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Vietnamese EFL Secondary School Teachers' Perceptions of Task-Based Language Teaching

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Abstract

Research on Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) has received much attention in language education in Vietnam. However, research on investigating perceptions of secondary school teachers towards TBLT implementation in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam is still scarce. The current study investigates secondary school English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' understandings of task concept and TBLT principles. It also explores teachers' attitudes and concerns in implementing TBLT. Ninety-eight secondary school EFL teachers participated in the study. Framed by TBLT principles adapted from Nguyen, Jaspert and Van den Branden (2018), a survey was used to collect quantitative data. The results indicated that the teachers generally had a high level of understanding of task concept and TBLT principles. In addition, they showed positive views on implementing TBLT in their practices. The results also addressed teachers' concerns in implementing TBLT into their teaching practices including time constraints, the mismatch between the reform goals proposed by the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) and current teaching policies at the secondary school level as well as the large class size. Accordingly, insightful implications for a better TBLT implementation in Vietnam and similar contexts elsewhere have been taken into consideration.

Keywords: task, task-based language teaching, teachers' perceptions, Vietnamese policies of education reforms

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1. Introduction

In the history of English language teaching, it is assumed that learners could be able to acquire a language better only when they focus on grammar memorization. However, this notion has been proven unacceptable by many researchers since learners are not able to make use of language successfully in unrehearsed contexts (Ellis, 2003; Van den Branden, 2015). Studies on second language acquisition have indicated that traditional form-based teaching approaches (e.g., Grammar Translation Method, Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP), etc.) fail in enhancing learners' communicative competence particularly in real-life situations (Long, 2015).

On the other hand, language is seen as a means for communication rather than discrete learning of grammatical patterns and lexical items which require much memorization (Nunan, 2004). Therefore, communication is considered a top priority in language education. To foster language acquisition and communicative proficiency among learners, together with other factors, the teachers need to apply appropriate teaching methods as well as teaching techniques allowing learners to actively engage in real language use in the classroom (Long, 2015).

Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) has appeared in many parts of the world "as a potentially very powerful language pedagogy" (Van den Branden et al., 2009, p. 1) since this approach shares common features of communicative-based education, i.e., meaning-based focus, learner-centered education, form-based allowance, etc. which effectively help promote learners' language use proficiency (Ellis et al., 2019; Norris, 2016; Van den Branden, 2006). TBLT has been officially adopted in different contexts of language teaching through prescribed syllabi such as in India through the Bangalore Communicational Teaching Project (Prabhu, 1987), in Belgium by the Center for Language and Education at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Van den Branden, 2006), in New Zealand through the New Zealand Curriculum (East, 2012; New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2007), in Hong Kong primary schools from the mid-1990s and secondary schools from 1999 (Carless, 2012), and in China through the Chinese National English Curriculum Standards (Zhang, 2007).

To check whether TBLT is feasible as an alternative teaching method in Vietnam, a few studies have been conducted in different educational levels. Phuong et al. (2015) conducted a study in which they compared the effectiveness

between TBLT and PPP on tertiary learners' writing development. The authors concluded that the TBLT group outperformed those in the PPP in terms of lexical density and self-regulation, but not linguistic accuracy. Dealing with the level of communicative effectiveness, the delayed posttest indicated that TBLT learners significantly outperformed those of the PPP. Nguyen and Jaspert (2021) conducted another study investigating whether the use of TBLT can help tertiary students develop their language proficiency better than through the use of a traditional teaching method. The results indicated that the students treated by TBLT performed better than those treated by traditional teaching methods for speaking, listening and writing, but not for reading.

Regarding challenges in implementing TBLT in classroom-based practice, Duong and Nguyen (2021) conducted a study investigating challenges that 96 secondary school teachers faced while implementing TBLT. The results from the interviews showed that both objective challenges, i.e., class size, incompatibility between the curriculum and TBLT principles, preparation time, uncertainty about the role of teacher, and subjective challenges such as the lack of ability in assessing TBLT performance were found. At the high school level, Barnard and Nguyen (2010) explored the extent of convergence between teachers' beliefs about TBLT and their teaching practice. The authors concluded that the teachers showed their inability in implementing TBLT because they lacked TBLT training.

