

INVESTIGATING THE INSTRUCTIONAL EFFECT OF TBLT ON BUSINESS STUDENTS' ENGLISH LANGUAGE PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT: *The aim of this research paper was to explore the instructional impact of Task-Based Language Teaching on English language attainments among 81 second-year university business studies students. The participants were studying a private university located in the surrounding areas of Bangkok, and were introduced to a TBLT learning environment for the duration of one English course (16 weeks). To test the effectiveness of TBLT, t-tests analyses (0.05) were utilised to compare resulting end-of-term performances with prior achievements attained under the conventional form of instruction. Overall, the findings indicated that TBLT positively influenced English language performances when compared to conventional methodologies (TBLT: 60.9 = Grade C+; CONV: 54.93 = Grade C; $p [0.0195] = sig < 0.05$). Nevertheless, the bulk of progress was concentrated in speaking skills ($p = sig < 0.05$), as no significant difference was noted in formal comprehensive examinations. Furthermore, variability analyses highlighted that upper-quartile students showed significant improvements in both major sets of assessments (speaking and formal examinations); while speaking scores for the lower-quartile remained stagnant, and formal examination scores exacerbated altogether. This led to the unequivocal conclusion that learners' response to TBLT is governed by linguistic potential.*

KEYWORDS: English, task, language, performance, TBLT

INTRODUCTION

In view of the paucity of comprehensive literature on the subject of TBLT, compounded with the lack of methodological detail provided on how to impart TBLT style lesson structures, as well as incomplete data analyses displayed in the papers selected for review; this paper established three objectives to respond to this apparent empirical shortfall. First of all, the methodology section of this paper pledges to offer a thorough example that details the transition from a conventional class environment to a TBLT setting, empowering interested teachers to comprehend the concept of TBLT for respective implementation. Secondly, the results derived from this study are to be analysed using a variety of cross-sectional analyses, which, aside from overall performance variations, include reviewing the role of gender and ability levels to comprehend which students are more responsive to this model of learning. Thirdly, recommendations will be provided for the consideration of curricular designers, which will be formulated based on the inferential remarks that come to light in this paper.

Task-based language teaching:

TBLT stems from Dewey's philosophy that learning occurs primarily through experiences, especially if these relate to the learners' interest, or at least, can be of practical value to the learner (Samuda & Bygate, 2008). This educational philosophy was proposed as an alternative to traditional (teacher-centred) educational structures, whereby *most of the opportunities for language use are taken by the teacher* (Willis, 1996). Contributing to this theoretical observation, Lightbown and Spada (1993) emphasise the importance of student involvement in the acquisition process; "to add physical action to their learning ... to experience the new knowledge in ways that involve them better". The importance of TBLT is that this model of learning maximises students' communicative participation, and tasks *remove teacher domination* (Willis, 1996).

Nunan (1989) defines a task as a "a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form". For which, Ellis (2003) established a set of criteria that must be met for an activity to constitute a task, where language serves as a tool for communicating, and, students move away from being language learners to become 'language users' (Ellis 2001). In order for a lesson structure to qualify as TBLT, the focus must be centred on meaning Nunan (1989), as opposed to specific linguistic forms. Secondly, a task will trigger the emergence of a 'gap' (Ellis, 2009), creating a situational necessity to convey meaning, such as an opinion, a contribution to an argument, imparting information or factfinding to argue a case. This nature of language use forces learners to *stretch their interlanguage* (Nunan, 1989), inciting individuals to take risks with new language structures; increasing pushed output (Ellis, 2009).

Thirdly, to complete tasks, students usually are required to utilise both linguistic and non-linguistic resources to accomplish the task. Participants may be required to research factual information to consolidate an argument, and refer to linguistic resources to enhance communicative delivery. Fourthly, as mentioned a priori, the language serves as a means for achieving the outcome of the task, rather than an end product in its own right. TBLT is disparate to standard situational grammar exercises, as during the latter, learners are not required to negotiate meaning, but rather demonstrate a correct understanding of a given linguistic feature, and in doing so, they are explicitly made aware of the language-related objective; whereas a task-orientated syllabus comprises of a list of tasks to be completed (Prabhu, 1987), rather than forms to mastered.

