

ENACTING A TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING CURRICULUM IN INDONESIAN NON-FORMAL EDUCATION (INFE): RATIONALES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Tasks-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has successfully attracted attention of a second (L2)/foreign language (FL) practitioners, researchers, trainers as well as curriculum developer. Much of the research conducted, however, has mainly focused in formal educational settings, and less research carried out in non-formal educational context. The intent of this paper, therefore, is to advocate the notion of enacting 'TBLT' curriculum in General English (GE) program in the pursuit of increasing students' language communicative competence at Institute of English Course and Training (IECT), one of Indonesian Non-Formal Educations (INFE) in East Lombok Regency of Nusa Tenggara Barat Province, Indonesia. The rationales and challenges of enactment will be provided, and mainly will be based on my experience as a founder of non-formal language centers, as well as a reflexive practitioner. The advocacy should not solely confine to my home regency, East Lombok, but also to language center of INFE that runs GE in Nusa Tenggara Province.

Keywords: *TBLT, Non-Formal Education & Rationales and Challenges*

INTRODUCTION

Tasks-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has successfully attracted attention of a second (L2)/foreign language (FL) practitioners, researchers, trainers as well as curriculum developer (Van den Branden, 2006). The method continues to evolve and influence language teaching in a variety of educational settings around the globe (Bygate, et al, 2015). It is a method of global use in both L2 and foreign language teaching contexts (Butler, 2011; Ellis, 2003 and Zheng & Borg, 2014). In the Asia context, as there is a growing need for interactive English proficiency, the syllabus and curriculum adopted move to communicative-based approach, such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and TBLT (Littlewood, 2006). In Malaysia and Vietnam, for example, the implementation of communicative teaching approaches was heightened by the government policy, who strongly urged institutional bodies to implement TBLT as an approach to teaching English as a second or foreign language (Van den Branden, 2016; Richards and Rodgers, 2014).

In Indonesian education context, language practitioners and researchers seem to battle with the advantages and constraints that CLT and TBLT bring about, and strategies to create lesson plan based on the spirit of communicative approach (see Arifin, 2018; Fadilah 2018; Ariatna, 2016; Astika, 2015; Griffiths, 2015; Musthafa, 2001). Given that the overall goals of foreign language instruction in formal school is to merely learn language (i.e. form-focused) instead of learning English for communication use (i.e. meaning-focused), it is not mind-blowing to witness a great number of students who fail to achieve reasonable and standard English proficiency for daily communication purposes. The intent of this paper, therefore, is to advocate the notion of enacting TBLT curriculum in General English (GE) program in the pursuit

of increasing students' language communicative competence at Institute of English Course and Training (IECT), one of Indonesian Non-Formal Educations (INFE) in East Lombok Regency of Nusa Tenggara Barat Province, Indonesia. The rationales and challenges of enactment will be provided, and mainly will be based on my experience as a founder of IECT (BestOne EDUCATION), and as a reflexive practitioner. The advocacy should not solely confine to my home regency, East Lombok, but also to all IECT of INFE that runs GE in Nusa Tenggara Province.

This paper will be organized into five main parts. Part one as it has been provided serving as an introduction, addressing a brief overview of TBLT development, aims and structure. Part two will be literature review that meanings and key principles of TBLT, brief history, claimed strengths, any criticisms and frameworks. Part three is discussion focusing on rationales and challenges of proposed method in GE program. The last part provides summary and recommendation for further actions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Meanings and Key Principles of TBLT

The term TBLT was first coined and developed by researchers and educator of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) (Van den Branden, 2006). Given that there are a number of TBLT definitions put forward by scholars, we use the one the proposed by Ellis and Shintani (2014, p. 135), stating that it is an approach "aims to develop learners' communicative competence by engaging them in meaning-focused communication through the performance of tasks." This definition provides a clear and concrete notion regarding the essence of TBLT. It is an approach that develops students' communicative competence as opposed to linguistics ones through tasks manipulation in the classroom

activities. For other definitions, (see Richards and Rodgers, 2014; Van den Branden, 2006 and Long, 2014, for the discrepancy between Upper Case and lower case of TBLT, Long & Norris, 2000, p.599; Willis and Willis, 2007).

