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## **Task-Based Language Teaching: Affordances and Challenges in TBLT Implementation at the Vietnamese Tertiary Level**

**Phuong Thi Hong Cao**

*Hanoi National University of Education, Vietnam*

### **Introduction**

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has been increasingly adopted and has emerged as a central concept from curriculum guidelines and syllabi (Nunan, 2003) in the Vietnamese context. Although TBLT has been vigorously and explicitly promoted by recent language education policies in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2011), a variety of affordances and challenges have arisen in connection with the implementation of TBLT in Vietnamese EFL classrooms. This report explores different factors that afford opportunities for or hinder the implementation of TBLT in the Vietnamese tertiary context, where students often lack the chance to practice the target language beyond the classroom doors.

### **Affordances and Challenges in TBLT implementation**

Within various interpretations of TBLT, significant features of this approach are emphasized. First, TBLT is defined as “learner-centered approach to language teaching” (Van den Branden, 2016, p. 164) which aims to ‘develop learners’ communicative competence by engaging them in meaning-focused communication through the performance of tasks” (Ellis & Shintani, 2014, p. 135). Second, it also develops learners’ linguistic and interactional competence (Ellis & Shintani, 2014). In short, a fundamental principle of TBLT is that although learners are mainly concerned with comprehending and constructing messages, they are also required to attend to form for learning to occur (Ellis & Shintani, 2014).

Over the past decades, the Vietnamese government has shifted national language policies and curricula towards different versions of communicative language teaching including TBLT (Yen, 2016) to foster the quality of EFL teaching and learning in the Vietnamese context. On the national level, English language competence is seen as human capital to help boost the countries’ economic competitiveness in the global market. In the particular context of Vietnam, an English language education initiative, known as Project 2020, has recently been launched by the government to enhance the quality of English language teaching and learning at all educational levels in the national education system. An objective of the project is to enable university students to become effective English language users who can function successfully in different environments (Le & Do, 2012). Specifically, Vietnamese undergraduates should communicate in

English proficiently at B1 the (CEFR) level. In line with the national policy, there has been a growing tendency for English to be adopted both as the medium of instruction (Vu & Burns, 2014) and a compulsory subject through task-based teaching being the principal teaching method (Hoang, Nguyen, & Hoang, 2006) in many universities across Vietnam. This means that task-based approaches are adopted at all levels of the curricula (Adams & Newton, 2009). Thus, TBLT has been advocated by both the policymakers and curriculum initiatives in Vietnamese tertiary education. Specifically, the government of Vietnam supports the organization of workshops and conferences for teachers on TBLT (Le, 2011). As a result, Vietnamese lecturers and teachers of English have begun to apply TBLT in their classrooms and achieved a particular outcome (e.g., Nguyen, Newton, & Crabbe, 2015; Yen, Van den Branden, Van Steendam, & Sercu, 2015). However, studies have also revealed a mismatch between the core features of TBLT and local pedagogical practices (e.g., Barnard & Viet, 2010; Nguyen, Le, & Barnard, 2015; Nguyen, Newton, & Crabbe, 2015; Yen, 2016). This is because of diverse factors hindering the adoption of TBLT in the actual practices.

### **Institutional Factors**

The primary barrier to adopting TBLT in the Vietnamese tertiary setting is the institutional factors, which are considered a psychological burden for EFL teachers to apply TBLT in their classrooms. The form-focused examination system in most universities throughout Vietnam focuses largely on a summative assessment of multiple choice testing formats, which may result in teachers' concentrating on giving explicit grammar instruction rather than focusing on meaning, which is argued to be an important feature of tasks (Ellis, 2003). Moreover, the use of commercial textbooks, such as *New English Files* and *Cutting Edge* in most universities including my institution, does not support task-based instruction (Le, 2008). Many activities in those textbooks neither reflect "a work plan for student activity" nor "seek to achieve an interactional authenticity" (Ellis, 2003, p. 8). Teachers may also be required to stick to a syllabus that specifies what is to be achieved regarding vocabulary and grammar structures. Consequently, they tend to base their teaching on the items available rather than on tasks, which have an indirect relationship to the linguistic knowledge of the syllabus (Ellis, 2011). Another contributing factor to the institutional constraints is the lecturers' heavy workload required by the universities (Pham, 2001). A majority of lecturers work like a teaching machine (Pham, 2001), a "tool provider," a metaphor mentioned by Farrell (2015, p. 62). As a consequence, teachers have little time to keep themselves abreast with current TBLT-related knowledge. For instance, many English lessons have been delivered exclusively through a grammar-based approach that mainly focuses on accuracy and testing (Pham, 2001), which may limit the adoption of TBLT. Adams and Newton (2009) asserted that schools adopting TBLT need to create a supporting environment for teachers to carry out experiments with new teaching approaches in their classrooms. However, the current negative washback effects of examinations, the adoption of commercial textbooks without adaptation and teachers' heavy schedules act as challenges for the TBLT to be implemented in Vietnamese tertiary settings.

