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The effect of task-based language teaching on EFL learners' writing performance at Tien Giang University

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ABSTRACT

The present research is aimed at investigating the effect of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) on learners' writing performance and learners' writing motivation which is considered a mediating variable in enhancing writing performance of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners at Tien Giang University. The quasi-experimental design was employed with the participation of 40 freshmen equally split into the control group and experimental group. The analysis of the data collected from the participants' pretests and posttests, pre-questionnaires and post-questionnaires indicated that TBLT positively influenced EFL learners' writing performance with significant improvement of all five components namely vocabulary, content, grammar, organization and mechanics. In addition, it revealed that there was a positive influence of TBLT on learners' writing motivation and a positive correlation between learners' writing motivation and writing performance.

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1 INTRODUCTION

For English learners, writing is a very important skill because it is necessary for their learning, career and daily communication (Al-Shourafa, 2012). Nevertheless, according to Zhaochun (2015), writing is the most difficult skill to master.

In the process of searching for a better way to promote learners' writing performance, a number of researchers have also indicated that it is beneficial to apply Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) because it is based on communicative and interactive tasks which require meaningful communication and interaction among learners (Nunan, 2004). According to Huang (2016), TBLT helped enhance learners' writing skills thanks to the communicative nature of the approach. As viewed

by Zhaochun (2015), this approach "takes into account the writing process and the final products as well" (p. 72). Moreover, Lee (2004) states that completing the given tasks not only enables learners to acquire English, but also helps enhance their creativity and critical thinking skills.

At Tien Giang University, teaching writing focused more on form. Students spent most of the time doing grammatical exercises rather than interacting and negotiating with one another to accomplish given tasks. In reality, the average score of writing tests of English as a foreign language (EFL) students at Tien Giang University was quite low at 6.1 (Center of educational testing and quality assessment of Tien Giang University). In addition, teachers of English writing said that in general EFL students at Tien Giang University were not interested in their writing

class. Based on the positive results of previous studies on the influence of TBLT on EFL learners' writing performance in many countries in the world (Cao, 2012; Marashi and Dadari, 2012; Yhardi and Restu, 2015; Ahmed and Bidin, 2016) and in Vietnam (Phuong, 2014), the research titled "The Effect of Task-Based Language Teaching on EFL Learners' Writing Performance at Tien Giang University" was studied.

The study is guided by three research questions as follows:

- 1) To what extent does TBLT influence EFL learners' writing performance at Tien Giang University?
- 2) To what extent does TBLT influence learners' writing motivation at Tien Giang University?
- 3) To what extent does learners' writing motivation influence EFL learners' writing performance at Tien Giang University?

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

From Willis's (1996a) viewpoint, tasks are defined as "activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome" (p. 23). According to Willis (1996a), tasks are categorized into six types namely listing, ordering and sorting, comparing, problem solving, sharing personal experiences and creative tasks.

TBLT is defined as "an approach based on the use of tasks as the core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching" (Richards and Rodgers, 2001, p. 223). It is also defined as a method of language teaching in which meaning is primary and there are real world problems to solve, and priority is placed on the completion of the tasks, which are assessed in terms of the outcome (Willis and Willis, 2007). According to Nunan (2005), the underlying principles for TBLT include scaffolding, task chains, recycling, organic learning, active learning, integration, reflection and reproduction to creation.

Willis's (1996b) framework, which was adopted in the current study is presented in Figure 1 as follows:

Motivation plays an important role in learning. It enhances an individual's energy and activity level (Pintrich *et al.*, 1993) and fosters initiation of certain activities and persistence in those activities (Stipek, 1988). Thus, students who are in some way motivated do significantly better than their peers (Harmer, 1991) and better apply what they have learned to new situations (Mayer, 2003). Thus, it is really necessary to maintain strong motivation while learning writing.

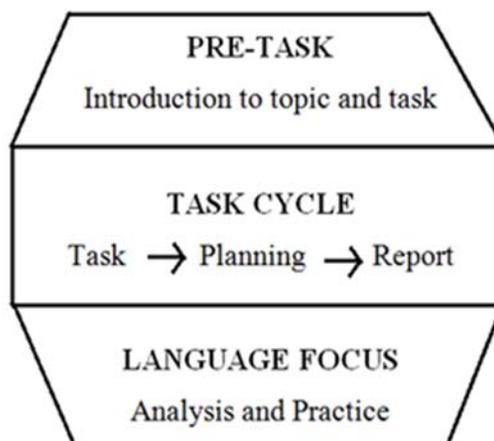


Fig. 1: Task-Based Language Teaching Framework (Willis, 1996b, p. 53)

