



Task-Based Language Teaching: An Alternative Approach in Teaching Reading Comprehension in Indonesia

Dwi Poedjiastutie

University of Muhammadiyah Malang, Indonesia

Didik Darmaji

University of Muhammadiyah Malang, Indonesia.

Musrina Musrina

University of Muhammadiyah Malang, Indonesia

Rianjani Novikasari

University of Muhammadiyah Malang, Indonesia

Introduction

Reading is one of four major skills in language teaching that must be acquired by students. As reported by Pang, Muaka, Bernhardt, and Kamil (2003) reading is the process of understanding or comprehending written text. In a similar vein, Blachowicz and Ogle (2008) state that reading is a crucial process to obtain information and ideas from different types of sources such as books, newspapers, manuals, letters, contracts, advertisements, and journal articles. Paris and Stahl (2005) point out that reading comprehension is the ability to identify meaningful relationships between various parts of a text and the readers' background knowledge. Equally, by reading, people likely can set up, change, and revise their schemata after gaining new information (Miller, 2002).

However, even though reading is a beneficial activity, the reading interests of Indonesian students cannot be considered high. The Program in International Reading Literacy Study in 2011 reported that the results of the reading achievement of Indonesian students ranked 45 out of 48 country participants (Mullis et al., 2012). A similar survey conducted by the Program of International Student Assessment or PISA (2012) investigated the reading literacy scale of 15-year-old students (NCES, 2012). The results placed Indonesia in the position of 60 out of 65 country participants. Another study conducted on literacy done by Miller and McKenna (2016) put Indonesia as the second lowest of 61 countries in the World's Most Literate Nations (WMLN). Based on the data above, it is disappointing to learn that reading achievements of Indonesian students are considered unsatisfactory. A fundamental question emerges from this research, what is wrong with the literacy skills of Indonesian students?

Alongside the research examining the cognitive, linguistic, and meta-linguistic bases for reading ability in L1 or L2 among children, the development of reading ability cannot be considered without the wider

societal and cultural context. For example, reading habits of Indonesians have never been inherited from their ancestors. Early on, many children are used to listening or learning verbally from stories and fairy tales commonly read by the parents or community leaders. The stories are normally shared with the children orally and they are rarely given opportunity to read by themselves. This is similar to Chakravarthy (1997) who claims that family lifestyle, relationships between children and parents at home, and family socioeconomic status are closely related to the nurturing of reading habits which affect children's reading achievement both in the L1 and L2. Furthermore, Winsler, Kim, and Richard (2014) argue that education and country of birth, for example, have been found to affect children's L2 literacy outcomes. Particularly in school settings, the Indonesian education system has not encouraged students to learn independently outside of the classroom. Generally, the students rely on the information obtained from the teacher and they take the information from the teacher for granted without critically examining it. Basuki (1993) argues that since the goal of the Indonesian education system is to pass the National examination, accordingly there is a lack of interest in reading books for pleasure outside of the classroom.

Teachers as knowledge facilitators in the classroom are supposed to provide help for students to improve their reading performance. Marina, Rahman, and Roselan (2011) claim that teachers must utilize appropriate methods in order to elevate students' achievement in reading. Richards and Renandya (2002) especially suggest Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) for the Indonesian EFL classroom context.

What is TBLT?

The application of TBLT has become a familiar approach both in ESL and EFL contexts. Many academics and scholars believe that the emergence of TBLT is the development of Presentation Practice and Production (PPP) where the orientation has focused on language accuracy (Sato, 2010). Unlike PPP, Willis (1996,) has pointed out that the tasks in TBLT is the activity where students use the target language for communicative purposes to get better outcomes. In a similar vein, Nunan (2004) states that the "task is a piece of classroom work that involves students in understanding, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning" (p. 4). According to Ellis (2003), TBLT has a specific goal which includes communicative language use in the process because the task is supposed to be similar to the one that emerges naturally in the real world. Hence, he further describes that TBLT provides a more natural learning opportunity, focusing both on meaning over form and aids in language pattern acquisition.

