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CHALLENGES OF SHIFTING TO TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING: A STORY FROM A VIETNAMESE TEACHER

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ABSTRACT

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is currently being introduced throughout Asia and has emerged as a central concept from a study of curriculum guidelines and syllabi in the Asia Pacific countries (Nunan, 2006). In some countries such as China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, TBLT has been strongly promoted in English language education policies (Butler, 2011). However, in practice, recent research shows that Asian teachers still prefer long-standing presentation- practice-production (PPP) (Tang, 2004; Tong, 2005). In that context, this case study used diary methods and stimulated recall interviews to investigate specific obstacles that a Vietnamese teacher had to overcome when implementing TBLT in her writing classroom while she had more knowledge of and experience with PPP. Teaching one undergraduate class of writing under task-based instruction and another under more teacher-directed instruction – PPP for one semester, the teacher had a lot to tell about the challenges she faced when implementing TBLT.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Language teaching approaches in Asia have shifted from focus-on-forms approaches to those fostering communicative language competence (Butler, 2011). Various researchers, such as Nunan (2006), Littlewood (2007), and Adams and Newton (2009), have documented the introduction of task-based language teaching (TBLT), the latest teaching methodology advocated in many Asian Pacific countries such as mainland China, Hong Kong, Thailand or Vietnam in curriculum documents and syllabi.

Various challenges arise when TBLT is implemented in an Asian context. These challenges will be presented in this paper from a case study of one Vietnamese university lecturer of English, Jenifer (pseudo name). We have documented her teaching process over the course of 6 months and will report on that process here against the background of a state-of-the-art overview of what is known about the introduction of task-based language teaching in Asia.

1.1 Presentation-Practice-Production versus Task-Based Language Teaching

PPP is a type of synthetic approach to language instruction in which the language to be studied is broken down into small discrete items. The teachers will decide which items are to be learned and convey those items to the students (Ducker, 2012). Being recommended to trainee teachers as a useful teaching procedure from 1960 onwards (Harmer, 1991), PPP consists of the following typical steps as described by Byrne (1976) and Samuda and By-

gate (2008). First, the teacher *presents* the language to be learned; then, the learners *practice* the items through controlled and gradually less controlled activities; and finally, *produce* the teacher-selected target language.

TBLT, on the other hand, is an analytical approach to language pedagogy (Ducker, 2012) whereby students are exposed to holistic chunks of language that they can analyze themselves. Central to TBLT is a task that learners are required to perform (Prabhu, 1987) and new language or new avenues of learning will be generated in the completion of this task. In a TBLT class the sequence is often different from that of PPP and one such popular cycle of learning introduced by Willis (1996) includes a *pre-task* introducing the topic and the task; *task cycle* consisting of task planning, doing the task, preparing for task report and presenting the task report; and a language focus which focuses on the form (grammar) in the *post-task*.

Since 1990s PPP has received widespread and well-known criticism from academics such as Lewis (1995), and Willis and Willis (1996). Several problems with PPP posed by these critics include its being too linear and behaviorist in nature, so failing to account for learners' stages of development readiness (Ellis, 2003) and thus unlikely to lead to the successful acquisition of taught forms (Skehan, 1996); its assumption that accuracy precedes fluency, which is often not the case (Thornbury and Harmer, 1999); and its characteristic of teacher-centered fits uneasily with more humanistic learner-centered frameworks (Harmer, 1991).

In response to the weaknesses of PPP, TBLT appeared and is described as a reaction to the inadequacies of PPP. Proponents of TBLT commonly argue that conventional approaches such as PPP do not work nor reflect current understanding of SLA research (Skehan, 1996; Ellis, 2003). A key rationale for TBLT is that form is best acquired when the focus is on meaning (Prabhu, 1987). TBLT proponents state that tasks enable learners to learn through communication and engagement (Prabhu, 1987; Ellis, 2003) and since a task-based approach involves students in active learning through communicative use, it is assumed to have a positive impact on motivation.

