The Roles of TESOL Students’ TBLT Practices and Their Willingness to Implement TBLT

Hyejin Lee (The State University of New York at Buffalo)


This study explores teacher trainees’ perceptions on Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and their willingness to introduce it in their future teaching contexts. The participants in this study were ten TESOL students from various countries who volunteered as English teachers at a Community English School (CES) located in the South Central region of the United States. The CES, supported by the TESOL program, is staffed by TESOL students and designed to provide free English instruction with community members learning English. The curriculum of the CES is entirely based on TBLT. Hence, the student volunteers can experience and practice TBLT while working with community members. To understand how volunteering teaching experiences are translated into the participating teachers’ perceptions of the TBLT approach, the study utilized three instruments to collect data: classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. The study findings suggest that the CES served as a constructive outlet for TESOL students to practice TBLT and to reflect on its applications. The study further indicates that while TESOL students’ participation in the CES positively influenced their attitude toward TBLT, their willingness to introduce it is likely to be conditioned by socio-cultural constraints in their institutional situations. The results from this study shed light on the practical benefits and constraints of implementing TBLT in language classrooms.

I. INTRODUCTION

In English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts, in which English is not readily available outside the classroom, Task-based Language Teaching

1) This work is a revised version of the author’s MA thesis.
Hyejin Lee (TBLT) is regarded as one of the efficient and practical instructional approaches to promote EFL learners’ target language proficiency (Nunan, 2004). The benefits of TBLT (e.g., authentic, meaning-focused, learner-centered, intentional, and interactive) have been widely recognized in the empirical and theoretical literature. In spite of its theoretical and research-based support that advocate the pedagogical values of TBLT, in actual teaching contexts, it has not been fully and actively implemented (Nunan, 2004). Among the factors involved, teachers’ perspectives and attitudes towards TBLT play a decisive role in the execution of TBLT as instructional practices (Jeon & Hanh, 2006).

Teachers have the agency to enact, discard, or adapt the certain pedagogical approach and possess the potential to bring about educational changes. Unlike long-practicing teachers, who are often constrained by the curriculum, student teachers in the process of being trained are more likely to encounter and experiment various pedagogical approaches, including TBLT. Viewing that there is a link among teacher education, teacher trainees’ disposition towards a certain pedagogical approach, and their actual classroom practices, this study examines teacher trainers’ TBLT practices with the focus on the following three aspects: their perceptions of TBLT, their willingness to implement TBLT in their future classrooms, and factors that encourage or discourage teacher trainees from using TBLT as an instructional method.

The uniqueness of this study lies in its research context. This study was conducted in a Community English School (CES), housed in the teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) program, in an American University (pseudonym). In addition to being introduced to different approaches and methods in language teaching through coursework, TESOL students in this research context can gain teaching experience (and earn practicum hours to fulfill degree requirements) by teaching English in the CES. The CES was established not only to lend a helping hand to community members lacking English abilities but also to provide a myriad of teaching opportunities for TESOL students. The curriculum of the CES is entirely based on TBLT. Thus, TESOL students in this research context can experience and practice TBLT while teaching community members learning English in the CES. By bringing participants’ TBLT experiences to the fore,
this study aims to shed light on the issues and practices surrounding the TBLT implementation. The research questions that guide this study are as follows:
1. How and to what extent have TESOL graduate students’ experiences in the CES helped them to understand the concept of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)?
2. What are the participants’ perceptions of practicing TBLT in their future teaching contexts?
3. What factors affect teachers’ decisions on whether to adopt TBLT?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Definitions and Characteristics of TBLT

In traditional language classrooms, one of the typically employed teaching methods is present-practice-produce (PPP), which primarily focuses on the linguistic forms of the language. However, it has many drawbacks. Willis (1996) indicated that the PPP approach does not provide enough opportunities for producing and practicing the target language, leading students to be incompetent when communicating with the target language. In addition, Skehan (1996) contended that students’ learning processes do not always fall into what is taught in a PPP sequence or what they are exposed to. Therefore, as a reaction to the problems of traditional PPP teaching, task-based language teaching (TBLT), which has its basis in the communicative language teaching method was developed (Ellis, 2003).

The definition of a “task” varies from researchers to scholars. Nunan (2004) characterized a task as “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” (p. 10). Ellis (2003) defined a task as “a work plan that requires learners to process language pragmatically to achieve an outcome” (p. 16). Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001) described a task as “an activity, susceptible to brief or extended pedagogic intervention, which requires
learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective” (p. 11).

Even though the way of defining the term “task” differs to some extent, in the end, all definitions highlight one feature. A task entails the use of language for communication purposes and the learner’s attention is in the context of meaning as opposed to grammatical or linguistic form (Nunan, 2004).

