



Applying Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) To Enhance Students 'Communicative Grammar Competence at Dong Nai Technology University

Nguyen Hong Ngoc

Faculty of Foreign Languages, Dong Nai Technology University, Dong Nai, Vietnam.

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 teenager 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. As the matter of fact, the research question is 'How do students respond to grammar learning with 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.

Keywords: Grammar teaching, communicative ability, Task-based language teaching (TBLT).

I. INTRODUCTION

I have been teaching English at Dong Nai Technology University for more than 4 years and my students are EFL learners. 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 me on every day of teaching. Although I tried to minimize teacher's talking time and provide my 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 I do not find an appropriate way to enhance my students' communicative ability, then my 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?

II. MATERIAL

In his study about Task-based learning for Communication and Grammar use, Thompson (2012) tried an interactive task that could facilitate both English communication and grammar use. He aimed to investigate how well his students learn about English articles through completing a communicative task. He conducted a three-stage lesson plan including pre-task, task cycle, language focus, and observed all groups during the task cycle. All six groups receive TBLT. At the beginning, the purpose of the research was announced to the students and verbal consent was approved by all participants. After the experimental lesson, he analyzed language performance produced by one recorded group

and gained satisfaction with the result. Due to the fact that only one group's English use was recorded and analyzed and it is unclear about the way or criteria that are used to analyze and evaluate, this results in limitation of the research. In short, Thompson employs an experimental study which requires students actually to participate in tasks in TBLT, and by observing, he gained his own certainty of applying the teaching method to enhance students to use English grammar for communication.

Different from the above study, the study of Marzban et al (2012) tested the effect of focus on form in TBLT on learners' grammar learning. The researchers put hypotheses at the first place, and then also conduct an experimental lesson. It is undeniable that the preparation of this research was careful because of the fact that a Nelson English language test (NELT) was used to classify students' language proficiency level. After the test, there were three groups including 2 experimental groups and 1 controlled group. Also, the teachers used a grammar pre-test concluding 40 multiple items in a multiple choice format to evaluate students' grammar knowledge. They also did an experiment among three groups, the first two groups receive focus on form but one with pre-emptive and the other with reactive. The third group was considered as a controlled group which means receive no focus on form. Three groups had to complete a main task, 'picture description'. When all participants finished their job, the researchers noticed that reactive focus on form group perform the best.

From the two above studies, I have a clear understanding of the data needed for my study. Those are students' performances of both speaking and grammar before and after trained with TBLT.

However, there is still one thing that can contribute to the success of applying TBLT is students' perception towards tasks in TBLT. TBLT is a learner-centered approach which means learners have more responsibilities for their learning. This could promote their interest in language learning (Makarova, 1997, as cited in Hadi, 2012). Moreover, learners' perception plays an important role to the success or failure of language acquisition. As cited in Hadi, "no curriculum can claim to be truly learner-centered unless the learners' subjective needs and perceptions relating to the processes of learning are taken into account" (Nunan, 1998). It can be asserted that learners' perception is considered necessary to be investigated. Hadi (2012) employed a survey including questionnaire designed according to Nunan's checklist for evaluating communicative tasks.

After the researcher identifies and gathers the information needed, as well as reviews related articles, it is concluded that only conducting an experimental teaching design which investigates the effects of trying communicative tasks to teach specific grammar points, can provide the researcher with satisfactory answers for the inquired questions raised to examine the application of TBLT.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

Action research in which teachers play roles as researchers aims to explore teaching context critically and systematically. It helps researchers see gaps between the reality of their teaching and what they wish to see happening. The word 'action' in action research is to intervene a solution in a problematic situation so that teaching and learning yield improvements (Anne Burns, 2010). It is exactly what is happening in my research when I identify my students having difficulties in speaking English and Task-based language teaching is seen as the intervention to help promote my students' communicative ability.

It is essential to firstly decide which specific features will be examined or observed, and then procedures or methods used to collect and analyze data based on those features. Any of research methodologies can be used such as, quantitative, qualitative, or mixed method and some methodological designs which can be effectively utilized are surveys, experiments, and interviews and so on.

There are two main approaches in research: qualitative and quantitative. Quantitative research uses techniques to test and produce numerical data used to confirm or disconfirm previous hypotheses. Also, it measures the frequency of observation (Hoe et al, 2012).