Regarding teachers' perceptions of TBLT at tertiary level, Nguyen et al. (2018) conducted a study on 62 teachers at a university in the South of Vietnam. The results from the focus group interview showed that the teachers had a high level of TBLT understanding and showed positive attitudes towards TBLT implementation (Shirafkan et al., 2022). In addition, the study showed teachers' concerns in TBLT implementation. They were the discrepancy between the goals stated in the planned reform proposed by the MoET and current language teaching-related policies at the school level, large class size, students' negative learning attitudes and time limitations.

Recognizing the importance of conducting more studies on TBLT, particularly the one focusing on the perceptions of secondary school teachers since this might provide them with insights for designing and implementing TBLT, and this field has not been sufficiently researched yet, the purpose of this study is to explore secondary school teachers' perceptions of TBLT implementation by means of analyzing their level of understanding and attitudes towards TBLT

implementation. The study also further investigates teachers' concerns if TBLT is implemented.

Research Questions

This study aims to address the following questions:

1. To what extent do EFL secondary school teachers understand the concept of task and TBLT principles?
2. What are EFL secondary school teachers' attitudes of TBLT implementation?
3. What are the EFL secondary school teachers' most extreme concerns when they implement TBLT?

2. Literature Review

2.1. English Education at Secondary School Level in Vietnam: An Overview

The English language education has undergone a significant change since the introduction of the education reform titled "Reforming and Improving the Effectiveness of Teaching and Using English in Vietnam's National Education System, 2008-2020" (The Government of Vietnam, 2008). It is said that the primary goals of the reform focus on making critical and comprehensive change in English teaching and learning across the whole education system. By introducing a ten-year-program of English language teaching starting from Grade 3 (at primary level) up to Grade 12 (at upper secondary school level) and also tertiary education afterward, the reform aims to help learners to be able to use English as a means of communication at a certain level of proficiency in four macro skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and to have mastered necessary knowledge and skills in dealing with other language related issues (MoET, 2007).

In addition, promoting new communicative and task-based teaching methods, a learner-centered approach as well as delivering new textbooks series were also taken into account. In fact, textbooks are considered a major source of language knowledge and instructional tool in language classrooms which can make significant change in learning (Dinh, 2014). Textbooks represent the teaching curriculum and support the process of English teaching and learning, and also bridge the gap between the learning outcomes and learners' actual practice

(Hoang, 2009). It should be mentioned that textbooks in public schools in Vietnam mean a single and compulsory national textbook series produced by the Ministry, and school teaching is centrally planned via provincial Departments of Education and Training (Vu & Pham, 2021). Since 2019, according to the revised Vietnamese Education Law, provincial schools can choose their own textbooks series within the national curriculum, provided that the series has been approved by the MoET and the Provincial People's Committee. Regarding the curriculum distribution of English teaching, there are totally 35 weeks of teaching per year including three 45-minute-English lessons per week. About the class size, the maximum number of students is 45, and this number in fact varies by region.

2.2. Definitions of Task

The term “task” has been defined in different ways in literature. Some researchers propose their own definitions of task ranging from real-life (Bygate et al., 2001; Long, 1985) to classroom activities (Van den Branden, 2006; Willis, 1996).

Long (1985), for instance, proposes a definition of “task” in which the author argues that a task is meant “the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between” (p. 89). For another, Willis (1996) states that a task is an activity in which learners use target language for achieving the communicative goal. Learners, therefore, have to comprehend the meaning so that they can accomplish the task successfully. Task is considered the main unit for defining language learning goals. In this respect, Van den Branden (2006) defines a language task as “an activity in which a person engages in order to attain an objective, and which necessitates the use of language” (p. 4). In a similar vein, Ellis (2003) proposes a definition of task as a workplan that the learners have to process language in a pragmatic way if they want to achieve an outcome. It is noted that the learning outcomes must be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed.