A number of researchers from many countries in the world such as China (Cao, 2012), Iran (Marashi and Dadari, 2012), Indonesia (Yhardi and Restu, 2015), Malaysia (Ahmed and Bidin, 2016) and Vietnam (Phuong, 2014) have conducted their studies on the influence of TBLT on improving EFL learners' writing performance. The participants of the studies were also diverse, ranging from junior high school students, high school students to undergraduate students and graduate students. According to the findings of the studies, TBLT is an effective approach because it positively influences learners' writing performance. Nevertheless, so far there have been no studies on the effectiveness of TBLT on enhancing EFL learners' writing performance with consideration of learners' writing motivation as a mediating variable contributing to their writing performance at Tien Giang University. It is the gap that has encouraged the researcher to conduct the current study.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

Forty students from two classes were the participants of the study. They were split equally into the control group (CG) and the experimental group (EG). The participants were from 19 to 23 years old. Most of them are female (39 females and 1 male). Twenty-nine of them had studied English for nine years and only one of them had taken an extra English course elsewhere for a B-level certificate in English.

3.2 Materials

The participants in both CG and EG used the course book entitled "Weaving It Together 1" by Broukal (2010). In the course book, there are eight units which have two chapters each. Totally, there are 16

chapters relating to 16 topics. However, based on the syllabus of the subject (15 weeks, two periods per week), only 15 chapters were used.

3.3 Pretests and posttests

The pretest and posttest were from the book entitled "Tapestry Writing 1" by Pike-Baky (2000). Both tests were from one book to make sure the level of difficulty of the tests. The students were asked to write about 120 - 150 words in 30 minutes. The pretest was "describing your favorite place to visit" and the posttest was "describing your hometown". The students' pretests and posttests were marked based on the Analytic Marking Scale adopted from Hughey *et al.* (1983), which consists of five dimensions (content, organization, grammar, vocabulary and mechanics).

3.4 Pre-questionnaire and post-questionnaire

Learners' writing motivation was investigated by using questionnaires. Seliger and Shohany (1989) indicated that questionnaires are mainly used to collect data on phenomena such as attitude, motivation and concepts, which are not easily observed. Moreover, they help collect a great deal of information quickly from respondents (Brown, 2001). All the questionnaires comprised close-ended questions with five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), uncertain (3), agree (4) to strongly agree (5). Pre-questionnaire had two main sections. The first section was about participants' personal information, and the second section included 10 items about learners' writing motivation, which were adapted from the questionnaire of Bouguerne (2011). However, post-questionnaire only consisted of 10 items.

3.5 Procedures

The students in CG learnt with traditional lesson plans based on the structure of the course book. There were two main sections in each class namely writing skill and writing practice. The lesson started with writing skill first. It mentioned the brief introduction of some grammar points. Then there were exercises for the students to practice those grammar points. In the second section, the students had to complete writing practice by answering some questions relating to the writing topic. They were asked to put the answers into a paragraph, exchange their paragraphs and edit them.

In contrast, the students in EG were instructed with TBLT lesson plans which were based on TBLT framework by Willis (1996b). First, in pre-task stage students were introduced the topic, and the teacher activated some topic related words and

phrases. Then, in task cycle stage, the students had to discuss the task with each other and then wrote the first draft. After that, the students exchanged their pieces of writing and worked in pairs or in groups to give feedback and then redrafted their paragraphs. After that, some students took turns to report in front of the class, and others give comments. The teacher summarized and gave comments to the students. Finally, language focus and practice were conducted.

3.6 Procedures of data collection

The study was conducted for 15 weeks from March 7th to June 19th, 2016. One week before the experiment, all the participants in two groups were asked to do pretest in 30 minutes in order to examine their writing ability. After that, they had to finish the questionnaires on learners' writing motivation. From week 1 to week 15, participants in CG learnt with traditional method while the ones in EG learnt with TBLT. After 15 weeks, they were asked to do posttest and post-questionnaires.

3.7 Data analysis

In order to maximize their validity, pretest and posttest were first selected from a book for paragraph writing entitled "Tapestry Writing 1". Then, they were sent to two experts in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) for consideration before they were delivered to participants.

Pre-questionnaires and post-questionnaires were firstly adapted from the questionnaire in the master thesis of Bouguerne (2011). Next, they were sent to two experts in TESOL for assessment. Moreover, all the questionnaires were translated into Vietnamese to make sure that it is easy for the respondents to understand. The Vietnamese versions then were refined by two translation experts and converted back into English to check the equivalence between the original and the translated versions.