When it comes to defining the term *task*, there are numerous definitions put forward by scholars. As there is no consensus of ways to classify tasks (Ellis, 2018), there has been a proliferation of the meaning of tasks in the literature. Van de Branden (2006), for example, has listed 17 definitions of tasks, and divide them into two categories; task as goals of language learning, reflecting things people do (See p, 4 and 7-8) and task as a pedagogical activity that reflects meaning exchange (see pp.7-8). Ellis (2018), however, argues that the definitions provided have failed to differentiate between task-as-work-plan and task-as-process. He argues, “a task cannot be defined in term of process” due to its unpredictability. His own definition bases on four criteria (see Ellis & Shintani, 2014) which distinguish between task and exercise. He argues that tasks refer activities that are primarily meaning-focused, while exercises are activities that call for primarily form-focused (Ellis, 2003). Some authors even have made some modification to their definition (see Long, 1985 & 2015, Breen, 1987 & 1989 and Nunan, 1989 & 2004). Despite this, most of them claim the importance of focus on meaning rather than grammatical features (Nunan, 2004). For this paper, we deploy the meaning task put forward by Nunan (2004, p. 4), as it addresses explicitly the importance of meaning-focused without neglecting the role of grammatical features in the instruction.

“A task is a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey

meaning rather than to manipulate form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, a middle and an end.” (Nunan, 2004. p.4).

Drawing on the above-mentioned definition of TBLT, it is apparent that *tasks* are of the essence, and most distinctive features of TBLT. Unlike other methods, TBLT employs tasks as the overarching component that construct the syllabus units of an instruction (Long, 2014; Hismanoglu and Hismanoglu, 2011; Willis, 1996). The versatility of tasks has also expanded their use not only limited in pedagogical perspective, but also in the areas of Second Language Research (SLA), in which they take the role as an activator for language production, interaction, negotiation of meaning, as well as input and form processing that leads to successful language learning (Van den Branden, 2006). Another important key feature of TBLT lies on the notion of meaning-focused or communication-based instruction. In this principle, both teachers and learners’ endeavor to achieve mutual understanding of meaning and intention rather than put great emphasis on language accuracy and complexity of grammatical features that students have to produce (Van den Branden, Bygate & Norris, 2009, p. 3). One of the premises of TBLT is that “Task creates a need to mean both in terms of creating a semantic space and a demand or reason for meaning-making” (Bygate, Van den Branden & Norris, 2014, p. ix). Simply stated, TBLT-based classroom practice creates opportunities for students to make an interpretation during the instructional process and encourage them to provide rationale behind it.

Brief history

The term Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) was first coined in 1980s, and was developed by Second Language Acquisition (SLA) researchers and language educators as a response

to the shortcomings of dominance of teachers-led instruction and form-focused of second language instruction (Van den Branden, Bygate & Norris, 2009). The method was first implemented for relatively short period in Malaysian Communicational Syllabus and English project in Bangalore, India by N. Prabhu in 1987 (Richards and Rodgers, 2014). In the initial stage, Research conducting related to TBLT were strictly limited in laboratory under close scrutiny (Van den Branden, 2006), and until interest in using tasks sparked in the mid-1980s when researchers used them as a means to explore SLA (Richards and Rodgers, 2014). Tasks in study “have been widely used as vehicles to elicit language production and focus on form, all of which are believed to foster second language acquisition” (Van den Branden, 2006, p. 1).

