBLT concerns, their use in EFL contexts and TBLT attitude.

Research Design
The qualitative research design was used in this study. This was done to elicit verbal responses from teachers regarding their understanding of task-based language teaching. It was hoped that a more comprehensive account of the phenomenon under investigation would be presented by using this design. The case study approach was chosen for the study because it can handle the complexity of real-life occurrences (Stake, 1995) through the social construction of the participants. This was to provide verbal answers for teachers on how they understand task-based language teaching and investigate teachers' attitudes to this approach.

Data Collection

To collect the data of the study, the researcher did the following steps. First, he identified the data collection instrument. The interview guides were then developed using the principles of TBLT and teachers' attitudes toward the approach. After that, the interviews with the four participants were conducted, with each interview lasting approximately twenty minutes. Each participant had open questions to answer differentially based on their understanding and attitude towards TBLT as a method of language teaching and learning in the classroom. Responses from participants to the questions from the interview were directly recorded for analysis during the data discussion.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. The thematic analyzes include an analysis that examines all the data to uncover common concerns and identify key issues that summarise the perspectives that have been obtained (Patton & Cochran, 2002). In this study, the researcher sorted the data into two topics based on both research questions. The topics were grouped into one category by similar findings. If the results were comparable, they were grouped under one subject irrespective of the data source. The researcher studied and listened carefully to all the data he had collected to achieve this. After developing topics using the research questions, it was easier for the researcher to put data in the proper themes consistently. Data analysis also involved the interpretation and analysis of the information obtained to display it understandably.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data are provided in the following section. The data are presented under the two themes of the study as above.

Teachers' Understanding of Task-based Language Teaching

The first study objective was to ensure that teachers understood Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). For this study to be successful, it is crucial to figure out whether the teachers understand what TBLT is about and whether they are aware of the teaching methods employed in English classes' classroom teaching. It isn't easy to apply the TBLT strategy without a clear understanding of TBLT.

Regarding their understanding of task-based language teaching, the teachers had a good understanding. The interviewees mentioned the key concepts of task-based language teaching. They underlined the need for task-based language instruction, which focuses on task utilization. Here are a few examples:

As the name implies, task-based language teaching is based on the task. Students are assigned various tasks in the classroom. In implementing this approach, there are three stages. The first stage is pre-task, the second is task cycle, and the last is post-task. At the post-task stage, the teachers will explore the language focus or grammar of a topic discussed. (Interviewee 1)

The name of the approach, "Task-based language teaching", tells you what we, as task-based language teachers, should focus on in this approach. We should concentrate on the task, which is the main character in this approach. (Interviewee 2)

Task-based language teaching is an approach that focuses on how students may communicate using tasks. Role-playing, discussion, and problem-solving are examples of tasks in a task-based classroom. (Interviewee 3)

For TBLT, the task is essential for offering communication opportunities in the classroom. (Interviewee 4)

Furthermore, the interviewees said the objective of task-based language teaching is to enhance the communication abilities of students. Here are just a few examples:

Task-based learning is a teaching approach aimed to enhance communication skills. TBLT students usually work in groups, encouraging them to communicate in English effectively. (Interviewee 1)

Task-based language teaching aims to guide students to learn how to communicate successfully in the target language. (Interviewee 4)

In addition, when discussing the definition of a task, it is clear that they were able to identify task characteristics. According to the interviewees, a task is an activity focused on meaning and communication. Furthermore, the interviewees stated that the task should be authentic and relevant to real-life situations. Some examples are as follows:

Tasks are any activities that students must complete during the lesson. The tasks should be genuine and meaningful. (Interviewee 1)

Tasks, in my opinion, are any activities or pieces of work that lead my students to a deep understanding of the language features or enable my students to communicate effectively in the target language. (Interviewee 2)

Tasks are activities in which the emphasis is on meaning and communication in a real-world situation. Tasks in TBLT allow students to communicate in a given setting. As a result, tasks should be relevant to the real world. (Interviewee 3)

Tasks are any activities assigned to students in a TBLT classroom. Students must communicate with classmates or teachers in the target language to complete the tasks. (Interviewee 4)

Additionally, the interviewees can differentiate between tasks and other everyday classroom activities. Some examples are as follows:

Tasks differ from exercises in that exercises emphasize grammatical structure over communication. (Interviewee 2)

Tasks are concerned with meaning, whereas exercises are concerned with form. (Interviewee 3)

The analysis of the interview findings demonstrated that the participants had a good understanding of TBLT. The interviews could highlight the essential elements of task-based language teaching. They are aware that TBLT aims to improve learners' communication abilities through task-based learning. They can define tasks in task-based language instruction. They can also tell the difference between tasks and other everyday classroom activities.

