

Forms or Meaning? Teachers' Beliefs and Practices Regarding Task-based Language Teaching: A Vietnamese Case Study

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The increasing body of research work in the area of language teacher beliefs shows that this research domain has been of particular interest and now well-established (Borg, 2006). One question that arises is that teachers' beliefs in general are too broad to conceptualise and investigate. In fact, recent research work has seen the increasing popularity of studies that specifically address the question raised more than two decades ago by Pajares (1992) about the need to investigate teachers' beliefs about specific aspects of their work, such as grammar instruction (e.g., Burgess & Etherington, 2002; Canh, 2011), communicative language teaching (e.g., Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999), and codeswitching (e.g., Barnard & McLellan, 2014). However, little research has been carried out into teachers' beliefs regarding Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT), and none has been done in the context of Vietnam, a context where the current curriculum and accompanying textbooks are claimed to adopt TBLT as the principal teaching method. This qualitative case study uses a number of data collection methods, including audio-recorded lesson planning sessions, classroom observation, stimulated recall, and focus groups. The findings show that there is a significant gap between teachers' current beliefs, intention, practices and the general principles of TBLT identified in the literature. The findings have implications for pedagogy and research not only in the Vietnam, but also in relatable contexts.

Key words: beliefs, TBLT, Vietnam, curricular innovation, language teachers

INTRODUCTION

Language teachers' beliefs and their relationships to classroom practices have gained much interest in the past two decades, much of it stimulated by Simon Borg (Borg, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2010, 2011, 2012; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Borg & Burns, 2008). Research into teachers' beliefs has been recognized as important because teachers are regarded as active decision makers whose thinking plays a central role in shaping classroom events (Borg, 2006; Farrell, 2007). Such research helps inform teacher educators of teachers' personal constructs that may be useful for designing and conducting teacher education programs. Understanding language teachers' beliefs also has considerable implications for language policy-makers regarding, for example, the implementation of innovations. In the specific context of Vietnam, this research can helpfully inform curriculum designers when they consider teachers' capacity for implementing a specific curriculum (Nation & Macalister, 2010).

This paper reports findings from a qualitative case study which collected data from different sources from a sample of eleven English language teachers working in two high schools in Vietnam. The focus of the paper is the teachers' beliefs regarding aspects of TBLT in their context. As such, following this introduction, an account of key constructs in TBLT is presented, followed by a description of English language curriculum and textbooks in Vietnam. The following sections comprise, in this order, a review of literature on teacher cognition research on TBLT, description of research methodology, presentation of key findings, discussion of the findings, and conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Task-based Language Teaching

The central concept in the methodology of TBLT is of course ‘tasks’. Nearly three decades ago, Long (1985b) put forward a generic definition of what a task constitutes:

[a task is] a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Thus, examples of tasks include painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form, buying a pair of shoes, making an airline reservation, borrowing a library book, taking a driving test, typing a letter, weighing a patient, sorting letters, making a hotel reservation, writing a cheque, finding a street destination and helping someone across a road. In other words, by ‘task’ is meant the hundred and one things people *do* in everyday life, at work, at play and in between (p. 89).

This definition implies that a task, for whatever purpose, is meant to serve non-technical and non-linguistic ends (Nunan, 2004). With respect to the former, it is likely that in everyday ‘tasks’, we are not necessarily aware of how we technically carry out such tasks. For example, a person dressing a child does not necessarily spell out what to do first and next, and how to do what they do; they just do it. Also, tasks by this definition may require the use of language (such as making a hotel reservation) or may not require language use (such as painting a fence). It could be noted that whether language use is involved or not, such tasks remain non-linguistic by nature, that is, there is no explicit attention to what language features should be used to complete the task. Such a non-linguistic feature distinguishes tasks from language exercises (Nunan, 2004), the latter of which focus learners’ attention on particular language features.

However, when tasks are defined from a pedagogical perspective, many authors assert that tasks necessarily postulate language use for input, output and interaction (Breen, 1987, 1989; Bygate, 1999; Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Richards, Platt, & Weber, 1985; Samuda & Bygate, 2008). For example, a task is defined as:

a holistic activity which engages language use in order to achieve some non-linguistic outcome while meeting a linguistic challenge, with the overall aim of promoting language learning, through process or product or both (Samuda & Bygate, 2008, p. 69).

In summary, to qualify as a task, a language learning activity should have at least the following characteristics:

1. It should focus primarily on *meaning*, that is, learners are required to pay primary (if not entire) attention to what they want to convey in the process of communication. This characteristic is in contrast to a forms-focused activity where learners are expected to display their linguistic knowledge (Ellis, 2003).
2. It should explicitly direct learners to achieve a non-linguistic outcome, and this is regarded as a criterion for task assessment (Skehan, 1996, 1998).
3. It should allow learners to make use of any language resources that are available to them. In other words, there is no restriction as to any language features (structures, lexical items) that learners are supposed to use as part of their task completion (Ellis, 2003).
4. It should allow for a degree of attention to form in some stage of task performance. It is noted that a place for *form* here is preferably implicit, in that on the one hand, it allows learners to 'notice the gap' (Schmidt, 1990) between their current language level and the next; on the other, it does not affect the process of communication. In some versions of

TBLT (e.g., Long, 2000; Nunan, 2004; Willis, 1996), a place for form may be available before, during or after learners have actually completed the main task.

