Iranian English Language Teachers' Perception of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT): Principles and Challenges

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Abstract
This paper presents the findings of the study on Iranian English language teachers' understanding of task-based language teaching (TBLT) principles and perceived challenges of TBLT implementation in Iran. The data obtained from 100 respondents on a 39-item survey instrument and four essay questions analyzed through frequency statistics revealed that nearly 70 percent of teachers were cognizant of TBLT principles and in comparison with institutional and learner factors, teacher-related factors including teacher proficiency, experience, training, ability/skill, satisfaction and fidelity to tradition, inadequate income, and assumed roles were top challenges in the implementation of TBLT. The result is a further confirmation of the extraordinary role put down to teacher variables by Deng and Carless (2009), Jeon and Hahn (2006), Chang and Goswami (2011), Li (1998), and Richard (2011). The study also revealed that factors like teachers' being aware of TBLT advantages, their willingness to do TBLT, compatibility of their understanding with TBLT, their ability to change student attitudes towards TBLT, their access to authenticity, and student motivation can be viewed as assets in TBLT implementation.

Keywords: TBLT, Challenges, Teacher Variables, Implementation

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INTODUCTION

Task-based language teaching (TBLT), as an equivalent to or as a realization of the strong version of communicative language teaching (Ellis, 2003) has received positive sentiment of research and practice across the world. Originally developed in second language acquisition (SLA) research as a means of clinically eliciting samples of learners' language for research purposes (Corder, 1981), TBLT tasks have achieved prominence over language exercises and practices in the traditionally product-oriented presentation-practice-production (PPP) lesson paradigm. As a central component in language pedagogy and as a device for organizing the content and methodology of language teaching (Prabhu, 1987), tasks are believed to provide better contexts for learners' acquisition process through involving learners as language users in undertaking 'message-focus' communicative interaction since TBLT is motivated primarily by theory of learning rather than a theory of language (Richard & Rodgers 2003, p. 226).

Since the introduction of task-based language pedagogy in Anglo-Saxon societies in 1980s, there have been attempts to implement TBLT across different contexts, especially in the Oriental countries like China, Hong Kong, Thailand, etc. (Carless 2004, 2007 & 2009; Deng & Carless, 2009; Adams & Newton, 2009; Chang & Goswami, 2011). Unfortunately the adoption of TBLT in these contexts, especially in East Asia, ran into problem which is attributed to the role of teachers. Adams and Newton (2009) reported three types of factors proved to be main challenges in implementing TBLT and communicative language teaching approaches in Asia namely: (1) institutional factors including inappropriate grammar and vocabulary knowledge-focused national examination for TBLT in China, summative and knowledge-based high stakes exams in Hong Kong, unsuitability of national exam for TBLT in Korea, (2) classroom factors like large and mixed proficiency classes in Korea, Hong Kong and mainland China, and (3) teacher developmental factors which require teachers to develop sustainably and their voices to be attended to.

Careless (2009) interviewed 12 secondary school teachers and 10 teacher educators in Hong Kong where TBLT has been adopted since 1990s.The interview was mainly about the interviewees' view about the potential advantages of TBLT and PPP and also their reason for TBLT or PPP preferences in their teaching. The data suggested that teachers preferred PPP since it appears to be more easily

understandable, more manageable and renders a clearer teacher instructional role. The data also revealed that teacher educators who voiced greater support for TBLT acknowledged the complexities of its implementation in the school classrooms since in spite of being the government policy, more still needs to be done for TBLT to be accepted by Hong Kong teachers and implemented in the classroom.

Chang and Goswami (2011) explored factors that promote or hinder Taiwanese college teachers' implementation of CLT. They interviewed eight teachers through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews to investigate the participants' perceptions and experiences regarding the issue. The study showed that teacher-related factors like professional training play a crucial role. Factors like students' willingness, proficiency, and motivation can make CLT implementation feasible; on the other hand, administrative factors like exam-oriented teaching, limited teaching hours, and large classes impede the teachers' practicing CLT effectively. Finally, they state that the teachers should be provided with sufficient teaching resources such as appropriate curricula, textbooks, authentic materials, professional training, and teaching equipment.