However, it should be noted that linguistic features are not underemphasized in this approach. Rather, priority is given to meaning-based activities, and attention to the linguistic aspects follows. Willis (2001) contended that such linguistic analysis through meaning-based activities is crucial as it is reflective of the cognitive learning processes in real life. In this approach, language learning is a developmental process for communication and social interaction, not a product of practicing the target language as a formal skill (Ellis, 2003). Moreover, Littlewood (2004) argued that learners can acquire the target language in an effective manner when meaningful task-based activities are provided. The principles of TBLT are as follows: learner-centered, meaningful use of language, and enhancing the cognitive learning process. From a pedagogical point of view, implementing TBLT into the language classroom seems to be a viable alternative to traditional methods. Despite the perceived merits of TBLT, however, whether teachers apply this theory to actual future teaching environments remains unclear. Some factors that may affect EFL teachers’ decisions to implement TBLT include time constraints, lack of support, lack of confidence, class management issues, a test-focused curriculum, and students’ and teachers’ preference for traditional teaching style (Jeon & Hanh, 2006). What follows is a review of previous research on the TBLT approach in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts.

2. Research on TBLT in EFL contexts

One of the key principles of TBLT is that it emphasizes learner-centered tasks as a way to achieve communicative competence. The pedagogical benefits of TBLT have exerted a profound influence on East Asian countries,
including Korea, China, Japan, and Taiwan. Nunan (2003) contended that in East Asian English language teaching (ELT) policy, “TBLT is the central pillar of government rhetoric” (p. 606). Although curriculum scheme and syllabuses in many non–English speaking countries have moved towards the versions of TBLT, reviews of the literature on TBLT in EFL contexts suggested that there are discrepancies between national curriculum goals and actual classroom practices.

For example, Kim and Jeon (2005) conducted a survey with Korean English teachers working at the secondary school level using TBLT. The survey data suggested that even though the teachers had a high–level of understanding of TBLT, they had negative views about implementing it in their teaching contexts. The survey data gave some reasons for teachers avoiding the TBLT implementation: teachers’ lack of knowledge of task–based instruction; teachers’ self–perceived inability to use the target language; classroom management; task performance assessment; materials; and classroom sizes. Hu (2003) also indicated that even though teachers are well informed about the TBLT approach, there are some socio–cultural factors in EFL contexts that can affect teachers’ decisions about introducing TBLT. Hu listed some plausible considerations: teacher education, teachers’ beliefs, the lack of support, students’ expectations, classroom management, the lack of resources, time limits, the influence of assessments, and a prevalent PPP approach.

Some studies on TBLT suggest that teachers’ inadequate understanding of tasks and TBLT may influence their teaching practices and pedagogical decisions. For example, Yang and Fang (2010) researched secondary school English teachers’ perceptions of TBLT in China to understand the effects of EFL teachers’ perceptions of TBLT on their teaching practices. The findings indicate that the teacher participants showed scant knowledge of TBLT and that teachers’ lack of understanding of TBLT resulted in their limited application of TBLT in Chinese instructional contexts. Deng and Carless’s (2010) study also suggested that teachers’ lack of theoretical understanding of TBLT can contribute to the hindrance for implementing TBLT. The teacher participants in their study revealed a limited understanding of what constitutes a task in TBLT and what characterizes task–based activities.
embedded in textbooks. With the findings, Deng and Carless concluded that teachers’ lack of understanding of TBLT can prevent them from adopting TBLT in class.

It should be noted that, however, teachers’ understanding and knowledge of TBLT do not necessarily translate into their actual implementation of TBLT. For example, in a study conducted by Jeon and Hanh (2006), even with the Korean EFL teacher participants’ high-level understanding of TBLT concepts, some participants revealed negative views on executing TBLT as an instructional method, mainly due to disciplinary problems and their unfamiliarity. The teacher participants in their study also showed varied views toward TBLT. Some teachers, who believed that TBLT does not improve accuracy, displayed negative views about applying TBLT for English teaching. On the other hand, some teachers, who considered the effectiveness of TBLT as it can increase intrinsic motivation, realize a learner-centered approach, and promote interaction among students, were more open-minded toward introducing TBLT in their instructional settings.

Teachers’ attitudes and beliefs toward particular theories and methods can be influential factors in their actual teaching practices and pedagogical decisions. For example, Ogilvie and Dunn’s (2010) study found that new teachers entering the ELT profession might be favorably disposed toward TBLT on account of their teacher education experiences. However, they may not employ TBLT due to the “need to adhere to cultural norms and expectations related to teaching” (p. 172). Ogilvie and Dunn further indicated that even when an instructional context is amenable for implementing TBLT, there remains the perceptions and dispositions amongst teachers in their use of the TBLT approach.