My interest in this article is centred on the distinction between *meaning* and *forms* in the participants' beliefs and practices. A focus on meaning constitutes a situation in which the learners pay attention to *what* they want to convey, rather than *how* they should go about saying something (focus on forms). It is noted that there is a further distinction between *form* and *forms* within the language teaching domain. A focus on form is claimed to be compatible with TBLT (see #4 above), where language features are (implicitly) attended to during the context of communication, while a focus on forms is achieved by pre-teaching discrete-point grammar items (Long, 2000). Focus on forms is not considered compatible with TBLT.

These concepts are discussed most commonly in TBLT literature, possibly because the distinction can help distinguish what constitutes a task, and what does not. But the distinction also helps explain other distinctions relating to task characteristics. For example, the meaning-forms distinction (#1) is closely related to whether a task has a non-linguistic outcome (#2), and whether learners are restricted to using only some language features (#3). The data presented in this paper, therefore, are featured around the meaning-forms aspects of teachers' beliefs and practices. Within the scope of this paper, I especially look at three aspects of teachers' work specifically related to the meaning-forms distinction: their overall beliefs concerning meaning and forms, their decision-making and instructional strategies, and their corrective feedback.

In terms of beliefs, to be compatible for TBLT, teachers are supposed to consider tasks as vehicles through which meaning is conveyed in the process of classroom interaction (Andon & Eckerth, 2009). The question is, therefore, whether the teachers believe that such a way of teaching is beneficial for students' language competence.

In terms of their decision-making and instructional practices, this paper

considers the way the teachers in this study made choices about textbook activities and the rationales behind each, as well as what the teachers focused on when giving instructions.

In terms of corrective feedback, TBLT principles suggest feedback should occur in the process of communication, i.e., incidentally, rather than planned (Ellis, 2003). Also, feedback should focus on the content of the message (meaning) rather than linguistic forms such as structures, pre-taught lexical items and pronunciation (Beretta, 1989). If forms are focused on, there should be no explanation, exemplification or generalisation in a TBLT classroom (Beretta, 1989; Prabhu, 1987), rather the treatment should be occasional and transitory (Long & Robinson, 1998).

Having said that, the present study is operationalized using 'strong' principles found among the different versions of TBLT (see, for example, Long, 1985a, 2000; Samuda & Bygate, 2008). As such, the characteristics in focus in this article represent the criteria of the 'strong' version, based on which teachers' beliefs and practices are analysed and discussed.

Curriculum and Textbooks in Vietnam

In Vietnam, it is stated that the recently adopted English language curriculum for lower and upper secondary schools is task-based, and the textbooks being used consist of communicative tasks (MOET, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2006d).

In terms of methodological innovation, the new English curriculum advocates "two popular approaches in education and foreign language teaching internationally and domestically: the learner-centred approach and the communicative approach in foreign language teaching, in which *task-based language teaching* is the principal method of teaching" (MOET, 2006c, p. 12, italics added). As the aims specified in the curriculum state that students should acquire communicative competence so as to use English both receptively and productively, it also implies that teachers should use communicative strategies to enable students to achieve such competence. In

one of the teacher manuals designed to familiarize teachers with the new curriculum and the textbooks, one of the eight ‘new’ developments as compared to the old curriculum and textbooks is the use of task-based pedagogy:

The fourth new development of the standard Year 10 English textbook is that the activities are designed based on specific tasks (both pedagogical and real-life), each of which is clearly instructed. The method of task-based language teaching has many advantages. First, it provides situations where students use language. Second, it lowers the methodological burden on the teacher [...]: the teacher does not have to be concerned about how to design activities for teaching as usually seen when using the traditional set of textbooks (MOET, 2006b, p. 54, *my translation*)

My analysis of one of the textbook units (Nguyen, 2013) indicates that although not every task conforms to a strong task-based design compared to those recommended in the relevant literature (e.g., Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 1996; Willis, 1996), the lessons represent a generic form of TBLT. As such, each textbook task is built upon, and linked to, other tasks in the same lesson, which somewhat reflects the version proposed by Nunan (2004). Furthermore, relatively little explicit attention to form (‘focus on forms’) can be observed, especially in the receptive skills lessons. Examples of meaning-focused tasks are finding word meaning in context, matching headings with paragraphs, and discussions.

This contextual reality motivates the present study to explore what English language teachers know, think and do regarding the implementation of the curriculum and textbooks.

Teachers' Beliefs Regarding TBLT

Despite language teacher cognition research having now become a well-established domain of inquiry (Borg, 2003, 2006, 2012), literature on teachers' beliefs regarding tasks and TBLT is still very limited. This is surprising given the popularity of TBLT in the form of curriculum and textbook production worldwide (Littlewood, 2004) and growing interest in researching tasks in various pedagogical contexts (e.g., Boston, 2008; Edwards & Willis, 2005; Foster & Skehan, 1996; Iwashita, 2003; Lynch & Maclean, 2000; Mayo & Pilar, 2007; Samuda & Bygate, 2008). In Asia, some literature has reported the use of tasks and TBLT implementation in the classroom (e.g., Carless, 2002; Deng & Carless, 2009; Luk, 2009; Nguyen, Newton, & Crabbe, 2011; Vilches, 2003) without a reference to teachers' beliefs. The limited number of teacher cognition studies in Asia (Carless, 2003, 2004, 2007, 2009; Cheng & Moses, 2011; Deng & Carless, 2010; Hui, 2004; Jeon & Hahn, 2006; Yim, 2009) have tended to abstractly investigate attitudinal beliefs (through questionnaires), or neglect the four aforementioned characteristics, which help distinguish a task from other kinds of classroom work, as criteria for investigation.

