The Role of Task-Based Language Teaching in Fostering Tunisian Pre-service Primary School Teachers' Functional Competence

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory practice study, conducted at the Higher Institute of Human Sciences of Jendouba and the Higher Institute of Languages of Gabès, Tunisia, investigated the impact of task-based language teaching (TBLT) on pre-service teachers' functional competence and explored both teachers' and students'perceptions of TBLT in their English courses. Data came primarily from classroom observations and focus-group interviews. Findings suggest that TBLT fostered pre-service teachers' functional competence in English. Both teachers and students reported that TBLT helped improve learners' linguistic and communicative skills.

Keywords: communication skills, functional competence, TBLT, tasks, Tunisian pre-service teachers

INTRODUCTION

Enhancing Tunisian pre-service primary school teachers' functional competence is one of the major objectives that Tunisian EFL college teachers seek to achieve in their classrooms by utlilizing general English and teaching English to young learners (TEYL) courses. Such courses are designed to respond to pre-service teachers' needs, especially concerning natural use of language. Grounded in a Tunisian context, the Higher Institute of Human Sciences of Jendouba (HIHSJ) and the Higher Institute of Languages of Gabès (HILG), this exploratory research focuses its attention on the role of task-based language teaching (TBLT) in fostering Tunisian pre-service teachers' functional competence. It also explores teachers and students' perceptions of the implementation of TBLT in English courses.

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The research stems from two bewildering issues. First, students feel that they are learning language in an artificial fashion rather than in a spontaneous, authentic way. Second, they feel that there is a mismatch between the language they learn in the classroom and the real-world domains they encounter. We therefore attempted to shift our instructional focus to providing opportunities for a more organic use of language in the classroom. This was done via maximizing situational and procedural authenticity as well as communicative learning. Against this background, through this study we hoped to gain a preliminary understanding of the role of TBLT in developing learners' functional competence.

THE PUZZLE

Tunisian pre-service primary school teachers enrolled in the Education and Teaching Department at both HILG and HIHSJ are required to have 21 hours of English class out of a total of 336 class hours per semester, which equals 1.5 hours per week. For the pre-service teachers, English is one component of the Languages module in the curriculum. While the weight (or coefficient) given to both French and Arabic in the module is 2, English only receives a weight of 0.5. Moreover, there is an absence of a national blueprint for the curriculum, which leads to idiosyncratic practices in different regions. Thus, teachers at HILG opted for teaching General English to further consolidate students' command of the English language and improve their communicative competence, while the HIHSJ teachers taught a TEYL course to provide professional training to pre-service teachers.

As instructors, one of us teaching at HILG and one at HIHSJ, we share the observation that pre-service teachers generally have difficulty speaking and/or writing in English. They show lack of fluency and accuracy and become anxious when asked to produce output. To help them overcome these hurdles, we tried to improve their process of learning using a TBLT approach. We designed tasks that focus more on communication and created interesting topics related to students' real-life experiences. We also varied the tasks accounting for procedural and situational authenticity and cognitive load, and provided space for negotiation and feedback to optimize the learning process.

The present study was guided by the following questions:
1. To what extent does task-mediated language teaching cultivate the functional competence of Tunisian pre-service TEYL teachers?
2. What are teachers and learners' perceptions about the role of TBLT in developing a functional competence in English?

THE DATA

Participants

A total of 295 students (i.e., pre-service teachers), whose ages ranged from 20 to 22, participated in this study for four weeks. Students had different levels of English proficiency ranging from intermediate to upper-intermdiate (see Table 1). In addition, 20 teachers (i.e., currently in-service), many of whom had been teaching for over ten years, participated in this study by sharing their expreriences applying TBLT in their classrooms (see Table 2).

