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TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING (TBLT) APPROACH IN LEARNING ARABIC LANGUAGE: STUDENTS' VOICE

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Abstract

- *Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is a new approach in teaching second language particularly in Arabic language. The approach, which employs student-centred approach, is viewed as more effective than the traditional way. This approach is slowly gaining its popularity among Arabic language educators and learners all around the world. In Malaysia, the Centre for Languages and Pre-University Academic Development (CELPAD) of International Islamic University Malaysia is one of the first institutions of education to implement this new way in teaching Arabic language. As such, this study was conducted in order to explore the students' opinion towards the implementation of task-based language teaching (TBLT) in this learning institution. 10 respondents were randomly selected from the students in Arabic elementary level studying at Centre for Foundation Studies, International Islamic University (CFSIIUM). A semi structured interview was carried out on them. The qualitative results via nvivo analysis were used to examine students' view towards the implementation of task-based language teaching (TBLT) in Arabic language. The findings unveil that while the respondents were positive and motivated to learn Arabic language using this approach, they also disclosed some challenges that they face.*

Keywords: Students' opinion, Task-based language teaching (TBLT), teaching Arabic as a second language

1   INTRODUCTION

With the advent of the communicative language teaching approach in the early 1980s and much emphasis on learners' communicative abilities over the last two decades, the term Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) came into common use in the field of Second Language Acquisition in terms of designing communicative tasks to promote learners' actual language use. Within the varying interpretations of TBLT

related to classroom practice, recent studies exhibit important features such as TBLT is compatible with a learner-centered educational philosophy (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Richards & Rodgers, 2001) and consists of particular components, such as goal, procedure, specific outcome (Murphy, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Skehan, 1998).

According to Izadpanah (2010), among the interesting aspects of TBLT is that it includes almost all the major points of contention in language pedagogy: attention to meaning, engagement with grammar, use of authentic communication, importance of social interaction, integration of language skills and connection to psycholinguistic processes.

Adhering to the significant roles of TBLT in teaching field which has been mentioned above, the main purpose of this study is to explore students' perceptions of Task-based language teaching (TBLT) in learning Arabic language as a second language. The topic was chosen because it is related to the implementation of the new approach in theCentre for Languages & Pre-University Academic Development (CELPAD), IIUM. CELPAD, IIUM is thecentre responsible for offering language courses which could be an entering or a graduation requirement for all students in IIUM. Among the language courses offered are Arabic proficiency courses. In 2012, CELPAD started to use TBLT approach in Arabic language teaching. The introduction of the new approach has created major changes in the way of Arabic language teaching and learning in IIUM. Studentshave to adapt to a totally different approach than what they were accustomed to in their secondary school. Outside the Arabic speaking world, particularly in Malaysia, there are hardly any institutions that employ such approach in Arabic language teaching. Thus, it is interesting to find out how this new implementation is perceived by the students themselves. Since this approach is rather new in Arabic teaching, the researchers have yet to find any similar studies in Malaysia that report on perceptions of students studying Arabic using similar approach. This is the prime reason that had prompted the current study. Understanding the students' perception of TBLT seems to be the most important step for any institutions undertaking this new approach for it would give a better understanding and preparation in delivering the curriculum.

1.1   Arabic Language Requirement in IIUM

IIUM is an international university which uses English language as the first medium of communication and instruction, while Arabic language comes as a second medium of communication and instruction. All new students registering in IIUM, are required to sit for language placement examinations namely English Placement Test (EPT) and Arabic Placement Test (APT) administered by the Centre for Languages and Pre Academic Development (CELPAD). The purpose of the examinations is to determine their level of English and Arabic language proficiency. Those students who meet the language requirement may continue their core courses according to their programme. Meanwhile, those who do not meet the language requirement must learn English and Arabic language courses before they can pursue their studies. The language requirement for English and Arabic language varies according to their programme. Those students who intend to pursue their studies in Arabic based programme like Bachelor in Arabic or Bachelor in Arabic Communication or Bachelor in Shari'ah Law will have to undergo six levels of Arabic, while those who are majoring in English based programme will only need to undergo two levels of Arabic.

