The effects of task-based language teaching on Vietnamese EFL students' reading comprehension at a secondary school

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ABSTRACT: *Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is regarded as one of the most efficient methods for great exposure to the target language through meaningful tasks. However, very few studies have been undertaken on the application of TBLT in secondary education in the Vietnamese EFL context. This paper aims to investigate secondary school students' attitudes towards the implementation of TBLT in an English reading class. The participants included 73 eighth graders at a Ho Chi Minh City-based secondary school. They were divided into two groups: control group and experimental group. Thirty-three students were assigned to the experimental group and they took a 17-week course with the intervention of TBLT while the others in the control group received traditional methods. The pre-test and post-test were employed to collect the quantitative data. The results revealed that the students in the experimental group achieved better results in the reading comprehension post-test than those in the control group. It is, therefore, suggested that EFL teachers should consider implementing TBLT to aid students in improving their reading comprehension.*

1. Introduction

English has never before dominated the fields of science, scholarship, and education as it does now (Altbach, 2007). Consequently, students in English as a foreign/second language (EFL/ESL) setting, particularly in urban areas, tend to begin learning English at a young age. Students in Vietnam are expected to learn English and obtain international certifications of English competence. The acquisition of language skills, particularly reading ability, is one of the greatest obstacles for Vietnamese students. This has been a necessary skill as it assists in catching up with the advancements in the economy, science, culture, and technology. Numerous educational studies undertaken by researchers and educational specialists have demonstrated that reading comprehension, one of the receptive skills, is crucial for English as a Foreign Language students. By reading a variety of

materials, students can expand their vocabulary in multiple ways. Likewise, Castillo and Bonilla (2014) affirmed that reading is essential since it is an interactive process that requires students to have access to academic subjects such as history, politics, economy, education, and other areas, and then convert them into knowledge. In a narrower sense, Nguyen and Nation (2011) pointed out that the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension is significant as lexical knowledge can help foreign language learners comprehend the meaning of written content. In addition, reading may assist in the expansion of students' vocabularies. It not only enhances vocabulary knowledge related to their preferred subjects, but also enhances cognitive abilities. In fact, the majority of EFL students are motivated when they read materials that are relevant to their daily life. Students whose intellectual development is facilitated by

opportunities to acquire new information through extensive reading and collaborative discussion are more likely to do well (Husna, 2018).

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) was enhanced in the 1980s and has been endorsed by numerous linguists (Duong & Nguyen, 2021; Duong & Nguyen, 2022; Duong & Truong, 2022; Ellis, 2009; Hismanoglu & Hismanoglu, 2011; Nunan, 2003; Tran & Vu, 2022). These authors emphasized that language training should focus on learning interaction to produce the effective use of language, and that language proficiency can be achieved through completing tasks. A task is referred to as an activity with definite, "goal-oriented" objectives that must be accomplished by utilizing the target language (Willis, 1996). Additionally, the emphasis is on comprehending and communicating meanings in order to complete the tasks successfully. Learners are likely to meaningfully employ the target language while completing tasks. According to Bygate et al. (2001), a task is an activity that requires learners to utilize a language, with an emphasis on meaning, to achieve a goal, and the central challenge of language instruction is to develop learners' communicative language skills through pedagogical intervention with tasks completed. Meanwhile, Ellis (2003) defined a task as an activity that requires learners to acquire a language pragmatically in order to achieve a certain outcome that can be evaluated based on whether the correct or suitable propositional content was delivered.

Reading comprehension could be defined as a process of taking information and inferring meaning from reading texts using the language system and readers' experience. Reading comprehension is also viewed as "a set of skills that involve making sense and deriving meaning from the printed word" (Linse, 2003, p. 68). This author also asserted that readers must be able to decode the printed words and understand the text in order to read well. Another definition proposed by Elleman and Oslund (2019) states that reading comprehension is an activity that requires the combination of many linguistic and cognitive processes including the ability of word identification, meaning retrieval, analysis

of sentences, meaning inference, and prior knowledge. Reading processes are divided into two main forms which are lower-level and higher-level (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). The former process requires word recognition or the relationship between how the words look and how they are pronounced, while the latter includes syntactic, semantic, and other complex processes. In other aspects, reading is a fluent progress of readers integrating information from a written text and their background knowledge to deduce the meaning (Nunan, 2003). Nunan (2003) also gave two types of reading, which were strategic reading and fluent reading. Strategic reading is the readers' ability to apply reading strategies to achieve a specific purpose for reading, while fluent reading is the ability to read the text at a specific rate with adequate text. He asserted that meaning does not lie on the readers nor the text, but it is readers' prior knowledge that comprehends the text to create the meaning. The act of reading is the combination of the text, the reader, fluency, and strategies as represented in Figure 1. In conclusion, reading comprehension is a complex process in which readers need to integrate with the text, using a particular language system as well as readers' background knowledge to extract the information and comprehend the message conveyed in the text.
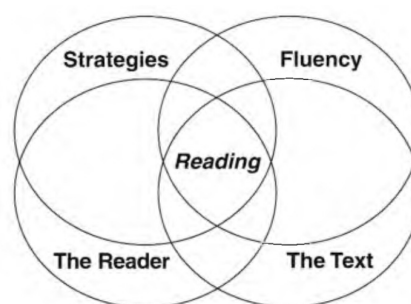