Interviewing five experienced teachers through focus-group design and ten teachers through semi-structured interviews, Van Le (2014) investigated external and internal factors affecting the implementation of TBLT in Vietnam. The teachers who took in the study reported that the factors affecting TBLT were external and internal. The external factors were class size, textbooks, time allocation, and students' achievement tests, English proficiency level, and motivation. Internal factors were teachers' knowledge about TBLT, teaching experience, English proficiency, training, and ability to use technology. The external and internal factors can affect TBLT implementation in both positive and negative way. Regarding class size, doing TBLT with large classes will be cumbersome and unwieldy, while it doesn't demand a lot with small classes.

The current study is an extension of two previous papers about TBLT by the same author (Najjari, 2012, 2014). In the first article (2012), he has presented a detailed treatment of TBLT and argued that Iranian English language teachers (IELTs) can implement TBLT methodologically, basing his argument on Widdowson (2003) and Kumaravadievelu (1993) while translating sociocultural underpinnings of TBLT, i.e. mediation, scaffolding, and ZPD into

practical techniques in the Iranian context. In the second article (2014), drawing on the notions of communicative competence, especially with the recourse to Widdowson's (2003) 'language capability' and 'methodological maneuver', Halliday's 'meaning potential' (1973), Ellis's treatment of two versions of task-based language teaching (2003), Carless's 'situated task-based approach' (2007), and Willis and Willis 'methodological innovation'(2011), the writer has argued that teachers can manipulate linguistically-oriented textbooks, and utilize the linguistic materials to make language pedagogy more communicative and meaning potential. Both articles emphasized the role of teachers already recognized by Chunrago and Carless (2009), Chang and Goswami (2011), Li (1998), and Richard (2011). In the current study, teachers' role in implementing TBLT has received a focal consideration both in terms of their general understanding about TBLT and their share of perceived challenges. In other words, this study was meant to unearth the extent to which Iranian EFL teachers are aware of principles of TBLT and the extent to which the successful adaptation of a new method can be attributed to teacher-related factors including their proficiency, capacity, knowledge, etc. The following research questions were posed for investigation:

1. How much are Iranian English language teachers aware of the main principles of TBLT?
2. What are the main challenges of the TBLT implementation in Iran?
3. What are the teacher-oriented barriers of TBLT implementation?

METHODOLOGY
Participants of the study were 33 male and 67 female English language teachers, of whom 34 were teaching in public schools, 12 in private schools, and 43 in language institutes. Fourteen teachers held B.A. and 79 M.A. qualifications in TEFL. They took the questionnaire catering for both global and local challenges of TBLT which were taken from the following: Abebe, Davidson and Biru (2012); Coskun (2011); Ellis (2003); Jeon and Hahn (2006); McDonough and Chaikitmongkol(2007); Ozsevik, (2010); Skehan (1996); Yaman (2012); Yang (2007); and Willis and Willis (2011). The internal consistency reliability coefficient of the 39-item questionnaire determined by the Cronbach's alpha value was $r = 0.62$ indicating an acceptable reliability index for the measure. The first section of questionnaire with 14 statements dealt with teachers' understanding of

tasks and TBLT. The second part of the questionnaire with 25 statements was meant to elicit data on perceived difficulties and challenges in implementing TBLT. In the first and second sections, participants had to choose one of the scales *strongly agree, agree, undecided, strongly disagree and disagree.* The third section acted as a written mini-interview was consisted of four open ended questions. It could also be treated as a concurrent validity tool which assesses the construct in a different facet (via open-ended measures).The last section of the questionnaire asked for participants' background information such as their gender, university degree, age, level of teaching, school setting, method of teaching, and teaching experience. Descriptive statistics was computed to take care of the sum of the frequency and percentage of '*strongly agree*' and '*agree*' and '*strongly disagree*' and '*disagree*' together as indication for determining the criteria for being cognizant or ignorant of TBLT principles or as the criterion for impeding factors or facilitators in implementation of TBLT