2.3. Key Principles of Task-based Language Teaching

One of the most prominent principles of TBLT is that it places a strong focus on meaning or interactive communication during the learning process via doing authentic and real-life tasks (Long, 2015; Norris, 2016). The task under TBLT

perspectives helps solve the problem of communication gaps via interaction (Ellis, 2003). In fact, TBLT boosts interlocutors to build up meaning through contributing to classroom tasks (e.g., personal information exchange, problem-solving, discussions, etc.) that necessarily allows the acquisition of new knowledge and also the reinforcement of prior knowledge (Shintani, 2016).

Although TBLT places a strong focus on meaning, it does not exclude form in teaching and learning (Van den Branden, 2006). During the phase of language focus, for instance, learners are given the opportunity to explicitly learn grammatical patterns (Willis, 1996). In addition, a focus on form, under TBLT perspectives, can be possibly carried out in different ways, i.e., designing and implementing tasks or giving feedback activity during students' performances (Moore, 2018).

TBLT is a learner-centered educational philosophy (Long, 2015; Van den Branden, 2006). A learner-centered approach refers to discovery learning, inductive learning, or inquiry learning which places a stronger focus on learners rather than teachers. The purpose of the learner-centered approach is to set up a learning environment where knowledge is built by the teacher as well as students instead of being transmitted directly by teachers (Van den Branden, 2016).

2.4. The Roles of Teacher and Learner in Task-based Language Teaching

In TBLT, the teacher is considered a selector and sequencer of tasks (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Also, the teacher plays an active role in instructing and scaffolding the learning process from the beginning to the end of the lesson. Van den Branden et al. (2009) define TBLT as a "learner-driven education" (p. 3) and it "aims to develop learners' communicative competence by engaging them in meaning-focused communication through the performance of tasks" (Ellis & Shintani, 2013, p. 135). In this respect, the teacher has to change his role from a controller and knowledge provider (Nguyen et al., 2021) to being a facilitator (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 2005). Van den Branden (2016) states that the teacher should perform three crucial roles: the teacher as a mediator, the teacher as a change agent and the teacher as a researcher.

Regarding learner roles in TBLT, it is said that the learner has to take the role of a group member, a monitor as well as a risk-taker in all learning activity

(Richards & Rodgers, 2001). They should be the one who actively carries out communicative tasks through cooperative and intensive interaction with peers. By actively involving in these tasks, this helps learners produce language that they do not have adequate linguistic resources (Van den Branden, 2006). At the same time, the activity helps provoke learners' prior knowledge effectively (Long, 2015). The skills of making guesses from linguistic and contextual clues, asking for explanation, and consulting with other learners can be developed (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). In addition, learners should be involved in the process of needs analysis (Long, 2015). The learners, together with other related agents such as teachers, syllabus designers, and the like, are obviously important to be consulted because they are considered direct customers of the learning business who, according to Long (2015), have to understand clearly "why they are doing what they are doing" (p. 129).

2.5. Task-based Language Teaching Assessment

Typically, the tests used in TBLT should measure how well the learners can use the language communicatively in real-world situations (Norris, 2009). Van den Branden (2006) argues that TBLT assessment is the evaluation of communicative proficiency in the target language of the learner. In fact, assessing learners' ability in performing target tasks (as opposed to the demonstration of knowledge about the language) throughout the program must be primarily a focus (Norris, 2009).

Assessing learners' performance in doing tasks is therefore one of the challenges of TBLT implementation since it is completely different from other kinds of formative assessment in which the learners are mostly evaluated in terms of explicitly achieving grammar rules or lexical items (Jeon & Hahn, 2006). In addition, the assessment of task performance is not simply a matter of imitating real-life activities, but rather demonstrating an effort to get an accurate representation of learners' communicative competence.