In Asia, TBLT is increasingly and widely promoted (Adams & Newton, 2009; Nunan, 2003). However, some studies in this context discover that many school teachers appear to prefer long-standing PPP approaches (Tang, 2004; Tong, 2005), and PPP is still quite pervasive in Asia (Littlewood, 2007). Challenges of TBLT in Asian contexts, which will be summarized in the coming part, can explain for Asian teachers' hesitation in implementing TBLT in their classroom.

1.2 Challenges of task-based language teaching in Asia

Across Asian contexts, three different types of constraint have been identified when TBLT is implemented in primary and secondary schools while little research has been conducted in the tertiary context. In particular, different studies have highlighted constraints relating to teacher beliefs, institutional and classroom factors, and the socio-cultural and economic environment.

First, typical *teacher-related constraints* include teachers' proficiency in the foreign language which is below the level required to adequately support learners completing open-ended real-life communicative tasks (Li, 1998; Kam, 2002; Butler, 2005; Jeon and Hahn, 2006) , teachers' uncertainty concerning their understanding of TBLT (Li, 1998; Cheng and Wang, 2004; Jeon and Hahn, 2006) and their beliefs that TBLT does not fit in well with actual teaching conditions in terms of time availability, textbook materials, and examinations (Carless, 2003; Jarvis and Atsilarat, 2004; Jeon and Hahn, 2006).

In addition to these teacher-related barriers, *institutional and classroom* constraints are also of great concern to EFL teachers applying TBLT in Asia. One of the institutional factors frequently mentioned is the psychological burden generated by norm-referenced and form-focused examinations which keep them from teaching communicatively (Li, 1998; Gorsuch, 2000; Carless, 2003, 2007; Hu, 2005; Canh, 2008; Chunrao and Carless, 2009). The fact that EFL teachers very often rely on textbooks constitutes another barrier since teachers in Hong Kong (Carless, 2003), Korea (Jeon and Hahn, 2006), Thailand (Todd, 2006) and Vietnam (Canh, 2008) either found that their textbooks did not support task-based instruction, or refused to transform their old ways of teaching even when task-based syllabuses became available. Moreover, time was identified as another major obstacle to adopting task-based teaching. Particularly, heavy schedules imposed on Hong Kong primary teachers (Carless, 2003), lack of preparation time in Korean schools (Jeon and Hahn, 2006), or time pressure from heavy workloads in Thailand (Todd, 2006)

have discouraged these teachers from actually preparing for and/or implementing task-based teaching.

Moreover, Asian teachers are confronted with large classes with students of different levels, making learner-centered teaching extremely difficult. In some Asian schools, discipline and order are important values, so many teachers feel that the noise from collaborative learning tasks may affect discipline in neighboring classrooms and therefore refrain from those learner-centered approaches (Li, 1998; Carless, 2004). Furthermore, large classes are difficult for teachers to manage, especially when implementing TBLT (Li, 1998; Jarvis and Atsilarat, 2004; Jeon and Hahn, 2006; Nishino and Watanabe, 2008), although Adams and Newton (2009) suggest that this applies foremost to speaking activities and not so much to tasks mainly supporting the development of listening, reading and writing skills. Students' multi-level proficiency presents an additional challenge to teachers with respect to choosing, designing and organizing communicative activities (Bock, 2000; Adams, 2009), a finding applying to mainland Chinese (Li, 2003), Hong Kong (Carless, 2004), Japanese (Eguchi and Eguchi, 2006), South Korean (Lee, 2005), Thai (Todd, 2006) and Vietnamese classrooms (Canh, 2008).

The final type of constraints voiced among many Asian teachers relates to *social-cultural barriers*. First, most of Asian EFL teaching takes place in a social environment where English is not commonly used outside the classroom (Nishino and Watanabe, 2008), which discourages students to sustain prolonged efforts to improve their communicative competence in the foreign language classroom. Second, many Asian cultures attach high importance to hierarchical order and respect (Hofstede, 1986). This results in an authoritative teacher attitude and in students' expectation that teachers will tell them what to do, which to a large extent undermines students' confidence to initiate learning or look for opportunities to further their language competence independently (Jarvis and Atsilarat, 2004). Last but not least, Asian conceptions of teaching and learning as transmitting and receiving knowledge rather than "using knowledge for immediate purposes" (Hu, 2005) support teachers in their preference for teacher-fronted modes of teaching over more learner-centered approaches.