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
3.1. Quantitative analysis of questionnaire: section one and two
As to the first part of the questionnaire, the results showed that nearly 70 percent (i.e. the sum of *strongly agree* and *agree* percentages was divided by the total number of answers See appendix A) of Iranian English teachers are familiar with TBLT principles (Table 1). It can hopefully serve as the cornerstone of generic sense of TBLT among Iranian English language teachers making it easier and more promising for teacher educators and curriculum developers to take care of their understanding of TBLT principles regarding running communicative oriented methods. It also seems more than half of the job is already done if there is a determination on the part of curriculum developers to implement TBLT in Iran.

Table 1.
Iranian English language teachers' familiarity with TBLT

Scale	f	%
Strongly agree and Agree	884	67.07
Undecided	236	17.91
Strongly disagree and Disagree	198	15.02
total	1318	100.00

As to the second section of the questionnaire (see appendix B for frequency and percentage), the top challenges which have won the attention of nearly half of the respondents (Figure 1) and can be grouped into three main categories:

(1) teacher-related factors which include statements 1,2,12,8,6, and11.The main theme of the statements is teacher proficiency, teachers' satisfaction with the current practice, inconsistency of teachers' traditional roles with that of TBLT, training, income, and teachers' inability to do TBLT in the case of limited proficiency;

(2) institutional factors which are statements 14,15,18,16, and17. They are generically related to the lack of administration support, time shortage, large number of students in classes, inadaptability of current materials for TBLT, shortage of assessment tools, and current testing practice; and

(3) learner factors which point to the fact that learners lack enough language proficiency to make TBLT implementation possible (statement 24) and are not able to cope with learners' role in TBLT(statement 23).
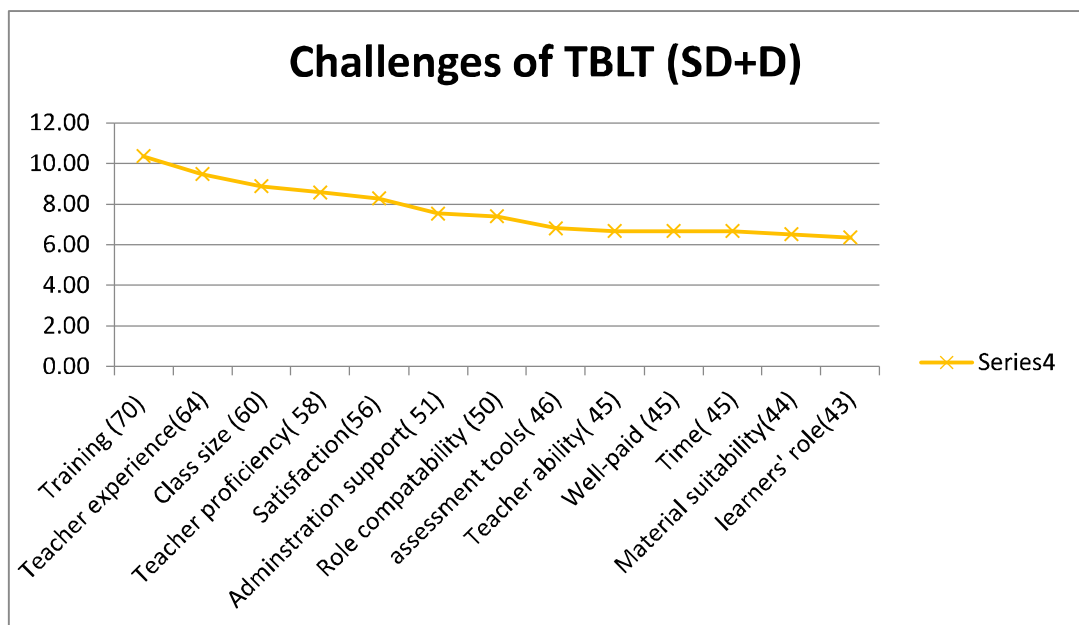

Figure 1. Challenges of TBLT implementation.