The development of TBLT was mainly in response to several main factors. Apart from vagueness and misunderstanding of the meaning of CLT, referring it to merely interactive activities-based instruction (Littlewood, 2014), the methodology used was still traditional in nature, i.e., the persistent use of presentation, practice and production (Ellis, 2003; Long and Crookes, 1991). In relation to this, Howatt (1984, cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2014) distinguished a weak and strong version of CLT. Weak version of CLT emphasis on the use of notions and functions with traditional teaching approach (i.e. Presentation, Practice and Production (PPP) approach, while in strong version, the contents are specifically derived from communicative tasks and methodology (Ellis, 2018). TBLT was subsequently developed by its advocates based on the spirits and principles of the second version of CLT, thereby TBLT had its provenance and was subcategory of CLT. Another factor for TBLT emergence lied in robust empirical research funding in SLA. The main principles of TBLT were strongly supported and, and relevant with 40 years of research findings in SLA (Long, 2014). Drawing on past several cross-sectional studies (e.g., examination of accuracy with English grammatical morphemes) and longitudinal studies (e.g., learners’ acquisition on negatives,

interrogatives and relative clauses), Krashen developed five-theory hypothesis (e.g. the acquisition learning hypothesis, input hypothesis etc.), which was the embryo of TBLT development (Ellis, 2018). His general research findings indicated that speaking lead to language acquisition and grammatical features of language were not necessary to teach. Drawing on the findings, Krashen together with Terrell produced a book, so-called *The Natural Approach* in which tasks serve as an activity to attain comprehensible input. This approach argued that acquisition was subconscious process and neglected the importance of production, but research revealed that production was unteachable which led to the proposal for TBLT (Ellis, 2018).

Claimed strengths

One of the most well-grounded strengths of TBLT claimed is that it does fit with the theory of second language acquisition (SLA). In the research application, tasks “have been widely used as vehicles to elicit language production and focus on form, all of which are believed to foster second language acquisition” (Van den Branden, 2006, p. 1). SLA research focusing on strategies and cognitive processes have suggested that there was no positive impact on grammar-focused pedagogy toward learners’ cognitive process in an unstructured classroom setting, while the deployment of tasks have proved to stimulate better learning experience (Richards and Rodgers, 2014). This intriguing study could be related to what Krashen and Terrell’s argument (1983, p.55) that “Language is best taught when it is being used to transmit messages, not when it is explicitly taught for conscious learning”. Transmitting a message, in particular, can be considered a task of real-world activities through which a learner is engaged to manipulate the target language. Beside cognitive benefits of implementing TBLT, it also positively influences the students’

affective domain. Fitri, Husnawadi and Harianingsih (2021), for instance, found that students' motivation and writing skill are increased when applying digital storytelling-based task.

Any Criticisms

While TBLT has great potential to promote successful language learning (i.e., language acquisition), it is, however, not without criticisms. Aside from criticism on the basis of theoretical perspective (e.g., Widdowson, 2003; Swan, 2005; Sheen (2003; Seedhouse, 1999), criticism also emanates from its practicality. With regard to theoretical critics, Ellis (2009) responded that the misconceptions generally stem from misunderstanding of the general concept of TBLT (e.g., misunderstanding of the meaning task meaning, and think that there is only one type of TBLT framework, etc.). The real problem, however, is when it comes to its implementation. Research conducted by Carless (2004) examining the TBLT implementation in Hong Kong elementary school. One of the research questions was searching for teachers' attitude and understanding toward TBLT. It was revealed that there was a lack of teachers' knowledge about tasks resulting in pseudo-communication as opposed to genuine communication in English. In response to this, Ellis (2009) provided five practical advices, one of them is that the need for teacher to have in-depth knowledge of the core meaning of tasks and both teachers and students should understand the rationale and purpose of tasks (e.g., the need for incidental learning to exhort genuine communication). Another important practical advice to consider is to reduce the hierarchy gap between student and teacher. In Asian classroom context, the gap seems to be persistent resulting in student's reluctance to actively participate in the classroom.