In TBLT class structures however, language objectives are not omitted, but rather tend to be 'hidden' (Ellis, 2009), therefore not being explicitly brought to the learner's attention. Tasks that involve a grammar focused element are referred to as 'focused' task. With careful planning, educators are able to create appropriate learning experiences that enable learners to naturally

encounter and process the language features intended (Ellis, 2009). This alignment can be ensured by including a blend of ‘input-providing’ tasks, which involve reading and listening skills, and ‘output-prompting’ activities, engaging students in speaking and writing activities (Ellis, 2009). Most tasks tend to be integrative, involving two or more skills, such as ‘read and do’ tasks, allowing the instructor to create a more defined context for acquisition and output.

In relation to task implementation, while there are a number of proposals positing optimum implementation, there is no single structural framework to which TBLT practitioners must strictly adhere. All theorists concur that the vital component of a TBLT lesson is the main-task phase, however, the introduction of additional phases in the forms of pre-task and post-task activities tends to remain discretionary.

Task methodology (pre-task, main task and post-task)

Pre-tasks, as summarised by Ellis (2009), take one of four forms:

- (1) A task similar to that of the main task: during which students may participate in an initial task. This can constitute an interactive class-based activity (Phrabu, 1987), before being required to complete the task independently (individually or in groups).
- (2) An observation-based model: merely observing others perform a task as an introductory model can help reduce the cognitive load on the learner (Skehan, 1996; Willis, 1996).
- (3) Non-task related activities to prepare learners for the task ahead: this form of preparation helps to activate learners’ content schemata, and when familiarised with the requirements of the task, more processing space becomes available to formulate language structures needed to express ideas, enhancing fluency and complexity of language used. Within this premise, Newton (2001) posits that such activities will ‘prevent the struggle with new words overtaking other important goals such as fluency or content learning’; such activities may constitute brainstorming or mind-maps (Willis, 1996).
- (4) Setting a time limit: allowing participants to strategically plan for the main task; for which Skehan (1998) proposes that a 10-minute timeframe is optimal.

Main tasks may comprise *task-performance* and / or *process* options to optimally manage task implementation. Task performance options allow the instructor to place the emphasis of the task on fluency or accuracy (by adding or removing a time pressure). The second task performance option may involve providing students with the input prior to embarking on task-related activities, which would naturally result in greater accuracy than if such input was not made available (Ellis, 2009). Thirdly, the instructor may contemplate introducing a surprise element into the lesson; forcing students to suddenly reformulate ideas, arguments and language use.

On the other hand, *process options* involve live in-class decision making in the handling of tasks, especially with regards to delivering corrective feedback. Firstly, errors may be addressed during task time, where the teacher pauses momentarily to attend to form (Ellis, Basturkmen & Loewen 2001), or in-task corrections may occur incidentally (Prabhu, 1987); being addressed when the need arises. Within this context, educators may intervene to support a process initiated by the

learner in the form of a recast (asking students to reflect and reformulate), or by metalingual comments (informing the learner of the correct form of language without explicitly providing the answer); this technique is referred to as *nudging* (Lynch, 1997).

Post-tasks provide scope for revisions and recap to achieve three separate goals. Firstly, to repeat the task to enhance performance either under identical or modified conditions. Secondly, to reflect on task performance and discuss communication related difficulties and problem-solving issues to enrich subsequent performances, for which Allwright (1984) coined the term *uptake*. Thirdly, teachers may allocate attention to forms, (referred to as *grammar surgery*), that appeared continuously problematic during in-task performance (Loshcky & Bley Vroman, 1993).