### **Classroom Factors**

The second set of difficulties with implementing TBLT in Vietnamese tertiary context stems from classroom factors. Such constraints include what Butler (2011) mentioned in his study, which are the large class sizes with students of different proficiency levels, issues with classroom management and limited numbers of English instructional hours (Butler, 2011). As Littlewood (2007) argued, it is challenging to implement TBLT in large classes since students are noisily engaging in group discussions (Carless, 2012), which may lead to other teachers' complaining. Butler (2011) also added that it is demanding for teachers to employ alternative activities in large classes to ensure that every student participates. Moreover, students' multi-level proficiency reflects a challenge in terms of teachers' selecting, designing and organizing appropriate tasks (Adams, 2009). Vietnamese tertiary classrooms themselves also act as a

hindrance for task-based lessons because of the rigid set of rows of chairs and desks. In the last five years, I have been in charge of teaching different classes comprising of more than 40 undergraduates of multi-level proficiency in classrooms where desks are tightly arranged in four rows. I have found it hard to employ appropriate classroom management techniques and suitable activities to promote task-based learning. In respect to the limited number of teaching hours in the Vietnamese tertiary setting, English instruction is only allocated between three and four hours per week in most universities nationwide (Vu & Burns, 2014). There is also teachers' pressure of completing the syllabus (Carless, 2003), which impacts on the time available to conduct activities and tasks (Carless, 2003) through TBLT. In short, the reality of classroom factors mentioned above has made any methodological innovation, including TBLT, difficult to implement.

## **Teachers' Perceptions**

Last but not least, teachers' perceptions of core features of TBLT reflect a potential challenge in the adoption of a strong version of TBLT, as teachers' conceptions and beliefs about pedagogy are more influential (Carless, 2012) than other factors affecting the success of any educational innovations. In the Vietnamese tertiary context, knowledge about TBLT may have been accessible to teachers in teachers' manuals, conference materials, and implicitly embedded in the textbooks. However, teachers might only appear to adjust their attitudes (Viet, 2014). Consequently, many lecturers conduct their lesson plans with activities organized in a form-focused sequence, reflecting a weak form of TBLT, namely, the Presentation – Practice– Production (PPP) model (Viet, 2014), which is similar to what Carless (2009) found in Hong Kong contexts. This practice is not aligned with that advocated by a TBLT framework as proposed by Willis (2005). For example, research by Nguyen, Le and Barnard (2015) shows that Vietnamese teachers' understanding of TBLT was somewhat limited, with the teachers tending to focus on forms rather than on meaning. They believe that “the students needed an explicit knowledge of relevant grammatical features before they could communicate effectively” (Nguyen, Le, & Barnard, 2015, p. 79). It seems that Vietnamese teachers share the same difficulty as their colleagues in other Asian EFL contexts as mentioned by Carless (2012) regarding receiving “sufficiently in-depth teacher education to illuminate the key issues in implementing TBLT successfully” (Carless, 2012, p. 353). This lack of training also affects their perceptions of interpretation of the TBLT framework and the nature of tasks. In sum, teachers in different contexts including the Vietnamese tertiary setting, as mentioned by Adams and Newton (2009) “have not had the opportunities to gain sufficient understanding of tasks and task-based teaching” (Adams & Newton, 2009, p. 9), so that they can adopt it in their classrooms. A vague understanding of TBLT may lead to their confusions of the nature of TBLT and its implementation in the actual practices.