Frameworks

There are a number of 'TBLT' frameworks proposed by scholars. However, for the purpose of the TBLT-Based GE curriculum, I choose Willis' framework (1996), consisting of three main phases, namely Pre-task, task cycle and language focus. Aside from providing clarity in terms of terminology used, it also presents a plausible explanation of each phase. As an illustration, *Pre-task activities* begin with introduction to the topic and equip students with repertoire of words and phrases related to activities for the incoming phase. In the next stage, *the task cycle* is a moment when students can manipulate and reproduce the acquired lexical resources within previously informed topics in the forms of *doing tasks, planning* and *reporting them*. The last stage, *language focus*, provides an opportunity for the learners to reflect some language features within the discussed topic found in the task cycle. This last phase is in accord with Long's (2016) viewpoint that students in TBLT not only benefit from gaining communicative competences, but also acquiring language forms as the instruction progresses.

Other two frameworks are proposed by Nunan (2004) and Skehan (2009). Nunan's model is mainly constructed with three elements. The starting point of the model begin with *target tasks*, referring to day-to-day activities, such as confirming a line reservation to sharing personal information to new friends. For the purpose of classroom learning activities, those all-authentic activities are transferred to *pedagogical tasks*, activities that take place inside the class. The tasks then are placed into *rehearsal rationale* to introduce or familiarize students with outside classroom activities and *activation rationale* for stimulation of learners' language functions and structures. Language features are then addressed through *enabling skills* by means of *language exercises* and *communicative activities*. Also, Skehan's model (2009) comprises of three main stages. The

model begins with *pre-emptive work* aiming at establishing target language as well as reducing students' cognitive load. The next step is *during stage*, which aims to mediate accuracy and fluency from decided tasks. Last stage is *post*, which is divided into categories; post 1 and post 2. The first post stage, on the one hand, is intended to reduce students' over-emphasis on language fluency, and second post, on the other hand, is a moment when synthesis and analysis of activities of *during stage* are conducted. In general, all three frameworks seem to imply scaffolding instructional process in which teachers equip their students with background knowledge or skill before going to further steps of learning activities.

PROPOSED CONTEXT FOR TBLT IMPLEMENTATION

IECT is one of private institutions of INFE in East Lombok Regency of Nusa Tenggara Province. It is one of the concrete implementation programs of Early Childhood and Community Education (ECCE) units of Ministry of Education and Culture, Indonesia. INFE is in response to the government law regarding National Educational System Act No. 20, Year 2003, chapter No. 26 (Article 4). It is stated that INFE unit consists of institute of course and training, and center for learning community aiming at (Article 5) accommodating those who intend to develop life skills, profession, self-entrepreneurship and/or for further education purposes (infokursus.net/nipuk).

Virtually all IECT in East Lombok include GE program in their curriculum, apart from other English-related courses (e.g., English for kids, International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) preparation). The GE course is purposely designed to increase learners' confidence and their general communicative skill in daily context. The participants are usually students of Junior High

School, Senior High School, University students and the public who want to increase their general English communicative proficiency. There are five levels of the course; beginner, elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate and advanced, all of which take up to over a period of two months to complete. Each level of the courses consists of twenty-five meetings, three times a week with a total of ninety minutes for each session. The class usually starts from 15.30 pm to 21.00 am, as between 07.00 am and 13.00 am the students attend their regular class at formal school. The tutors of the course have mostly completed bachelor degrees in English language education. They usually have training in teaching (e.g., conceptualization of course contents, classroom management and course evaluation) before the commencement of the course.

Unlike formal institutions, IECT organizers are given authority to develop their own syllabus. The government provides neither textbook nor teaching approaches. Most of IECT use thematic/topical syllabus, i.e., a syllabus built around topics, such as self-introduction, daily activities, transportation, education, social media, shipping center and so forth. The class is equipped with some auxiliary teaching aids (e.g., projector, sound system and internet connection) and some learning resources (e.g., ELT books, graded reader, novel and magazine. At the end of course, the students are assessed by means of test, comprising of speaking, writing and grammar, and are awarded a certificate of completion displaying their strengths and areas that need improvement.

DISCUSSION

Rationale TBLT in context

There are two plausible reasons underlying the advocacy for enacting TBLT-based curriculum in the GE course program in the context of INFE.