1.2   Background of Arabic Language Teaching and Learning

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is not a common approach in teaching Arabic language for non-native speakers of Arabic in Malaysia. In traditional Arabic teaching, the approach or teaching methodology use a lot of grammar drills and grammar-translation method. Prior to 2012, most teachers of Arabic language

courses in CELPAD used this methodology in their classrooms. Students depended totally on their teachers: from explaining the subject, translating the text, preparing the language practises to choosing the groups of vocabularies that they must memorize. Students were not trained to think and to expand what they have learned. Meanwhile, teachersrelied totally on textbooks. They only taught what is written in the textbook using grammar-translation method. Most of them did not use their creativity to attract students nor motivate them to use and learn more outside classroom. They failed to realize what has been stressed by Leaver and Willis(2004) and that of the findings of Chomsky (1959, as cited in Leaver & Willis, 2004)who have demonstrated convincingly that both language learning and language use must be a creative process. Teachers need to focus more on the learning process rather than learning results, to help students know how to learn instead of what to learn only, and to help students establish creative learning rather than adaptive learning. Chomsky (1959, as cited in Leaver & Willis, 2004) stipulates that a basic rule system that underpins all languages is innate and that, given exposure to a specific language, children will naturally create the specific rules of that language for themselves. Learning is thus seen as a process of discovery determined by internal processes rather than external influences.

In the past, teaching focused more on reading and writing skillsin CELPAD. Only students in the upper levelswere exposed to speaking and listening skills. Many believe that this approach is among the reasons why IIUM graduates who are not majoring in Arabic based programs cannot communicate in Arabic language not even converse in the most basic phrase such as 'how are you'(كيف حالك).Grammar-translation based approach which had been practised for many years have failed to produce the desired effect of helping learners to practically use the language learned. Instead of acquiring a sense of when and how to use which vocabulary, learners only learn all the carefully selected words that they will need for the exams and then promptly forget them. As a result, this method makes learning Arabic boring; thus the students' innovative ability cannot be improved as well. When the students go into the society, they are not brave enough to communicate with the native speakers because their responding role has a limited range of language functions.

1.3   The Implementation of TBLT in Arabic Language Courses

Realizing this problem, CELPAD decided to make a paradigm shift in the field of Arabic teaching in order to become more student-centered`and thus allows for more meaningful communication, and provides for more practical extra-linguistic skill building. The traditional way of present/practice/produce (PPP) method of teaching Arabic has been replaced by communicative language teaching and many studies reveal that task-based language teaching is an offshoot to communicative language teaching.Teacher-centered classes and structural-syllabus teaching are giving way to a more student-centered, practical and flexible approaches.

Some other practitioners have adopted TBLT out of desire for a meaning-focused approach that reflected real-life language use. They believe that language needs to be transferred to real-world activities and that is best accomplished by doing some of these activities in the classroom (Brown et al, 1989). In foreign language learning contexts where students have little exposure to the target language outside the classroom, TBLT can be specifically helpful (Jeon& Hahn, 2006). Others, like Prabhu (1987), adopted tasks because they firmly believed that task-based interaction stimulated natural acquisition processes. There are special characteristics offered by TBLT approached as stated by Larsson (2001) when he describes about the advantages of TBLT. According to him, TBLT helps to:

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1- Improve students' communicative skills.
2- Increase thegeneral ability of social interaction.
3- Encourage students to gain deeper sense of understanding.
4- Activate student to be actively acquiring the knowledge and not be passive receivers.
5- Motivate students to learn in a way that the prospect of a final examination rarely manages to do.