2.6. Teacher Perceptions of Task-based Language Teaching in Asian Contexts

Over the past decade, a vast body of studies focusing on investigating teachers' understandings and attitudes of TBLT implementation in Asian contexts has been researched (Table 1). Although most studies from Table 1 showed that teachers

had a high level of TBLT understanding (n=7 out of 10) and shared positive attitudes towards TBLT implementation (n=8 out of 10), there are still a few ones (n=2) indicating that teachers' understandings of TBLT were low. In addition, two of the ten studies indicated a mixed results indicating that while some teachers had a clear understanding of TBLT principles and strongly believed that TBLT could be beneficial for their teaching, others did not (Barnard & Nguyen, 2010; Mahdavid, 2017).

Table 1
Studies on Teachers' Perceptions of TBLT in Asian Contexts

Author(s)	Design	Number of participants	Context	Level of understanding	Attitudes
Barnard and Nguyen (2010)	Descriptive qualitative research design	23 teachers	High school in Vietnam	High/ Low	Positive/ Negative
Xiongyong and Moses (2011)	A Mixed-method of qualitative and quantitative research design	132 teachers	Secondary school in China	High	Positive
Tabatabaei and Hadi (2011)	A Mixed-method of qualitative and quantitative research design	51 teachers	Kish Language Institute in Iran	High	Positive
Pohan et al. (2016)	Descriptive qualitative research design	55 teachers	High schools in Indonesia	High	Positive
Musazay (2017)	Qualitative case study	3 teachers	International Islamic University, Malaysia	High	Positive
Mahdavid (2017)	A Mixed-method of qualitative and quantitative research design	160 teachers	Language institutes in Iran	High	Positive/ Negative
Liu et al. (2021)	A Mixed-method of qualitative and quantitative research design	66 teachers	Higher education in China	Low	Positive
Nguyen et al. (2018)	A Mixed-method of qualitative and quantitative research design	62 teachers	Higher education in Vietnam	High	Positive
Amini et al. (2019)	Descriptive quantitative research design	117 teachers	High school and private institute in Iran	High	Positive

Author(s)	Design	Number of participants	Context	Level of understanding	Attitudes
Prianty et al. (2021)	Descriptive qualitative research design	6 teachers	Secondary school context in Indonesia	Low	Positive

Regarding teachers' concerns in TBLT implementation, Littlewood (2007) reviewed five practical and conceptual concerns which might affect the implementation of TBLT including (1) classroom management problems such as the loss of control of communicative activities, noise and discipline, or large-sized classes (Nguyen et al., 2018; Xiongyong & Moses, 2011), (2) avoidance of English due to their lack of confidence and language proficiency in introducing communicative tasks (Liu et al., 2021; Mahdavid, 2017), (3) learner factors (Lee, 2005), (4) the incompatibility with public assessment demands (Barnard & Nguyen, 2010; Littlewood, 2007) and (5) the conflict with educational values and traditions (Duong & Nguyen, 2021).

Adams and Newton (2009) categorized related concerns for TBLT implementation in Asian contexts into three groups of factors, including institutional factors such as focused exam and assessment (Barnard & Nguyen, 2010), large-sized classes and mixed-proficiency classes (Duong & Nguyen, 2021; Xiongyong & Moses, 2011); teacher factors such as teachers' lack of ability to approach TBLT and false beliefs about it (Barnard & Nguyen, 2010; Liu et al., 2021; Mahdavid, 2017; Prianty et al., 2021), unwillingness to change to TBLT due to their negative beliefs and uncertainty of capacity (Carless, 2007; Iwashita & Li, 2012); and finally, student factors such as doubts of TBLT effectiveness and preference of traditional teaching which they considered to be familiar and trustworthy. They felt secure and not losing face in terms of mistake avoidance (Lee, 2005).