Qualitative research uses techniques to understand human behaviors and experiences (Hoe et al, 2012) and

produce data under written text form which helps to promote relationship and conversation between researchers and participants as well as reduce the imposition of hypotheses. In other words, this lets participants raise their voices on certain issues. This also enables researchers to account for what is behind pieces of numerical results.

It is synthesized that in a research design, qualitative and quantitative data support each other. Because qualitative data is analyzed to reinforce quantitative hypothesis and quantitative results are interpreted in qualitative dialogues (Moore et al, 2012).

The idea of mixing two above methods is considered as a tool to highlight similarities and differences among certain features of a phenomenon. However, when researchers use a mixed method in a single study, they should take this into consideration "one method is usually given priority over the other" (Bernadi et al, 2007, as cited in Ostlund et al, 2011). Therefore, my study which aims to conduct an experiment puts quantitative method at the first place.

IV. EXPERIMENTAL METHODOLOGY

In order to conduct a complete experimental study, it is demanding to know some features of a teaching experimental study. Firstly, the purpose of conducting an experiment is to investigate whether a teaching method considered as a teaching intervention, treatment or independent variable, results in better learning (Lee, 2012). In his study, Lee cited three different ways to manipulate independent variables. The first is "presence or absence technique, in which an experimental group receives some intervention, whereas a controlled group does not" (Brett, Rothlein & Hurley, 1996). The second way is to manipulate the degree of providing intervention (Hulstijn, 1997). And the last one is to manipulate a use of various instructional techniques (Ramachandran & Rahim, 2004). In general, it is recommended to use a combination of three ways presented above.

Secondly, in order to divide participants into different groups, "randomized controlled trials" (RCTs) are considered crucial in measuring what is effective or not (Delandshere, 2004, as cited in Lee, 2012). Although RCTs aim to provide an appropriate match of pairs from two different groups, they are only suitable for a large sample size, so it is unfeasible to employ them in small studies.

Due to the fact that RCTs cannot be applied in classroom contexts, quasi-experimental design which seeks similarities between two groups can yield satisfactory results. One of the most popular techniques used in this design is using pre-test to control for any pre-existing differences between two groups that potentially have influence on an outcome of an experiment. Moreover, a pre-test is employed in parallel with a post-test used for measuring the effects of an intervention. This quasi-experimental design is seen as a compensation for the lack of RCTs as it statistically equates two groups that helps guarantee dependent variable or result of an experiment.

Thirdly, it is recommended to use an embedded experimental design which integrates qualitative research elements to compensate for lacking of qualitative description that can complete an understanding between treatment and outcome (Moore et al, 2003, as cited in Lee, 2012). Therefore, a research design would be "the experimental mixed method design in which the experiment takes the leading role, with the additional collection and analysis of qualitative data taking place before, during or after the implementation of the treatment" (Lee, 2012). One of the most important qualitative elements is a description of participants' experiences with an intervention. In other words, researchers interview participants. As cited in Lee (2012), Christensen (2010) suggests a parallel interview would not only show participants' points of view but also enable researchers to deeply understand experiment and meaning behind numbers of quantitative outcomes. In short, experimental teaching designs are important because they let researchers and teachers know what is actually happening in classrooms.

Last but not least, an experiment might fail if its quality is not critically evaluated. As a result, validity plays an important role in experiments, because it is "a basic tenet of experimental method" (Davis & Bremner, 2006, as cited in Lee, 2012). In his study, Lee (2012) provides some validity concerns to think of when researchers conduct an experiment are firstly, changes may happen to participants both physically and cognitively. This effect highlights the significance of having a controlled group which help recognize whether participants' performances at the end of

experiment brought by the changes above or a tested treatment. Secondly, a pre-test is demanded in order to make sure that there will be no difference between an experimental group and a controlled group; otherwise, difference between two groups after experimental manipulation cannot be attributed to a treatment effect. Thirdly, a particular measure or test cannot be repeated because participants can improve their performances if they get accustomed to it. Lastly, it is essential that participants in controlled group not know information about treatment because they can imitate the treatment, then their performances in post-test might be considered invalid.