In addition to the above mentionedcriteria for task-based approach, Willis (1994, cited in Harris, 1998) claims that there is a six stagecycle in task-based teaching. The first stage is introduction to both topic and task, where the teacher helps the students to understand the objectives of the task and he/she organizes the collection of ideas or information aboutthe topic. In this stage students take part in activities that either help them to recall words or phrases which will be useful during the performance of the task. The second stage is the task itself. Studentswork in pairs or groups using whatever language resources they have to express themselves. Teacher encouragesthem but there is no correction. Emphasis is on fluency and getting things done. The third stage is planning. Students spend some time on putting together in written or spoken form a report on what they did andwhat conclusions they reached. Teacher can help with language here, if it is required, with the emphasis onability to communicate the results. The fourth stage is reporting where the teacher organizes feedback, with thegroups reporting to the class, either orally or in writing their results. Again, there is no overt correction. The fifthstage is language focus and practice where the teacher sets up a language focus task, which draws attention toone or more of the following: a) language which students could have used but they did not use, b) language theyused but not as well as they might have used, c) any other language that is related to the topic and task which theteacher considers important and wishes to focus on. This stage can include drills, dialogues or typical activitiesfrom the practice stage of Present Produce Practice (PPP). In all cases, the goal is to focus students' attention onkey language points. The last stage is the parallel task where the students have a chance to try out the task again, but with different materials, which will necessitate the same kinds of language.

The basic principle of TBLT is that by having learners perform tasks, it will help them to develop knowledge and skill in the second language in accordance with the way their own language learning mechanisms work. According to Ellis (2002), the task function in TBLT works as 'devices for creating the conditions required for language acquisition'. Thus, it is not the content of the lesson that is the focal point but the process of classroom interaction that generates opportunities for learning. The focus is not on the product or on what to learn, but rather on the process or on how to learn. TBLT offers what traditional method failed to accomplish. This is the main reason why CELPAD has decided to adopt TBLT as a new approach in the second language learning in IIUM.

2　　PROBLEM STATEMENT

Over the last few decades, TBLT approach has been used in many countries in second and foreign language learning. Nevertheless, this approach is not widely followed and practised as an educational approach in Arabic language teaching in Malaysia.In fact, the educational culture of the task-based learning/teaching (TBLT) is completely new to Malaysian students especially in Arabic as a second/foreign language learning even though Arabic language has been taught in Malaysia for decades.Hence, there are little discussions of TBLT in teaching and learning Arabic in Malaysian context.The closest attempt to study TBLT approach in Arabic language teaching is that of SalihTinggari (2012). The study focuses on teachers' perception of TBLT , which had been conducted at the Centre for Foundation Studies IIUM Petaling Jaya and IIUM Gombak campus, as well as their opinion of the effectiveness of this methodology for teaching Arabic language. However, the issues related to learners' perception of language learning especially for Arabic language learning have not been

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explored; whereas, language learners' beliefs surrounding language learning processes have an undeniable impact on their learning. Due to this information gap regarding learners' perceptions, the present study seeks to examine CFS IIUM students' perception of TBLT in this learning institution.As such, this makes the current study the first study conducted in Malaysia.

3 OBJECTIVES

Thus, the aim of this present study is to examine the opinions of the students in the Elementary level on the TBLT approach in Arabic language learning in CFSIIUM. Specifically, the objectives of this research are to find out learners' attitudes towards learning Arabic via TBLT, the challenges they faced in learning Arabic by using this new approach and their views of their teachers.

4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present study is an attempt to investigate the students' opinion of TBLT approach in the Centre for Foundation Studies, IIUM. For this purpose the following research questions were formulated:

1- What are their attitudes towards learning Arabic via TBLT?
2- What are the challenges that students face in learning Arabic via TBLT?
3- How do they view their teachers teaching Arabic using TBLT?

5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.1 Design of TheStudy
- To answer the above formulated questions, the present study employed a qualitative method through semi structured interviews.

5.2 Respondents

10 respondents from purposive sampling were chosen from the Elementary Quranic Language (Quranic Language Level 1&2) Centre for Foundation Studies (CFS),IIUM, Petaling Jaya. The respondents vary in theirprogramme to ensure that the findings will cover the students' opinion from Arts and Sciences programmes in CFS, IIUM.

5.3 Data Collection Procedure

One interview session was conducted for each respondent at the end of semester 1, session 2013/2014. All respondents they have had at least 1 semester (4 months) of learning Arabic language as a foreign language in CFS, IIUM. The data from the interview was collected through video recording and handwritten notes.