TBLT methodology in practice

Skehan (1998) insists on introducing a pre-task phase prior to the main task, to allow for more explicit instruction and form correction. However, in his model, tasks are entirely unfocused and post-task activities are not included. Long (1985), on the other hand, incorporates both focused and non-focused tasks, providing corrective feedback when required, but, does not advocate the inclusion of a pre-task or post-task phase; whereas Willis (1996) proposes that attention to form is best reserved for the post-task phase. Ellis (2003) alludes to the inclusion of all three phases, paying attention to form during all three stages. Similar to Long (1985), Ellis introduces tasks that are both focused and unfocused, but dissimilar to both Long (1985) and Skehan (1998), Ellis (2009) does not necessarily reject traditional forms of instruction in order to rectify deviant language use. Nonetheless, despite this conceptual variability, all three versions of TBLT share five essential similarities: (1) all three TBLT variations provide natural opportunities for language use; and, (2) naturally these lesson structures are learner centred; (3) Tasks are either focused or unfocused, (4) while attention is paid to form is when considered appropriate. Furthermore, (5) all TBLT ideologies reject the concept of traditional forms of instruction as a central ideology.

Criticisms of TBLT

Widdowson (2003) claimed that the structural weakness of TBLT was that tasks are *loosely formulated*, and are not distinguishable from more traditional classroom activities, and, accused tasks of neglecting semantic meaning. Seedhouse (1999) argued more explicitly that tasks are not valid constructs for language learning, asserting that TBLT only results in impoverished language samples that are of minimal acquisitional value (pidginised language), and, that the over-reliance of context at the expense of accuracy will promote fossilization. Seedhouse (2005) also added that language production arising from tasks is very unpredictable and disparate to those intended. Sheen (2003) accused TBLT syllabuses of neglecting grammar, while Swan (2005) was more condemning, claiming that TBLT 'outlaws' grammar. In response to these scathing claims, Ellis (2009; 2005) pointed out that the criticisms have ignored the fact that TBLT can comprise input-prompting and output-providing tasks, which expose students to high quality input (through text or audio), and with careful planning, focused tasks ensure a close

match between the intended language features selected and those processed by the learner. A task-based syllabus is not mandated to merely constitute a pure (unfocused) task structure, a hybrid syllabus consists of focused and unfocused tasks. Further to which, Ellis (2009) acknowledges the potential use of traditional forms of instruction if implemented carefully (and minimally) alongside TBLT, namely in the form of *conscious raising tasks*, to target confusing language structures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Below is a compilation of studies published recently in three separate countries active in EFL; Cyprus, Albania and Indonesia.

Eastern Mediterranean University - Cyprus (analysed students' reactions to TBLT)

The leading study for discussion was published in the Asian EFL journal (volume 9, issue 4, 2007), and was conducted at the Eastern Mediterranean University in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. The study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of TBLT lesson structures, as well as to ascertain the students' reactions to TBLT in comparison to traditional forms of instruction. 54 first-year students (aged between 17-23 years) from two separate classes were selected for inclusion at the ELT department of the university. Both groups were demographically diverse and comprised participants of various nationalities including Turkey, Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, Jordan, Kuwait, Israel, and Pakistan.

This study used a mixed methods approach consisting of questionnaires (quantitative), interviews and diaries (qualitative). While questionnaires were distributed to all participating students, only four students were invited to take part in interviews and diary recordings. Questionnaires consisted of 26 questions utilising a 5-point scale response format; the first ten questions were related to the students' views of the traditional syllabus, and the following 16 questions canvassed students' reactions to TBLT. The results of the two sets of questions were statistically compared via t-tests analysis for significance testing. The results inferred significantly higher levels of engagement and enjoyment during the TBLT phase (despite the clear absence of statistical reporting).

