

Task-based language teaching and English for Academic Purposes: Challenges and effectiveness

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This paper deals with the implementation of the Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) method to develop English competency in the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course at Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada. Students from non-English-speaking backgrounds commonly enroll in EAP programs, which are intended to satisfy postsecondary English language proficiency requirements, as a means of pursuing higher education. TBLT has been growing in momentum in Canada, New Zealand, Hong Kong, India, and Vietnam since the 1980s as part of the communicative agenda and has drawn the attention of the educators, curriculum designers, policy makers, SLA researchers, and textbook writers. The method of TBLT is essentially a learner-centered and experiential pedagogical approach, which stands in contrast to more traditional approaches to language pedagogy like presentation, practice, and production (PPP). The student-focused methods advocated by TBLT suggest that the teacher should remain in charge of what happens in the classroom. In recognition of these advantages, TBLT has been incorporated into the national curricula of many Asian nations in the decade of 1980, particularly India, China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong (Adams & Newton, 2009). This paper is an attempt to share my TBLT experiences in an EAP course at Carleton University, where all students learn English as second language (L2) from non-English departments.

The principal rationale of TBLT research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is to show how classroom tasks can foster a genuine need for communication, encourage an emphasis on form, give students the chance to receive feedback and correct their work, and get them ready for real-world tasks outside of the English classroom. TBLT is “effectively a teacher-free zone, in which tasks work their effect without any need for mediation” (East 2012, p. 82). All of these goals facilitate the interactionist domain. From an interactionist standpoint, in TBLT, “teacher input and direction have crucial roles to play in helping students to execute tasks successfully” (East, 2012, p. 82). The major significant strength of TBLT is that students can achieve more benefits from task-based learning because it is more student-centered, enables more meaningful communication, and frequently offers opportunities for the development of useful extra-linguistic skills. In the TBLT approach, students are more likely to be involved in their language learning because they are likely to be familiar with the tasks.

Because of the internationalization of higher education, EAP is gradually becoming an important component of English Language Teaching (ELT). Particularly, in the Canadian context, many immigrants and international students admit to the higher educational institutions in Canada, which necessitates the importance of teaching EAP courses so that students from diverse countries can adjust to Canadian education, life, and society. The paper seeks to outline the benefits and challenges of TBLT while demonstrating that EAP students benefit most from its use in an EAP context. Finally, this paper recommends ways to facilitate TBLT in ESL implications. In addition, language practitioners can get ideas from this paper about TBLT-based language pedagogy particularly, in the EAP context.

What is TBLT?

Generally, TBLT denotes using real language to accomplish meaningful tasks in the target language. These include going to the doctor, doing an interview, or contacting customer support for assistance. Many of the TBLT activities, according to Willis and Willis (2007), should be developed using everyday language. For instance, «making a conversation, reading newspapers, and finding our way around the world by asking people or looking at written sources on paper or electronically» (p. 139) are examples of such activities. Because of this, TBLT is particularly well-liked for boosting students' confidence and target language proficiency. Therefore, one could classify TBLT as a subset of CLT: "I would say that CLT addresses the question, *why*? TBLT answers the question, *how*?" (Nunan, 2004, p. 458). Long (2015) defines tasks under TBLT as "the real-world activities people think of when planning, conducting, or recalling their day" (p. 6). Furthermore, Nunan (1989) proposes that tasks "involve communicative language use in which the user's attention is focused on meaning rather than linguistic structure" (p. 10). TBLT addresses the significance of "what learners are able to do with the language" and attempts to provide guidance for the creation and implementation of tasks in the classroom (Norris, 2009, p. 578). Norris continues by saying that classrooms serve as crucial "holistic activity structures" that let students connect language forms, meanings they convey, and contexts in which they are employed. Because of its efficacy, TBLT is globally accepted, as Chen and Wang (2019) highlight the clear global evolution of TBLT, characterized by its increasing recognition as an effective pedagogical method.

Principles of TBLT

The primary goal of TBLT is to communicate meaning in a way that is understood by learners with limited language proficiency. One of the most beneficial goals of TBLT, according to Willis and Willis (2007), is to provide students with "the confidence and willingness to have a go, even if their language resources are limited" (p. 2). The following are some of the main principles of TBLT:

- The curriculum's content is largely determined by the needs of the students. Topic selections should not be decided by teacher rather it should be fixed by students.
- The main components of teaching and learning a language should be based on communicative tasks. Instead of forms and structures, communicative skills should be given priority.
- Through practice more and more in the class, students will develop confidence, knowledge, and skills in language.
- Classes must be learner-centered focusing on students' engagement in the classroom activities instead of traditional teacher-led and lecture-based pedagogy.
- Grammatical accuracy is important but not the main goal of teaching. Focus should be given on real-life communication.
- Tasks are educational activities that imitate the kinds of things students do outside of the classroom. Tasks should be connected with everyday life, common, and familiar.
- Teachers must keep an eye on their students' progress and assess whether the tasks have been completed and whether students have met the task outcomes.