Counterbalance to language form-oriented practice and assessment

There have been massive changes in the Indonesia curriculum development since 1994. According to Lie (2007), the English curriculum of Indonesia has undergone eight revisions from Grammar Translation Method (GTM), direct method, Audio-Lingual method, CLT and genre-based approach, and currently the Indonesian 2013 curriculum is on trial. Despite this constant change, the students' communicative skill in *formal education* seems to remain stable, albeit the communicative competence has been formally introduced in the 1994, stating that "development of communicative competence the ability to use English for communicative purposes which covers all four macro-skills: reading, listening, speaking, and writing; efforts should be made to strike a good balance among the four macro-skills" (Musthafa, 2001, p. 2).

The lack of school leavers' English proficiency, especially in communication skill has been a concern among English teachers and the Indonesian central government (Nur, 2004). As an ELT practitioner, the cause mainly lies not because of lack of teachers' English proficiency, nor insufficient government support in terms of teacher training and learning resources, but rather in the goals or expected outcomes of the English teaching and learning in the formal context. National English exams as a final summative assessment, for example, tend to influence the teachers' decision

on *what* and *how* English should be taught. The notion of enacting TBLT in IECT could be a solution to the pressing problem. As a starting point, all IECT leaders should make not only communicative competence as the main goal of the GE program, but more importantly to employ communicative based- assessment as a part of a summative test (i.e., final exam) at the end of the instruction. The question may arise on how the TBLT-Based GE program could improve students' English communicative proficiency.

Compatibility with course goal

As stated in the above-mentioned context, the main goal of the program is to develop students' general English communication, and this is in accordance with TBLT tenets and methodology. Firstly, tasks-focused methods strive for *authentic material and learning activities*. Unlike other approaches, TBLT units are based on real life tasks. As Long (2015) states, prior to its implementation, it is preceded by a task-based analysis, aiming at identifying target tasks that accord with what students are likely to do with a new language input in day-to-day activities. Similarly, Nunan (2004) argues that TBLT involves immediate learner's personal experience, as it is experiential learning based. Secondly, in terms of implementation, TBLT strongly promotes student-centeredness. Pair and group work are the most common forms of teaching strategies used (Willis, 1996). This inevitably maximizes students' involvement in L2, thereby increasing their speaking ability.

Challenges

While the proposed method has a great potential for developing learners' communicative ability, there are, however, several factors that could impede its implementation. Although there is not much empirical research conducted regarding the hardship in adopting TBLT, particularly in INFE context, there is,

however, intellectually engaging literature and discussion concerning the potential challenges in implementing CLT in formal context. The difficulties found in the CLT implementation will be considered TBLT shortcoming as well in this discussion, since TBLT is a strong form of CLT (ibid.).

Limited exposure in target language

Before further discussing this particular challenge, it is of paramount importance to distinguish first between teaching English as a foreign language (FL) and teaching English as a second language (SL). As Dörnyei, Csizér and Nemeth (2006) and Shehadeh and Coombe, (2012) argued, FL refers to a process of English language instruction taking place in learners' home country and become a part of school subject, while SL context is L2 is used a means of instruction (e.g., English for immigrants in the UK would be considered SL). Drawing on this definition, it could be argued that teaching or learning English in an Indonesian educational school, both in formal and non-formal context constitute FL. Considering this, Griffiths (2015, p.52) argues that "without the reinforcement of an English-speaking environment, English is just a part of the school curriculum". She is mainly concerned about the opportunities for the students to have immediate exposure to an English environment where they can practice their English. Adopting tasks-focused pedagogy in this kind of context, she argued, can result in students' discouragement to learn as well as to practice their English.