V. RESEARCH APPROACH

In this paper, the quantitative approach is conducted strictly. In other words, the researcher is urged to test the effectiveness of applying TBLT in teaching grammar with respect to both grammar and speaking proficiency. As a result, a small teaching experiment needs to be designed and done carefully. It is also necessary to propose a hypothesis which is considered an expected answer. As a result, it is: students who are exposed to TBLT will experience a better grammar learning condition in which they not only learn a specific grammar point but also communicate with their friends in English as evidenced by their abilities to use English to communicate tasks. In the experiment design, there are two groups: an experimental group and a controlled group. The former receives the treatment (TBLT) whereas the latter does not. The data is collected before and after the treatment that means the researcher uses pretests and posttests.

Also, the researcher has to design lesson plans employing two teaching methods: one is TBLT used for the experimental group, the other is Grammar Translation Method (GTM) used for the controlled group.

VI. PARTICIPANTS

At the time of conducting this research, the researcher teaches two classes which have the same level, same ages. The participants study the same book which covers every four units for each course lasting 2 months. As presented at the beginning of this study, the subjects of the study are good at grammar but speaking. There have generally been 15 students in Class 1, while 13 in Class 2. It is considered that there hardly are any differences between 2 groups.

In order to test the effect of focus on form instruction on learners' grammar learning in TBLT, Marzban et al (2012) firstly proposed hypotheses, then they used Nelson's test to choose 79 participants out of 120 based on standard deviation above or below the mean. In addition, the criterion of homogeneity was carefully employed to guarantee the fact that the variances of the three groups were identical. Although, a pre-test was given to all three groups to diagnose participants' performances on the use of tenses, it was designed in a multiple-choice format which hardly evaluates students' grammatical knowledge accurately.

Three groups were chosen in the experiment and all of the groups have to finish a main task "picture description". The first two groups were experimental groups which received TBLT focus on tenses. The point is one group received preemptive focus on tenses which means the participants were drawn on use of tenses at the beginning, then instructed to complete main task. However, the second experimental group received reactive focus on tenses. In other words, they started directly with the main task, only until participants had problems, then the teacher intervened and implemented TBLT. The last group was the controlled group which received no focus on tense but still has to complete the main task. Due to the fact that the experiment was conducted only one time, there was not any post-test, but the main task was considered instead. In short, this experiment is hardly considered valid enough. However, it helps researchers prove one of their hypotheses.

In the study of how TBLT affects the interaction between teacher and students, Magsoudpour et al (2011) also proposed a hypothesis at the beginning. The participants came from two classes, 19 in each class. Though they employed a placement test as a tool to check participants' homogeneity and then revealed that all participants were at the same level of proficiency before the treatment, they did not make it clear what are tested in the test.

There were two groups: one was the experimental group; the other was the controlled group. The experiment

lasted ten sessions. The researchers observed and audio-recorded also counted the frequencies of the occurrences of interaction process characteristics. In the end, the researchers ended up with acceptance of their hypothesis.

VII. DATA ANALYSIS

There are two types of data collected both before and after the experiment, quantitative data and qualitative data. The former one processed by experimental data analysis is scores of pretests and posttests. The later one processed by descriptive data are students' responses in the interviews.

Firstly, in term of quantitative data, the researcher intends to know the mean which is the average score computed from the results of all participants in each group after pretests and posttests. Marzban et al (2012), in his study of the effect of focus on form in TBLT on learners' grammar learning, identifies Mean in his every test such as Nelson test, pre-tests and posttests, in order to condense a large amount of data. Mean scores; for example, helps indicate no significant difference between participants in both controlled group and experimental group.

It is common to see a correlation between mean and standard deviation which is the square root of the averaged square distance of the scores from the mean. Standard deviation is applied to understand the spread of score distribution among all of the participants in two groups in term of grammar and speaking tests.

The t-test is employed to compare the means of the controlled group and experimental group in order to see any changes of the later group as a result of the treatment. Applying t-test brings about t-value. Marzanban et al (2012) also uses an independent t-test for equality of means in his study and finally he is able to prove one of his hypotheses by comparing means among groups in his experiment.

Secondly, the researcher follows a 5-step approach to do a qualitative data analysis: tidying up; finding items; creating stable sets of items; creating patterns; and assembling structures (LeCompte, 2010). The researcher arranges interview data in order of their date of creation, makes copies. Because of the fact that the researcher uses audio recorder during interviews, recording are transcribed, edited. After that, the researcher highlights and marks the content in order to find out similarities and differences among ideas, then groups them according to topics. Coding or labeling is considered the most popular tool helping analyze qualitative data. The researcher firstly breaks the data into separate pieces or categories, and then finds out mutual relationship among those categories which means they are grouped again based on relevance with the research question. And finally, the researcher analyzes and integrates the results.