Theoretical framework of TBLT

It is clear that a carefully planned task sequence is crucial to any TBLT classroom. This begins with the teacher choosing a task according to students' needs. The next step is to create a set of target tasks that are more realistic and authentic. According to Willis and Wills (1996), a TBLT class can be divided into three main stages to provide a detailed introduction to each of these: pre-task, on-task, and post-task phase.

Pre-task, on-task, and post-task

Preparing students to complete the task and acquire the language is the aim of the pre-task phase. In this stage, the instructor presents the subject and assigns exercises that help students in learning words and phrases necessary for completing the task. This includes providing students' prior knowledge about the subject through reading or listening exercises, outlining important words and phrases, and getting them involved in strategic planning.

However, a three-stage task cycle is part of on-task (Willis, 1996). (1) Task: Students work in small groups or pairs to complete the task. The instructor resolves problems that need to be addressed and offers assistance and clarification as required. (2) Planning: Students get ready to show the class their work. It can be done orally or in writing. When necessary, the instructor offers assistance and linguistic guidance. (3) Report: After groups present their findings to the class, the instructor offers comments on the language and content.

With TBLT, the instructor takes into account a variety of potential solutions to the issue at hand rather than expecting the same result from every student.

According to Willis (1996), the post-task phase is known as the language focus phase, during which students can examine particular aspects of the task. The teacher can give form-focused instructions or practice exercises using new words, and students can write down new words and phrases they have learned. It makes it possible for the students to use language in a way that is clear. Students can self-correct with the teacher's assistance and feedback.

Observation detailed

At Carleton University, an EAP course is taught to develop students' L2 competency. The EAP course is for the students who have not come from countries where English is taught as L1. The instructor designs and teaches the course following the TBLT method. The course that I have observed is ESLA1500. There were eleven students from 8 different countries (2 Syrian, 2 Senegalese, 2 Afghans, 1 Indian, 1 Chinese, 1 Colombian, 1 Saudi Arabian, 1 Egyptian), which is a multilingual and multicultural phenomenon. The purpose of the course is to help students be familiar with a new culture, language, and environment in Canada. One striking issue is that students are very enthusiastic about learning English. It is a mandatory course for the students, without which they will not be eligible to get a graduate certificate. My observations are based on the two major components of the course materials, such as in-class writings and presentation. I have observed the in-class writing and presentation performances of the students from the perspectives of TBLT. I have found that students participated in both the activities with interests to learn something new from their peers and teacher.

Teaching practice of in-class writing and presentation

In this section, I will narrate the classroom practices in an EAP class regarding the implementation of TBLT. Here, I want to mention two topics practiced in the EAP class that I have observed. Students are assigned in-class writing weighing 15 marks. In the in-class writing, students are asked to write about their cultural heritages. The class is culturally diverse, and the students have presented their insights. For example, two Senegalese students have pointed out their African cultural traditions and customs focusing on African songs and dances. The Indian student has nicely presented the cultural heritages like the Sanskrit mythology, the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Another student from Egypt has presented the Egyptian glories such as the Pyramids and the historical tombs of the pharaohs.

Presentation is the topic in which I have been instructed by the teacher to present a lecture and I have also observed students' presentations along with giving feedback to them. This is the topic in the EAP course, where

the students are asked to decide a topic in line with their respective degree subjects. Students have chosen suitable topics with consultation with their friends and teachers. They have prepared their presentation slides and presented them as a rehearsal of the final presentation. The students have received feedback from their friends and teachers. Finally, they have presented following the rubrics and the presentations have been graded. The students have aptly shown their talents in the presentation. For example, the Indian student who is doing an MA in Human Resource Management (HRM) has shown how the English language is used in advertisements to get the highest benefits by using English language in different products. The Colombian girl of the Economics department has presented the statistics of women's employment in financial sectors in Canada. One of the Afghan students has presented a comparative analysis of the use of AI technology in Canada and Afghanistan.

Discussion and reflection

I have observed each activity in the EAP classroom from a TBLT perspective, as one of the purposes of the course is to prepare students in such a way that they can effectively communicate both in writing and verbally in real-life contexts. If I consider the in-class writing from Wills (2006), I find that in the process of the accomplishment of the task, the criteria of pre-task, on-task, and post-task have not been followed. Therefore, in-class writing tasks have not been followed TBLT aspects both theoretically and practically (Figure 1). In-class writing task was mainly based on traditional presentation, practice, and production (PPP) method instead of TBLT. My opinion regarding in-class writing is that the post-task strategy of Willis (2006) can be followed to make the task under the TBLT method. Students' self-corrections and teachers' feedback can facilitate in-class writing in line with TBLT.