In sum, recent research across many Asian contexts has documented numerous challenges posed to Asian primary and secondary school teachers in using TBLT. However, little empirical research has been undertaken to investigate the implementation of task-based instruction in the Vietnamese tertiary context, a gap this study seeks to fill.

2 RESEARCH DESIGN

2.1 Research participant

The research participant in the current study is Jenifer, who had ten years of teaching experience with PPP and was willing to learn and apply TBLT in her own classroom. Having been trained at the teacher education institute when PPP was strongly promoted in Vietnam, she was very confident with composing the lesson plans and teaching her class following PPP approach. Implementing TBLT, however, made her to struggle as described in the coming section. Both the teacher and students participating in this research had given their informed consent before the research procedure started.

Jenifer taught two English writing classes from the English Language Studies program in the study. One group was taught under PPP while the other group taught under task-based language teaching. Both groups were expected to be able to write good descriptive and argumentative paragraphs after thirty class hours over ten weeks of students' first university semester.

2.2 Research question

The study aims to answer the following research question:

Which specific challenges did Jenifer have to face when implementing TBLT in her English writing classroom?

2.3 Data collection and analysis

Data for the study were obtained from Jenifer's diary and stimulated recall interviews. For the diary method, Jenifer was asked to write down the difficulties she faced while designing the course materials for both classes, challenges she encountered in the classroom, what she did to deal with them, what she thought to be the causes of these difficulties and challenges, what kinds of support she thought she needed, and specific differences between the two groups in the process of designing the course materials and teaching the two classes. She was asked to write down these things right after she finished designing and teaching a lesson when her ideas were still fresh in her mind and add some ideas later when she had time to think more carefully about them. Diary methods involve inten-

sive, repeated self-reports that aim to capture events, reflections, moods, and interactions near the time they occur (Iida *et al*., 2012). Therefore, Jenifer's diary is useful to reveal her perceptions of the differences between PPP and TBLT as well as the challenges she faced when applying TBLT in her own classroom.

All the lessons were videotaped and the recordings of the second, fourth, fifth and tenth lessons of the TBLT group were used in stimulated recall interviews which were conducted on average 48 hours after the teacher finished her teaching. These interviews were conducted at the time when students finished their pre-task (the second lesson), worked on their task (the fourth lesson), completed post-task activities (the fifth lesson) for the descriptive paragraphs and when they finished their lessons on argumentative paragraphs (the tenth lesson). Stimulated recall interviewing is a special technique because it involves participants watching themselves, recalling and reflecting on their actions. It is an introspective method to elicit data about "thought processes involved in carrying out a task or activity" (Gass and Mackey, 2000). A stimulated recall interview focuses mainly on the report of what the teacher was thinking while engaged in a certain pedagogical action. Such questions as *What were you thinking?* or *What was on your mind at that time?* were used to ensure relevant recall prompts. Stimulated recall interviews were opted for because, by providing access to what is "inside a person's head, it makes it possible to measure what a person knows (knowledge or information), what a person likes or dislikes (values and preferences), and what a person thinks (attitudes and beliefs)" (Tuckman, 1994). As a consequence, these interviews provided additional information on what Jenifer perceived about the differences between the two teaching approaches and challenges of TBLT.

All data from the diary and interviews were transcribed by the researcher. Data were coded basing on the challenges that Jenifer faces. Bearing in mind the research question and the review of challenges that Asian teachers encounter, in reading through each transcript, the researcher tried to focus on the relevant data that could reveal Jenifer's challenges in her TBLT classroom. As a result, not every utterance or piece of data was coded (Creswell, 2002). The process of analysis was iterative with an examination for consistencies in the diary and stimulated recall interview for Jenifer's challenges of implementing TBLT in contrasting different stages in her PPP and TBLT classrooms.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Jenifer's struggle concerns both her lesson preparation and teaching time because of the differences she sees between her PPP and TBLT classrooms. These differences will be analyzed using Ellis'(2006) TBLT framework, distinguishing between a preparatory pre-task, during task and post-task phase.