* The numbers in parentheses show the number of respondent who have strongly
agreed and agreed

In light of figure 1, it becomes evident that factors related to teacher variables were ranked, among the other variables, as the most challenging issues since from these 13 top factors, nearly fifty percent is related to the teacher variables. Remarkably enough, this finding is in a similar line of thought expressed by Deng and Carless (2009), Jeon and Hahn (2006), Chang andGoswami (2011), Li (1998), and Richard (2011) to underscore the importance of teacher factors in implementation of innovation in language pedagogy.

As to the facilitating factors, the frequency and percentage of *'strongly agree'* and *'agree'* show that 6 factors (statements 19, 20, 3, 21, 22, 25) serve as an asset and can fulfill a complementary role to accelerate TBLT implementation. They are related to teachers' awareness of TBLT advantages, teachers' willingness to teach through TBLT, teachers' ability to change student attitudes towards TBLT, teachers' understanding TBLT principles, teachers 'access to authenticity, and student motivation.

3.2. Qualitative section of questionnaire: section three

In addition to a 39-item survey questionnaire which required learners to choose one of Likert scale options (out of five), The qualitative section was concerned with the participants' written response to the barriers and challenges of TBLT implementation where they were asked to produce ideas on main formidable challenges. In fact, it acted as a concurrent validity measure with a different facet so as to make sure that assessing the same construct with a different format would not change the result.

Concerning the analysis of the first question (see appendix C), teachers were not unhopeful and pessimistic, though ambivalent. It seemed that their tendency toward promising implementation had taken an implicit lead over their explicit concerns as they sometimes provided the researcher with some guidelines how to face problems. Their positive sentiment toward TBLT was more analogous to the finding of questionnaire for the high frequency of answers for teachers' willingness to implement it, their awareness of TBLT advantages, and teachers' understanding of TBLT principles as facilitating factors.

The results of the second question showed that nearly 50 percent believed that they couldn't use TBLT with all learners while

attributing it to learners' low proficiency level accompanied by the shortage of time, unsuitability of materials, inappropriate assessment tools and so on. These results echoed studies done by Chang and Goswami (2011), and Li (1998) which indicated that teachers found it difficult to conduct communicative activities with students who have limited English proficiency or resist participating in group work.

As to the third question, nearly half of the participants considered TBLT implementation as a formidable challenge again while attributing it to factors mentioned in figure 1.

In question four, they were asked to write formidable challenges to provide the researcher with their own suggestions, and finally to offer five top challenges form the most important to the least important. Again from 5 top challenges, 83 percent was related to teacher variables: i.e. teachers' knowledge of TBLT (24.53), teacher proficiency (23.11), teacher experience (19.34), student willingness (17.45) and teacher willingness (16.04). These values bear a close resemblance to results gained from the second part of the questionnaire.

As to the section 4 of the questionnaire, one point of noteworthy was that when teachers were asked which approach they were practicing in their classroom, only 12 percent of teachers had checked TBLT option as their favored method in teaching English in spite of the fact that the results of the first section of questionnaire showed nearly 70 percent of teachers knew TBLT principles.

This paradox between what teachers believe about TBLT and what they do in practice in their profession warrants a different mode of research. Apart from this survey study in which teacher-related variables as challenges received the highest frequencies and percentages in comparison with other variables, a qualitative research, especially ethnographic study, needs to be conducted to cater for the teachers' reluctance to do TBLT while they are not completely ignorant about its principles and advantages.