In my analysis, the TBLT method is appropriately followed in the presentation activity. Here, the three-stage task cycle of on-task (Willis, 1996) has been maintained (Figure 1). Firstly, the students have formed groups according to their subjects, chosen their presentation topics, and prepared presentation slides. Secondly, one class is scheduled to present the slides for peer and teacher feedback. Finally, after accommodating the feedback provided, the students have presented their topics, and the teacher has graded the presentation with final comments. In this presentation task, students have demonstrated their previous learning and also got suggestions for future pathways.

Implications for ESL teaching

Here, I will narrate the effectiveness and challenges in implementing TBLT in an EAP context. I will also suggest some ways to make TBLT effective in ESL teaching. In the ESL context, TBLT is a very effective way of teaching pedagogy. To develop L2 competency, the TBLT method has facilitated ESL learners to

improve their English efficiency particularly in the communicative purposes. The practicality, effectiveness, and learner-centeredness of TBLT are the major advantages. The most common advantage, practicality, is associated with how well TBLT activities fit the needs of EAP students and how they can get the students ready for similar tasks in their future degree courses. Effectiveness is another advantage of TBLT where students believe that TBLT activities are superior to other teaching strategies. Over time, students will be able to apply taught skills more successfully and learn and retain more information. The learner-centered classroom rounds out the top three advantages of TBLT. This becomes possible with TBLT because activities are more student-centered, and the teacher acts as a facilitator. Task-based activities encourage greater learning commitment and ownership on the part of the students. Here, I observe that students have got adequate opportunities to align the activities of the EAP course with their degree courses, and most of the class activities are based on real-life context, which made their learning effective and meaningful.

However, some drawbacks of TBLT have been addressed in my observation of the EAP program. The challenges that I have found are excessive instructor preparation, a lack of classroom time, and a mismatch with student expectations. Firstly, mismatch with student expectations is identified as the most significant disadvantage in relation to students' expectations for instruction and learning in an EAP class using TBLT methodologies. Some students may expect the teacher to do all of the teaching because they dislike learner-centered tasks. Students are thought to be accustomed to more conventional teaching techniques and are frequently unfamiliar with TBLT strategies. Some students are unwilling to receive knowledge from their peers. Secondly, TBLT is thought to be time-intensive, requiring more class time than some other methods. It has been noticed that within fixed class time, teacher cannot handle the TBLT activities in a proper way. Sometimes, in the middle of the activities, teacher has to end his class. Finally, with careful planning and skillful implementation, TBLT requires more instructor preparation. Because TBLT is difficult to organize, instructors have to be quite skilled in designing tasks.

From my observations of an EAP course at Carleton University, some suggestions are proposed to make TBLT more effective and meaningful in an EAP context.

- Pair and group interactions should be prioritized. Classroom processes seemed centered around teacher-student interactions. Students' participation in the classroom activities should be focused more, and overreliance on the teacher in the interactive scenario needs to be reduced.
- Balance between task time and class time should be given proper attention to implement TBLT. It is noted that the teacher often changes task time and intervenes in the pair and group activities. Teachers have limited class time and a tendency to accomplish all the predetermined topics. To facilitate TBLT, teachers should avoid introducing many topics in one class.

- Teaching objectives and assessment methods should have a good alignment. The intention of the teacher is noted to navigate a task-based teaching, but the assessment process is found mostly traditional grammar and knowledge focused. Students are found concerned about English linguistic knowledge about forms and structures. Therefore, a good alignment between TBLT practice and assessment process is required.
- Teachers should design tasks in a way that they promote student engagement. In addition, students like tasks and learn from the tasks. To engage students more in the classroom activities, students should be given enough time to share their thoughts.
- Tasks should be based on specific real-life activities so that students find motivations and interests to engage in activities and consider tasks as fun. Unknown topics or difficult topics should be avoided as students are found reluctant to join in the discussion when topics are unfamiliar to them.
- Teachers should create a low-anxiety learning environment where students feel free to share their ideas and practice English language to develop confidence and competence in communication. The core objective of TBLT class should be learning for pleasure.

Conclusion

This paper mainly addresses the implementation of TBLT in an EAP context. The paper tries to focus on a theoretical framework of TBLT perceptions and classroom practice in an EAP classroom. Generally speaking, TBLT motivates EAP students to improve their L2 linguistic knowledge and skills. Some benefits and drawbacks have been addressed from observation of an EAP class. Some suggestions are also provided to facilitate TBLT in an EAP context mainly in the implication of ESL learning. Above all, TBLT is a learner-centered approach that focuses more on learning theories than language theories. One notable distinction between TBLT and earlier form-focused approaches is that TBLT classes start with an emphasis on meaning before shifting to language and finally form. It engages students in an activity that is meaning-focused. TBLT appeared to offer the prospects to combine “the best insights from communicative language teaching with an organized focus on language form” (Willis, 1996, p. 1).

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