Cochran-Smith (2002) maintained that teacher education programs exert a substantial impact on teacher quality, teacher trainees’ beliefs about teaching, teacher dispositions, and eventually student achievements. In other words, teachers’ dispositions towards certain pedagogies can be developed and experientially reinforced from teacher education programs. In this regard, the structures and practices of teacher education programs serve an integral role in preparing teacher trainees to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for successful implementation of certain pedagogical
III. METHODOLOGY

1. Research Contexts

The context of this research study was a TESOL program, in an American University (Pseudonym), situated in the South Central region of the United States. TESOL students in this American University were required to take a course titled, “Theory and Methods of TESOL.” The course offered an overview of historical reviews, theoretical bases, and practical applications of different language teaching approaches, including the direct method, total physical response, the audio-lingual method, and task-based language teaching approach. The classroom period lasted around two and a half hours with a ten-minute interval session. Each week, the instructor introduced one particular pedagogical model of language teaching in relation to second language acquisition theory to TESOL students. Then, after the interval session, he asked TESOL students to practically apply their theoretical understanding of the language teaching approach through various experiential activities such as micro-teaching, group discussion, and lesson planning.

In the final semester of coursework, teacher trainees in this TESOL program were required to complete a practicum as part of their degree fulfillment. Teacher trainees had a range of options for locations where they can teach, and the CES was one of them. The CES was situated on the campus of an American University, and the instructor of “Theory and Methods of TESOL” course was the director of the CES. Task-based language teaching was the entire basis for the curriculum in the CES and as the mission suggests, the CES attempted not only to enhance community members’ lives but also to provide opportunities for TESOL students to have practical experiences by applying what they have learned in courses to actual teaching. In other words, there was a symbiotic relation between community members learning English and TESOL students: community members can benefit from free English instruction whereas TESOL students can promote
the implementation of new theories and methods that are being taught.

2. Research Participants

The participants were selected based on the observation of their involvement at the Community English School, their previous teaching experiences, and their cultural backgrounds. The participants came from various countries representing eight nations: five from South Korea; two from China; and one each from Pakistan, United States, and Iraq. The volunteer teachers ranged in age from 24 to 41 and the number of years teaching varied, ranging from 0 year to 8 years, with an average of about 3.3 years. To preserve confidentiality, the names of the participants have been replaced as follows: David, Jung-Hee, Do-Jin, Deok-Min, Jenny, John, Kyung-Won, Jung-Im, Yeol, Ahn. The demographics of the participants in the study are summarized and displayed in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Duration of Teaching</th>
<th>Previous teaching contexts</th>
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<td>David</td>
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<td>College</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jung-Hee</td>
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<td>1 year</td>
<td>Private institution</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do-Jin</td>
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<td>2 Years</td>
<td>High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deok-Min</td>
<td>28</td>
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<td>4 Years</td>
<td>Private institution</td>
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<td>Jenny</td>
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<td>6 months</td>
<td>Intensive English Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Iraqi</td>
<td>1 Year</td>
<td>College</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahn</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Data Collection

1) Classroom Observation
The classroom was observed eight times and field notes were taken, which captured specific features of the classroom under the TBLT curriculum. The notes included information about classroom arrangement, types of activities and materials used for TBLT, and the nature of the interaction between TESOL students and community members within TBLT. The results from the eight classroom observations were used to further analyze TESOL students' attitudes toward the TBLT instructional approach as well as how well they understood the concepts of TBLT in their application in the Community English School.

2) Interviews

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted, with each interview lasting from thirty-five to forty minutes. The participants were asked about their experiences with TBLT before they started teaching at the Community English School. After that, the volunteer teachers were individually asked about their willingness to employ TBLT after completing their master's program, or rather, each individual's rationale for adopting or avoiding TBLT in their language teaching was requested. All responses to the questions were recorded and collected as qualitative data.

4. Data Analysis

Overall, the data were analyzed in accordance with the research questions: (a) participants' dispositions towards the TBLT approach, (b) their willingness to implement it in their future teaching contexts, and (c) factors that determine this decision. Each participant's interview and classroom observation data were treated as a separate case and the collected data were subjected to inductive thematic analysis. The interview transcriptions were read thoroughly and then coded that were of potential relevance to addressing the research questions. To corroborate the internal validity of the results, the interview data were cross-examined with classroom observation data. After examining a single case on an individual basis, a cross-case analysis was conducted to locate recurring themes and common patterns.
across the participants. For example, after reading through the participants’ interview transcripts, I noticed that participants with teaching experience at secondary school level (both public and private institutions) discussed the effect of test-oriented educational systems on their pedagogical decisions. I made a note detailing the connections among the participants’ educational background, teaching levels, and dispositions towards TBLT. I tried to base my analysis on participants’ dispositions towards the TBLT approach, thereby thoroughly examining the issues from their perspectives. To make a claim valid and to ensure the legitimacy of the data, I strove to keep the participants’ accounts intact as much as possible as a warrant of evidence.