Independent samples t-test was employed to investigate the difference in the results of the pretests and the posttests between EG and CG and paired samples t-test was used to find out the difference between the results of the pretests and those of the posttests of each group. The correlation coefficient (r) was used to examine the correlation between learners' writing motivation and writing performance of CG and EG before and after the treatment was calculated. Also, regression analysis was conducted to see to what extent learners' writing motivation positively influence writing performance.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Effect of TBLT on EFL learners' writing performance

In order to examine whether there was significant difference between the pretest mean score of CG and that of EG, independent samples t-test was run. The results indicated that there was no significant difference between CG and EG ($p = .78 > .05$).

Table 1: Independent samples t-test results of the pretests and posttests

Writing test	Condi-tions	N	M	SD	MD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pretest	CG	20	58.15	6.53	.82	28	38	.78
	EG	20	57.33	11.35				
Posttest	CG	20	62.40	7.01	-8.35	-3.15	38	.00
	EG	20	70.75	9.58				

Moreover, pair sample t-tests were run to examine if there were significant differences within each group in terms of the mean score of the pretest and the posttest. The results indicated that while there

However, after 15 weeks, the data collected from posttests were analyzed. Independent samples t-test was run with the result that there was a significant difference between the posttest mean score of CG and that of EG in writing performance after the treatment ($p = .00 < .05$). The results of independent samples t-tests are presented in Table 1.

was no significant difference between the mean score of the pretest and that of the posttest in CG ($p = .08 > .05$), there was a significant difference between the mean score of the pretest and that of the posttest in EG ($p = .00 < .05$) (Table 2).

Table 2: Pair sample t-test results of the writing tests of CG and EG

Conditions	Writing test	N	M	SD	MD	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)
CG	Pretest	20	58.15	6.53	-4.25	-1.85	19	.08
	Posttest	20	62.40	7.01				
EG	Pretest	20	57.33	11.35	-13.42	-3.89	19	.00
	Posttest	20	70.75	9.58				

The analysis of the results showed that TBLT positively influenced the participants' writing performance. Similarly, many studies in other countries such as China (Cao, 2012), Iran (Marashi and Dardari, 2012), India (Kadel, 2013), Indonesia (Yuhardi and Restu, 2015) and Malaysia (Ahmed and Bidin, 2016) indicated that TBLT helped foster learners' writing performance.

Furthermore, the current study revealed that all the five components including content, organization, grammar, vocabulary and mechanics based on Hughey *et al.*'s rubric (1983) for assessing a written text were significantly enhanced after the implementation of TBLT. Based on the independent samples t-tests, the p value of mechanics was .04; the p value of organization was .03; the p value of content and grammar was 0.2 and the p value of vocabulary was .00.

TBLT helped improve the mean score of the students in EG in the content and vocabulary in their posttests because they had more opportunities to enrich their vocabularies in task-based writing class. Ellis (2003) argues that tasks provide learners with rich exposure to a wider range of language. First,

they had a variety of chances to interact and discuss with one another which helped them share their vocabularies. They learnt a lot from their capable peers and teachers. Second, they were exposed to what was presented not only in textbook but also in other sources of authentic materials such as newspapers, magazines or videos. In Kadel's (2013) study, learners' vocabulary was also significantly enhanced. In addition, learners' grammar was also significantly enhanced since TBLT not only focuses on discussing meanings but also language use (Nunan, 2004). Based on Willis's (1996b) TBLT framework, specific grammatical points are discussed in the third stage - language focus. In task-based class, learners had more chances to interact, learnt from their peers, and were exposed to rich input, enabling them to enhance the components of organization and mechanics, contributing to the improvement of their writing performance.

4.2 Influence of TBLT on learners' writing motivation

The result of independent samples t-tests showed that there was no significant difference between the mean score of the pre-questionnaire of CG and that of EG before the implementation of TBLT ($p = .74$

> .05). Nevertheless, after the treatment, there was a significant difference between the mean score of the

post-questionnaire of CG and that of EG ($p = .00 < .05$) (Table 3).