Incompatibility with culture value

This concern is mostly voiced by many teachers in an attempt to implement CLT or TBLT. Griffiths (2015) contends that children in Asian nations are brought up to heed the elders, and this has negatively affected the level of students' participation. Likewise, Ariatna's (2016), assertion, aside from raising the issue of contextual constraints (e.g., limited teacher knowledge, big class

size, grammar-oriented syllabus and curriculum), she also addresses cultural constraints (e.g., low class participation) due to pedagogical paradigm, i.e., student as a receiver and teacher as a transmitter. Fadila (2018) responded to Ariatna's arguments by providing macro-level challenges (e.g., social, socio-economy, ideology and culture). In the cultural constraint perspective, she argues that "there are communities where CLT practices run counter to cultural norms of acceptable behavior" (Fadila, 2018, p. 231). In support of this argument, she cited Marcellino's (2008) research finding revealing that *Javanese* (name of tribe in Indonesia) students hold belief that it is immoral to make complaints, as well as interruption to the teachers' arguments and explanations.

Despite the two challenges mentioned above, it could be argued that they are irrelevant, as the ideas have failed to keep abreast of technological breakthroughs, and are not being aware of the evolving needs and characteristics of today's language learners. In relation to the first argument, it could be ameliorated through what I term Digital Age-Mediated Immersion (DAMI), i.e., making a good use of advanced technology to connect students beyond the classroom. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory in which this rebuttal mainly based on transcends social interaction within the inner circle. Vygotsky believed that language is the greatest tool for communication outside the world (McLeod, 2018). To achieve this, learners need ancillary means to communicate. Today's technological devices (e.g., Smart phone computer and other means of communication, coupled with cutting-edge communication applications) can reach virtually all corners of the planet. Taking this into consideration, the notion of not being able to practice English due to instruction taking place in non-English speaking countries is not relevant. DAMI can also provide opportunities for the learners to access plethora of online English materials (e.g., YouTube and English audio and English language websites, such as BBC English, British Council, Voice of America and so forth), through which they can live with English.

Before suggesting a solution to the second constraint, it is worth responding to the culture barrier in the effort of adopting the communicative teaching approach put forward by Ariatna (2016) and Fadila (2018). The idea of students as a sole receiver and immoral to make complaints to the teacher seems to be an exaggeration. As an ELT practitioner and former English student, it is common to witness a teacher who exhorts his/her students to actively engage during the class. Practical advice (e.g., do not be shy, asking questions if it is not clear and give some suggestions for better learning experiences) are often done on the first day of the instructional process. However, if the problem is persistent then establishing *mutual understanding* between student and teacher (e.g., providing clear roles and responsibilities of both teacher and student prior to class commencement) could be the best solution. In TBLT, a teacher plays the role of *facilitator* who maintains the students' balance involvement in both language exposure and use (Willis, 1996). A Teacher also is a mediator, while students are agents who actively engage in task-based performance (Leuven and Van den Branden, 2016). Providing this role of responsibility in the initial state of instruction, can boost students' motivation to actively participate in the classroom without worrying about the cultural or traditional constraints.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented a brief history of TBLT along with the main principles and rationale underpinning its emergence. It also has described the main strengths and criticism around the theoretical and practical dispute amongst scholars. It then continued with a description about the TBLT framework proposed by Willin (2007), Nunan (2004) and Skehan (2006), and addressed the development and implementation of TBLT in the Indonesian educational context. Following that, it has described the

prospective context where TBLT will be implemented. The GE program, as one of the IECT programs of INFE, was argued to be one of the most suitable courses for TBLT implementation. Three main areas that have been discussed in relation to TBLT adoption; rationales, challenges based on my experience as IECT founders and reflective practitioner. There are two arguments that have been forward with regard to reason for task-focused pedagogy implementation; counterbalance to language form-oriented practice and assessment and compatibility with course goals in proposed teaching context. It then provided two major constraints (e.g. lack of English exposure and cultural barrier) that could inhibit the adoption of TBLT along with measures (e.g. DAMI and establish mutual understanding) to alleviate the problem. As the supporting arguments for enacting in INFE mentioned above mainly based on my experience as a reflective practitioner and practical problems put forward are literature-based, there is need for conducting empirical research in the areas of proposed method concerning its effectiveness and perception of teachers, as well as students in Indonesian non-mainstream contexts especially, and in formal ones generally.

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