Preparatory Phase

PPP	TBLT
– The lessons are compiled from different commercial books, given that they have chapters on the same writing genres.	– The teacher has to design a writing task which can generate communicative needs which learner will want to meet.
– Students are assigned to 1 or 2 writing tasks available in these books.	– The teacher has to design a task sheet clarifying a possible procedure for task completion which students can observe.

For Jenifer, it is easier to prepare for her PPP class than for her TBLT one. Much like what other Vietnamese teachers do in preparation of their writing lessons, Jenifer compiled (with adequate referencing of course) her teaching materials for her PPP class from two commercially available books on writing. These books contain chapters that guide students on how to write descriptive and opinion paragraphs – the learning goals she set for her students. All she had to do was to select some parts related to the topic that she wanted her students to write about and then combine them, adding some new photos, and changing some sentences in the exercises, taking better account of students' cultural backgrounds and trying to engage them more deeply in the learning process.

By contrast, it took her a lot of time to design a good writing task and task sheet for her TBLT class. She reported that her uncertain understanding of TBLT was the main cause of this. She had had no opportunity to learn about TBLT. The university teacher training program she followed ten years ago or in-service trainings had not prepared her for TBLT. Besides, it was hard for Jenifer to design a

writing task that would generate communicative needs among her students. She had never really considered this point before, basically using writing exercises presented in textbooks and assessing them from the point of view of language practice only. In Jenifer's mind, the writing exercises she knew from her PPP teaching would just as well serve her TBLT purposes.

It was not until a colleague who had experience on TBLT pointed this out to her that she came to realize that task-based language teaching does not come down to setting a task and leaving students to their own devices. For Jenifer, this remark constituted the beginning of a journey away from PPP and towards TBLT, taking care not to ask her students something they were not ready for but assisting them to become more autonomous learners of English. This journey was one of going back and forth between more and less autonomy. For example, the consideration that her students respected her as a teacher and would expect her to lead them through the learning process made her less confident again in asking students to initiate learning by themselves and only consulting the teacher when necessary. On the other hand, her conviction that writing for a real audience would be truly motivating for students directed her back to choosing tasks that not only met the linguistic demands she had in mind for them, but also generated exactly those communicative needs that would oblige the students to actually use the linguistic forms she expected.

Revising her task sheets again and again, she learned to strike the balance between taking away all teacher interference and providing the guidance which her students would need to be able to complete the tasks she had designed for them. She learned how to formulate the tasks in such a way that students would know what their final product would have to look like, making explicit the criteria the task had to meet and explaining that these criteria would be used to assess the quality of their work. In addition, she saw that it was important to point out to students what audience they were supposed to write for, pointing out to students that they would be writing for fellow classmates who did not know the city they were describing, thus again reducing the number of choices her students had to make by themselves. In addition, she understood that she had to make explicit the different steps students could take towards the accomplishment of the task. That is because her students were used to being educated in a system in which the teacher almost always told them what to do.

Jenifer faced a lot of challenges when it came to the feedback procedure. These included the openness of the tasks, appropriate time to give feedback and types of feedback to give, to name a few. She kept worrying about the openness of the tasks and considered whether she would not also have to hand vocabulary lists to her students as well as grammar explanations, as she would do in the PPP class. She also considered when or whether to give feedback to students on their writing products. Should she refrain from providing any feedback at all? If she could give feedback, what type of feedback could she give that would not make her direct the students' learning processes? Considering these questions, she decided to provide students with in-between feedback, since her students might lose all confidence if no regular feedback were given, in this way respecting the difficulties students might experience with the TBLT approach, especially in the light of their expectations towards teachers whom they should respect and would guide them, and in the light of what she wanted them to know for the final exam. At first, she thought she would provide the same detailed corrective feedback as she was used to doing in the PPP class. Then, she considered that in this respect she needed to refrain more from the learning process, and opted for a compromise. She still instructed the students to evaluate each other's work using the evaluation criteria they had received and revise their texts according to the peer feedback they received, but also wrote that she would give feedback on a revised version of students' texts. The type of feedback she would give would be of a more general type than the feedback she was used to giving to students, pointing out and even correcting language mistakes in every detail. In the TBLT group, she decided to provide feedback of a more general type, making reference to the evaluation criteria the students had had to use during a previous phase when commenting on each other’s first drafts of a written product, and formulating rather broad hints on how to improve their texts making use of these criteria. She decided to use feedback sentences, such as “Make sure you meet all requirements of the task.” or “You may want to reconsider the order in which you have presented the different pieces of information. Just think about how you would expect the information to be presented if you read someone else's text”.

