Interpretations of Task-Based Language Teaching following an Inset Course: A Case Study

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Abstract

In 2010, a new curricular reform of English as a foreign language, based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the Communicative Language Teaching Approach, was established in Ecuador. Task-based language teaching, which aligned with previous approaches, can be applied to reach the new curricular objectives. In this regard, between 2011 and 2012, a number of public high school English teachers in Cuenca attended a one-year in-service training program (INSET). This program was based on the use of communicative strategies and the task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach for teaching English as a foreign language. The main objective of this qualitative research study, conducted from 2014 to 2015, was to determine whether the participants applied communicative strategies within TBLT after the training program. Classroom observations and semi-structured interviews were administered to twelve out of the twenty-three participants. Although the results of the study showed an increase in the use of communicative strategies by the participants after the training program, only a small number of teachers used the TBLT approach appropriately. Others employed the presentation-practice-production (PPP) approach. Nevertheless, some teachers who used PPP perceived that they were, actually, using the TBLT approach.

Keywords: Teacher training; English teachers; communicative strategies; Task-Based Language Teaching

Introduction

Task-based language teaching (TBLT), also known as *task-based instruction* (TBI) or *task-based teaching* (TBT), was developed in the late 70s and early 80s (Skehan, 2003) as a means to introduce "the right kind of interactional processes in the classroom" (Richards, 2006, p. 30), and, therefore, enhance communicative competence in students. It is generally accepted that communicative approaches to language teaching will result in better students' performance. At the same time, it is well known that teacher practices influence the student learning process.

Hattie (as cited in Van den Branden, 2016) claims that teachers are key players in the instructional process. That is why there is a need to "recognize teacher expertise as one significant element in shaping understandings of pedagogy" (Cross, 2011, p. 166). Since a large body of data concerning task-based language teaching has been reported (Richards, 2006), it is relevant to consider teachers´ perceptions when implementing TBLT. "The available research reveals that teachers' decisions and actions in authentic classroom practice may

strongly differ from the prescriptions in the pedagogically oriented literature" (Van den Branden, 2016, pp. 166-167) when applying TBLT.

In this regard, not many studies have considered teachers´ perceptions of the TBLT approach in EFL contexts; therefore, there is a need to conduct research about instructors´ ideas regarding TBLT within EFL classrooms. Thus, the current research complements a quantitative study carried out between 2014 and 2015 which established the impact of an in-service training course delivered to a group of high school English teachers in the city of Cuenca, Ecuador (Calle, Argudo, Cabrera, Calle & León, 2015). Between 2011 and 2012, twenty-three English teachers participated in an INSET course which mainly focused on communicative strategies and task-based language teaching (TBLT) principles. The impact of this INSET course was established by comparing quantitatively the results of three phases. The first one took place before the delivery of the course (2010); the second phase happened immediately after the course finished (2012), and the third phase occurred two years later (2014). Before the course started, it was noticed that teachers lacked communicative strategies in their English classes (Calle, Calle, Argudo, Moscoso, Smith, & Cabrera, 2012). When the course finished, there was a significant increase in the use of communicative strategies. After two years, these strategies were used less frequently. However, the number was higher compared to the lack of communicative strategies of the first phase. It was concluded that permanent training is needed in order to keep meaningful changes in teachers´ classes (Calle et al, 2015).

The Ecuadorian context and other studies

The new Ecuadorian English curriculum is based on the Communicative Language Teaching approach which promotes communication as the main goal. Also, this curriculum proposes to align with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages that establishes different levels of language proficiency. Thus, by the end of high school, students are supposed to have acquired an exit profile which enables them to do, among other things, the following ones, according to the Ministry of Education of Ecuador (2014, p.22):

- produce simple, connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest;

- describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes, and ambitions;

- briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.

Because task-based language teaching can enhance the aforementioned learning aims, it was the methodology used as the main topic of the contents delivered in the in-service training course for English teachers (Calle et al., 2015).