VIII. ETHICAL ISSUES

Research ethics consist of standards regarding how a researcher deals with participants. When conducting a study, the researcher has to take ethical issues which include permissions from head teacher; participants' confidentiality and voluntary; informed consent form, into consideration. When it comes to permissions, it is necessary to ask for permission from head teacher of the English center where the researcher is working at. In spite of the fact that the researcher does the experiment only in her classrooms to examine the effect of applying a new teaching method as well as the results collected and analyzed would not be publicized or shared with other people, but used for informing her own practice only. However, in case the study might be shared, the possibility of TBLT practical application for the whole center in the future, if it is successful would be more guaranteed when permission is given at the beginning. In addition, it is important to get agreements from participants through informed consent form which presents purpose and methods of the research, as well as how participants' confidentiality will be secured. When participants understand the purpose of the study, they will accept the researcher and be willing to give true answers. As a result, data collected will be precious. The researcher also has to ensure participants' anonymity and acceptance of releasing some identifiable information in order to address the confidentiality. Some social risks such as loss of dignity, autonomy and self-esteem, so on for participants might come from the data collection methods that the researcher uses in the study. For example, in the interview, some participants might feel awkward when they have to answer or they are recorded. Therefore, the researchers should capture personal information of participants in order to design appropriate interview questions and ask for permission about recording

which avoid harming the participants.

IX. CONCLUSION

Through this paper, the researcher understands the importance of data collection and analysis. Data has to be gathered and analyzed carefully and accurately, so that the certainty of the research can be achieved. Although it can not be denied the supportiveness of researches done in the similar field, only doing my own research can prove the reality of TBLT application. As the hypothesis is concerned with the effectiveness of implementing TBLT, the most appropriate way to know whether it can enhance students' use of grammar for communication is to actually train them with communicative tasks. Therefore, it is mandatory for the researcher to apply this treatment in real context. In order to achieve the objectives, research methodology plays an important role, the researcher needs to follow strictly approaches proposed, and then data collected and analyzed provides a complete picture of applying TBLT in teaching grammar for teenagers communicatively.

X. REFERENCES

1. Hadi, A. (2012). Perceptions of Task-based Language Teaching: A Study of Iranian EFL Learners. *English Language Teaching*, 6 (1), doi: 10.5539/elt.v6n1p103.
2. Hoe, J (2012). Understanding quantitative research: part 1. *Learning zone* , 27 (15-17). www.nursing-standard.co.uk.
3. J.H.Lee (2012). Experimental methodology in English teaching and learning: Method features, validity issues, and embedded experimental design. *English teaching: Practice and Critique*, 11 (2), 25-43. <http://education.waikato.ac.nz/research/files/etpc/files/2012v11n2art2.pdf>
4. LeCompte, M (2010). Analyzing Qualitative Data. *Theory Into Practice*, 39:3, 146-154, doi: 10.1207/s15430421tip39035
5. Magsoudpour, M., & Rahimpour, M. (2011). Teacher-Students' Interaction in Task-based vs Form-Focused Instruction. *World Journal of Education*, 1 (1), doi: 10.5430/wje.v1n1p171.
6. Marzban, A., & Mokhberi, M. (2012). The Effect of Focus on Form Instruction on Intermediate EFL Learners' Grammar Learning in Task-based Language Teaching. *Procedia- Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 46, 5340-5344.doi: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.06.435.
7. Moore, A., & Komesaroff, P. (2012). Contextualizing the use of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies in Chinese medicine: Epistemological & Ethical issues. *Monash University Victoria, Australia*.
8. Ostlund, U., & Kidd, L., & Wengstrom, Y. (2010). Combining qualitative and quantitative research within mixed method research designs: A methodological review. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 48, 369-383. Doi: 10.1016/j.ijnurstu.2010.10.005.
9. Thompson, C., & Millington, N. (2012). Task-Based Learning for Communication and Grammar Use. *Language Education in Asia*, 3 (2), 159-167. retrieved from http://www.camtesol.org/Download/LEiA_Vol3_Iss2_2012/LEiA_V3_I2_04_Thompson_Millington_Task-Based_Learning_Factors_for_Communication_and_Grammar_Use.pdf.