Pre-Task Phase

PPP	TBLT
– Writing skills such as brainstorming for ideas, developing vocabulary, writing a topic sentence, using cohesive devices, etc. are provided in the teaching materials and accompanied by exercises for practice.	– Students build up their own (mental) writing instruction sheets through analyzing writing samples provided in the task sheet, planning their own writing, exchanging ideas with classmates.

Students in the two groups approached the tasks in two different ways in the pre-task phase. At first glance, the teacher seems to be working harder in preparing herself for her PPP class because she has to guide her students in every respect, exemplifying how to brainstorm for ideas, pointing out the vocabulary items they should learn to be able to write their texts, and focusing their attention onto which cohesive devices they can use to link sentences. Nevertheless, Jenifer found it easy to teach her PPP class because everything - content, language and teaching approach - had been provided for in the materials she had compiled. She just talked her class through the teaching materials, step by step, and could easily predict some difficulties her students would have at particular points in the lesson. Jenifer felt really comfortable teaching these lessons and so did the students, experiencing a teaching approach they were familiar and comfortable with.

On the other hand, in her TBLT class, students were required to build up their own writing scheme by analyzing the sample paragraphs they had been given during the first class meeting. While reading the samples, she could see them taking notes and conferring with classmates to check their understanding of the texts and collaboratively identifying criteria the sample texts seemed to meet. All of these self-regulation activities were obviously new to her students and she had to make great efforts to bring her students to accepting her new approach to teaching, granting her students the right to initiate learning activities and make their own choices as to how to approach their reading-and-writing task.

For Jenifer, the Vietnamese tradition of hierarchical order and respect which the students are expected to live by seemed to have impacted students to such a degree that many of them were actually unable to take any initiative at all. In addition, Jenifer confided to having had a really hard time not to direct her students, providing them with right answers or directing them towards the next step they could take. The first few meetings in the TBLT class truly put a lot of pressure on Jenifer and her students, with both parties having doubts about the TBLT-approach, and with Jenifer worrying about the outcome of her experiment. On the other hand, she could see progress in learner autonomy over the course of her classes, noticing also that the writings produced by the TBLT students promised to be more attractive and creative than those written in the PPP group. Yet, she kept worrying about the linguistics, the actual learning of the vocabulary, and the cohesive devices.

During-Task Phase

PPP	TBLT
– Students use what they have learned in the pre-task phase to write their own texts. – Students rarely use a dictionary, the internet or a grammar book. Everything they need is in their learning materials, and when not, the teacher will provide them with the correct answer.	– Students use their own approach to studying the sample texts they receive. – Building on their own conclusions gained from the pre-writing phase, they use dictionaries, the internet and grammar books and each other to bring their thoughts to paper throughout the writing process.

When it came to the during-task phase, differences existed between the two groups. Jenifer found that it took the students in her PPP class a shorter time to write because almost everything they needed for text production, such as vocabulary, topic sentences, ideas, and cohesive devices had been attended to during English lessons and could be retrieved from the learning materials.

In comparison, students in the TBLT class, depending on their proficiency level, spent from twenty minutes to an hour more on the same task than their peers in the PPP class. According to her observations, most students kept revising their texts,

returning to the sample texts in the task sheet, checking words in the dictionary and seeking help from friends. Since students under TBLT were free to resort to all kinds of aid, the classroom was much more difficult to manage. Some of the difficulties include the noise from students' activities, frequently moving to different students' desks asking for help, as well as students' finishing their texts at different times and then chattering on. At this point in time, Jenifer felt both happy and uncertain: happy about the large amount of self-directed learning activity she could see going on in her classroom, but uncertain about whether the TBLT class would not lag behind the PPP class, since both classes would have to meet the same end requirements set for the course.