A study by Zheng and Borg (2014) regarding TBLT stated that abundant information has been written about TBLT (See Batstone, 2016; Bygate, 2016; Ellis, 2009; Van den Branden, 2006, and Van den Branden, 2016) but few empirical studies focusing on teachers´ understanding and application of this approach have been conducted (See also Jeon & Hahn, 2006).

In 2003, a new English curriculum emerged in the People's Republic of China as a response to traditional pedagogy focused on grammar and vocabulary without the "development of students´ communicative competence" (Zheng & Borg, 2014, p.206). The new Chinese curriculum was based on TBLT guidelines (Ministry of Education, as cited by Zheng & Borg, 2014) (See also Yan & He, 2012). In other EFL contexts, such as Libya, similar situations are observed. Orafi and Borg (2009) state that curricular innovations must consider "the cognitive and contextual realities of teachers' work" (p.1).

Zheng and Borg (2014) reported that for the participants of their study, three English teachers, TBLT was similar to communicative activities. Also, two of the three teachers did not consider the curriculum guidelines, and one of them seemed to have implemented them closely. It was concluded that for these first two instructors, their beliefs were more powerful than the curriculum guidelines because they employed more grammar items since they considered explicit grammar as a fundamental part of teaching. A last finding showed that teachers felt that the implementation of the new curriculum was challenging due to other factors (e.g. large classes). However, the youngest teacher showed more commitment to using the new curriculum compared to the older ones.

Another study conducted by Carless (2009) in Hong Kong investigated the preferences of secondary school teachers and teacher educators regarding presentation-practice and production as well as TBLT approaches. Among its findings, it was revealed that even though the government promoted the use of TBLT, it seemed most teachers preferred to use the PPP because of its simplicity. Additionally, Carless (2009) citing Rodgers, stated the difficulties that innovations can convey. Thus, this study showed that the implementation of TBLT can become a challenge for teachers due to their lack of knowledge of this approach. On the contrary, teacher educators favored the use of TBLT as they are acquainted with its theory and advantages.

Notwithstanding, Carless mentioned that a large proportion of teachers have reported a preference for both approaches. In South Korea, Jeon and Hahn (2006) claimed similar findings. Even though teachers have a high understanding of TBLT, there are negative views when implementing it. Carless (2009) pointed out that deeper research about the real usage of TBLT was needed.

Comparing the study of Zheng and Borg (2014) to the Ecuadorian English classes, similarities regarding grammar-centered classes are found. In fact, in public schools of Cuenca, English classes were teacher-centered with a main focus on grammar in spite of the communicative approach, which was mandatory by the Ministry of Education (Calle et al, 2012). Also, within the Ecuadorian context, studies related to teachers´ perceptions towards TBLT have not been conducted, matching the literature which lacks empirical research (See Zheng & Borg, 2014; Jeon & Hahn, 2006). This is the gap this present research attempts to fulfill. Indeed, it is a contribution from this South American context. Consequently, the current qualitative investigation aims to determine to what extent a group of English teachers apply communicative strategies within TBLT after a training program and to comprehend their perceptions concerning the use of these strategies.

Method

The current research employed a mixed methodology (Dörnyei, 2007) which included the collection of data in two phases: first, by observing one class and later, by conducting a semi-structured interview. The observations were conducted by two researchers. In order to quantify the communicative strategies used by teachers, a checklist with a list of communicative strategies was employed. Also, open observations (Friedman, 2012) were used by means of detailed field notes with the purpose of registering instructional activities within the stages of a TBLT lesson (i.e. pre-task, task, post-task, outcome) among other elements (type of tasks, type of interaction, skills developed, and time). Field notes allow the registration of rich information and details, which at the same time permit richer descriptions of teachers´ classes. At the end of the observations, lesson plans were collected as well. The purpose of these observations was to collect evidence of teachers´ application of TBLT and the use of communicative strategies.