The literature review of TBLT-related studies shows that TBLT is likely to bring educational benefits to EFL classrooms. However, it is believed that TBLT itself does not guarantee any success regarding its implementation in actual classroom-based practices without teachers' actions. In fact, teachers are the ones who understand clearly when and how to use tasks appropriately in certain situations. Therefore, to ensure a successful implementation of TBLT, it is necessary to investigate teachers' perceptions of TBLT.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Ninety-eight Vietnamese EFL secondary school teachers (working at 82 secondary schools in four provinces of Vinh Long, An Giang, Ca Mau, Can Tho in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam) were involved in this study. Prior to the study, all had taken a training course on teaching professional development in which TBLT was partly instructed. In fact, the training was promoted by the Vietnamese MoET through a project called National Foreign Language Project. Table 2 provides a detailed summary of the demographic data of the participating teachers.

Table 2
Demographic Data of Participants

Number of participants (N=98)			
Vinh Long N=15 (15.3%)	An Giang N=23 (23.5%)	Ca Mau N=42 (42.8%)	Can Tho N=18 (18.4%)
Gender			
Male N=70 (71.4%)		Female N=28 (28.6%)	
Age range 25 years old – 50 years old			
Years of teaching experience			
1 – 10 years N=23 (23.5%)	11 – 20 years N=67 (68.4%)	21 – 30 years N=8 (8.1%)	Over 30 years N=0 (0%)

As can be seen that there is a large range of age and years of teaching experience of the participating teachers indicating a factual nature of this group of teachers at schooling level. Therefore, it can be concluded that this kind of participant selection shows a high rate of ecological validity.

3.2. Instrument

The current study employed a questionnaire adapted from Nguyen et al. (2018) for data collection because this questionnaire is well matched with the context of the current study. The questionnaire includes two sections. The first section contained questions for collecting participants' demographic data such as gender,

age, years of teaching experience, and workplace. The second section was used to investigate teachers' perceptions of TBLT implementation and its related issues. In this section, it included 23 Likert-scale items which were given a numerical score (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree) and divided into three clusters to investigate teachers' understanding of concept of task and TBLT principles (items 1-10), teachers' attitudes of TBLT implementation (items 11-15) and teachers' concerns in implementing TBLT (items 16-23). To ensure the validity of the questionnaire, it was presented to two experts in the field of English language teaching, particularly in TBLT, as each expert gave his opinion on the suitability and appropriateness of the item.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

Prior to conducting the study, one of the researchers contacted participants right after they had just finished a 200 hour training course of professional development (PD) to inform about the purpose of the study and seek their voluntary participation. It is worth mentioning that during the PD training course, the participants extensively received three modules of training including teaching methodology in which TBLT was partly instructed accounting for 24 hours, Information Communication Technology and Testing and Assessment. To collect data, the questionnaires were distributed among the participants by visiting them in person.

At first, 105 teachers were reached for answering the questionnaire. However, seven of them were excluded from the study afterward since they did not fully complete all the items stated in the questionnaire. Therefore, data collected from 98 teachers was officially used for data analysis.

3.4. Data Analysis

The data were descriptively and quantitatively analysed with the help of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software, version 26 to investigate teachers' perceptions of the concept of task and TBLT principles, their attitudes of TBLT implementation and their concerns in TBLT implementation. The Cronbach alpha analysis indicated that the level of reliability of the questionnaire was high ($\alpha=0.70$). This result implied that the questionnaire data could be officially used for the study.

4. Results

Overall, the teachers had a high level of understanding of the concept of task and TBLT principles ($M=4.27$) and showed positive attitudes toward TBLT implementation ($M=4.26$). Regarding teachers' concerns when implementing TBLT, time limitation was mentioned as the most influential concern ($M=4.29$), followed by the mismatch between reform goals proposed by the MoET (meaning-based focus and learner-centered approach) and current language teaching-related policies at secondary school level (form-based focus and teacher-centered education) ($M=4.27$), and large-sized classes ($M=4.21$).