There are, therefore, only a very limited number of teacher belief studies that explicitly include the aspect of whether teachers favour forms or meaning regarding the implementation of TBLT. However, teachers' beliefs regarding meaning/forms in the context of TBLT operation can be inferred from some of the studies available, although in most cases the authors do not explicitly address this issue. The study by Carless (2003) investigating factors in the implementation of TBLT in Hong Kong primary schools found that the teachers generally aligned with the meaning-focused approach, in that they favoured situations that promote meaning. His later study (Carless, 2009) seems to support this finding, in that the teachers realized the positive aspects of meaning focused communication when they mentioned students' speaking for a purpose, problem-solving and contextualization. The survey by Jeon and Hahn (2006) indicates a sound understanding of TBLT among

the respondents, in which, among other things, about 63% of middle school teachers and 71% of high school teachers agree that “a task involves a primary focus on meaning.” In a study of teachers’ beliefs regarding TBLT, Andon and Eckerth (2009) found that the four teachers had a great extent of relevance to TBLT principles, and a great extent of meaning focus is implied. For example, they claimed that the teachers valued exchange of information and negotiation of ideas in their classrooms. However, one teacher in Deng and Carless’s (2009) study, in spite of expressing positive attitudes towards TBLT, seemed to be inclined to a more forms-focused approach.

In the literature there seems to be no research that has explored aspects of teachers’ planning lessons and classroom spoken instructions in the context where TBLT as innovation is implemented. And yet these aspects are extremely important for fully understanding the relationship between beliefs and practices. Decision-making revealed during the course of planning is important for exploration of underlying beliefs and factors that facilitate or impede a particular planned behaviour. Teachers’ instructions in the classroom can be considered specific behaviour that reflects their beliefs about teaching. More practically, investigation of teachers’ classroom instructions can help identify the extent to which a particular innovation has been implemented.

In terms of corrective feedback in TBLT classrooms, several studies have investigated into this particular issue. Regarding classroom practices, Beretta (1989) analysed part of the data set from the Bangalore project and found that although the teachers attended more to the content (meaning) than linguistic (forms) errors, the way they treated the linguistic errors reflected a focus on forms approach, in that examples of explanation, exemplification and generalisation were found in the lessons. In terms of beliefs, in a TBLT setting in Iran, the survey by Rashtchi and Keyvanfar (2012) indicates that the teachers had a positive attitude to explicit error correction, leading the authors to conclude that TBLT is not compatible in the context of Iran. There is, however, a lack of published studies that seek in-depth understanding about this issue by triangulating self-reported, self-commentary and

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observational data.

METHOD

Research Questions

The overall aim of this study is to investigate the Vietnamese English language teachers' beliefs and practices with reference to the characteristics of TBLT outlined above. The specific research questions are:

1. Do the Vietnamese English teachers focus on meaning or forms in their planning and giving instructions for specified textbook activities?
2. In what way do their beliefs about language teaching and learning converge with, or diverge from, the four key characteristics of TBLT?
3. To what extent is the teachers' corrective feedback compatible with the four key characteristics of TBLT?

Setting and Participants

The participants in this case study were eleven English language teachers working in two public (state) high schools in a suburban area in Northern Central Vietnam. Five teachers from School A and six teachers from School B participated in the study. While the schools were different in size, tradition, and students' academic backgrounds, the teachers were considered to share similar backgrounds, experience and working conditions (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
Participant Teachers' Profile

Teacher	Age	School	Gender	Qualifications	Service (Years)	Teaching year cohort
1	36		Male	BA (TEFL)	13	
2	34	A	Female	BA (TEFL)	12	10
3	30		Female	BA (FLT & TEFL)	8	
4	34	A	Female	BA (TEFL)	12	12
5	33		Female	BA (TEFL)	12	
6	35		Female	BA (TEFL)	13	
7	34	B	Female	BA (TEFL)	12	11
8	33		Female	BA (TEFL)	9	
9	34		Female	BA (TEFL)	12	
10	32	B	Female	BA (TEFL)	10	10
11	28		Female	BA (TEFL)	5	

For the sake of confidentiality, the teachers were labelled by numbers (i.e., Teacher 1 – Teacher 11). As can be seen in Table 1, the teachers were allocated into four dyads or triads according to which school they were in and which year cohort they were teaching. At the average age of 33 years, these teachers ranged from 28 to 36, with teaching experience between five and thirteen years. All the teachers had experienced using the new textbooks for a minimum of three years. They were all university graduates with qualifications in English language teaching. Teacher 3 had a dual degree in English and French. All these degrees were obtained from Vietnamese universities.

Data Collection

This case study adopts a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. As qualitative research, the purpose of this study is to seek meaning, examining events, behaviours and reasons that underpin personal theories and

principles, rather than to test *a priori* theories (Drew, Hardman, & Hosp, 2008; Ogilvie & Dunn, 2010). This multiple-method case study was carried out using the following data collection procedures:

1. Group lesson planning;
2. Observation; and
3. Stimulated recall.

First, the teachers were allocated in four groups (see previous section), and started planning a lesson they intended to teach the following week. A total of ten sessions were recorded, with Group 1 and Group 4 performing three sessions each, and Group 2 and 3 two each. These sessions varied in length, lasting between 18 and 55 minutes.