Afterwards, with this information, narrative accounts of lessons were constructed to show what teachers actually did in their classes[1]. Similarly, these types of accounts were used by Zheng and Borg (2014) in their

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[1] Two samples of narrative accounts are detailed in the Results Section.

qualitative study. For the current study, interviews (audio recorded and transcribed) were also conducted in order to comprehend teachers´ perceptions regarding the objectives of the lessons in terms of the outcome within a TBLT framework. Each interview lasted approximately twelve minutes. These interviews were conducted immediately after the observed lessons in order to preserve the researchers' and teachers' first impressions. For the purpose of this paper, only the sections of the interviews directly dealing with the teachers' perceptions were considered here. To determine the frequency of communicative strategies used by teachers, there was a tallied checklist. In order to establish the accuracy of TBLT implementation, a Likert scale of five points was used, containing five principles of TBLT[2]. Each researcher rated each lesson considering every principle. Similar values were assigned, so after several discussions, all researchers agreed on the values and rated lessons and principles keeping interrater reliability (Mackey & Gass, 2005).

Sample

Out of the twenty-three teachers who attended the 110-hour training course, twelve were willing to participate in this study (Calle et al., 2015). This group of teachers constitutes the research sample.

All twelve teachers work in public schools and have a public appointment. Of the sample, seventy-nine percent belongs to the urban area and twenty-one percent belongs to the rural area of the city of Cuenca. The teachers working in evening shifts were observed during a 30-minute lesson each. Whereas the ones that work in the morning and afternoon sections had lessons that lasted between 40 and 80 minutes. The following graph shows the research sample.

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[2] TBLT principles based on Skehan, as cited in Van den Branden (2006, p. 8)
       a) Meaning is primary.
       b) There is a communication problem to solve.
       c) There is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities.
       d) Task completion has some priority.
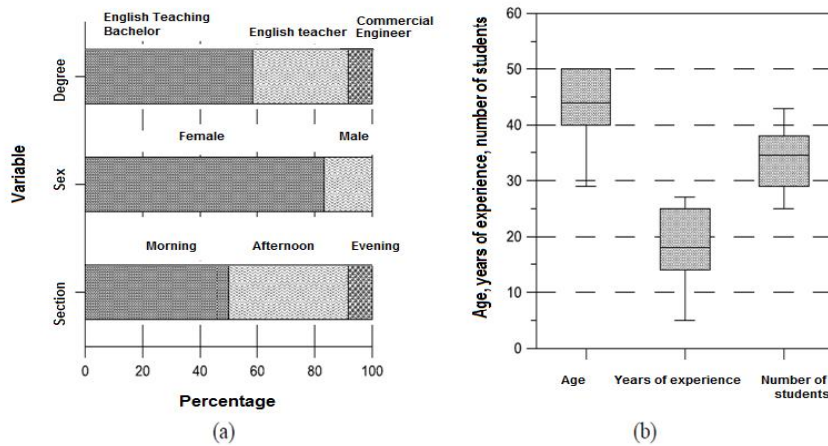   e) The assessment of the task is in terms of outcome

Figure 1. Sample description: (a) degree, gender, and shift; and (b) age, years of experience, and number of students

Teachers of the morning section represent 50% of the sample, while the ones working in the afternoon constitute 40%. The final 10% work in the evening shift. The teachers belong to a 29-50 age range. Ninety percent of the teachers hold a university degree for teaching English. Ten percent of the teachers have a university degree in other areas different from English teaching. The participants' years of experience teaching English ranges from 6 to 27. The number of students these teachers work with varies from 25 to 43. (See figure 1).

Procedure

The objective of the present research was to have all twenty-three participants of the previous study. However, four of them could not be contacted as two were abroad pursuing graduate studies. One teacher changed classes and another one passed away. Thus, nineteen teachers from the previous research (Calle et al, 2015) were approached and informed about the objectives of this study, having as a result, twelve who agreed to participate. They confirmed their participation by signing a consent form after the research group was given permission from the authorities at the Ministry of Education to conduct the observation. Observations were conducted by two researchers (non-participant observers).