5.4 Data Analysis

All data collected are managed and processed using NVivo software to ensure the systematic analysis of the data. During the coding process, the respondents were labelled as Research Respondent (RR) and they were

identified as RR1 to RR10.The data have been categorized into 3 different nodes: attitudes, challenges and teachers, so as to make the work systematic and therefore easyto retrieve the data.

6   FINDINGS

Detailed analyses were madebased on the interview. The following are the detailed analyses of each of the three Research Questions. Themes and discussions are illustrated briefly under each question.

RESEARCH QUESTION 1: What are their attitudes towards learning Arabic via TBLT?

THEMES: Positive Attitudes
            Negative Attitudes

Table 1: Positive attitudes towards learning Arabic via TBLT

Positive Attitudes	
Class	RR 1: I love to attend Arabic class RR 2: Yes, I **enjoy** RR 2: it make our class **fun and alive** RR 3: I really **enjoy** RR 3: It make my class more **interesting** and I feel more **motivated** to learn Arabic RR 4: Definitely RR 6: **Awesome**, I **enjoy** learning Arabic and do not feel stress and sleepy RR 8: I think I will enjoy if my lecturer use it RR 9: I am very **happy** and **enjoy** RR 9: I **enjoy** learning Arabic with my friends with the guide from my beloved lecturer RR 10: UstazahNik makes Arabic class **fun** and **interesting** RR 10: TBLT promotes fun and at the same time provide **effective** learning
Teachers	RR 1: Yes, my teacher did a great job of teaching us using activities RR 1: My lecturer very creative in delivering the lesson and she is like a sister and mother to us
Language Skills	RR 1: Yes, somehow it help me to practice speaking in Arabic RR 2: Yes, it help my speaking skill RR 3: Help me develop confidence in communicative and I can write simple sentences RR 4: Help to develop my confidence in simple conversation RR 5: Yes, help my writing skill RR 6: Yes, the activities help to train me to speak Arabic RR 7: yes, it help me to converse using simple Arabic sentence RR 9: I think Arabic class help me to improve my language skills RR 10: Yes, writing activities help me write simple sentences

The positive attitudes towards learning Arabic language are divided into three aspects: (1) class; (2) teachers; (3) language skills. From the responses, it is clear that most respondents shared similar positive attitudestowards TBLT. This is shown in the words that eight out of ten respondents(RR1, RR2, RR3, RR4, RR6, RR8, RR9, RR10) used like: 'love', 'enjoy', 'fun', 'awesome', 'happy', 'effective', 'interesting' and alive', when they described their Arabic learning experiences using TBLT approach in class. One respondent claimed that her teacher did a great job in using all sorts of tasks (RR1). Not only that, some respondents also confessed that by using TBLT, it had helped them in developing their language skills especially their speaking skills (RR1, RR2, RR3, RR4, RR6, RR7) and writing skills (RR3, RR5, RR10). Furthermore, two respondents were convinced that TBLT has also developed theirconfidence and motivation towards learning Arabic language (RR3, RR4).

Table 2: Negative attitudes towards learning Arabic via TBLT

Negative Attitudes	
Activities/tasks	RR 1: Too many activities to be completed in one semester
	RR 2: Very difficult to discuss in group using Arabic language due to lack of vocabularies
	RR 10: Sometime I feel shy to present in front of class
Examination	RR 3: I don't know what to focus for examination
	RR 9: I like learning Arabic but I'm not ready to sit for APT
Language skills	RR 4: I know how to pronounce certain words but I sometime did not know how to write it correctly

From the interview, it is obvious that TBLT posed some difficulties among students interms of tasks, examinations and language skills. Regarding the tasks or activities conducted in class, the problems that the respondents faced are the quantity of tasks and the types of task. Too many tasks could create a problem as RR 1 mentioned:

"...too many activities to be completed in one semester" (RR 1)

Other problems revolved around the feeling of incompetence among the respondents such as feeling lacking of vocabulary (RR 2) and feeling shy to speak in front of the class (RR 10). It is the nature of TBLT to "push" learners to be performing a task which requires him or her to use the language even though the learner is not competent enough.