Non-participant observation was used to collect live classroom data (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). A total of 22 lessons were observed and video-recorded, two from each teacher. The videos were used for subsequent stimulated recall sessions, which took place within 24 hours to guarantee that teachers still remembered what happened (Gass & Mackey, 2000). In these sessions, teachers were asked to comment about their decision-making and thinking processes (Borg, 2006; Gass & Mackey, 2000; Yinger, 1986) regarding the characteristics in question. As a result, 22 respective stimulated recall sessions were audio-recorded, ranging from 25 to 80 minutes in length. Collecting different sources of data gave the researcher the opportunity to triangulate these data with those from other sources (Morgan, 1988).

In addition to these methods of data collection, in this study the researcher used extensive field notes as supplementary data to gain understandings of the teachers' practices and beliefs. The field notes, being in the form of a reflective research journal (Borg, 2001) recorded the facts and perceptions the researcher felt relevant to the inquiry on various occasions, such as when he attended the teachers' academic meetings, or talked with a particular teacher on a social occasion.

Except for the observed lessons, the language the teachers used for

discussion in this study was Vietnamese. Data from lesson planning sessions, observation, and stimulated recall sessions were transcribed and translated (and cross-checked by a colleague). Ethical procedures were strictly followed.

Data Analysis

The general principles and procedures of data analysis in this study were based on Charmaz's (2006) grounded approach. As in any qualitative research study, analysis in this study started with reading through the data again and again to get a general sense of the whole dataset. This was followed by open coding of data from individual teachers, with the help of qualitative analysis software *Nvivo 8* (Bazeley, 2007). The open coding was followed by axial coding, whereby the different datasets (planning sessions, observation, stimulated recall) were subjected to a constant process of comparison and contrast in order to allow common (and contrasting) patterns to emerge. These emerging themes were then compared and contrasted against the pre-determined criteria related to the TBLT characteristics outlined above to draw on the conclusion about how relevant the teachers' beliefs and practices were for TBLT.

For example, in order to see the relevance of TBLT with teachers' decision-making, the textbook activities that the teachers were discussing were categorised into two types: meaning-oriented activities and forms-oriented ones. Meaning-oriented activities are those that have a focus on meaning, promote language use, and/or have a clear objective. Examples are discussion, ranking, and word meaning in context. Forms-oriented activities include those which focus more on mechanical (forms) practice such as gap-filling, dialogue practice, and word 'spotting' activities like true/false statements. This process allowed a calculation of how many (and the kinds of) activities were retained and adapted.

The list of themes, categories and nodes generated were then put together in groups to establish an overall picture of teachers' beliefs and practices regarding the topic in question. At this stage, following the thick description

(Geertz, 1973) of the teachers' beliefs and practices, the researcher started to establish a rich interpretation of the data regarding the research questions.

RESULTS

Planning for Skills Lessons: Retaining and Adapting Textbook Activities

Two major themes emerged from the lesson planning data: the decisions to retain and to adapt the textbook activities. Retaining an activity meant the teachers decided to keep it for teaching, without changing, adding or omitting any elements of the activity. Adapting an activity was when the teachers considered changing, adding or omitting one or more elements in it. These decision-making processes were analysed with reference to characteristics of tasks to bring about the relevance of TBLT to the teachers' practice. There were also instances of replacing, omitting, and adding an activity from/to the lesson, but due to the space limitation these are not reported in this paper.

TABLE 2
Retaining and Adapting Textbook Activities

	Number of activities				
	Reading (<i>n</i> *=3)	Speaking (<i>n</i> =2)	Listening (<i>n</i> =2)	Writing (<i>n</i> =3)	Total (<i>n</i> =10)
Retained	9	2	5	3	19
Adapted	1	4	2	3	10

**n* = number of lesson planning sessions

Table 2 shows that, in the 10 lesson planning sessions, the teachers tended to retain more activities from reading and listening lessons. In contrast, they decided to adapt more activities from speaking and writing lessons. This can be explained by the fact that listening and reading lessons are usually input-

dependent, that is, the activities are dependent on some texts. The question is how their decision-making is explained with reference to TBLT characteristics.

TABLE 3
Retaining and Adapting Meaning-oriented and Forms-oriented Activities

	Total	Retained	Adapted
Meaning-oriented	16	2	10
Forms-oriented	19	17	1

There was a strong tendency to retain forms-oriented textbook activities, and to adapt meaning-oriented ones, thus showing that the teachers were likely to favour activities that focus on mechanical practice of forms. Indeed, qualitative analysis of the data indicates that in productive skills lessons the teachers favoured some instruction of grammatical forms, followed by controlled practice (drills).

In the extract below, for example, the awareness of forms was evident among Teachers 9, 10 and 11 when they discussed how to adapt an information-gap activity (Task 2, *Tieng Anh 10*, p. 159), which asked one student to read about London and another to read about New York and exchange information about the two cities.