An analysis was carried out through the use of the Likert scale. Each researcher rated the five principles of every lesson in a range from one to five with the following equivalence: one being poor, two fair, three good,

four very good, and five excellent. All of the principles had the same relevance. Therefore, after rating each principle, the mode per lesson was obtained. After analyzing these lessons, patterns were found. Three categories of lessons were established from these results. Teachers who executed a lesson which obtained a mode of four or five were considered as instructors who applied TBLT principles. The ones who achieved a mode of three were deemed as teachers who applied a PPP lesson, and the teachers with one and two points in the mode were placed in the category that neither applied TBLT principles nor the PPP approach but rather focused on a traditional grammar class. We arrived to these conclusions because the patterns found in the lessons matched the features of these three categories (i.e. TBLT, PPP, and grammar focused).

Results

The results of the observations carried out in this research showed that most teachers applied communicative strategies, such as controlled dialogue (24 % of the sample), matching (19.1 %) and problem solving (19 %). The least applied strategies during the lessons were the following: onion ring (9.5%), as well as information gap (9.5%), and mind map (9.5%). Wall reading (4.7%) and other communicative strategies (4.7%) were also among the strategies used less frequently. It should be pointed out that the teachers employed more than one of these strategies for communicative purposes in their classrooms.

Regarding the use of TBLT principles, as mentioned before, three types of categories of lessons were found: TBLT principles were implemented in the first type of lessons observed; PPP principles were applied in the second type of lessons observed, and none of the aforementioned principles was considered in the third group of lessons. Results showed an equal number of lessons for each category: four lessons per group. In other words, only one third of the sample applied the TBLT principles. Narrative accounts of the first two groups are presented in order to illustrate TBLT and PPP lessons[3].

Table 1

Lesson based on TBLT principles

Stages	Task	Type of interaction	Skills/grammar/ vocabulary	Time

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[3] A lesson of the third category will not be presented because it does not have any relationship with TBLT principles or PPP methodology.

1. Pre-task	A student guesses the meaning of a verb by looking at another student miming it.	Student-Student	Vocabulary	2 min
	The teacher sticks flash cards on the board, and students have to say the name of the food that pictures represent.	Teacher-whole class		3 min
	The teacher reads a text from the book. She points out the pictures whenever the text mentions them.			
	Students are asked to read the first paragraph of text and underline nouns, verbs and adjectives. Students come to the board to write the words. The teacher adds one more word in each category. Choral repetition of words.		Vocabulary	7 min
			Vocabulary Reading	6 min
2. Task	Students read the entire text and complete a chart on the book.	Individual work	Reading	10 min
	Teacher gives feedback on the board. Students have to ask questions on the book to partners.	Teacher-whole class Student-student	Speaking	6 min
	Students do a listening by writing "true" or "false."	Individual work	Listening	2 min
3. Post-task	Students talk about Ecuadorian dishes in their groups. The teacher provides questions to talk about dishes.	Student-student	Speaking	22 min
	Students choose one Ecuadorian dish and write about it (material is provided for displaying paragraphs)		Writing	
Outcome			A paragraph about an Ecuadorian dish.	

Source: Observation records

As can be observed, this teacher has a clear outcome in mind, a paragraph about an Ecuadorian dish. There is a logical sequence of activities which provides students with vocabulary and expressions related to

food. They start with words, follow with a reading and finish with a tangible written outcome. Therefore, the lesson structure shows that the teacher follows the TBLT principles. During the interview, this teacher stated,

[…the teacher has to plan his lesson very well; the most important is to get to the outcome; otherwise, the lesson is incomplete and that would not make any sense][4]

Indeed, this lesson differs significantly from the one that will be presented next. In the following example, according to the lesson plan, the teacher used the three stages of the TBLT approach assigning these names: pre-activity, activity and post-activity. However, the analysis of the lesson shows a different perception. It can be observed that the lesson develops a PPP approach since there is neither an outcome nor a communication problem to solve.