TABLE 1
Students' Background Information

Number of participants	295	
Higher institute	Jendouba 120 (41%)	Gabès 175 (59%)
Gender	Female 275 (93%)	Male 20 (7%)
Age (in years)	20-22	
Educational level	Junior students	
Language level	Intermediate to upper-intermediate	

TABLE 2
Teachers' Background Information

Number of participants	20	
Participation in TC-Tunisia Project	Participants 5 (25%)	Non-participants 15 (75%)
Gender	Female 15 (75%)	Male 5 (25%)
Teaching experience	5-10 years 6 (30%)	> 10 years 14 (70%)

Data Collection

Based on our understanding of the premises of TBLT, we designed and implemented a variety of teaching strategies in our classes, including using a task sequence that allowed for the integration of communicative skills. Tasks run through a cycle of pre-task, task-cycle and a language focus task to prepare students for target tasks such as role play, debates, e-mail writing and opinion paragraph writing). Several qualitative research instruments were used to explore the research questions: classroom observation, checklist, focus group, interviews and writing assessment rubric.

1. Classroom observation: Hora and Ferrari (2013) define classroom observation as "a method of directly observing teaching practice as it unfolds in real time, with the observer or analyst taking notes and/or coding instructional behaviors in the classroom or from videoed lessons" (p. 1).
2. Observation checklist: Makram et al. (2022) describe educational checklists as "tools that set out specific criteria, which educators and students may use to gauge skill development or progress and to support the learning process. In that sense, a checklist can be designed for each lecture or lesson to list of the main content the students should focus on" (p. 2).
3. Focus group interviews: A focus group as defined by Lederman is "a technique involving the use of in-depth group interviews in which participants are selected because they are a purposive, although not necessarily representative, sampling of a specific population, this group being 'focused' on a given topic" (Lederman, 1990, as cited in Thomas et al., 1995). Richardson and Rabiee (2001) mention that participants

in this type of research are selected based on the criteria that they "would have something to say on the topic, are within the age-range, have similar socio-characteristics and would be comfortable talking to the interviewer and each other" (p. 5).

4. Writing assessment rubric: Bukhari et al. (2021) define a rubric as a measurement tool for comparing and measuring a performance, behaviour, or product. It serves as scoring guide to evaluate the quality of students' work on a given task. It lists the criteria, indicators, and/or guidelines established for a particular task and the levels of achievement associated with each criterion. These levels are generally specified by a rubric, which often appears in the form of a matrix or table. The three main features of a rubric commonly discussed in the literature (Popham, 1997; Reddy & Andrade, 2010; Tierney & Simon, 2004; cf. design elements by Dawson, 2017) include: (1) evaluative performance criteria, indicators, guidelines, (2) quality definitions, descriptors, and (3) scoring strategy, progression scale.

Procedure

As teacher-researchers, we implemented the task sequences and audio- and video-recorded the task sessions. We then relied on an observation checklist to examine the recordings (see Appendix A). The checklist focused on students' performance in the task cycle in order to determinine the effect of TBLT on the pre-service teachers' functional competence. The checklist also included teachers' instructional performances during the implementation of TBLT with the aim of understanding how TBLT is operationalized in Tunisian EFL pre-service teaching classrooms. In addition, we exchanged the filmed sessions and evaluated each others' task sequences to reach more objective findings.

Furthermore, we conducted focus group interviews via teleconference using open-ended questions to enhance our understanding of teachers' and students' perceptions regarding TBLT, especially its impact on students' speaking and writing (see Appendices B and C). Finally, we used a writing assessment rubric to assess students' achievement in written tasks (see Appendix D).

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The Role of TBLT in Cultivating Functional Competence

Based on the checklist and interview data, TBLT increased students' engagement with the tasks over time. As students were encouraged to use language for meaningful purposes, they became more proficient at comprehending and producing the target language while gaining content knowledge. In one participant's words, "we were able to communicate and negotiate with our classmates; this way helped us to correct some ideas, convince our peers with our beliefs and get to know theirs." A second participant commented, "the thing I like most about the course is the ability to speak, debate and express my opinions with my friends and my teacher. The course developed my knowledge about the young learners and adult learners' characteristics." Another said, "it is very interesting and it provides me with important information that will make it easier for me to teach later. I get also to know the methods that suit the level of learners and the effective approaches to achieve optimal learning."