The diaries recorded by students A, B, C and D (held in anonymity), helped to clarify the students' supporting rationale (assuming a limited number of four students can represent the views of the whole sample population). Notwithstanding, the diaries revealed "great satisfaction" as the students enjoyed watching and giving presentations, and they also positively evaluated the variety of tasks as well as being provided with more opportunities to speak. The same four participants expressed their dissatisfaction with traditional style lessons in the interview phase due to their limited role in the learning process, and, the fact that the teacher appeared to hijack most of the talk-time in this mode of instruction. The respondents also stated that the course book was not relevant to their interests, as most of the content consisted of lengthy passages

ensued by repeatedly identical exercises.

South East European University - Albania (evaluated the impact of TBLT on speaking skills)

An alike study was carried out at the South East European University (Albania) to examine the effectiveness of TBLT on students' speaking skills. This paper also investigated the teachers' reaction to TBLT style lessons, as well as the students' feedback. The student population in this study comprised 60 undergraduates aged between 18-25 who were pre-intermediate / intermediate level of proficiency.

All participants received questionnaires with a Likert scale continuum ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The students were divided into two separate groups; a control group to be taught conventionally, and the experiential group which received TBLT instruction for limited duration of 8 weeks (in the winter semester of 2012).

A pre-test in the form of a 3-minute presentation was introduced to benchmark the students' level of spoken English, in which they introduced themselves to the class and discussed their personal interests. After the TBLT programme, students took a post-test, and, the results of which allegedly indicated that the students reacted positively to TBLT (despite the absence of statistical reporting and analyses to support this indication).

Ganesha University – Indonesia (introduced TBLT to improve speaking skills)

More locally to Asia, a higher education research project (2010) was carried out at the Ganesha university of Education (Indonesia) to assess the efficacy of TBLT on speaking achievements. A mixed methods research approach was utilised to collate quantitative data (through post-test speaking scores), and qualitative data (via interviews and field notes). Intriguingly, in line with the current study, the main purpose of this research initiative was to ascertain whether TBLT could help solve issues related to timid behaviour, lack of fluency, and, inability to communicate in real-life scenarios; despite many years of learning. Out of a total of 68 students active on the programme, 40 were selected for participation through random sampling.

The teacher talk-time was mostly designated to brainstorming ideas and interactive dialogue, and the teacher monitored students' progress and adequate use of target language in discussing ideas during jigsaw activities, role-play or presentation preparation time. The 40 students taught by TBLT learning reportedly showed a significant improvement in relation to overall speaking skills when compared to the 28 that followed the conventional form of instruction (TBLT group: 79.18; conventional group: 74.22). The qualitative data inferred that students' higher standards of performance were owed to a more relaxed and collaborative atmosphere, and, because tasks involved practical language that was considered useful for students; involving scenarios such as greeting friends, agreeing and disagreeing, asking / giving information, asking / giving suggestions and describing people.

Research objectives

1. The research papers hitherto discussed appear to be lacking fundamental detail. First of all,

across all three papers, findings centred purely on speaking skills, which were reported to have improved significantly as a result of TBLT. Nonetheless, the remaining issue is the lack of tabulated data and statistical reporting to clarify the extent of the influence of TBLT in all three settings; especially in relation to performance variations across demographic profiles or according to ability level.

2. The significance of this study is to investigate the instructional effect of TBLT on both speaking proficiency and formal examinations among a larger student population (N = 81) of business studies students at a private university in Bangkok. An additional line of inquiry is to examine the level of variability in performance outcomes in terms of gender and ability level in order to ascertain the calibre of learner for which TBLT is most suited.

3. Moreover, this paper will be among the first to transparently disclose details regarding TBLT lesson plans and implementation. This is in response to the timid level of detail offered by both academics and researchers explicating how to effectively impart TBLT style lessons.

Hypothesis

Based on the review of literature, speaking assessments are expected to improve significantly as a result of TBLT. Furthermore, due to the arguments put forth by high-profile academics positing the acquisitional value of TBLT, equal improvements are also expected to be mirrored in formal comprehensive assessments; irrespective of gender or ability level.