The TBLT framework has three phases (Willis, 1996). The pre-task activity is where the teacher introduces the topic and task. The second phase is the task cycle where students may do, plan, and report whether they are going to complete the task through oral or written production. The last phase includes the language focus that covers the analysis activity, feedback, and practice. In addition, five characteristics of TBLT during the task cycle must be observed. Those are:

1. *The uses of natural language*

The uses of natural language mean that the language taught should be similar to what students usually use in the real world. Especially in reading, teachers should be sensitive in selecting reading materials that students may also encounter in real world situations. For example, students need to understand how to read flight schedules.

2. *Student-centered platform*

The learning should allow students the freedom to use language, which promotes wider and greater exposure to the target language. Having said that, minimal teacher input during the task should be observed.

3. *Focus on meaning*

Tasks given to the students are not merely about grammatical features. The classroom learning should discuss meaningful tasks such as reading the manual of a washing machine, reading travel itineraries, and grammar may be discussed to clarify meaning when misunderstanding occurs.

4. *Focused and unfocused task types*

Focused task types are necessary when teachers want students to learn and master particular language elements and functions. On the other hand, unfocused tasks enforce and encourage students to use several language patterns to deal with the task, more often unpredictable language patterns and forms.

5. *Rejection of the traditional approach*

A traditional approach is basically learning language for the sake of understanding its grammatical patterns. One of the aspects of traditional instruction is Presentation-practice-production (PPP) that has been developed as an alternative approach to language teaching. This task-based framework differs from a PPP cycle because the focus on language form comes at the end while in task-based learning, the communication task itself is central to the framework. Such a task may involve student production of language and/or may be linked to a spoken or written text.

Reflecting on these five characteristics, several scholars have divergent points of view toward them. Ellis (2009) explores the differences comprehensively in the following table:

TABLE 1
The Characteristics of TBLT

Characteristic	Long (1985)	Skehan (1988)	Ellis (2003)
Natural language	Yes	Yes	Yes
student-centeredness	Yes	Yes	Not necessarily
Focus on form	Yes -- corrective feedback	Yes -- mainly through pre-task	Yes -- in all phases of a TBLT lesson
Kind of task (focused and unfocused)	Yes -- unfocused and focused	Yes unfocused	Yes -- unfocused and focused
Rejection of traditional approach	Yes	Yes	No

As has been listed in Table 1, overall TBLT advocates learning instruction that emphasizes natural language (e.g. the activity focuses on meaning rather than language structure). They also agree on the focus-on form aspect of TBLT, but they differ in regards to the stage that teachers should introduce language forms. When it comes to the task, Skehan (1988) advocates unfocused tasks while Long (1985) and Ellis (2003) favor focused tasks during its implementation. In addition, Long (1985) and Skehan (1988) emphasize learner centeredness while Ellis considers student centeredness as not critical in the TBLT framework. Furthermore, Ellis (2009) does not object to a traditional approach. The traditional approach here refers to the PPP in which the implementation still deals with drilling for language accuracy. In short, referring to the characteristics of TBLT, particularly to the divergent points of view, the adaptability characteristics are possibly suitable for EFL classrooms, especially to improve and develop reading skills.

What does the TBLT Classroom Look Like?

Several TBLT studies have highlighted its effectiveness in EFL contexts. Iranmehr, Erfani, and Davari (2011) revealed that TBLT has significantly contributed to the advantages of teaching reading for ESP in Iran. A quasi experimental research design was used in this study. The results found that task-based instruction using Willis's (1996) three stage task-based framework: pre-task, task cycle and post-task

strongly contributed to improving the reading comprehension of ESP students in an Iranian university. The results showed that TBLT was a suitable approach for teaching reading comprehension by indicating that there was some progress in a group of college students.