Additionally, findings from the focus group interview suggest that TBLT helped improve the quality of students' production and maximized their productive skills. TBLT

provided natural opportunities for them to speak and write in English. For example, one interviewee said that "the speaking session helped me in developing my negotiation and debating skills," adding, "in speaking, I feel myself, and that what makes me speak, share, and prove my existence." According to another participant, "the situations provided for using the language are also natural and authentic …. The tasks helped me to develop my functional competence especially speaking and writing skills, we use ofen [sic] the English language in the classroom despite some gaps." Another participant mentioned that "Yeah I always wrote long emails while in those sessions I understand how to put the important ideas and how to be clear and concise also, [sic] when I want to apply to a Master's degree of education abroad, I had difficulties to write the letter of motivation that should be filled with details so that helped me to understand the strategies of how to write an effective email." Thus, pre-service teachers confirmed that TBLT facilitated their command of the language.

Similarly, the focus group interview and the observation checklist show that the operationalization of the task-mediated approach in the TEYL course improved learners' language acquisition. Interviewees commented that the rich input broadened their vocabulary as they reinvested what they acquired receptively into their production, making the interactional process more spontaneous and smoother. Focus group members affirmed that week after week they started to use language through communication, not just for communication. Further, students' self-confidence increased due to the large amount of input they received and their involvement in cooperation, negotiation and information exchange tasks. One focus group member mentioned that "taking part in team work [sic] helped to build my confidence in speaking." When asked about their views on the task types, one of the focus group interviewees opined that "the task types are accessible and help in task understanding and completion. They are motivating for students and engaging and help in the success of the lesson." The collected data showed that TBLT enhanced their interest and participation in language learning tasks, as compared to traditional activities, likely because the tasks are relevant, contextualized and mimick real life situations. TBLT presented an alternative approach that provided learners with opportunities to solve problems and make decisions and are made more accountable for their learning, which helped increase their agency.

In the focus group interview, students affirmed that in the TBLT lessons, teachers ensured a considerable provision of input, negotiation, feedback and output opportunities, which improved their communicative fluency without disregarding accuracy. As one student detailed, "the lessons provide rich input and output for two simple reasons: one because of the great opportunities provided to debate and negotiate the input with my classmates smoothly... Second, it is the great interaction between the students and the teacher and of course the positive and constructive feedback." Another added, "it begins with discussing a topic, where we negotiate and have enough time to discuss and debate the important points of the lesson, get feedback and then produce some output." Students also mentioned that the teacher "uses modern means of communication, video clips and articles which enable them to assimilate information quickly and easily through negotiation of meaning either in pairs or groups or by asking for their teacher's support while moderating the lessons." Similarly, some said that "the input is rich, comprehensible and authentic."

Furthermore, one of the focus group members said that "I benefited from the immediate corrective feedback that the teacher used while my classmates were performing the tasks." One of interviewed members commented on the peer feedback saying that "it allowed me to share my answers with my colleagues and theirs too so that we can make sure we're in the right way, we can evaluate each other." Another focus group interviewee mentioned that "as we are required to speak English as much as possible, we (…) pinpointed each other's mistakes and that way helped us to develop both our functional and linguistic

competencies." Students confirmed that getting corrective feedback at the end of each session helped improve language retention and believed that getting delayed feedback with due focus on some common mistakes was of great help to them. In short, as one student put it, "the tasks provide opportunities for input, negotiation, feedback and output."

Moreover, regarding their ability to produce oral and written output, students commented that they were able to process, understand, negotiate and turn the input eventually into meaningful output. This is corroborated by our observation in the classroom that cooperative tasks such as Four Corners, Think-Pair-Square and Share and Jigsaw gave students space to display their negotiation and communicative skills. Such tasks also helped students to overcome their fears of public speaking and lowered their anxiety. One of the focus group members said that "teamwork, collaboration and interactive tasks enabled us to exchange information and learn new ideas from each other." Another one added that "I stepped on my shyness and shared many ideas with my peers while working on the four corners activity and discussed well before giving the answer. That is how I developed my discussion skills." Another focus group member said that "the tasks were helpful in developing my functional competence. In fact, they provided me with the opportunity to better use the language in both our receptive and productive skills and especially the productive skills, where we can speak and communicate genuinely." Yet another said that "the tasks helped me because they are varied (we speak and produce writing related to the themes taught)."