Lesson Planning Extract #1

- | | |
|-----|---|
| T11 | And this [Task 2], this has a model... |
| T10 | We should present it on an extra board; put it on directly. |
| T11 | All right, this should be presented. |
| T10 | We put it up and lead it in.
We ask them the |

	questions and ask them to answer.
T11	Put it on the board.
T10	We give them the model.
T11	This model, yeah?
T10	That will do. (G4.LP1. Speaking)

It might be possible to infer that in this extract the teachers were aware of the language structures embedded in the exemplar; therefore they intended to bring forward the 'model'. Teacher 10 suggested that they should present the model on "an extra board", which was conventionally understood as a poster. She said, "put it on directly" to mean that there was no need to elicit from the students, but instead, the teacher should show them the model. Next, she suggested that the teacher get students to rehearse the model ("lead it in", "we ask them the questions and ask them to answer"). What this teacher meant here was that after presenting the model on the board, she would most likely start rehearsing the model with the students, to get them to practise the model before they applied it using other information in the boxes. Although there was no overtly-expressed intention to explain any particular structures, their decision showed that they intended to explicitly direct students to use the given language features. This intention included the extensive rehearsal of the model and their emphasis on it when they wanted to put in on an 'extra' board.

Classroom Instructions: Explicit Supplementation of Grammatical Structures

Classroom observation data are generally consistent with the teachers' intention in the planning sessions. As such, the percentage of retained activities in reading and listening lessons (both at 52%) is higher than in speaking and writing lessons (32% & 36% respectively). In contrast, the

number of activities that were adapted was higher in speaking and writing lessons (both at 55%) than in reading and listening lessons (13% & 16% respectively). This pattern reveals the extent of textbook dependency on the part of the teachers, in that the teachers had to rely on the reading and listening texts provided in the textbooks.

TABLE 4
Retained and Adapted Activities in Observed Lessons

	Reading		Speaking		Listening		Writing	
No. of activities	23	%	22	%	25	%	11	%
Retained	12	52	7	32	13	52	4	36
Adapted	3	13	12	55	4	16	6	55

The most frequent way of adapting productive activities was by drawing attention to specific forms prior to student performance. Observational data show that the teachers had a strong inclination towards the explicit presentation and explanation of a structure as preparation for communicative practice. In the observed speaking lessons, all the teachers used explicit instructions to guide students to use particular structures provided in the model exemplars in the textbooks.

Teacher 3, for example, was presenting a given model as part of activity instructions in one of her speaking lessons. This activity asked students to work in groups and ask one another about what they felt about different types of film. There were a list of films, some suggested adjectives and exchange exemplars as input for the activity.

Observation Extract #1

T3 Task 2. Dialogue [writes on board, reading aloud as she does so]
A: What-kind-of-film-do-you-like/- want-to-see?¹

¹ This (word-word) represents the teacher speaking and writing at the same time.

- B: I-like-love-story-film.
- T3 Love story film. Đây là phim gì các bạn? *What kind of film is this?*²
- Ss Tình cảm *Love story*.
- T3 Cartoon film, and so on.
- T3 [continues to write, reading aloud]
- A: What-do-you-think-of-love-story-films?
- B: I-find-them-really-interesting/moving...
- T3 And so on. Tức là ta suy nghĩ về bộ phim đó như, như thế nào? Nó hay, nó hấp dẫn, hay nó dở, có phải không? *That is, what do we think of the film? Is it interesting, exciting, or awful, right?* (T3.O2.Year 10.Speaking)

It can be seen that Teacher 3 was focusing on the particular model in the above extract, by writing the model on the board. The students were also asked to copy the model into their notebooks. It is possible that the teacher wanted her students to use this 'framework' and replace the necessary information in the later phase of the activity. This inference was later confirmed in the simulated recall session with the teacher (see next section). The teacher's instructional strategy here was obviously forms-focused, with very little attention to meaning (of the adjectives). The way students were expected to ask and answer did not seem to reflect any particular reflection of students' thinking, but instead to give an overall, abstract statement about the type of film.

After getting students to drill the dialogue given, the teacher provided a lengthy explanation of a grammatical structure.

Observation Extract #2

- T3 Như vậy, để đưa ra một ý kiến, để đưa ra một ý kiến về... ý kiến về một bộ phim hay một vấn đề gì đó thì các bạn có cấu trúc gì? [writes on board] Ta có gì? Subject cộng gì? *So, to give an opinion... an opinion about a film or*

² The italics are translation from Vietnamese originals.

something what structure do you have? What do we have? Subject plus what?

- Ss Find.
- T3 Cộn̄g somebody hoặc là gì? *Plus somebody or what?* Something. Cộn̄g vớī gì? *Plus what?* Adjective. OK? / I find thì là gì? *I find what?* I find them really interesting or terrifying. Or violent, violent, moving and so on.
- T3 [draws a frame around the structure] (T3.O2. Year 10.Speaking)

Here, Teacher 3 focused students' attention solely on one particular structure embedded in the model she presented above. She elicited the structure "to find + something + adjective" with an explanation of the usage of the structure. Then she went on to provide some adjectives to go with the structures such as "interesting" and "terrifying". This explicit focus on forms implied that students would have to remember this structure, and to use it in the subsequent activity.

In most writing lessons, a similar manner of instruction was observed. My analysis of teachers' instructions in these lessons shows that the teachers usually took a further step in making grammatical points more explicit, regardless of whether the activity in question was forms-focused or not. Below is such an extract from Teacher 6's writing lesson, which asked students to write a report about their collection (books, stamps etc.). This activity was preceded by a list of questions to suggest the content of the report.