METHODOLOGY

This study examined the instructional impact of TBLT methodologies on 81 second-year business students at a private university in the Thai capital. Statistical comparisons were made using t-tests (0.05) to compare students' formal examination results in general English obtained under TBLT vis-à-vis prior attainments achieved under traditional instruction.

Research design

The majority of activities prescribed in the existing curriculum entailed lower order skills, such as identifying correct answers, grammatical irregularities and correcting existing faulty syntax structures. This trial introduced sweeping changes to the syllabus to promote, develop and sustain interactive use of language. The cruciality of TBLT is moving learners away from being pure memorisers of content (and being recognisant of correct answers in multiple-choice format), to language users) being capable of independent language creation). A basic example of this transition is to put learners of an L2 in a basic real-life situation, in which they are required to seek information regarding transport schedules, time allocation and ticket fares. As students will come to discover, in the real world a list of options designed for pre-selection does not fortuitously appear, and the learner, despite years of attending English classes, is often left mute when forced to solicit and convey information.

Learners will initially need to be inducted how to participate in TBLT, and understanding that a wide variation of responses among individuals and groups is encouraged, if not inevitable. Due to individual creativity, and using a variety of possible lexical formations to convey (the same) meaning, it should be unlikely that groups produce identical work and all work on exactly the same idea. As demonstrated in the example below, when learners are familiar with the demands of a task, a role-play (with great variability in output) can easily be produced based on a list of prompting words.

For example: (1) destination; (2) payment (options / cost); (3) frequency; (4) time; (5) distance: for all the words listed, a range of possibilities are available. In the first instance alone (destination), a wide selection of possible questions of varying complexity may well include:

Excuse me sir, how could I get to Cambridge?

I would like to go to Manchester, what would be quickest / cheapest / easiest way?

Could you please advise me on how to get to ... ?

Could you please help me? I am lost, I need to return to ...

I am interested in seeing the Big Ben, how do I get there?

What interesting monuments are there here?

Needless to say, the variability of responses to the questions above is virtually infinite and should enable students to reproduce individual dialogues. With innovative planning, most lesson themes can be reformatted into TBLT structures, essentially converting the syllabus into a task-list. Some tasks easily allow for hidden grammatical structures to be incorporated into the lesson.

Some examples may include dialogues discussing holidays (also focusing on past simple), role-plays regarding complaints (formulating expressions, modals and negatives), describing an accident / incident (multiple past tenses and adjectives), presenting and comparing non-electronic inventions (encouraging fact-finding, comparatives and superlatives), story narrations (a multitude of tenses, creative thinking and descriptive vocabulary), job interview simulations (formulating / answering questions, formal language and life skills). While it remains to the discretion of the teacher whether all three phases of the task are introduced (pre-task, main task and post task), within the context of this experiment however, all three components were included to allow for grammatical corrections identified in context. This would also offset Seedhouse's (2005) concern that TBLT neglects grammar and promotes pidgin style language production.

Participants

The participants in this research study comprised 81 second-year business studies students (females = 48, males = 33) studying their second general English course, (business English is taught in the third year). Business studies students were invited to participate in this trial seeing the importance of English to their academic and vocational aspirations. In view of the fact that

prior attainments were effectively the *control* element of the experiment, the inclusion of additional control groups was considered unnecessary.

Measures

The formal assessment criteria include a speaking test (weighted at 40%), and two formal examinations worth a total of 60% (mid-term tests: 20%; and final examinations: 40%). Despite the curricular shift, in accordance with the university's assessment criteria both formal examinations still mostly comprised multiple-choice grammar and vocabulary related questions, a reading comprehension section, and, a small writing assignment. Letter grades were awarded according to the following grading scheme:

Score:	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100
Grade:	F	F	F	D	D+	C	C+	B	B+	A	A

Data analysis

T-test significance testing (0.05) was utilised to compare TBLT related performances with prior attainments achieved in a conventional setting. Furthermore, standard deviation was also calculated to ascertain the level of consistency across both performances. In addition, variability analyses were carried out to discover the extent to which students of all tiers of ability respond to TBLT.