Students in Jendouba showed interest and willingness to participate in tasks of opinion writing and line debates. Though the tasks were performed both individually and through group work, students managed to produce English language without referring back to their notes, and they were motivated despite working under time pressure. For instance, with opinion paragraph writing as a target task, students first completed a four-corner group activity where they were given a list of young learners' and adult learners' characteristics, and discussed the provided input. They then shared their views with teachers and peers and received feedback. At the end of the session students created a variety of opinion paragraphs sharing their personal experiences.

Similarly, students in Gabès demonstrated eagerness and zeal while performing the target tasks such as role-play and email writing. While working on the e-mail writing task, students were exposed to a non-target-like e-mail structure and were asked to spot the problem in that e-mail and collectively re-write it. After that, they wrote an e-mail to apply for the 2021-2022 Thomas Jefferson Scholarship Program for Tunisian students. The majority were able to express agreeing, disagreeing, blaming functions in role-plays. In the same vein, students developed their email writing skills and were able, through editing and peer correction, to respond to the requirements of writing an application email. However, the majority of students read their role plays from what they hadwritten. Only one group was able to enact their role play without referring back to their notes.

Our analysis of students' written compositions, using the writing assessment rubric, showed that working on opinion paragraphs and writing emails improved pre-service teachers' writing skills. The opinion paragraphs required students to produce persuasive writing, while defending their view points and gathering relevant information to undergird their arguments, which helped improve and hone some of the twenty-first-century skills, including critical thinking and research skills and others such as creativity and logical thiking. Additionally, showcasing real-world relevance, email writing engaged students in practical applications of writing, which prepared them for future professional communication depending on the different situations provided for learners (e.g., writing an email to apply for a scholarship).

In sum, the classroom observation, the focus group interviews and the writing assessment rubric revealed that task-based teaching offered ample opportunities for students to use the target language in a natural way. As one focus group member commented, "the tasks are engaging and motivating, a great stimulus to get involved in the lesson (…) I find them genuine and significant for learning."

Teachers' and Learners' Perceptions About TBLT

Online teleconferences with two focus groups revealed that the majority of learners believed that the sessions improved their speaking, writing and language skills. A total of 8.3% of participants in Gabès did not really find the sessions interesting while a total of 26.7% of participants in Jendouba believed that the amount of information was heavy. Yet 91.7% of participants in Gabès and 73.3% in Jendouba reported that the TBLT lessons had an immediate impact on their speaking, negotiating and writing skills. They said that their writing skills gradullay improved and that they became more aware of some of their common mistakes.

Based on the interviews with teachers from the Education and Teaching Department in both Gabès and Jendouba, interviewees' perceptions of TBLT varied depending on their experiences, beliefs and their specific teaching context. Teachers valued TBLT for its focus on the organic use of language. They mentioned that students' engagement in real-world tasks and communicative activities resulted in developing their language skills required for practical and meaningful comunication in the target language and fostered learner autonomy and responsibility.

When asked about their views on using TBLT in their classrooms, teachers mentioned that this approach helped shift the focus from the teacher as the only source of knowledge to students being actively engaged in constructing their own understanding while using language purposefully. They remarked that, by implementing TBLT, students gradually became able to practice their language skills in a meaningfully contextualised way, resulting in significant language learning outcomes. They added that, through the familiarization of students with such an appraoch, they observed not only students' increased interest in learning but also the significant role of TBLT in cultivating language production, skill development and communicative competence. Additionally, teachers noticed that there is a lingering need to vary classroom interactions and teaching strategies to manage group work, facilitate language production, and scaffold students in the process of completing tasks collaboratively.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