Observation Extract #3

- 01 T6 [writes] Two. Useful-language. Now. OK. You can use some useful language for your writing. Now have a look here. First, you can you structure 'classify...'
[writes] classify-into-different-cate-cate-gories.
Second, 'put....' [writes] put ... put-on-different-

- different-page. Right. Provide-somebody-with-something or ask-somebody-to give-them or ...
- 02 Now, classify into different categories, put them on different page ... Now, more ideas? Can you? Useful language you also use them ...
- 03 Có thể dùng gì nhi? *What can you use?* [writes] provide-somebody-with gì nhi? *What?* With-something. Các em có thể dùng gì nhi? *What can you use?...* Mời bạn Toàn nào? *Toan please?* Em có thể cho cô một vài ví dụ. *Please give me some examples.*
- 04 Trong quá trình viết các em có thể dùng những cấu trúc này để làm gì? *While you write how can you use these structures?...* Để viết thành câu *To write complete sentences.* Chứ các em làm sao mà viết thành câu? *Otherwise how can you write complete sentences?* [points at one student] ...
- 05 S (xxx)
- 06 T6 To be interested in something, hoặc là *or* with something có được không nhi? *is [it] possible?* ... Được không? *Is it?* [writes]
- 07 S To be interested...
- 08 T6 In gì nhi *what?* Some-thing hoặc là *or*, doing-some-something.
- 09 S Something.
- 10 T6 Something. Hoặc là ta có thể sử dụng gì nhi? *Or what can we use?* ... Like, hoặc *or*, love / enjoy... etc. huh? Thank you... Mời bạn khác nào? Mời Hằng nào? *Another person please? Hang please?* (T6.O1. Year 11.Writing)

The extract took place after the teacher had elicited the organization of the essay on the board. As can be seen, the teacher provided students with a

number of structures and expressions for them to write in their essay. She made it explicit that students needed the structures to make complete sentences (04). This procedure went on until around ten items were written on the board. Like the speaking lessons presented above, the activity was adapted in that forms-focused input was brought to the lesson, possibly drawing the students' attention to the input during the activity completion.

Teachers' Beliefs: Forms-focused Approach to Teaching

The 22 stimulated recall sessions (two per teacher) generally show a strong inclination for a forms-focused approach to teaching. Specifically, the teachers believed that each lesson, or in some cases, an individual activity, should be built around some language structure. They believed that such a feature should be emphasised so that students would be able to remember it.

Most of the teachers presenting language structures confirmed that their aim was for students to use the features in focus. Teacher 3, for example (see *Observation Extracts #1* and *#2*), said, "I did want them do use the structure 'find something adjective'. Yes." (T3.SR2.Speaking). She thought that the feature was the main point of the activity because it was emphasised in the exemplars. She said: "I read from the book, in which it was printed bold, so I picked it out and presented it; I thought it must be some kind of focus" (T3.SR2.Speaking).

Teacher 2, similarly, commented on her intention to focus on a particular form ('may' for opinions) in her speaking lesson:

...in Task 2, they had to use 'may'. This was kind of basic requirement, which asked them to use this to agree or to disagree. Just kind of giving opinions [...] And I just gave them 'I think' and 'I don't think' as additional items, for them to give opinions.
(T2.SR1.Speaking)

She believed that in order to express their opinion about 'the zoo of new kind', students had to use 'may', which she thought would be the focal item of the activity. Like Teacher 3, she also confirmed that she wanted her students to use the structures presented, "I just wanted to use the model because this would make it easier for them. They could use them because they were there" (T2.SR1.Speaking).

Following her comments above, Teacher 3 provided another explanation for focusing students on using the model for language production:

- R If you had let students talk as freely as they wished, would they have been able to talk?
- T3 I'm afraid not. I believe everything must be guided in detail. So all I wanted them to do was to use information about other films and replace information in the model. It would take more time to let them make questions and answers by themselves, while at that time, I had only 10 minutes left. Difficult to carry out. (T3.SR2.Speaking)

Teacher 3 believed that it would be difficult for students to carry out the activity without showing them how to make questions and answers. She later emphasised that the model was very important in framing how students would work for the activity, in that students were expected to replace the information into the model to make new conversation. In this sense, what she expected was more like a substitution drill than a meaningful activity.

Teacher 11 claimed that asking students to use the language without presenting and explaining grammatical items was just "rote learning" (T11.SR2.Speaking). According to her, it made more sense for students if they understood the rules and used them in language production. Thus, a deductive approach to teaching could be inferred.

Corrective Feedback of Linguistic Elements

The observation data showed a general tendency for these teachers to give corrective feedback, mainly in the pre-task and post-task phases. In speaking lessons, pre-task corrective feedback occurred during the rehearsal of the exemplars, and post-task corrective feedback happened when students were asked to re-perform the activity in an open demonstration manner (i.e., standing for everybody to see and hear). There was little evidence of on-task corrective feedback; that is, feedback did not occur during the process of communication. There were rare occasions when the teachers were seen to talk to some specific groups or pairs, which suggests that opportunities for transitory and incidental focus on form, highly favoured by such TBLT proponents as Long and Robinson (1998), were extremely limited in the observed classrooms. In writing lessons, corrective feedback usually happened in the post-task phase, where the teachers asked students to put their writing onto the board for the teacher to correct mistakes in front of the whole class. This was a typical strategy of giving feedback in Vietnamese classrooms, as shown in some previous studies (e.g., Canh, 2011). Again, there was little evidence of on-task corrective feedback in the writing lessons.

When individual feedback episodes were analysed, there was a tendency for the teachers to give feedback on forms, rather than meaning (i.e., content of the message - see Beretta, 1989). In the extract that follows, Teacher 2 was asking one student about his perception of 'the zoo of new kind'.