Shabani and Ghasemi (2014) did a comparison study between TBLT and Content-Based Language Teaching (CBLT). Sixty students were selected randomly to participate in this study. Thirty students were taught using CBLT in the control group, and another 30 students were taught using TBLT in the experimental group. The results showed that TBLT outperformed CBLT for five reasons. First, TBLT encouraged the learners to comprehend the written text with an unconscious and peripheral focus on the form of the language. Ellis (2003) points out that the significance of TBLT is that it delivers an authentic, purposeful, and intentional background for understanding and using language which was encouraging for the EFL learners. Second, the pre-task phase of the TBLT cycle seemed very helpful for students because the teacher tried to engage students' background knowledge to the schemata. In this process, the teacher stimulated the background knowledge of students by completing the tasks that resembled the tasks in the cycle. Compared to CBLT, especially in the pre-reading phase, TBLT offers more effective, authentic, meaningful, and purposeful activities. This meaningful pre-task activity has been strengthened by another TBLT study conducted by Demirel and Amer (2017), who found that the pre-task phase had facilitated students to comprehend the text effectively because it was related to the students' background knowledge. Third, by contrast, in CBLT the students focused on the provided content not the language, while in TBLT they focused on both the manipulation of language and the learning content. Fourth, in the TBLT task cycle, the cooperative planning and report phases had significantly developed students' reading competency by obtaining and reflecting on feedback from group members. In the last activity, the TBLT post-task, the teacher summarized several difficult language structures, vocabulary, and other linguistic problems faced by students during the task completion. Therefore, TBLT is formal instruction which focuses on the use of language and contents which were absent in CBLT.

How Do EFL Teachers Respond to TBLT?

Even though empirical data showed the effectiveness of TBLT for ELT, teachers have different attitudes toward TBLT and its use to facilitate the teaching process. Tabatabaei and Hadi (2011) investigated teachers' perceptions toward TBLT in Iranian EFL reading classrooms. Fifty-one Iranian EFL teachers participated in this study. The results showed that most teachers had a positive attitude and deep understanding about the concept and pedagogical principles of TBLT. Therefore, teachers had successfully employed the TBLT approach in their classes. The findings of Tabatabaei and Hadi (2011) showed that task-based language pedagogy can be successfully implemented in classrooms if the teachers understand its principles and characteristic and how it works.

Harris (2016) conducted a similar study exploring teachers' beliefs about TBLT in Japanese classrooms using an online survey. He investigated teachers' beliefs not only by looking at teachers' understanding of TBLT but also by questioning them about what special considerations are made for teachers to become TBLT enthusiasts. The results showed that TBLT effectiveness included the task design and excessive teachers' support as the scaffolding in the pre-task cycle. Moreover, it shaped students to be more independent and used to student centeredness where they could actively participate either individually or in group tasks in which the learning atmosphere barely existed in most EFL contexts. However, teacher centeredness can still be used if the teacher introduces new or unfamiliar tasks.

In Hong Kong, by contrast, Carless (2004) revealed that teachers dominantly rejected TBLT due to its complexity. Kewaza and Welch (2013) conducted a study on whether TBLT was effective for reading classes. The respondents argued that due to the big number of students in a class, there was an obstacle in implementing TBLT. The large classes create problems for the teachers in giving feedback on individual needs. There is also limited student-teacher interaction and time constraints in giving feedback on every individual's reading progress. There was also a greater possibility for learners to use the mother tongue

during task performance. As was recommended by Nation (2003), the use of the mother tongue should be minimized during task performance to give the opportunity for students to explore the target language.

The use of the mother tongue cannot be avoided in Indonesian classrooms since English is not the students' first language. English is used as the language of instruction only in English classes. Understanding the similarity of the status of English in both countries, Indonesian teachers may respond to TBLT in the same way as Hong Kong teachers.

In addition, Hu (2005) conducted a TBLT study in China. The results showed that the teachers refused to use TBLT because it was not the appropriate method to prepare students to pass examinations. Since the focus of TBLT was on language fluency rather than on the linguistic system, this kind of criticism had become a consideration for some teachers to avoid TBLT. In this sense, the language evaluation from the academic curriculum has a focus on language structure instead of a communicative purpose.