CONCLUSION

Findings in this study provided some interesting insights into IELTs' understanding of TBLT as nearly two-thirds of teachers stated '*strongly agree*' or '*agree* 'on its principles. Mostly teacher-related variables proved to receive a lion share of challenges. To cater for these challenges needs context specific provisions so as to render a local

implementation of TBLT as Deng and Carless (2009) refer to the fact that there is a need for a home-grown emphasis in TBLT and CLT implementation in China - Carless's (2004) his own label is 'situated task-based approaches' -and a need to be supported by teacher development activities which facilitate further understanding of theory and practice in TBLT. Their emphasis on teacher development activities is the first top concern that nearly 70 percent of teachers voiced (section two, statement 8). In a similar thought Mâţă (2012) believes that change in educators is important because the main barrier to curriculum innovation is teacher educator resistance to change.

Additionally, some other factors which can precipitate its initial adaptation were extracted that can hopefully provide a springboard for launching some initiatives to practice TBLT in Iran context. This is in line with Xiongyong and Samuel (2011) findings that most EFL teachers hold positive attitudes toward TBLT execution due to a higher level of understanding on TBLT concepts, but that there exist constraints like the large-sized class and difficulty in evaluating students' task-based performance. Interestingly they also refer to the help that teachers and teacher trainers can be provided with to administer TBLT more effectively in the future.

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APPENDIX A. Questions pertaining to perceived difficulties /challenges in adopting TBLT For each of the following statements, please answer by putting Vin a box, according to the following scale: SA (strongly agree), A (agree), U (undecided), D (disagree), SD (strongly disagree)

Statements	SA %	SD%	A%	D%
1. I am happy with my current teaching practice.	56	5.11	23	2.75
2.Teachers have enough English language proficiency to implement TBLT in Iran	20	1.83	58	6.95
3.TBLT is compatible with my existing understanding about language teaching	50	4.57	20	2.4
4.I have enough time to do TBLT in my classes	29	2.65	45	5.39
5. You have to be a highly experienced teacher to use TBLT effectively.	64	5.84	20	2.4
6. I am well-paid to make changes in my existing teaching practice toward TBLT.	31	2.83	45	5.39
7. Some of my colleagues have already taught their language learners through TBLT.	47	4.29	24	2.87
8. Language teachers need a special training in using TBLT.	70	6.39	19	2.28
9. I have a good knowledge of task-based instruction.	38	3.47	26	3.11
10.I can methodologically do TBLT in spite of non-task-based materials	36	3.29	26	3.11
11. Teachers with limited language proficiency can do TBLT.	36	3.29	45	5.39
12. Traditional view on teachers' role is compatible with TBLT.	28	2.56	50	5.99
13. Western educational assumptions on TBLT are suitable within Iranian context.	22	2.01	37	4.43
14. There is enough support from administration to implement TBLT.	22	2.01	51	6.11
15. Classes are too large for the effective use of TBLT.	60	5.48	28	3.35
16. There are effective and efficient instruments to assess TBLT.	34	3.11	46	5.51
17. Existing practice in examinations is compatible with TBLT.	27	2.47	41	4.91
18.Materials in textbooks are suitable for using TBLT	38	3.47	44	5.27
19.I have access to authentic materials such as books ,newspapers, magazines, movies and etc.	49	4.47	34	4.07
20. TBLT offers more advantageous for learners than the other methods.	69	6.30	10	1.2
21. Students have motivation for getting innovation in language pedagogy especially toward TBLT.	47	4.29	27	3.23
22. I can change attitudes of students who are not used to TBLT.	60	5.48	14	1.68
23. Traditional view on learners' role is compatible with TBLT.	24	2.19	43	5.15
24. Students have enough language proficiency to make TBLT possible.	23	2.10	40	4.79
25.I would like to implement TBLT in my classes	63	5.75	7	0.84
total	1095	100	835	100

APPENDIX B. Please answer the following questions either in <u>Farsi or in English.</u>
1. What are your comments and reflections concerning any aspect of the implementation of TBLT in Iran?
2.Can you use TBLT with all level of students? If yes/ no, why
3. Do you consider the implementation of TBLT a challenge for you? If yes/no, why
4. What are formidable challenges for implementation of TBLT in Iran? Write five top challenges from the most important to the least important.