Observation Extract #4

- | | | |
|----|----|---|
| 01 | T2 | Yes. Er Minh? |
| 02 | S1 | Er, I think animals will may er feel happy |
| 03 | T2 | Cả 'will' cả 'may'? <i>Both will and may?</i> No. No.
No. Er, again. |
| 04 | Ss | Lại. Lại. Lại. <i>Again. Again. Again.</i> |
| 05 | S1 | I don't think animals will may feel happy. |
| 06 | T2 | 'Will may'? Not 'will may'. |

07	Ss	Will. Will.
08	T2	Will. I think use "will".
09	S1	(xxx)... feel happy.
10	T	Again.
11	S2	I don't think...
12	S1	I don't think er animals er will er will feel happy.
13	T2	Ah, yes. I don't think animals will feel happy. Yes. (T2.O1. Year 10.Speaking)

In this extract, Teacher 2 was focusing on correcting the student's mistake. However, while the teacher was focusing on the forms, she seemed to neglect the meaning of the message this student wanted to convey. With both the teacher's correction and other students' support, the student eventually produced the correct statement, with much more hesitation than in the original one. It is interesting to note that the teacher did not seem to be concerned about the meaning and the fluency, but the accuracy of the sentence the student produced. In fact, the eventual statement the student produced at the end (12) had an opposite meaning to which he had stated earlier (02). However, the teacher seemed satisfied because the student had at last made it correct (13).

Apart from such syntactical matters, most of the corrective feedback dealt with pronunciation mistakes. In general, the teachers' treatment of pronunciation mistakes could be regarded as incidental. That is, feedback occurred without a teacher's pre-planned intention. However, it is noted that there was usually a strong emphasis on the mistakes, in the form of explicit repetition, generalization, or exemplification. In the extract that follows, for example, Teacher 10, when noticing students pronouncing the names of countries incorrectly in the rehearsal phase of a speaking activity which required students to ask and answer about world cup events, decided to stop and focused their attention to this pronunciation issue.

Observation Extract #5

- 01 T10 Now you and er you please.
02 S1 Where was the first World Cup held?
03 S2 It was er held in er Uruguay.
04 S1 Which team played in er the final match?
05 S2 Uruguay and er Ar[hen]tina.
06 T10 Argentina.
07 S2 Ar...
08 S1 Which team became the champion?
09 S2 Uruguay.
10 S1 What was the score of the final match?
11 S2 Four-two.
12 T10 Thank you. Sit down... Now you can look the table again
and practise the dialogue...
13 T10 Now read some names of countries. Uruguay. Now read
after me. Uruguay.
14 Ss Ss Uruguay.

[This went on with 11 country names; each was repeated at least twice chorally] (T10.O1. Year 10. Speaking)

The teacher noticed that S2 made a mistake in pronouncing 'Argentina' (05) and corrected it in the form of recast (06). However, when these two students had finished their conversation, on further thought before asking students to practise the conversation (12), she decided to get all the students to repeat all the names of the countries listed in the textbook (13). This instructional strategy, typical in this study, is consistent with the importance all the teachers gave to correct pronunciation.

Although most corrective feedback episodes were incidental, there were instances of planned feedback. For example, in a reading lesson, during the post-reading activity, Teacher 9 provided a table on her PowerPoint screen, which showed the years and the events relating to the football World Cup history, and asked students to talk about the events. Prior to this, Teacher 9

focused her students' attention on saying dates correctly.

Observation Extract #14

- T9 Now, note the numbers, okay? Những con số *The numbers*. Now, the first./// Now who can? Now? [points to one student]
- S1 Thưa cô là *Dear Teacher*, one er one thousand nine hundred oh four.
- T9 One thousand <s1: thousand> nine hundred <s1: oh four> oh four? Đó là cách các em đọc năm phải không? *Is that the way you all say years?* Đó có phải là cách các em đọc năm hay không? *Isn't that how you say years?...* Nào, các em phải nghiên cứu cách đọc năm *Come, you must study how to say years*. Năm 1904 ta đọc như thế nào các em? *How do we say the year 1904, whole class?*
- Ss Nineteen...
- T9 Ah, nineteen oh four. OK. Check the answer. [clicks] nineteen oh four?
- Ss Yes. (T9.O1. Year 10. Reading)

The teacher had anticipated that her students would probably make such a mistake in saying these dates, because she had already prepared a PowerPoint slide which helped her show students how to pronounce the items. This was confirmed later in the follow-up stimulated recall session.

In summary, regarding whether the teachers in this study are inclined to forms or meaning, the data largely show that the teachers were more oriented to forms in both their beliefs and practices. Ample evidence of awareness of grammatical features in planning, explicit focus on forms in classroom instructions, structure-based approach to teaching, and forms-focused corrective feedback showed a large extent of divergence in the teachers' beliefs from the identified characteristics of TBLT.

DISCUSSION

The findings in this study are not surprising, given the body of research has revealed the problems TBLT is experiencing in various contexts in Asia (e.g., Adams & Newton, 2009; Cheng & Moses, 2011; Deng & Carless, 2010). It seems that the teachers in this study were working on a curriculum and input materials incompatible with their beliefs. This study again confirms the claim made by many authors regarding the gap between the intended curriculum and the realized curriculum (e.g., Markee, 1997; Tayjasanant & Barnard, 2010).