Furthermore, Adams (2009) pointed out that top down academic policy enforced by the government was hardly support for TBLT classroom practice across East Asia. It is apparent that a top-down curriculum is something familiar in most Asian countries including Indonesia., which also experiences the same issue in that English evaluation still focuses on the linguistic system. This case somehow made teachers believe that TBLT is time consuming because it did not prepare students to pass examinations.

Both of the claims by Hu (2005) and Adams (2009) are a true case in Indonesia as well. Indonesian school curricula are formulated using the top-down approach, and the problem with this top-down system is giving less or no room for school teachers to flexibly adopt phases recommended in TBLT to boost students' reading performances (Poedjiastutie, Akhyar, Hidayati, & Gasmi, 2018). These top-down curricular approaches are usually followed by the national examination.

However, it does not mean that TBLT is indeed just a dream for EFL contexts like Indonesia. Willis (1996) suggests that with the balance of text and task will encourage students to get the feel of what language patterns might sound or look. She further points out that when the exams come, the teacher can emphasize language focus more. In addition, Ellis (2003) argues that TBLT does not teach communication. It only provides conditions to make students communicate through task development. He emphasizes that the emergence of TBLT does not reject other approaches and that the linguistic systems still have a place in language pedagogy.

How Do Students Respond to TBLT?

Unlike teachers, when it comes to EFL learners, they have shown more positive reactions toward TBLT. Meng and Cheng (2010) in their study found that most students in China were excited and considered the approach beneficial when it came to the task. Students felt excited due to a variety of tasks given and considered it beneficial because the more they participated in the task process, the better they evaluated their own performance. Nevertheless, more than a quarter of the participants felt disappointed about their task performance. Teachers were recommended to introduce the task as early and as clearly as possible to provide time for students to prepare for the task performance. Moreover, during task phases, teachers were still responsible to guide the students whenever they faced difficulties. In TBLT, the teacher plays a crucial role during the activity and post activity.

Hadi (2012) conducted a similar study of students' perceptions toward TBLT. He studied 88 Iranian female learners through open-ended questionnaires. The results show that the students had positive attitudes and welcomed the new experience that TBLT offered them. These learners consider that TBLT had given them a chance of collaboration, provided natural interaction in using the target language and emphasized its motivational potential. Huang (2015) revealed that the ELT students have shown positive reactions towards TBLT. That study has shown that TBLT engaged students' motivation and increased their interests and made them more autonomous. The students said that TBLT enhanced their interest toward learning the target language and they became more autonomous through their active involvement in preparing the task and their information searching ability to solve information gap activities had

improved.

Students in nature never restrict themselves to welcome a new experience that any teaching approach offers. Teachers should be sensitive to this. To create a stage where students are being preoccupied and engaged in learning is not an easy job. Teachers possibly can combine the traditional instruction and TBLT.

In Indonesian contexts like several other countries in Asia, students have access to the Internet and this becomes their excitement. Teachers should understand what students are usually passionate about in their real life and relate this with reading activities. For example, a study on improving students' ability of reading comprehension was conducted within the framework of TBLT by Tahririan and Basiri (2005). In doing so, both of them utilized Internet reading as the focal task. The results of the study indicated that reading skills, such as skimming and scanning, are fundamental to Internet reading. Students did not read every word or every line of the page. Their eyes moved from one item to the other in search of relevant information.

Another example is to challenge students to read to obtain the information for problems that arise. Instead of requesting students to comprehend the reading passage and ask them to answer the comprehension questions, teachers may start with a problem and ask them to find a solution. The solutions should be based on the information from readings or what we call reading purposefully. Reading purposefully is more interesting, and text information is understood and recalled better when reading is purpose driven (Madhkhan & Mousavi, 2017).