IV. FINDINGS

1. TESOL students’ hands-on experiences in understanding TBLT

1) Emerging Interest and Understanding in TBLT

Some participants with a lack of experience in TBLT expressed that the teaching practice at the CES helped them to understand the TBLT teaching method. For example, Deok-Min, who had never had experience learning or teaching through TBLT, mentioned how helpful the experience with TBLT was for her teaching career.

Honestly, TBLT was not familiar to me at all because in my country, Korea, we didn’t teach like this way at all. In Korea, we usually focus on grammar translation. So, when I heard TBLT for the first time, it was hard to understand even though I am a teacher. But I am getting more familiar and comfortable with it. I think this experience was very helpful, and I want to use this kind of method in the future.

Deok-Min’s accounts suggest that her previous learning and teaching experiences were mostly based on traditional teaching methods that are
prevalent in her country, Korea, where the focus was on grammar translation, rote memorization, and drills. However, Deok-Min indicated that teaching at the Community English School gradually influenced her on the formation of favorable impressions about TBLT and helped understand characteristics of the nontraditional teaching method. Deok-Min’s comments indicated that her teaching experiences in the CES helped her gain knowledge about TBLT, familiarize the concepts, and eventually led her to introduce it in her real classroom. Along this line, Yeol also mentioned that the teaching experience at the CES helped her realize the pedagogical benefits of teaching through TBLT, which motivated her to implement TBLT into her real teaching.

2) Moving from Theory to Practice

Some participants reported that teaching at the Community English School provided opportunities to bridge the gap between theoretical concepts and real practice. For example, David, the previous coordinator in the Community English School, was satisfied with the opportunities to apply pedagogical knowledge obtained from the courses in a practical setting.

I did not know about the task-based teaching until I learned it from the TESOL program and taught here. I learned it from my Method of TESOL course and I always looked forward the opportunities for using it. The community school is totally based on task-based learning, so we can experience it through teaching. This experience was indeed useful and practical because I could practice what I learned from the course.

David explicitly learned the concepts of the TBLT approach from his course. However, he did not have occasions to practice them in an actual classroom setting. David mentioned that he was constantly seeking opportunities to apply educational theory learned from his TESOL graduate courses into real teaching contexts. Demonstrating his sound understanding of the curriculum in the CES, David seemed satisfied with the hands-on experiences. In a similar vein, Do-Jin stated that his practical experience in
the CES enabled his theoretical knowledge of TBLT to move from comprehension to application.

I had no idea what TBLT is before starting this TESOL program and teaching in this English school. I now know what it is and how I should use it to help students. I first learned it from the Method of TESOL course. The professor gave tasks to the class members to complete and he did not teach grammar or those kinds of linguistic features of the English language. But I just learned grammar naturally by completing the tasks. I think this is a good way of teaching for Korean students. I am happy that I can actually practice it before using it in my future classroom.

Do-Jin mentioned that when he first encountered TBLT, he was impressed by its pedagogical benefits, which he was not able to find in traditional instructions. Do-Jin was glad about the opportunity to practice the nontraditional TBLT approach before he introduces it in his real teaching contexts. It seemed that teaching at the CES offered TESOL students hands-on experiences in TBLT as well as intensified their understanding about the theoretical and practical aspects of the TBLT approach learned from the course.

3) Reinforcing and solidifying the understanding of TBLT

Some participants already had learning, teaching, or both experiences with a task-based instruction. For example, Jenny, a native English speaking TESOL student, has sufficient experiences with the use of TBLT not only as a language teacher but also as a language learner. Jenny had very positive and confident attitudes toward the TBLT-based instructions. Jenny recollected the joy she felt with the use of tasks when she learned Japanese as a second language.

I’m familiar with this type of teaching. When I taught adults students at the Intensive English Program, I used a lot of tasks.
I did not care about grammar or sentence-level instructions. I also had a learning experience with it. When I learned the Japanese language, my teacher gave us a task that was really fun for me as a student and it helped us to work as a group. Teaching at this community school was also helpful because previously, it was just a theory for me to understand the concepts. But, actually seeing and practicing it definitely helped me to solidify the concepts.

Jenny introduced the word “solidify” during the interview to indicate the beneficial aspects of the hands-on experience and reported that teaching at the CES further reinforced her understanding of TBLT. The classroom observation data also revealed that Jenny’s instruction seemed to align with the fundamental tenets of the TBLT instruction: Jenny was very sensitive to community members’ language proficiency levels and their interests when selecting task-based activities.

2. Willingness to implement TBLT

Most participants perceived TBLT to have pedagogical values in language learning and reported that they are willing to continue using TBLT in their own classrooms. The participants have their own rationales behind this decision, which were largely related to the key principles of TBLT. In what follows, factors affecting participants’ decisions on adopting TBLT in their own future classrooms are discussed.