The study's findings support a study by Tabatabaei and Hadi (2011), which intended to explore the attitude of EFL teachers towards TBLT in Iran. The study's results showed that teachers had a good understanding of TBLT concepts and principles. According to Tabatabaei and Hadi (2011), the majority of the participants were very familiar with the principles of task-based language teaching and its structural framework. In addition, the findings are consistent with the results of Jeon and Hahn's study (2006). They discovered that their participants, who were EFL teachers in Korea, had a firm grasp on the concept of TBLT. The participants were

aware of the three stages of the TBLT structural framework: pre-task, task implementation, and post-task. Furthermore, they understood the concept of tasks in TBLT.

Furthermore, the current study's findings are similar to those of Xiongyong and Samuel (2011), who investigated EFL teachers' understanding of TBLT in China. They discovered that the teachers clearly understand the critical concept of TBLT. They are well-versed in the application of TBLT. This resemblance can be explained by the fact that the previous study's findings are based on the Ministry of Education of China claims that teachers should be prepared to be good facilitators and knowledge constructors for learners due to the popularity of learner-centred and activity-based instruction nowadays. Similarly, this study reveals that major change in English language education in Thailand has been brought about by the National Education Act of 1999. These changes include promoting communicative language teaching approaches and encouraging learner-centeredness. As a result, teachers must pay more attention to task-based language teaching approaches and thoroughly understand them.

However, the study finding seems somewhat contradictory to the Lin & Wu (2012) study, which revealed that task-based language teaching in EFL in Taiwan was restricted. This can be explained by the fact that most teachers utilized a grammar-translation approach in their classrooms. Students are occasionally assigned to work in pairs or groups by their teachers. Even though they had a basic understanding of task-based language teaching, they were hesitant to use it in practice. This suggested that their actual teaching experience with task-based language teaching had resulted in a more limited amount of knowledge and understanding of the approach.

In conclusion, teachers had a high level of understanding of task-based language teaching when it came to all of the critical concepts of the characteristics of TBLT. Similarly, EFL teachers in several countries had a strong understanding of TBLT since each country's government now realizes the importance of the abilities of learners' communication. In some nations, however, the findings with the comprehension of EFL teachers may differ slightly from their current teaching practice.

Teachers' Attitudes towards Task-based Language Teaching

The study's objective was also to identify teachers' attitudes in respect of TBLT. This research goal was relevant to the study because teachers' attitudes influence both the implementation of educational policy and the learning approach or methods specified in the curriculum. The researchers performed face-to-face interviews with English teachers to assess the opinions of the teachers. The interview was guided by semi-structured questions to make the interview flow easy. To guarantee the accuracy of data obtained, the researcher employed a notebook and an audio recording device.

According to the interview findings, teachers had different attitudes toward the use of TBLT in the classroom. Some teachers had positive attitudes, some had negative attitudes, and some had neutral attitudes. Some teachers were optimistic and felt that the method for teaching English was effective. Indicate the following answers:

The approach is beneficial; one of the reasons I used this approach because is it focuses on English communication. In other words, it is practical to improve students' communication skills (Interviewee 1)

TBLT is beneficial, as the students usually respond immediately. Therefore, they can communicate in English. They can share their ideas or opinion based on the tasks given. (Interviewee 2)

I usually implement TBLT in every lesson. Oral questions are posed to the students. Every class expects students to communicate, and communication is TBLT. (Interviewee 3)

Students in TBLT have opportunities to develop their communication skills to communicate through tasks in the real world. (Interviewee 4)

According to the teachers, the approach allowed students to interact with one another while also assisting students in learning English. They claimed that TBLT enabled total students participation. Some teachers, however, were not enthusiastic about using TBLT techniques to deliver lessons. They stated that the method was impractical. Others claimed that the approach does not produce communicative students and that it is thus a waste of time to use TBLT. Consider these responses:

I sometimes use TBLT in my English classes because it's a waste of time. Because my students are in the ninth grade, I teach them for exam purposes. They should study for their exam (Interviewee 2)

I rarely implement TBLT in my classes because my classes are too large, and if we want to implement this approach, I will take much more time to prepare for the lesson (Interviewee 4)

In English lessons, some teachers have been neutral with the usage of TBLT. They did not know if the approach was effective or not. They chose to stay impartial in the matter. Two respondents said that respectively.