4.1. Teachers' Understanding of the Concept of Task and TBLT Principles

Regarding teachers' understandings of the concept of task and TBLT principles, the results (Table 3) indicated that teachers generally had a high level of understanding. The teachers agreed that a task should be communicative and goal-directed (item 1; $M=4.33$), involves a primary focus on meaning (item 2; $M=4.29$), has a clearly defined outcome (item 3, $M=4.26$), encourages learners to use target language (item 4, $M=4.21$), activates learners' existing knowledge (item 8, $M=4.09$), can be adjusted based on learners' different levels (item 9, $M=4.31$), and finally can be used as assessment tools (item 10, $M=3.91$). In terms of teachers' understanding of TBLT principles, the teachers agreed that TBLT teaching principles must be consistent with the principles of communicative language teaching (item 5, $M=4.20$). Moreover, the results showed that TBLT teaching must be based on the student-centered instructional approach (item 6, $M=4.77$). Dealing with item 7, which stated that a TBLT lesson consists of three stages of pre-task, task performance, and post-task, the teachers showed their high level of agreement ($M=4.38$).

Table 3

Teachers' Understandings of Task Concept and TBLT Principles

Items	Participants (n)	Mean
1. A task is communicatively goal directed.	98	4.33
2. A task involves a primary focus on meaning.	98	4.29
3. A task always has a clearly defined outcome.	98	4.26
4. A task is any activity in which the target language is used by the	98	4.21

Items	Participants (n)	Mean
5. learner. TBLT teaching principles must be consistent with the principles of communicative language teaching.	98	4.20
6. TBLT teaching must be based on the student-centered instructional approach.	98	4.77
7. A TBLT lesson consists of three stages: pre-task, task performance, and post-task.	98	4.38
8. Tasks can activate learners' prior knowledge.	98	4.09
9. Task can be adjusted based on learners' different levels.	98	4.31
10. Tasks can be used as assessment tools.	98	3.91

4.2. Teachers' Attitudes of TBLT Implementation

Regarding teachers' attitudes of TBLT implementation, the results (Table 4) indicated that the teachers shared positive attitudes ($M=4.26$). To explore whether the teachers had interest in implementing TBLT (item 11), the results revealed that the teachers were in favor ($M=4.15$). Dealing with item 12, stating that TBLT helps provide a relaxed atmosphere to promote the target language use, the teachers showed their strong agreement ($M=4.37$). In addition, in responding to item 13 (TBLT assists in activating the needs and interests of learners), item 14 (TBLT pursues the development of integrated skills in the classroom), the results indicated that the teachers agreed on these statements ($M=4.24$; $M=4.19$, respectively). To investigate teachers' perceptions of the materials used in TBLT classroom (item 15), the teachers agreed that materials must be meaningful and purposeful based on the real-world context ($M=4.39$).

Table 4
Teachers' Attitudes toward TBLT Implementation

Items	Participants (n)	Mean
11. A task is communicatively goal directed.	98	4.15
12. A task involves a primary focus on meaning.	98	4.37
13. A task always has a clearly defined outcome.	98	4.24
14. A task is any activity in which the target language is used by the learner.	98	4.19
15. TBLT teaching principles must be consistent with the principles of communicative language teaching.	98	4.39

4.3. Teachers' Concerns in Implementing TBLT

Regarding teachers' concerns in TBLT implementation, the results (Table 5)

showed that time limitation was mentioned as the biggest concern (item 19, $M=4.29$), followed by the mismatch between reform goals proposed by the MoET (meaning-based focus and learner-centered approach) and current language teaching-related policies at secondary school level (form-based focus and teacher-centered education) (item 20, $M=4.27$), large-sized classes (item 21, $M=4.21$) and the lack of real English speaking environment (item 23, $M=4.09$). When being questioned about the role of facilities in TBLT practice (item 18), the teachers showed the agreement that facilities play a key role ($M=3.84$). Dealing with item 17, the teachers agreed that TBLT requires much preparation time compared to other approaches ($M=3.74$) and gives much psychological burden to teacher as facilitator (item 16, $M=3.42$). Regarding the negative attitudes of learners (item 22), the surveyed teachers showed a fairly neutral view on this statement ($M=3.07$).