What may be surprising is that regardless of experience in using the textbooks for some time (at least three years), the teachers did not seem to change their beliefs about language teaching and learning, although to some extent, their classroom teaching reflected some change due to the need to cover textbook content. In this sense, the textbooks as agents of change (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994) are not applicable in this context, at least so far as firmly-held beliefs are concerned. It is possible the case that there were not sufficient conditions for significant change. This finding aligns with Prawat's (1992) point that getting teachers to change their beliefs is a difficult process. Knowledge about TBLT and CLT might have been available to the teachers in teachers' manuals, workshop materials, and implicitly embedded in the textbooks, and the teachers might make superficial adjustments to their attitudes (or peripheral beliefs). However, there is little evidence to indicate that their more stable 'core' beliefs (Phipps & Borg, 2009) were changing towards a more task-oriented approach. This confirms the implication in Woods and Çakır (2011) that theoretical knowledge is reinterpreted through the filter of contextual and academic experience. In other words, if teachers are informed with particular theoretical knowledge (e.g., TBLT), their understanding of such knowledge is reconstructed through the lens of socio-cultural factors inherent in the *beliefs* that they hold. The socio-cultural factors include the public examinations, institutional policies, and the reference to colleagues' practices and students' expectations. The factors can

be seen as important upon which core beliefs are formed, reshaped and made sustainable over time in the context of profession.

IMPLICATIONS

The discussion above does not mean that beliefs are impossible to change. In fact, it is possible to do so (Nation & Macalister, 2010) as long as comprehensive procedures are taken into account. The data from the present study show that merely providing the teachers with the textbooks, and a very limited extent of orientation in training workshops, was not sufficient for beliefs to change. This explains why take-ups did not occur as a result of using the textbooks and attending workshops.

The pivotal issue is how to effect cognitive changes towards TBLT in in-service teachers. In other words, the issue is how to transfer peripheral beliefs into core beliefs. Given evidence of successful TBLT implementation which is often institutionally initiated in small-scale projects (e.g., McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007), if TBLT is desired in the context of Vietnam, teachers as the most local agents of innovation implementation (Gorsuch, 2000) should be engaged in the process of design and introduction of the innovation. This view is compatible with a context-responsive approach (Bax, 2003), and has been put forward by Carless (2007, p.604) in Hong Kong using the term "situated TBLT approaches" in which TBLT instruction is operationalized in line with grammar instruction and Presentation, Practice and Production (PPP). More importantly, for these ideas to become established in their core belief system, teachers should be given the opportunity to carry out the innovatory methods and reflect on them. My argument is, therefore, that those peripheral beliefs would not simply become core beliefs and be implemented in classroom practice as a result of a top-down policy. Instead, teachers' core beliefs should be considered situated within the context where experiences and reflection play substantial roles in shaping and reshaping pedagogical beliefs and knowledge. It is necessary to

engage teachers in trying out the new ideas before they can be successfully established as core beliefs. Also, teachers should not be regarded merely as the implementers of innovation, but they should also act as knowledge makers (Allwright, 2006) who could contribute to the development of any innovation based on their substantial experience. In short, to enhance the possibility for cognitive change, bottom-up strategies are needed.

In the present study, it has been shown that the teachers' practices largely relied on patterns found to be similar to the PPP model. However, at the same time, they paid little attention to, or did not feel secure with, the third 'P' in the sequence. Similarly to the context of Hong Kong, where teachers' instructional roles and educational ideologies reflect Confucian-heritage societies, there is a need to develop a situated version of TBLT that suits the Vietnamese context, and particularly the teachers' existing beliefs. Drawing on research findings in Canh (2011) and the present study, and the need for the final P, it may be suggested that the first possible change is the enhancement of the communicative tasks in the final P stage of lessons. In doing this, teachers should be made aware of the importance of this stage and be encouraged to spend more time on it. Expert support should be provided in this initial stage of trying more communicative tasks in teachers' lesson sequences. In this stage, the teachers should also have the opportunity to reflect on the experience they have in providing students with such communicative tasks, as a starting point to challenge the teachers' existing beliefs about, for example, the role of explicit instruction.

This study also implies suggestions for authorities of different levels regarding English language teaching. The data strongly suggest that although the teachers tended to follow the textbooks in teaching, the way they enacted the textbook lessons represents a considerable gap between their current beliefs and the TBLT characteristics. My view here is that providing teachers with textbooks and hoping that they would change teachers' beliefs and practices in accordance to TBLT is naïve. Rather, it is necessary to support teachers in comprehensive ways, such as following teachers throughout task-based material realization and providing them with academic support when

required (McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007). It may also be important in this context for the important others to understand and provide teachers with authoritative and academic support. Finally, since the data show that the public examinations were identified as one of the key constraints to TBLT implementation (see, Nguyen, 2013), there is a need to review the existing national examination system and to make it more in line with the curriculum and textbooks.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have presented findings from a case study which investigated the extent of focus on forms/meaning with a group of eleven Vietnamese teachers. Data from lesson planning sessions, classroom practices and stimulated recall show that the teachers were generally inclined to a forms-focused approach of instruction, which is largely incommensurate with TBLT. Following the findings, I claimed that the teachers in this study were working on a set of curriculum and textbooks incompatible with their core beliefs. In order for the teachers' beliefs to change towards a more communicative way, I suggested that teachers' beliefs be addressed from a bottom-up direction in the process of teachers' development and innovation introduction.

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