Post-Task Phase

PPP	TBLT
– Individually, students check their own texts using the checklist available in the learning materials and reflecting the learning content and only that content.	– Students reflect on their own texts, exchanging texts, providing and receiving feedback, applying their personally built-up scheme of text quality to others' and their own text.
– The teacher provides specific feedback on every single piece of writing, indicating where a mistake has been made and providing students with specific suggestions as to how to improve their text's quality.	– The teacher gives very general feedback on every student's text, stating something like 'well-done' or 'your topic sentence is not well-developed'. It is up to the students to improve their texts by themselves.

At this stage, students in the PPP class could apply individually the checklist for text quality provided in their leaning materials to their own text. Students in the TBLT class also received the opportunity to revise their first drafts, but could do so through comparing their texts to the sample texts provided and to texts written by fellow students, providing feedback on others' texts and receiving feedback from others on their own.

Setting herself to text correction, Jenifer was challenged once more. As far as the texts from the PPP class were concerned, she was quite clear about what to do: underline mistakes and categorize them or ask students to add a piece of information so as to make the text more meaningful. It took Jenifer much more time to provide feedback on the TBLT class's texts. Every text was largely different and had its own shortcomings and strengths. She felt she had to read through every text several times, revising her own feedback until she was satisfied with her comments on students' papers. Because Jenifer had to correct and appreciate about 140 papers every week, she felt this provided her with quite some stress.

Getting her comments and corrections back to the students under TBLT, she felt students could not always figure out well what to do next or how to improve their texts, feeling she had to try and motivate them time and time again to work on their texts again and again, and wondering whether she should have set new communicative tasks to them instead of asking them to revise again. But then, she might lose the comparability between the PPP- and TBLT-class and just felt she could not run that additional risk. It can be seen that Jenifer had to struggle to opt for the best solution for her situation.

From the analyses of the differences between the two classrooms, it can be seen that Jenifer's story reflects many challenges that confront Asian teachers in a TBLT classroom. In addition, her story also provides additional insights into the particular challenges Vietnamese teachers have to cope with in each TBLT lesson phase. First, it seems Jenifer sees it as one of her responsibilities to make sure that all contents that might appear in the end exam for the writing class have been covered in the English classroom. Second, when students in the TBLT class need more time for finishing the same task in comparison with the students in the PPP class, she fears that she may not be able to cover what she has to cover in the TBLT class. It is, therefore, interesting for her to see that toward the end of the course, it may well be the TBLT group of students who will come up with better structured and more interesting texts, using richer language, in terms of the larger variety of vocabulary items and syntactic structures used. Third, when she found that students in the TBLT group object to revising their texts several times, she started doubting whether TBLT can actually promote learner motivation to learn how to write in more meaningful, more nuanced and linguistically rich ways.

Fortunately, by the end of the study, Jenifer starts seeing the value of inviting learners in the TBLT group to develop their own learning strategies and

evaluation criteria, recognizing that learners who know how to fight their own learning battles and not depend on what the teacher can cover in the classroom will make larger progress than PPP-students.

4 CONCLUSION

Jenifer's story concerns her first trials in TBLT. Through participating in this research, she has further developed her understanding of TBLT and is prepared to take it further, being aware now of how her current conception of what constitutes good teaching is affecting her TBLT experiences (Sercu and John, 2007).

From Jenifer's story, it is tempting to believe that TBLT will be introduced smoothly in Vietnam, or indeed in other Asian countries, at university level. Unfortunately, Jenifer cannot be considered an average teacher. It could be the case that other teachers in Vietnam may lack (part of) Jenifer's ability, to envision, plan, enact and assess a truly new approach to her teaching. Indeed, the data gained from our research show that it will by no means be evident to implement TBLT in the way envisioned by Ellis (2006) and others in Asian teaching contexts. In order to implement TBLT efficiently, as curriculum designers and managers in Vietnam, South Korea, Japan or mainland China expect, various stakeholders will have to commit themselves to participating in this promising endeavor. Such stakeholders include national or regional governments, educational institutions and researchers. Particularly, the governments should provide language teachers with training schemes on TBLT while educational institutions should create more favorable conditions for TBLT, and researchers of TBLT should focus more on Asian specific education contexts.

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