Table 2

Lesson based on PPP principles

Stages	Task	Type of interaction	Skills/grammar/ vocabulary	Time
1.Pre-activity	The teacher writes the word SKYSCRAPER and asks students in groups to make up words about places with any of the letters from the above word. Students say the words.	Student-Student	Vocabulary	10 min
	The teacher gives definitions of places and students have to say the name of the place.	Teacher-whole class	Listening Vocabulary	5 min
	The teacher draws a mind map with PLACES as the main word			5 min

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	and completes it with related words given by students. Choral repetition of places on book			
2.Activity	The teacher asks students to read and match the place with their descriptions (Exercise on book)	Individual work	Reading	10 min
	For feedback, teacher asks students to read their answers.	Individual work		5 min
	The teacher explains the mystery word game. She gives an explanation and omits the word referring to a place. Representatives of teams have to guess the word.	Teacher-student	Listening Vocabulary	15 min
3.Post-activity	Info-gap activity in pairs (very controlled practice of "I want to/I need to….. You should go to…….")	Student-student	Speaking	15 min

Source: Observation Records

This lesson contains in the post-activity an info-gap which makes students practice the language in a very controlled way. Two or three expressions were given by the teacher to complete a table with places and objects/activities. Therefore, this only involves practice. The students in this lesson do not produce language in a freer way as the students in the lesson previously analyzed when describing an Ecuadorian dish. Also, this cannot be considered an outcome since there is no problem to be solved through language.

Even though the lesson does not contain an outcome, the teacher explained in the interview that this was an important element in a class. The analysis of the lesson indicates that the teacher´s perception of her class involves the TBLT principles; however, it really approaches a PPP view.

[The three stages of teaching (…)it is the same as the pre-activity, the activity, and the post-activity; (…)The thing that impressed me the most in the course (She is speaking about the training course) was the outcome; students should talk and write, and that's what I have been trying to do ever since; because before that I would use the book, the book, and the book, not paying attention to students' speaking, just focusing on vocabulary, grammar, and nothing else.][5]

Despite the fact that she talks about the importance of the outcome in a lesson, it is not stated in her written lesson. From the results, it can be assumed that, for the teacher, this information is implicit since she considers an outcome when students are speaking or writing in the target language without focusing on grammar. However, in the above lesson, the fact that the students used already-made sentences does not mean they were truly interacting in the target language because the answers were given.

The following quote shows a similar perception by another teacher regarding the stages of TBLT.

[...three stages and a lesson is almost delivered, isn't that right? [...]. In other lesson planning we need […] to do many things, many ways, […] a long procedure to simply do three things, [...]: pre-activity, activity and post-activity][6]

However, in the observation of this teacher´s class and the analysis of the lesson plan, it could be observed that the task focused on grammar; meaning was not involved. Also, in the post-task, the last step of a PPP was considered since the students only practiced the language presented by using a picture. The same information is stated in the written plan.

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[5] los tres momentos […] de la enseñanza […] es igual que la pre-actividad, la actividad, y la post-activity; […] Lo que más me impactó realmente en el curso fue lo que tiene el outcome; que hablen y escriban y es lo que yo he estado tratando de hacer desde aquella vez porque seguía solo el libro, el libro, y el libro sin importar que hablen, solo que aprendan vocabulario, gramática y nada más.

[6] …tres pasos está ya casi dada una clase, no [es cierto]. […] . En otras planificaciones necesitamos de […] hacer muchas cosas, muchas formas, […] mucha largura para simplemente hacer tres cosas, no [es cierto], que es la pre-actividad, actividad y la post-actividad.

Discussion

If we compare the results mentioned in this research to the ones found in the study carried out by Calle et al (2012)[7] where teachers did not employ any communicative strategies, except a weak version of information gap, we could say that the results found in the present study are more encouraging, as they evidence the application of communicative strategies by the teachers.

Comparing the results of this study with the one drawn by Zheng and Borg (2014), a similar finding regarding communication can be observed. These authors stated that participants conceived TBLT principles as communicative activities. The teachers of the current study in the same way think of TBLT as communication, but, as we can notice from the previous lessons, this was very controlled and limited to few utterances. If we consider the PPP lesson, it is restricted to vocabulary and even though grammar is not explicitly stated, most of the PPP lessons focused on the form of grammar structures rather than on their functions. Therefore, there is another similarity with Zhen and Borg´s study (2014) which showed the importance of explicit grammar for teachers. In the current study, the age range did not show difference, as it did in Zheng and Borg´s study. In fact, the first lesson, which applied TBLT principles, was developed and executed with one of the oldest participants.