Conclusion

Indonesian EFL teachers need to have comprehensive understanding and sufficient knowledge and practical skills about TBLT before applying it as a teaching approach in their classrooms. The teachers need to attend more professional development events to better understand language pedagogy, especially when responding to some TBLT challenges such as the large class size and degree of teacher centeredness.

The positive views from learners can be the main consideration to propose TBLT as an alternative approach. Rifkin (2000) argued that the learner's attitude is crucial in the learning process, which can determine their failure or success. In other words, it is important for teachers to know the students' point of view to give better learning outcomes as this teaching approach has facilitated or hindered students in acquiring the target language. Moreover, teachers should not only be aware of student perceptions but also consider them as a decision requirement of selecting the proper approach in teaching (Cray & Currie, 1996). Then, teachers could further refine the conceptual model of TBLT in Indonesia since TBLT has been popularly applied in many EFL countries. Even though a great deal of research has been done in the area of TBLT and reading comprehension, the results do not agree in all cases. A number of factors merit consideration when implementing TBLT. One of the most crucial factors is teachers' ability to create efficacious and innovative reading activities.

Acknowledgements

This paper was based on my scientific writing subject for master level students at Department of English and Education at University of Muhammadiyah Malang.

The Authors

Dwi Poedjiastutie (corresponding author) is an Associate Professor at Department of English and Education, Faculty of Education, University of Muhammadiyah Malang, Indonesia. She wrote several

ESP books (English for Biology, English for Law, English for Information and Technology, English for Pharmacy, and English for Psychology) for students at the University Muhammadiyah Malang. Those books are also used as textbooks at other universities in Indonesia. She is an active researcher, and her work has appeared in a number of international journals. Her research focuses on studies of second language acquisition including large scale studies on needs analysis for national curriculum development. She can be contacted at dwi.poedjiastutie@postgrad.curtin.edu.au or dpoedjiastutie@yahoo.com.

Didik Darmaji is currently pursuing a Master of Education in the Department of English and Education, University of Muhammadiyah Malang, Indonesia.

Musrina Musrina is currently pursuing a Master of Education in the Department of English and Education, University of Muhammadiyah Malang, Indonesia.

Rianjani Novikasari is currently pursuing Master of Education in the Department of English and Education, University of Muhammadiyah Malang, Indonesia.

References

- Adams, R. (2009). Recent publications on task-based language teaching: A review. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 19(3), 339–355.
- Blachowicz, C., & Ogle, D. (2008). *Reading comprehension*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
- Carless, D. (2004). Issues in teachers' reinterpretation of a task-Based innovation in primary schools. *TESOL Quarterly*, 38(4), 639–662.
- Chakravarthy, G. (1997). *A Study of reading patterns among primary school children in Penang*. Universiti Sains Malaysia Project Cooperation, Ministry of Education and the British Council.
- Cray, E., & Currie, P. (1996). Linking adult learners with the education of L2 teachers. *TESOL Quarterly*, 30(1), 113–130.
- Demirel, O., & Amer, N. B. (2017). The effects of task-based language teaching (TBLT) on the reading comprehension in EFL classes. *Education and Linguistics Research*, 3(2), 123–130.
- Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, R. (2009). Task-based language teaching: Sorting out the misunderstandings. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 19(3), 221–246.
- Hadi, A. (2012). Perceptions of task-based language teaching: A study of Iranian EFL learners. *English Language Teaching*, 6(1), 103–111.
- Harris, J. (2016). Teachers' beliefs about task-Based language teaching in Japan. *The Journal of Asia TEFL*, 13(2), 102–116.
- Hu, G. W. (2005). Contextual influences on instructional practices: A Chinese case for an ecological approach to ELT. *TESOL Quarterly*, 39(4), 635–660.
- Huang, D. (2015). A study on the application of task-based language teaching method in a comprehensive English class in China. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 7(1), 118–127.
- Iranmehr, A., Erfani, S. M., & Davari, H. (2011). Integrating task-based instruction as an alternative approach in teaching reading comprehension in English for special purposes. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 1(2), 142–148.
- Kewaza, S., & Welch, M. (2013). Big class size challenges: Teaching reading in primary classes in Kampala, Uganda's Central Municipality. *US-China Education*, 3(5), 283–296.
- Long, M. (1985). A role for instruction in second language acquisition: task-based language teaching. In K. Hyltenstam & M. Pienemann (Eds.). *Modelling and assessing second language acquisition* (pp. 77–99). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Madhkan, M., & Mousavi, S.M. (2017). The effect of implimentation of TBLT in reading