1) TBLT Increases Students’ Motivation in Learning English

The data analysis demonstrated that participants’ preferences for task-based teaching method were related to how well they understand traditional teaching methods such as P–P–P (Presentation–Practice–Production) in comparison with TBLT. Pointing out the needs for educational innovation in their own country, the participants seemed to perceive TBLT as more effective than traditional teaching approach. Regarding a task as a source of motivation in language learning, participants were in favor of TBLT because of its motivational
potential. For instance, Do–Jin brought up community members learning English to explain how tasks can promote learners’ intrinsic motivation for language learning.

I would like to use a more communicative approach like this task–based teaching method in my home country because it can fix the disadvantage of the traditional method. For example, I did role–play and created some composition tasks based on community members’ lives. I really found that this was useful during my teaching. I was glad that I used tasks to teach English because I saw my students’ happy faces. I believe students learn better and more when they get motivated.

Do–Jin mentioned that while practicing TBLT at the CES, he realized that community members became self–motivated and goal–directed when they accomplished the assigned tasks. Do–Jin believed that TBLT enables community members to use the target language to achieve a specific outcome and that this goal–oriented approach gives a sense of accomplishment in their process of language learning. Along this line, Deok–Min also brought up the notion of motivation in language learning.

I think TBLT makes language learning more meaningful and exciting. I think the most beneficial aspect of TBLT is that it makes students fun and gets them motivated. I think TBLT is helpful because by doing tasks, community members can learn and use English for something that is connected to their real lives. I think it will make English learning more meaningful for them. For example, in this English school, I taught a woman who really loves cooking. So, I asked her to make a presentation about a recipe in English. I saw her really enjoyed doing the recipe task. I also saw other community members enjoyed doing tasks such as making PPT or doing some interview tasks. I think TBLT makes language learning more meaningful and exciting.
Deok-Min was favorably inclined towards the task-based teaching approach. Deok-Min witnessed that community members in the CES enjoyed using English through performing a series of tasks. From her perspective, students’ interests acted as a motivational force, leading them to feel the joy of learning while performing tasks. Her comments also imply that a task that is more responsive to students’ interests and needs may add to a motivational factor in their language learning.

With regard to the motivational aspect of TBLT, Yeol seemed to believe that tasks provide students with a sense of achievement and fulfilling learning experience. She demonstrated her understanding of the outcome-oriented features of TBLT (i.e., a task has a goal that requires learner to work towards) as follows:

I like task-based learning because it motivates students in learning English. For example, when students do some tasks, they feel like they need to produce something. After completing that task, they feel like they have accomplished something. I think it is the most important and practical aspect to teach English based on TBLT. Tasks make learners set the goals and they are supposed to complete something at the end of the class. I think this kind of activity, which has a goal or a purpose, motivates students. From a teacher’s perspective, it also provides me with opportunities to focus more on my students’ goals.

Given that TBLT is an outcome-oriented approach, it requires language learners to use the English language to complete the tasks. Therefore, rather than explicitly teach learners the target language features, TBLT focuses instead on letting students use the target language to accomplish the tasks. In this regard, TBLT provides learners opportunities to produce the target language to complete tasks while providing them a sense of achievement.

2) Promote Actual Language Use

Participants also valued the pragmatic aspects of a task-based curriculum
that is designed to engage learners in the authentic and functional use of language. Participants regarded TBLT as a practical manifestation of communicative language teaching in that TBLT gives language learners a legitimate need for using the target language. For instance, David believed that TBLT enables community members to apply the English knowledge gained from the CES into their actual life.

For me, the most important thing I like about this task–based learning approach is that tasks are based on authentic and real life concepts. Usually, the tasks that I worked on with students here are related to the real–life contexts, such as giving directions or creating an account on the Internet and searching information on the website. So, what students learn through tasks in this class can be used again in their later everyday life. I think it is fun and meaningful from students’ perspectives.

In his view, these tailored communicative tasks allow community members to establish connections between what they learned in the CES and how it can be translated into practical uses outside of the CES. Rather than be constrained into classroom settings, David seemed to value encouraging language learners to apply the English knowledge in a real life situation so that their linguistic knowledge can be internalized for future purposes. Likewise, David also appreciated the practical features of tasks that correspond to the specific purposes of language learning:

I like TBLT because teachers can teach some practical English that relates to students’ fields of study. This task–based learning will really work well especially for those who learn English for the specific purposes. For example, if we are to teach business students then, we can design some specific tasks related to the business field. For example, I had one student working in a restaurant. So, for the student, I designed interview tasks that have some possible questions from the customers. He was supposed to take an order and other students in the CES were acting as if they
were customers in the restaurant. Later, he told me that he used something learned in this class in his workplace. He seemed really happy and I was also happy.

Kyung-Won believed that TBLT allows teachers to present target grammatical structures and vocabulary more effectively.