This exploratory practice study allowed us to draw the following conclusions: task-mediated teaching is an effective way to develop pre-serivce teachers' functional competence in English as it can promote students' self-awareness and support a collaborative class atmosphere where the teacher and students co-construct the lesson. Equally important, while acknowledging our roles as facilitators and designers of meaningful and authentic tasks that were conducive to significant learning outcomes, we developed greater awareness of the importance of learners' accountability and agency in classroom activities. The implementation of task-based teaching in our context, nonetheless, brought forth some challenges, such as the lack of a shared undersanding between the administration and teaching staff; the insufficiciency of the instructional time for the English subject in the Department of Teaching and Education; and the inadequacy of resources, mainly, classroom

shortage, the unavailability of equipment, and the limited amount of photocopying. Informed by the findings of this study and its limitations, our next puzzle is the issue of how to cultivate learner agency in the classroom.

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APPENDIX A

Observation Checklist (Adapted and Modified)

Performance	Evaluation				
Pre-service teachers					
Functional competence in relation to linguistic skills		Beyond expectations	Successfully meets expectations	Partially meets expectations	Does not meet expectations
	Engages in natural use of language		×		
	Work willingly and without frustration	×			
	Actively engaged in negotiating meaning and try to make him/herself understood.			×	
	Follows along with instruction/ task		×		
	Constructivelycontributes to class		×		
	Ownership and responsibility			×	
	Engages in peer feedback		×		
	Students are intellegible and completetasks			×	
Functional competence in relation to task types	Involvelearners in pair and group workactivitiesand cooperative structures (jigsaw, four corners, think pair share), roleplay, discussions,debates…		×		
	Involve meaning-focused tasks		×		
	Focus on authentic use of language		×		
	Interesting, engaging and related to real life		×		
	Focus on output and communicative competence		×		
HIHSJ and HILG teachers of English					
Instructional performance for teachers	Acts as facilitator		×		
	Caters for learners' needs and individualdifferences		×		
	Uses corrective feedback and peer feedback		×		
	Activity/assignment/discussion connected to real world		×		

APPENDIX B

Focus Group Agendas

Institute : Higher Institute of Human Sciences of Jendouba
Topic : The Role of TBLT in Fostering Tunisian Pre-service Primary school teachers' Functional Competence
Interviewer : Jihen Fadhlaoui
    I.   Welcome the participants
    II.   Introducemyself and the focus group topic
    III.   Focus Group Participant Introductions
    IV.   Questions
    i. What do youthinkof the task-based language teaching experience? Express your opinion?
    ii.   Do tasks help develop your functional competence ? How ?
    iii. Do the lessonsproviderich input, opportunties for negotiation, feedback and output? How?
    V.   Wrap-up Final thoughts
    VI.   Thank the Focus Group

Institute : Higher Institute of Languages of Gabes
Topic : The Role of TBLT in FosteringTunisian Pre-service Primaryschoolteachers' FunctionalCompetence
Interviewer : Sana Jabri
    I. Welcome the participants
    II. Introduce myself and the focus group topic
    III.   Focus Group Participant Introductions
    IV.   Questions
    i. What do you think of the task-based language teaching experience? Express youropinion?
    ii. Do tasks help develop your functional competence ? How ?
    iii. Do the lessons provide rich input, opportunities for negotiation, feedback and output? How?
    V. Wrap-up Final thoughts
    VI.   Thank the Focus Group

APPENDIX C

Teachers' Interview

1. What are your current perceptions about TBLT as an instructional approach?
2. In your opinion, what role does TBLT play in developing students' communication skills and functional competence?
3. What strategies didyou use to assess students'progress and achievement in a TBLT-classroom?
4. What challenges didyouface in implementing TBLT in yourclassroom ?
5. What changes did you notice in students' attitudes towards languag elearning when using TBLT?
6. How do you think TBLT can promote a more interactive classroom environment?

APPENDIX D

Writing Assessment Rubric (Adapted)

Writing samples/ scoring	Complexity of language	Quality of language	Coherence of response	Communicative achievement	Degree of response	Mechanics
Sample 1: Opinion paragraph task						
Sample 2: E-mail task						

Note. Rating scale: 0 = Entering, 1 = Emerging, 2 = Transitioning, 3 = Expanding, 4 = Commanding.