As far as examination is concerned, the respondents revealed some expected responses like unreadiness and uncertainties of the focus of the lessons in preparing them for the exam. This is proven by the responses from two students:

"...I don't know what to focus for examination" (RR 3)
"... I like learning Arabic but I'm not ready to sit for APT" (RR 9)

    With TBLT approach, the respondent also felt that the focus of language skill is more towards speaking rather than writing and reading. Thus, one respondent claimed that he could pronounce the taught Arabic words after the lesson but he could not write the specific words.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2: What are the challenges that students face in learning Arabic via TBLT?

THEMES: **Lack of Vocabulary**
              Examination
              Teacher Factor

Table 3: Challenges in learning Arabic via TBLT

Challenges	
Lack of vocabulary	RR 2: Very difficult to discuss in group using Arabic language due to lack of vocabularies RR 4: I know how to pronounce certain words but I sometime did not know how to write it correctly RR 5: Lack of vocabularies in Arabic RR 10: Sometime I feel shy to present in front of class
Examination	RR 3: I don't know what to focus for examination RR 9: I like learning Arabic but I'm not ready to sit for APT
Teacher Factor	RR 7: I have two lecturers, one use TBLT and the other one did not. I have two lecturers which made the whole lesson became confused and not really focused RR 8: My teacher is native speaker from Arabic country and he rarely translate to English

    Among the emerging trends of challenges faced by the respondents was lacking of vocabulary which led them to faceseveral difficulties in communicating in Arabic. As shown in Table 3, lacking of vocabulary caused one respondent to experience difficulties in group discussions (RR 2), another to face problem in writing the words, which he could pronounce (RR 4), yet another to have challenges in performing public speaking in class (RR 10).

    Another emerging trend is the end of semester examination. The respondents believed that TBLT approach in learning Arabic did not prepare them for the examination. In other words, the tasks conducted were not enough to prepare them to answer the examination.To be specific, RR 3 claimed that she did not know what skills to focus on, while RR 9 felt she was not ready to sit for the examination even though she liked learning Arabic.

    Teachers could also pose some challenges to the respondents. The challenges confessed by RR 7 are that she was confused over her two teachers. She claimed that one teacher conducted the lesson by using TBLT

approach while the other did not. This had resulted in confusion and lacking focus. The other respondent revealed that her teacher was an Arab native and the teacher rarely translated any Arabic words into English. Therefore, it was difficult for her to understand the lesson.

RESEARCH QUESTION 3: How do they view their teachers teaching Arabic using TBLT?

THEMES: Positive
                    Negative

Table 4: Students' views towards teachers teaching Arabic using TBLT

Views Towards Teachers Teaching	
Positive	RR 1: Yes, my teacher did a great job of teaching us using activities
	RR 1: My lecturer very creative in delivering the lesson and she is like a sister and mother to us
	RR 10: UstazahNik makes Arabic class fun and interesting
	RR 9: I enjoy learning Arabic with my friends with the guide from my beloved lecturer
Negative	RR 7: I have two lecturers, one use TBLT and the other one did not, which made the whole lesson became confused and not really focused
	RR 8: My teacher is native speaker from Arabic country and he rarely translate to English

From the interview, it can be concluded that the respondents had two views of their teachers, which could be categorized as positive views and negative views. The positive views depict the opinion that a teacher using TBLT approach was creative, had a good rapport with the respondent and generally did a great job in teaching Arabic using TBLT (RR 1). RR 10 admitted that her teacher made the Arabic lessons fun and interesting while RR 9 was convinced that she enjoyed learning Arabic with the guidance from her teacher.

Nevertheless, some respondents reacted negatively when asked about their teachers. One respondent expressed dissatisfaction regarding having two teachers teaching Arabic – one using TBLT, the other one did not. Hence, this resulted in confusion and lack focus (RR 7). Having a native Arab as a teacher could also pose a challenge to one respondent in which, she was dissatisfied that her teacher seldom translated Arabic words into English.