I like it because I think task-based learning is more like student-centered. When students came to the English school, I first gave my students choices by asking what they want to learn from these different tasks. Based on their interests and needs, students chose tasks that best fit to their interests within their English levels. Because students can choose what they want to learn among varied task activities. I think this kind of giving power to students made them more engaged in this class.

For example, Kyung-Won said when teaching English in Korea, his primary focus was to provide students with an entire list of grammar rules or vocabulary with no specific reason for presenting them. Kyung-Won further indicated that in terms of teaching grammar through traditional P–P–P instructions, students are oftentimes taught isolated grammatical items without contexts. Kyung-Won seemed to believe that this can lead to students being bored, disengaged and losing interest in learning English. Thus, Kyung-Won expressed his preference for TBLT because it can provide the language input more meaningfully. In contrast to the PPP approach, Kyung-Won believed that students seemed to learn the target grammatical structure in a more meaningful way through tasks that require learners to get involved in using the target language. Kyung-Won said that learning through tasks allows students not only to develop communicative skills but also to deepen their knowledge of the target grammatical structure. In this sense, tasks are believed to give language learners a genuine purpose of using the target language features more meaningfully.
5) Realize Learner–Centered Approach

TBLT is a learner–centered approach by taking language needs of learners into consideration. The data analysis revealed that participants tried to actualize the learner–centered approach by respecting community members’ different language learning needs, interests, and their current proficiency levels. To illustrate, concerning the theme of the learner–centered approach, Yeol mentioned the following:

In China, it is like a teacher–centered classroom. A teacher is the center and students do not normally interact with the teacher. Students just listen to the teacher and take notes. I think we need to make students participate more and interact in the classroom. The most impressive thing I learned from this TESOL program was that a teacher should encourage students more to participate in the classroom. I think TBLT is more student–centered because it makes students more involved in activities and participated in the class.

Yeol seemed to believe that TBLT is grounded in the learner–oriented approach. Based on her account, Yeol seemed to support the student–centered approach more than the teacher–fronted lecture format such as imparting knowledge to students. In a similar vein, Jung–Im also placed more values on the learner–centered approach as opposed to the teacher–fronted, one–way transfer of information instruction.

I like TBLT because I think task–based learning is more like student–centered. Students here can choose tasks that best fit to their interests within their language levels and it is them who do the tasks. We as teachers are just watching or encouraging them. I think this kind of teaching makes students more engaged in their learning.

Jung–Im believed that the task–based approach can provide more active
and engaging roles for students than teacher-centered practices that are predominant in her home country, Korea. The classroom observation data also indicated that Jung-Im tried to give students autonomy to choose a series of tasks based on their language proficiency levels. Jung-Im seemed to enact a learner-centered instruction recognizes individual students’ learning needs and requires students to be active in their learning processes.

3. Unwilling to introduce TBLT

Despite participants’ positive attitude towards TBLT, with regard to the feasibility of TBLT, some participants voiced concerns about implementing TBLT in their future classrooms largely due to contextual constraints and institutional barriers within their teaching settings. The study results suggest that irrespective of the participants’ inclination to introduce TBLT in their classrooms, some contextual factors may hinder the participants’ pedagogical decisions. The following are factors affecting participants’ hesitant and disinclined attitudes towards the TBLT execution.

1) Perceived Contextual Constraints

The data analysis revealed that a washback effect of an examination-driven system is one of the major reasons participants were hesitant about implementing TBLT in their classrooms. Participants emphasized the determining aspects of the education system in controlling what is to be taught to students. As a result, participants indicated that despite their support of the TBLT approach, they may be unable to employ it in their institutional settings. For example, Deok-Min, who first encountered TBLT in the CES and developed her favorable attitudes toward it, stated she may face difficulties with actually implementing the contemporary TBLT approach if she teaches high school students in Korea.

Well, I am planning to teach high school students after my Master’s program, which means my focus of teaching will be preparing students for their exam. My students will need English
because they need to pass the college-entrance exam and to have a good score on the English exam. From my previous experience, students focus on something that is only related to the exam. I really like TBLT, but I don’t know how to make it happen.

Deok−Min seems to be worried about a washback effect of the current national college entrance exam. She stated that EFL teachers, especially those in exam-driven institutional contexts, are forced to maximize their students’ scores on the national college entrance exam. She added that even though she wants to base her teaching on what she has learned in the U.S.-based TESOL program, such as the TBLT approach, she sees some realities in EFL contexts may become obstacles for her decision on teaching methods.

According to Deok−Min’s comments, the dominance of the exam narrows not only student experiences of English learning but also teachers’ pedagogical decisions. In the contexts where English comes as a form of school subject in the exam-oriented culture, the main goal of English instruction is to raise students’ English test scores rather than to allow students to use the English language. In this vein, John also indicated that the present curriculum system mandated by the government can be one of the influential constraints affecting teachers’ instructional decisions.