Table 5
Teachers' Concerns in TBLT Implementation

	Items	Participants (n)	Mean
16.	TBLT gives much psychological burden to teacher as facilitator.	98	3.42
17.	TBLT requires much preparation time compared to other approaches.	98	3.74
18.	Facilities play a key role in TBLT teaching.	98	3.84
19.	Time limit is a main barrier for TBLT teaching.	98	4.29
20.	There is a big mismatch between reform goals proposed by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) (meaning focus and learner-centered approach) and current language teaching-related policies in high school (form-focused and teacher-centered education).	98	4.27
21.	The number of students in the classroom is too large.	98	4.21
22.	Learners' learning attitude is negative.	98	3.07
23.	Learners do not have real English-speaking environment to practice.	98	4.09

5. Discussion

Regarding the first research question which states that, "To what extent do EFL teachers understand the concept of task and TBLT principles?", the results showed that the teachers generally had a high level of understanding of task concepts and TBLT principles. We find this result not surprising and is in fact in line with previous studies (Amini et al., 2019; Mahdavi-rad, 2017; Musazay, 2017;

Pohan et al., 2016). For example, Amini et al. (2019) found that teachers in their study had good grasp of TBLT knowledge mainly due to the fact that they had witnessed a great shift to the use of TBLT proposed in their teaching context. The reason for the findings of the current study could be explained that the teachers had just finished a training course on their professional development in teaching in which TBLT approach was partly instructed. It is worth mentioning that the training primarily placed a strong focus on developing teachers' ability in promoting communicative-based teaching and learner-centered approach. These goals can be seen to match extremely well with TBLT principles (Ellis, 2003; Long, 2015; Van den Branden et al., 2009). It is, therefore, implied that a shift in language education policy given by the MoET was effective and this as a result had a great impact on the diffusion of teachers' knowledge of TBLT. In this respect, it is suggested that similar training programs should be promoted. In addition, careful investigations of current situations and needs before making decisions related to TBLT implementation should be a must to ensure that best effects of the training could be brought to all related stakeholders including the teachers (Nguyen & Jaspaert, 2021).

Regarding the second research question stating that, "What are EFL teachers' attitudes of TBLT implementation?", the result showed that the teachers had positive attitudes toward TBLT implementation and this is in line with previous studies (Amini et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2021; Musazay, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2018; Pohan et al., 2016; Prianty et al., 2021). For one, it is interesting to note that even when the teachers showed relatively low level of TBLT understanding, they held positive view on TBLT implementation (Liu et al., 2021). This may result from the teachers' beliefs that TBLT offers learners with best and friendly learning environment, and this could successfully activate learners' learning needs and interests, resulting in the enhancement of learners' intrinsic motivation (Long, 2015; Xiongyong & Moses, 2011). For another, the teachers believed that taking the role of a facilitator in TBLT was beneficial because this role might bring benefits to their learners (Van den Branden, 2016) and therefore it is worth performing. Furthermore, the teachers agreed that meaningful materials and real-world tasks were important since they are believed to help learners improve their communicative ability and social interaction skills (Long, 2015; Van den Branden, 2006). It should, however, be taken into account that in the context of Vietnam where both teachers and learners have to strictly depend on the textbooks on the one hand and on the other hand, the textbooks are also introduced as part of

a top-down policy making mechanism and said to be in favor of form-based focus rather than communicative task-based orientation (Le & Barnard, 2009), so textbooks inevitably have a significant impact on the success of TBLT implementation. From these perspectives, it is suggested to policy makers and educational leaders that there should be a vital need for providing teachers with favorable conditions and support to ensure that they can apply TBLT more effectively. By adjusting policies or offering appropriate sources in favor of TBLT, for instance, the related stakeholders can help teachers much in TBLT implementation.