RESULTS / FINDINGS

The opening research question looked to examine the general impact of TBLT on pre-intermediate business students' language performances, and, whether TBLT can help improve attainments in both speaking proficiency and formal tests.

Table 1. Measuring the instructional impact of TBLT across N (=81)

Method	Score (/100)	SD	P	Speaking (/40)	P	Exams (/60)	P
TBLT	60.9	20.04	.0195 (sig)	28.64	<.001 (sig)	32.26	.324 (not sig)
Traditional	54.93	16.33		23.56		31.37	

Table 1 indicates that by and large TBLT had a positive impact on English language performances when compared to conventional forms of instruction (60.9: *Grade C+* vs. 54.93: *Grade C*; $p = 0.0195 = \text{sig} < 0.05$). However, closer inspection reveals that the majority of progress emanated from improvements in speaking skills, which improved significantly ($p = < 0.01$); contrary to formal examinations where no significant level of progress was observed ($p = .324$). Moreover, higher levels of standard deviation in the TBLT results would infer greater variability

in language attainments.

4.2 The second research question aimed to analyse performance variations according to gender and ability level.

Table 2: Performance variations according to gender

Gender	Method	Overall (/100)	P	Speaking (/40)	P	Exams (/60)	P
Female	TBLT	61.83		29.02		32.81	
			0.0795 (not sig)		0.0007 (sig)		.391 (not sig)
Male	TRAD	56.29		24.21		32.08	
	TBLT	59.55		28.09		31.45	
			.0611 (not sig)		.0004 (sig)		.350 (not sig)
	TRAD	52.94		22.61		30.33	

Counterintuitively, the results presented in Table 2 show that neither gender responded to TBLT in significant terms, despite the encouraging results displayed in the previous table. Male students' improvements reached near statistical significance, as mirrored in the value of 'p' (.0611), which almost fell below the 0.05 threshold. Also, in concert with Table 1, the majority of progress stemmed from speaking skills. An additional point of interest is that higher achievements among male students in the TBLT environment appeared to narrow the achievement gap between genders.

Table 3: Variability in English language attainments

Quartile	Method	Overall (/100)		Speaking (/40)		Exams (/60)	
			P		P		P
Q1	TBLT	87.3	< .001 (sig)	37.4	< .001 (sig)	49.9	.002 (sig)
	TRAD	75.55		30.8		44.75	
Q 2+3	TBLT	60.39	.0004 (sig)	28.78	< .001 (sig)	31.61	.137 (not sig)
	TRAD	51.9		22.27		29.63	
Q 4	TBLT	35.55	.0139 (sig*)	19.6	.313 (not sig)	15.95	<.001 (sig*)
	TRAD	40.5		18.95		21.55	

*sig**= significantly inferior performance

The inferential relationship that comes to light in Table 3 is that the more linguistically responsive students (Q1) performed to significantly higher levels in both forms of assessment: speaking ($p = <.01$) and formal examinations ($p = .002$). Conversely, struggling students (Q4) achievements significantly exacerbated as a consequence of TBLT (*overall*: 35.55 vs. 40.5; $p = .0139$), as speaking skills remained stagnant ($p = .313$) and formal examination results deteriorated significantly ($p = 0 <.001$). Nonetheless, mid-tier students' language achievements (Q2 & Q3) proved to be more varied. While overall attainments improved significantly ($p = .004$), most progress was owed to improvements in speaking skills (speaking: $p = <.001$; formal examinations: $p = .137$).

DISCUSSION

The implementation of TBLT in this trial sought to increase students' fluency, creativity, confidence, risk-taking, and eventually lead to longer term improvements accuracy. It would appear that the majority of students responded positively to TBLT class environments, especially in relation to speaking skills. That said, the inconvenient revelation was that lower achieving students' attainments worsened considerably as a result of participating in a TBLT environment, which partly validates Seedhouse's (1999) allegation that TBLT only results in the production of impoverished language samples.