- comprehension classes of Iranian EFL learners. *English Language Teaching*, 10(11), 119–128.
- Marina R., Rahman, F. A., & Roselan, B. (2011). Memahami program LINUS dan teknik kemahiran membaca murid pemulihan. *Prosiding Seminar Majlis Dekan-dekan Pendidikan*, 1(1), 1301–1311.
- Meng, Y., & Cheng, B. (2010). College students' perceptions on the issues of task-based language teaching in mainland China. *Journal of Language Teaching & Research*, 1(4), 434–442.
- Miller, D. (2002). *Reading with meaning*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publisher.
- Miller, J. W., & McKenna, M. C. (2016.) *World literacy: How countries rank and why it matters*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Mullis, I. V. S., Martin, M. O., Foy, P., & Drucker, K. T. (2012). *PIRLS 2011 International results in reading*. Chestnut Hill, MA: TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center, Boston College.
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). (2012). *Program for international student assessment (PISA) 21012*. Retrieved from: https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/pisa/pisa2012/pisa2012highlights_5a.asp
- Nation, P. (2003). The role of the first language in foreign language learning. *The Asian EFL Journal*, 5(2), 1–8.
- Nunan, D. (2004). *Task-based language teaching*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Pang, E. S., Muaka, A., Bernhardt, E. B, & Kamil, M. L. (2003). *Task-based language teaching*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Paris, S. G. & Stahl, S. A. (2005). *Children's reading comprehension and assessment*. London, UK: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Poedjiastutie, D., Akhyar, F., Hidayati, D., & Gasmi, F. N. (2018). Does curriculum help students to develop their English competence? A Case in Indonesia. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ)* 9(2), 175–185.
- Richards, J. C., & Renandya, W. A. (2002). *Methodology in language teaching*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Rifkin, B. (2000). Revisiting beliefs about foreign language learning. *Foreign Language Annals*, 33(4), 394–409.
- Sato, R. (2010). Reconsidering the effectiveness and suitability of PPP and TBLT in the Japanese EFL Classroom. *JALT Journal*, 32(2), 189200. Retrieved from: <http://jalt-publications.org/recentpdf/jj/2010b/perspectives.pdf>
- Shabani, M. B., & Ghasemi, A. (2014). The effect of task-based language teaching (TBLT) and content-based language teaching (CBLT) on the Iranian intermediate ESP learners' reading comprehension. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 98, 1713–1721.
- Skehan, P. (1988). *A comparison of first and foreign language learning ability (Working Document No. 8)*. London, UK: ESOL Department, Institute of Education, London University.
- Basuki, S. (1993). Library education and training in Indonesia. *Asian Libraries*, 4,41–48.
- Tabatabaei, O., & Hadi, A. (2011). Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of task-based language pedagogy. *Higher Education of Social Science*, 1(2), 1–9.
- Tahririan, M. H., & Basiri, F. (2005). Reading internet documents: Appraising ESP reading from a new perspective. In G. Kiany, & M. Khayamdar (Eds.), *Proceedings of the first national ESP/EAP conference* (pp.134-156). Tehran, Iran: SAMT Publications.
- Willis, J. (1996). *A framework for task-based learning*. Harlow, UK: Longman
- Winsler, A., Kim, Y. K., & Richard, E. (2014). Socio-emotional skills, behavior problems, and L1 competence predict the acquisition of English for English language learners in poverty. *Developmental Psychology*, 50(9), 2242–2254.