Even though the current study did not consider teachers´ preferences, it was evident that the teachers employed either PPP methodology or grammar-focused lessons showing some sort of preference. From this point of view, there is a similarity with the research conducted by Carless (2009) since teachers favor PPP for its simplicity in spite of the government regulations. Therefore, this preference could be a sign of teachers´ deeper beliefs regarding language teaching. Likewise, Zheng and Borg (2014) reported that teachers´ beliefs were more relevant than the curriculum guidelines in China.

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[7] This study reveals that "…las estrategias empleadas por los profesores se enmarcan en un modelo tradicional" (p.14) […strategies employed by teachers belong to a traditional approach]. Also, "[existe] un pequeño número de profesores que utiliza una didáctica más comunicativa enfocada al desarrollo de las destrezas de la lengua. Sin embargo, de este número, algunos docentes no implementan apropiadamente el enfoque comunicativo" (p.15) [there are few teachers who use a more communicative methodology focused on the language skills. However, from this small number of teachers, some of them do not implement appropriately the communicative approach].

In addition, there is a research conducted by Lamb (1995) which highlights the impact of INSET courses. He reports that after finishing an INSET course, participants tend to apply the contents learned, but they actually adapt those contents to their beliefs. This seems to happen in the current research when teachers explained the importance of TBLT but applied PPP. Also, context might have played an important role when applying TBLT principles. In the interviews teacher mentioned constraints of their institution. A similar finding was reported by Orafi and Borg (2009) in Libya.

Limitations

When considering TBLT methodology, a teacher might need several lessons to provide students opportunities to reach an outcome. The fact that participants were observed only one time could mean that just a portion of the TBLT process was perceived. In the case of the PPP lesson, vocabulary was the main focus of this class. It might mean that that lesson was the very first stage of a TBLT procedure. The lack of a unit plan of this lesson does not allow us to determine precisely the instructor´s ideas regarding this class. Therefore, it is difficult to determine whether at the end of the unit the students would have achieved an outcome or not. Also, differences might have been observed among classes due to the different length of class periods because evening shift lessons lasted only 30 minutes, whereas morning shift lessons lasted between 40 and 80 minutes.

Conclusions

Communicative strategies, such as onion ring, wall reading, information gap and problem solving were employed by some participants. This shows that teachers consider that communication and interaction among students is a priority in the classroom. In some cases of the lessons of this study, some teachers employed these strategies within a TBLT lesson while others did it within a PPP framework.

Based on the observations in class and the interviews conducted, it seems that some teachers have a distorted perception of the concepts learned in the training, as their practice is in opposition to their discourse. Likewise, as it was found in Lamb (1995), without saying that there is an intentional misrepresentation, teachers seem to adapt these principles to their daily practice with the belief that the application is correct. Thus, if we consider the study conducted by Zheng and Borg (2014) where there was a curricular reform in China that was predicated on the use of TBLT, we can see that the participants have a partial perspective of what this methodology implies. In the case of the present study, this trend is also observed, but it is also possible to notice cases of teachers who do have a clearer conception of it, since they mention the outcome or achievement of

learning. Sometimes teachers do not remember the exact term, but in practice in their explanations, it can be inferred that they know this fundamental element of this methodology.

Educators adapt new strategies to their beliefs and frequent practices. In spite of the training offered, it was found that the conceptions about the nature and the learning of the language directly influenced the teaching practice. It would seem that a practice which has been employed for a long period of time becomes more difficult to change if it is not exposed to permanent training in the area. Therefore, a higher reflection and practice in INSET courses to promote the use of TBLT in the EFL classrooms is recommended.

Context and its main actors play an important role. When planning INSET courses, contexts as well as teachers´ needs and beliefs should be taken into account to make new methodologies applicable. Further research focused on teachers' beliefs should be conducted. This will allow the implementation of innovations in teachers´ practices.

Further research needs to be conducted in which more lessons are considered for observation. A unit plan should be considered as well. With the analysis of the previous instruments which involves a longer period of time in the classroom, a complete process would allow researchers to determine in a more precise way teachers´ practices and perceptions.

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INTERPRETATIONS OF TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING

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