Table 3: Independent samples t-test results of pre- and post- questionnaires

Questionnaires	Conditions	N	M	SD	MD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-questionnaire	CG	20	3.01	.47		-3.34	38	.74
	EG	20	3.06	.47	-.05			
Post-questionnaire	CG	20	3.13	.51		-6.37	38	.00
	EG	20	4.04	.40	-.92			

In addition, pair sample t-tests were carried out to examine whether there were significant differences within each group (CG and EG) in terms of the mean score of the pre-questionnaire and the post-questionnaire. The results showed that while there was no

significant difference between the mean score of the pre-questionnaire and that of the post-questionnaire in CG ($p = .48 > .05$), there was a significant difference between the mean score of the pre-questionnaire and that of the post-questionnaire in EG ($p = .00 < .05$). The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Pair sample t-test results of pre- and post-questionnaires of learners' writing motivation

Conditions	Questionnaires	N	M	SD	MD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
CG	Pre-questionnaire	20	3.01	.47		-.72	19	.48
	Post-questionnaire	20	3.13	.51	-.12			
EG	Pre-questionnaire	20	3.06	.47		-7.32	19	.00
	Post-questionnaire	20	4.04	.40	-.98			

According to the analysis of the results of independent samples t-tests and pair sample t-tests, TBLT had a positive influence on learners' writing motivation. In addition, the present study also indicated that two factors namely writing self-concept and perceived value of writing in the questionnaire of learners' writing motivation for EG were improved significantly. The findings were based on independent samples t-test results ($MD = -.86, t = -5.11, p = .00 > .05; MD = -.99, t = -6.77, p = .00 > .05$ respectively) and pair sample t-test ($MD = -.82, t = -5.18, p = .00 > .05; MD = -1.21, t = -8.54, p = .00 > .05$ respectively). The finding that TBLT positively influenced learners' writing motivation in the present study contributed to the findings of the studies by Badalyan (2014) and Pietri (2015) which demonstrated that task-based approach significantly contributed to the improvement of the participants' motivation in English language learning. In Ellis's (2003) viewpoint, TBLT brings a number of benefits to learners and one of the most important benefits is motivation. It is intrinsically motivating since it provides learners with opportunities to use the language that they know without penalizing them for inevitable failures in accuracy (Willis and Willis, 2007). In Willis's (1996a) view point, "tasks remove teacher domination" (p.18). By putting grammar at the end of the cycle, there is every chance that we can increase motivation (Willis and Willis, 2007).

4.3 Influence of learners' writing motivation on their writing performance

Based on the result of Pearson correlation, there was no correlation between learners' writing motivation and writing performance before as well as after the treatment in CG ($r = -.20, p = .39 > .05; r = .02, p = .92 > .05$ respectively). While there was no correlation between learners' writing motivation and writing performance before the treatment ($r = .27, p = .25 > .05$), there was a positive correlation between learners' writing motivation to writing performance after the treatment in EG ($r = .63, p = .00 < .05$). This finding is similar to that of Gottfried's (1990) study which stated that learners' intrinsic motivation positively correlated with their achievement. Despite the correlation between learners' writing motivation and writing performance, in order to know to what extent learners' writing motivation contributes to writing performance after the treatment, regression was run. The results of regression are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: The results of regression

Model	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.63	.40	.37

The result indicated that learners' writing motivation contributed 37% to the enhancement of learners' writing performance. With that result, learners' writing motivation is considered as a vital variable, greatly contributing to the improvement of EFL

learners' writing performance. Motivation is a key for learners' learning progress (Crookes and Schmidt, 1991). According to Al-Shourafa (2012), motivation had a positive effect on writing skills. In addition, Lightbown and Spada (2006) stated that "learners with high scores on the motivation questionnaire will also have high scores on the language test" (p. 65). Prakash (2007) indicated that high motivated learners learn things without taking much time. Thus, when learners are motivated in learning writing, they try their best in order to accomplish their given tasks.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In conclusion, the current study indicated that implementation of TBLT helped enhance significantly learners' writing performance at Tien Giang University. All five components for evaluating the participants' written output were significantly improved. Moreover, the participants in TBLT condition greatly developed their writing motivation. Two factors including perceived value of writing and writing self-concept in the questionnaire of learners' writing motivation were also significantly higher than before. In addition, the results of the correlation and regression revealed that there was a positive correlation between learners' writing motivation and writing performance. Learners' writing motivation contributed 37% to the improvement of writing performance. Therefore, learners who were more motivated in learning writing in English tended to perform better in their writing. Based on the positive influence of TBLT, the teachers should design task-based writing lessons in order to enhance the learners' writing performance and pay much attention to motivating the learners by designing the tasks that are suitable to their needs. Authentic materials should be used to help engage the learners in their learning process since they are enthusiastic, stimulating, interesting, and natural (Peacock, 1997).

Nevertheless, the current study has several limitations such as the small sample size, the effect of TBLT on learners' writing performance in terms of descriptive paragraph writing instead of other genres and lack of examining the effect of each task type as well as the limited time for conducting the experiment. Thus, the recommendations for further research are carrying out the study with larger sample size, other genres or examining the effect of each task type and conducting the study in longer amount of time to help collect more data for analysis.

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