TBLT can be effective at times, depending on the topic being taught. It isn't always a good approach because TBLT doesn't apply to every topic. I, therefore, think it can be a positive as well as a negative way of teaching. (Interviewee 1)

In my opinion, TBLT can be good and bad depending on the topics and class. If the students can speak or communicate in English, this approach will be appropriate for the class. But if the students can not speak English, in my mind, it will not be applicable. (Interviewee 3)

One of the research objectives was to find the attitudes of teachers towards TBLT. Attitudes are of considerable importance to the adaption of teaching approaches and methods. The researcher performed individual interviews to learn the thoughts of the teachers. The interviewed teachers had different views on the usage of TBLT in lessons. TBLT is a valuable way of teaching English in general, according to some teachers interviewed in this survey. However, the majority of teachers asked themselves if it was an excellent method to utilize. In their opinion, TBLT can improve the students' communication skills. This approach will allow students to interact with one another.

Some teachers have negative attitudes towards TBLT. They thought that this approach was a waste of time. They believed that the objective of teaching and learning is that students are prepared for exams or tests. The teachers felt that students did not need to teach communication skills as they knew how exams were arranged. Chishipula (2016) found similar findings concerning teachers' attitudes toward teaching English in preparation for exams. These findings suggest that teachers did not thoroughly teach English. They are still committed to traditional teaching methods, which they believe better prepare students for exams.

Furthermore, based on the research findings, it can be concluded that there was a mismatch between teachers' attitudes and the implementation of TBLT. While teachers have had a positive attitude towards TBLT in some situations, this approach was not always applied, like Hui (1987), who stated, among other things, that there were no adequate resources and equipment. That will lead to the discrepancy between attitudes and implementation.

In addition, after analyzing the results of the study, it required a school-based teacher education. Continued professional development activities are essential since the education of

teachers is insufficient, and even teacher education strategies such as peer education are not considered sufficient to prepare teachers fully (Manchishi & Mwanza, 2016). Therefore, capacity-building activities for teachers should be emphasized in schools, for example, in house training and professional workshops.

In conclusion, some teachers had good attitudes, and others had negative attitudes to task-based language teaching. The next stage is to educate teachers on the benefits and capacity building of TBLT, which is what the method involves and how it may utilize it in the classroom and how the problems are avoided.

CONCLUSIONS

The goal of this study was to explore the teachers' understanding and attitudes towards task-based language teaching. The study revealed exciting insights into EFL teachers' understanding and attitudes regarding TBLT. It may infer that EFL teachers possessed a strong understanding of the concepts underlying TBLT. Some teachers were able to answer appropriately to questions about the concepts and practice of task-based language teaching. The teachers were able to describe the essential terms associated with task definition and to mention significant aspects of task-based language teaching theory.

Teachers' attitudes toward TBLT differed. According to the data acquired through interviews, teachers had good, negative, and neutral attitudes toward TBLT. Positive attitudes among teachers encouraged the implementation of TBLT and showed that it was an effective teaching method. On the other hand, those with unfavourable sentiments claimed that the approach was well suited for classroom use where the number of students was too large. Others who were critical of the system said it was a waste of time because it did not assist students in preparing for exams or tests. While those with indifferent sentiments indicated that TBLT was irrelevant, it all depended on the lesson being taught. They claimed it was helpful at times but not at others. They were uninterested in the approach.

The researcher advised the EFL teacher to continue evaluating the teaching-learning activities to provide effective teaching English, such as the method used in the classroom and the students' understandings. The researcher also suggests that the Indonesian government review its teacher training curriculum for trainees to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to implement the TBLT approach effectively. Furthermore, the researcher recommended that school managers lower the number of TBLT students in every school to build more schools to take in more students.

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