7   DISCUSSIONS

The results of the present study have revealed that the learners from the elementary level of Arabic actually held positive attitudes on learning Arabic using TBLT approach. Although majority of them did not have any basic Arabic when they first started the semester, they still perceived that TBLT approach had helped them in developing their speaking and writing skills. The interview has also discovered that learning Arabic via TBLT had helped the respondents in building their confidence and increasing their motivation. This finding seems to contradict the finding on staff perceptions study carried out by SalihTinggari (2012), which shows that TBLT is not suitable for elementary level.

Nevertheless, some negative attitudes from the respondents regarding their Arabic learning via TBLT were also noted from the interview. Negative attitudes among the respondents vary from the tasks given, examination and language skills. Some respondents felt that too many tasks for them to complete in one lesson posed a challenge to them; while some expressed difficulties in performing public speaking in front of the whole class. Furthermore, the final examination at the end of the semester had also posed some negative views from the respondents, in which they expressed unreadiness to sit for the exam. Some felt uncertainties about the focus of the lessons in preparing them for the exam. In reference to the focus of the skill, one negative view is that the respondent felt speaking skill was given more emphasis than any other language skills like reading, writing and listening.This situation occurs mainly because TBLT has its origins in communicative language teaching, and is a sub-category of it (Harmer 2001). Therefore, most of the tasks used are more focused on speaking or communicative skill as have been stressed by Richard, et al. (2001)"the use of a variety of different kinds of tasks in language teaching is said to make language teaching more communicative...." However, with suitable language tasks, it is believed that TBLT approach can also be used to develop other language skills especially when the tasks are properly conducted to emphasize on developing writing, speaking and listening skills.

What are some the challenges faced by the respondents of the elementary level in learning Arabic via TBLT? The interview has discovered that the emergingthree types of challenges were indeed lacking of Arabic vocabulary, examination preparation and teacher factor. Lacking of vocabulary had resulted in difficulties in participating in group discussions, writing certain words and performing public speaking. The next challenge was about the preparation for the final examination, in which the respondents felt TBLT had not prepared them well for the exam. The interview has also revealed the third challenge is which some teachers posed some difficulties. One would think that having a native Arabic speaker is a plus point for elementary learners; however, not in this case, where one respondent disclosed that he had difficulty in understanding the teacher as he seldom translated Arabic words into English or Malay. However, it is indeed salient to highlight that these challenges regarding teachers were not actually directly related to the TBLT approach; it could be ironed out by training and managing the teachers well by the Department.

As for the view about their teachers, it can be concluded that the respondents had two views of their teachers, which could be categorized as positive views and negative views. The positive views depict the opinion that a teacher using TBLT approach was creative, had a good rapport with the respondent and generally did a great job in teaching Arabic using TBLT. In contrast, the negative views elaborate on the opinion that more than one teacher teaching the course could confuse the students if only one teacher uses TBLT. Moreover, a native speaker of Arabic could actually create difficulties for the Elementary learners if the teacher does not often translate the Arabic words into English or Malay.

More importantly, during the interview the respondents recommended some steps so as to improve the Arabic course. First, the course should provide a list of relevant vocabulary prior to getting the learners to do any intended tasks. This would assist the learners to engage in the task successfully and meaningfully. Second, a series of vocabulary and grammar practice should be given to learnersto reinforce the acquisition of vocabulary and structure of the language. By doing this any learning of new vocabulary and structure would be strengthened. Third, teachers should use more interesting audio visual aids (AVA) in making the lessons more lively and captivating. Finally, to assist learners with the preparation of the examination, teachers should conduct lessons pertaining to preparing for the final exam like going through past year examinations.

8   CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings of the study seem to have demonstrated that students in CFS IIUM embrace TBLT approach in a positive and negative way.It is important to note that the challenges that were experienced by the respondents were mainly lacking of vocabulary, preparing for the final examination and facing a few difficulties with some teachers. Lastly, the study also reveals that the respondents held both positive and negative opinions about their Arabic teachers. Understanding the learners' view and attitude, may help teachers in developing a suitable module for teaching Arabic language to the elementary level students and as such contribute to the success of this new approach.

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