I am satisfied with TBLT, but I think we cannot apply it to all teaching contexts. For me, I am supposed to work and teach in my department. The method I have used in my department was mostly based on a grammar translation method. So it is more like a teacher-centered direct instruction and it does not have communicative activities, or task-based activities. I want to use tasks but I don’t have that freedom to use the new approach because I have to follow certain instructions and curriculums.

John stated that irrespective of his pedagogical inclination, the TBLT approach may not be feasible in his instructional context, which prescribes content to be taught. His remarks suggest that administrative aspects such as
fixed curriculum, predetermined contents and textbooks may ultimately prohibit teacher trainees’ resolution to employ TBLT in the classroom.

2) Perceived Benefits of PPP for Developing Accuracy

Despite teachers’ positive attitudes towards TBLT, some participants believed that TBLT is not appropriate for promoting language accuracy. Even though they acknowledged the downside of the traditional, grammar–based instructions, some participants regarded that conventional presentation–practice–production (PPP) approach which espouses explicit grammar instruction and controlled exercises yields better results especially in short–term testing. For example, Deok–Min first expressed unfavorable attitudes towards grammar–based instruction. However, she later shared conflicting thoughts about traditional grammar teaching.

I taught high school students in my country for three years, and I usually taught grammar not in authentic contexts. I only focused on what we call Su–Nung (Korean SAT) and just based my grammar teaching on the textbook. I know it is a problem, but I am not sure how TBLT can improve learners with their accuracy. I think TBLT is not enough and strongly believe that traditional grammar teaching is more helpful for improving accuracy. I think we need some explicit grammar teaching, and then include TBLT, because grammar cannot be acquired by the tasks themselves.

In light of her responses, Deok–Min seemed to value the traditional grammar–oriented teaching methods. She also believed that the TBLT approach by itself is insufficient to achieve language development goals. Likewise, David also indicated the values of the traditional grammar instruction especially in Korea by comparing TBLT with PPP.

If I go back to Korea, I have to tailor my teaching based on my students’ needs. First of all, I will have to figure out how to deal with standardized tests, because so many students are bound by
standardized tests now and they have to get a good score in order to get admitted to a prestigious university. So, they just focus on whatever the test requires. PPP can be useful in terms of promoting accuracy of language learning. I agree that the TBLT method can help students to use the English language, but in EFL contexts the correct use of English is more important than fluency. I think TBLT is beneficial for promoting fluency, and PPP is good for increasing accuracy. I acknowledge that I learned very useful teaching methods here, but I may not be able to use them in my teaching contexts.

David believed that explicit grammar instruction, which focused on specific language forms and structures is better in terms of promoting accuracy than TBLT. This also revealed that he possessed dichotomous viewpoints regarding communication (focus on meaning) in comparison to grammar (focus on form). According to two participants, TBLT by itself is insufficient for language development in that TBLT is inadequate for promoting the correct use of language. Such views may owe to misconceptions about the TBLT approach. It should be noted that there is a strong and a weak version of TBLT to understand the role of grammar. According to Nunun (2007), even though the strong version of TBLT does not include teaching grammar, the weak or form-focused version does involve grammar teaching. In other words, TBLT involved with grammar instruction and corrective feedback can be one feature of the TBLT approach.

V. Discussion

The first research question deals with how participants’ teaching practices within the TBLT-based curriculum in the CES helped them to conceptualize the TBLT approach. The participants were categorized into three different groups: those who had never encountered TBLT before, participants who had theoretical knowledge of TBLT but lacked practical experience, and those who had much experience with TBLT. Despite these differences, most
participants appreciated the hands-on experience with TBLT, which helped them gain a conceptual understanding of the theory. The results of this study underscores the role of practical experience in teacher training. As a result of the unique structures of the program, participants were able to translate their conceptual understanding of TBLT into professional practices. This suggests that teacher education programs should provide teacher trainees with ample hands-on experience by letting them carry out a new teaching method, rather than merely presenting the approach, so that teachers can transfer the theoretical knowledge gained from the course to actual practices.

With reference to the second theme, “willing to introduce TBLT,” some participants displayed positive dispositions towards the TBLT implementation, largely due to its perceived pedagogical values. The most reported benefits of TBLT were student-centeredness, authentic language production, motivation, and learner autonomy. Participants’ perceived values of TBLT correspond to previous studies on teacher perceptions of TBLT. For example, Jeon and Hahn (2006) interviewed secondary school teachers in Korea and found that the teacher participants regarded TBLT as an effective teaching approach: through task-based activities, “learners can be more easily exposed to target language use” (p. 138). Along this line, McDonough and Chaikitmongkol’s (2007) study also found that EFL teachers at a university in Thailand recognized the benefits of TBLT in developing learner autonomy, providing opportunities to practice the target language, and fostering transferable skills.