## **Implications and Recommendations**

As previously mentioned there are both opportunities and potential barriers to the implementation of TBLT in the Vietnamese tertiary classrooms. This report has attempted to discuss possible recommendations to address the issues. As argued by Van den Branden (2006), ambitious educational policies can only be successful if sustained efforts are made by by different stakeholders. As clearly stated, from the national level, the Vietnamese language policy explicitly promotes the implementation of TBLT in all educational settings, including the tertiary context. However, an efficient ELT policy needs to consider the contextual factors (Cao, Ta, & Hoang, 2016), in which the actual teaching practices occur. Thus, the policy is more likely to achieve its ultimate goals.

The primary recommendation with respect to the implementation of TBLT is how to create an appropriate task-based environment from institutional perspectives. First, “communicative tasks and task-based assessments” (Butler, 2011, p. 46) should be employed instead of classic form-focused examination,

which promotes teachers to utilize formative assessment types such as project work, presentations and other alternative assessments. Second, university authorities should encourage teachers and curriculum developers to design or adapt textbooks towards more task-like activities, which are argued to target the students' real world interest (McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007). A successful case has been shown in a similar context, at Chang Mai University, in Northern Thailand, where the English department faculty reframed the teaching syllabus into one that promoted a TBLT perspective and conducted a pilot program before introducing it university-wide. The success of this case regarding increased learner independence and real-world tasks would be a possible implication for other cases in South East Asia to consider.

Another recommendation regarding the classroom factors is that institutional policymakers should consider reducing the number of students in English classes to make them more feasible and appropriate for classroom interaction opportunities to occur. Teachers who are directly dealing with large class size issues should establish a code of behaviour in their classrooms to reduce the noise level. A more appropriate classroom environment to TBLT can satisfy three essential conditions as mentioned by Willis (2005). These are "the provision of exposure to the target language; the provision of opportunities to use the target language for real communication; and the provision of motivation for learners to engage in the learning process" (Willis, 2005, p. 19).

Since teachers are considered as the mediators and agents of change (Van den Branden, 2016) who drive the process of TBLT implementation forward, they play a crucial role in planning and designing lesson activities that "are tailored to students' internal syllabi" (Van den Branden, 2016, p. 179). Thus, to allow Vietnamese lecturers to obtain confidence and develop the professional expertise necessary for TBLT work, professional support regarding TBLT knowledge should be provided for teachers from TBLT experts through intensive training and coaching (Van den Branden, 2016). My institutional concern is similar to that described by McDonough and Chaikitmongkol (2007) in terms of teachers' needs of knowledge and skills of principle and philosophy of TBLT. With this support, teachers will be able to experiment, reflect, and revise task-based activities or a TBLT syllabus. By doing this, they can develop these skills sustainably and independently to make a radical transition from "traditional L2 teaching methods to TBLT" (McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007, p. 124).

## Conclusion

Although the educational policy in Vietnam has firmly supported the TBLT approach, it seems that the implementation of TBLT from such policy into actual classroom practice in the Vietnamese tertiary context has faced many difficulties, including institutional, classroom and teachers' constraints. Van den Branden (2006) asserts that TBLT takes a long time to become fully incorporated into classroom practice. The incorporation will be more likely to succeed if differently related stakeholders (Van den Branden, 2006) such as policymakers, school authorities, syllabus developers, in-service trainers, and practitioners can play their active parts in operating along agreed principles to optimize the opportunities for TBLT to fulfill its tasks.

In conclusion, adopting TBLT is not just a question of mastering a new teaching approach, it is more a matter of perspective and sensitive management of the learning environment (Willis, 2005). Considering myself as a reflective practitioner who has just established a task-based cycle for the first time in the Vietnamese tertiary classrooms, the most significant challenge for me is "processing the strength of mind to stand back with confidence, and to let learners get on with their own learning" (Willis, 2005, p. 148). With this in mind, I firmly believe that I will commit myself to participating in this promising TBLT endeavor.

## The Author

Phuong CAO (Cao Thi Hong Phuong) currently works as a lecturer and teacher trainer at the faculty of English, Hanoi National University of Education, Vietnam. She received her M.A degree in TESOL from School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, Victoria University of Wellington (VUW). Her research interests include strategic learning; teaching and learning vocabulary, ELT methodology and language teacher education. She has regularly presented her research papers at both national and international TEFL and TESOL conferences.

Faculty of English  
Hanoi National University of Education, Vietnam  
136 Xuan Thuy, Cau Giay District, Hanoi, Vietnam  
Tel: +84 915020617  
Email: hongphuongct@hnue.edu.vn

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