This shortfall also gainsays the claim that in collaborative environments, senior students support struggling peers to reduce imbalances, learning from the *more knowledgeable other* (Vygotsky, 1978). This under-performance among embattled students was not circumvented despite attempting to implement equal participatory structures, such as a timed *pair share* (Kagan,

2013), where participants are allocated equal time to speak in role plays and contribute answers to the class. Owing to the limited English proficiency levels of the Q4 students, in conjunction with their lack of familiarity with TBLT, it seems more apparent that struggling learners require more support and coaching from the instructor in the form of task supported learning (presentation, practice, production).

Separate groupings would enable higher achievers freely and thrive under the autonomy, whereas Q3 and Q4 students may be suited to task-supported learning, involving more worked examples and teacher intervention, directly relating to Sweller et al.'s revelation (2012) that novice learners do not respond positively to discovery-based learning, as the discovery is often *missed*. Sweller (1985) has long proposed that individuals initially learn more efficiently by studied examples, (*worked-example effect – essentially task supported learning*), and can gradually transition to a more autonomous learning environment (*guidance-fading effect*). This methodology also reduces the cognitive load during the acquisition of new content and skill, which enhances the learning process; (this) "is one of the earliest and probably the best known cognitive load reducing technique" (Paas et al., 2003). And, with gradual guidance removal, learners increase their possession of schemas (or partial schemas) that can be applied in successive problem-solution based tasks introduced at a later stage (Kalyuga, Chandler, Ayres and Sweller 2003).

Implication to research and practice

An additional limitation noted in this study was the relatively large class sizes (20 students on average), which may have blunted impact of TBLT. In relation to which, Ellis (2009) emphasises that large classes are *an unfavourable structural feature typical of many educational settings*. The other major constraint was the lack of manoeuvre in aligning the formal assessments with examinations that reflect TBLT, which may partly account for the disparity of progress between speaking skills and formal examinations.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results from this research trial largely showed that TBLT lessons help to promote fluency amongst the majority of students, given more opportunities to practice verbal output, encourage risk-taking and develop confidence. Inconveniently, however, Sweller's (1985) claim that novice (or less able) learners often fail to make the discovery also holds true; as the primary inferential relationship that came to light in this study is that the students' perceived level of progress in TBLT environments appears to be governed by their natural linguistic capacity.

In response to this observation, the fundamental recommendations put forth would consist of arranging students into separate groupings (based on ability) for two reasons: (1) to accelerate

acquisition of more proficient students who thrive in a task-based curriculum; and, (2) to provide a separate structured curricular trajectory for struggling students, for whom TBLT is not *yet* developmentally appropriate.

The university could otherwise contemplate initiating a bilingual programme, that is designed for highly proficient learners who excel in a TBLT setting. The university could also move away from antiquated forms of testing and model formal examinations on widely recognised IELTS testing formats, which not only necessitate high reading efficacy, but also require sound creative writing and speaking proficiency skills. This not only constructively aligns a TBLT curriculum with appropriate assessments, but also equips students to achieve in formal assessments that are vital for academic and vocational success.

Future research

- (1) Extending the scope of research to encompass more universities in Thailand, and more importantly, universities in other countries active in EFL would enrich findings, also helping to identify and compare the influence of cultural settings on the productiveness of TBLT learning structures.
- (2) Encompassing high schools with English programmes may also help to ascertain students' responsiveness to TBLT as a function of age and socioeconomic background.
- (3) Encapsulating the term 'task' as *an open-ended problem-based activity that results in great variability in response (as a function of individual creativity)* may help to disambiguate potential implementational misunderstandings. Such an encapsulation implies that learners are using creative language to present ideas, negotiate problems and reason opinions; which is therefore meaning-focused and the accomplishment of such inevitably necessitates both linguistic and non-linguistic resources. This helps to avoid conceptual ambiguity, and assists researchers in determining which activities are compatible with TBLT.

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