In regard to the last theme, meaning being “unwilling to introduce TBLT,” the study findings suggest that some participants, especially those with teaching experience at the secondary level, were hesitant about introducing TBLT in their future classrooms. They believed that unconventional pedagogical methods, such as TBLT, might not work well in exam-centered teaching contexts, where students are more acquainted with traditional teacher-centered pedagogies. This is reflected some of the practical and conceptual concerns that “CLT and TBLT do not prepare students sufficiently well for the more traditional, form-oriented examinations which will determine their educational future” (Littlewood, 2007, p. 245). The study results also indicate that instructional environments to which teachers and
learners are accustomed can influence teachers’ dispositions towards certain language teaching approaches. The effect of institutional constraints on teachers’ decisions of TBLT implementation can be found in several previous studies. For example, Ogilvie and Dunn (2010) examined pre-service teachers in a Canadian teacher preparation program. They found that although teacher trainees were positively disposed toward TBLT in theory, they were reticent to use it in practice due to the “need to adhere to cultural norms and expectations related to teaching” (p. 172).

The influence of socio-cultural norms and values on English teaching practices has also been addressed in a study conducted by Richards and Pennington (1998). They found that novice EFL teachers, who were trained in the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach during their teacher preparation program in Hong Kong, abandoned CLT in their first year of teaching. Instead, they followed traditional practices in order to adhere to cultural norms. Along this line, McDonough and Chaikitmongkol’s (2007) study also suggested that as a result of the pressure of school circumstances and students’ expectations, teachers may withdraw certain teaching approaches. For example, students’ preference for learning grammar over improving communicative skills led teachers in Thailand to oppose the TBLT implementation.

In sum, teacher decision-making is a complex adaptive process, which is situational and circumstantial. Several factors should thus be taken into account when discussing teachers’ willingness to introduce TBLT in class. However, McDonough and Chaikitmongkol (2007) pointed out that the more positive teachers are about TBLT, the more likely they are to apply it in the future. Therefore, teachers’ reported strong convictions in TBLT and their interest in applying it in their classes may lead them to overcome some difficulties they may encounter in the process of employing it.

VI. Conclusion

In response to some drawbacks inherent in the traditional PPP approach, the task-based view of language teaching has emerged, which views
language learning as a developmental process, which promotes social interaction (Ellis, 2003). Couched in a learner-centered approach, TBLT attempts to present opportunities for learners to engage in the natural and functional use of language for practical purpose. This study explored how TESOL students’ practical experience with a new teaching theory, TBLT, aided them to understand its concepts, influenced their instructional decision-making processes, and investigated factors that seemed to affect their future pedagogical decisions. Most of the participants acknowledged the benefits of having hands-on experience with a teaching theory in that it allowed them to raise their awareness and understanding of the theory. Some participants expressed great interest in applying TBLT in future teaching settings; they believed that TBLT can provide meaningful learning experiences, increase the interaction between students through task-based activities, and promote students’ intrinsic motivations in language learning.

Furthermore, participants also believed that through TBLT, teachers can make classrooms more student-centered environments by letting students actively participate in language learning. In addition, participants’ conceptual comparison between traditional teaching methods (i.e., PPP) and alternative instruction (i.e., TBLT) seemed to raise their awareness of the significance of meaningful, authentic, and interactive language learning. However, at the same time, the student teachers exhibited concerns about some practical issues related to TBLT’s actual implementation. Participants believed that applying theory to practice should be in accordance with particular teaching contexts and students’ needs. This study presumes that teachers apply pedagogical approaches based on their beliefs and the findings suggest that contextual factors such as the rigid exam-oriented education systems can affect their pedagogical decisions. The study suggests that to effectively implement a theory, teachers should be not only well-informed about it but also teachers should be flexible in adapting the teaching approach to specific situational needs.
REFERENCES


Appendix

Interview Protocol

1. Do you have any experience with TBLT in your learning or teaching?
2. How do you like TBLT so far and how do you think TBLT can help community members learn English?
3. Have you experienced any difficulties in using TBLT?
4. How do you find the idea of teaching English with TBLT compared with traditional teaching approach (e.g., presentation–practice–production (PPP) method)?
5. What role(s) do you think TBLT play in teaching English?
6. Do you think teaching experience in the CES helped you understand the TBLT approach? (If so, then how?)
7. Do you want to use TBLT in your future teaching contexts and why?

Examples in: English
Applicable Languages: English
Applicable levels: Secondary, Tertiary
Key words: TBLT, Hands-on Experience, TBLT Implementation

Lee, Hyejin
Graduate School of Education
The State University of New York at Buffalo
505 Baldy Hall
Buffalo, NY 14260–1000
+1–716–645–2455
E-mail: lee.hyejin0419@gmail.com

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