The third research question seeks the answer to the question “What are the EFL school teachers’ most influential concerns when they implement TBLT?”, the results showed that the issue of time limitation was reported to be the biggest problematic concern. This result is in line with previous studies (Lin & Wu, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2018). For example, Lin and Wu (2012) found that rigid school syllabus and limited teaching time were found challenging for TBLT implementation. It is reported by the teachers in their study that they had to spend a lot of time to do group work in class or the teaching schedule was too tight. With regard to the results of the current study, a possible reason for this can be explained in terms of the teaching syllabus and materials at secondary school level which are said to still depend heavily on form-based exercises (Le et al., 2015). Needless to say, it is practically challenging for the teachers to implement interactive and communicative TBLT tasks which require a lot of time to prepare (Le, 2014).

The mismatch between reform goals proposed by the MoET and current language teaching-related policies at secondary school level occupied the second place for teachers’ concerns in TBLT implementation (Nguyen et al., 2018). MoET (2007) states that the primary goal of English education is to focus on the enhancement of learners’ communicative competence and this trend to date is still a must. However, the pressure from current high-stake form-based examinations is still dominating educational activities resulting in a strong focus on explicit form-based and teacher-centered education (Lin & Wu, 2012; Liu et al., 2021). In other words, the dominance of traditional form-based teaching philosophy to satisfy learners’ needs in achieving high results in the exam is still a main factor impeding teachers from implementing meaning-based teaching or TBLT.

The issue of large class size is reported by participating teachers as a considerable concern in TBLT implementation (Amini et al., 2019; Lin & Wu, 2012; Prianty et al., 2021). This may result from the fact that TBLT employs peer interaction which is normally related to pair or group work (Willis, 1996). Organizing pair or group work requires a lot of discussion and debate; and this as a result can pose to the problem of classroom management and discipline in case of crowded classes (Jeon & Hahn, 2006; Littlewood, 2007). In addition, the teachers may struggle with the noise coming from communicative tasks. To facilitate the activity, the teachers have to distinguish clearly between the noise of learners engaged in doing the task and the noise of classroom disorder. In fact, this challenges teachers to implement TBLT.

6. Conclusion

The study showed that secondary school teachers generally had a high level of TBLT understanding and showed positive attitudes toward its implementation. We find these results encouraging, particularly in terms of promoting TBLT in Vietnamese teaching context. With key principles of learner-centered and meaning-based education, TBLT can be seen as a possibly alternative teaching method for other traditional form-focused, teacher-dominated approaches.

It is noted from the study that the training course in which TBLT was included given by the MoET had a profound effect on teachers' understanding of TBLT. Therefore, it is implied that more similar TBLT training courses should be promoted to help teachers deepen TBLT knowledge and experience. Moreover, teachers showed positive attitudes towards TBLT implementation. This indicates that they are willing to implement TBLT in their teaching contexts. Hence, it is suggested that educational leaders and policy makers should make necessary changes or support to motivate them to apply TBLT.

However, the teachers also showed concerns, i.e., time limitation, the mismatch between reform goals proposed by the MoET and current language teaching-related policies, and issue of large class size in implementing TBLT. Therefore, timely support and appropriate resources provided by the policy makers need to be offered to promote the success of the implementation. It is worth addressing that the process of TBLT implementation should be neither too ambitious nor flurried. In fact, it takes a long time for related agents (teachers, students, policy

makers, etc.) to fully adopt a new approach (Ellis & Shintani, 2013; Van den Branden, 2006).

It is inevitable that the study has its limitations. Firstly, the number of participants in this study was small and the participants mainly came from provinces in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. Therefore, the findings of this study cannot be generalized for all secondary school EFL teachers throughout Vietnam. Secondly, this study used a questionnaire as the only instrument for data collection. No need to say, the researcher could not fully collect in-depth data into the issue of teachers' perceptions of TBLT. It is, therefore, recommended that further studies should be conducted with the combination of the questionnaire and other instruments such as interviews or classroom observations to gain more insight into what teachers actually think about TBLT implementation and its related issues.



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