Figure 1. Defining reading comprehension (Nunan, 2003, p. 68)

The experiment on the effects of TBLT on students' reading comprehension has been conducted for years. The results have highlighted the improvement of students' ability in reading after being taught with the TBLT approach (Chalak, 2015; Chen & Wang, 2019; Demirel & Amer, 2017; Okcu, 2015; Poorahmadi,

2012). One research was conducted in Iran by Poorahmadi (2012) to explore whether the TBLT approach had certain effects on students' reading ability. The sample was 102 Iranian university students and they were randomly selected into the experimental group and the control group. The data was collected through pre-test and post-test. The results pointed out that the TBLT approach employed in a reading class has a significant effect on students' reading achievement. It also revealed that TBLT could enhance students' language proficiency at the end of the course.

Several teaching methods/approaches such as communicative language teaching (CLT), content-based instruction (CBI), or task-based language teaching (TBLT), have been introduced to L2 learners with the aim of focusing on meaningful language rather than structured one. Nevertheless, there have been very few studies conducted on the effects of TBLT on secondary students in Vietnam. In this sense, this study aims to examine whether TBLT improves EFL students' reading comprehension at a secondary school.

2. Methodology
2.1. Research sites and participants

The research was conducted at a secondary school in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. This school has been established for seven years. It is one of the national standard schools with over 150 well-trained and qualified teachers. The teaching and learning environment in this school

may familiarize students with advanced teaching methodologies, which focus on students' self-development. In the aspect of teaching English, the Grammar-Translation Method has been used for many years at this school; therefore, employing the TBLT approach may bring a particular effect on students' reading achievement.

The participants of the study were 73 Grade-8 students at the secondary school who were conveniently selected by one of the authors working as a teacher of English at this school. Thirty-three students in the experimental group took part in a task-based reading course, while 40 other students in the control group received traditional treatment. The experimental group has been following the Pilot English Curriculum book, which is designed to apply TBLT while the control group has been taught with the 7-year set English textbook without the intervention of TBLT. They were at the age of 13 to 14. The information of the participants is illustrated in Table 1.

2.2. Research instrument

The data was collected through pre-test and post-test. A pre-test was conducted to collect students' data on reading ability. A reading comprehension test was provided to both groups at the beginning of the course. The reading test contained two parts: cloze and true-false questions. In the cloze-test, students were examined the ability to use vocabulary by being required to read a short text and fill the appropriate words given in the box. Regarding

Table 1. The demographic information of the experimental group and control group

Group	No.	Personal information F		N=33	
				%	
Experimental	1	Gender	Male	14	42.42
			Female	19	57.58
	2	Age	13	26	78.79
			14	7	21.21
	No.	Personal information F		N=40	
				%	
Control	1	Gender	Male	22	55%
			Female	18	45%
	2	Age	13	32	80%
			14	8	20%

true-false questions, students read a passage to decide whether the statements given are true or false. True-False questions were applied to check students' reading strategies ability. After seventeen weeks of applying TBLT in reading class, a post-test was used to measure students' reading achievement in both classes. The pre-test and post-test had a parallel form. The reading passages were taken from two books: Practice of Pilot English Curriculum – English 8 (Mai & Nguyen, 2021) and Practice of Pilot English Curriculum – English 8 (Luu, 2021). The data was collected and analyzed to answer the research question, which is used to investigate the effects of TBLT on secondary students' reading comprehension.

2.3. Data collection and analysis procedures

Prior to the main research, a pilot study was administered. In the first two weeks, a quasi-experimental pilot lesson was done with one unit. The reading comprehension pre-test was provided to the students in week three so as to assess their reading ability before the start of the treatment. The findings of the reading comprehension pre-test were collected as quantitative data. During the instruction from week 3 to week 19, the unit selected was taught, with four periods for each week. The session was involved in the three stages of the TBLT technique: Pre-tasking, task cycle, and language focus (Willis, 1996). In the 20th week, there was a reading post-test for

students to assess their reading comprehension after they had received treatment using the TBLT method. The results of the post-test were collected as quantitative data. After the students completed the post-test, the data was collected and analyzed. To put it another way, the findings of the pre-test and post-test from two groups may reveal the benefits that the TBLT approach offers.

As regards the data analysis, the SPSS 20.0 software was used to analyze the quantitative data. In particular, descriptive statistics, i.e., mean (M) and standard deviation (SD), was calculated.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Results

3.1.1. The results of students' reading comprehension at the pre-test in both groups

Before employing TBLT to increase reading comprehension, the pre-test results of the control group (CG) and experimental group (EG) were compared to confirm that the students' scores were regularly distributed. Then, the scores were analyzed, and the pre-treatment results of the two groups were compared using the Independent Samples T-test as in Table 2.

The F-test is used in the Levene's test to check the null hypothesis that the variance is the same between groups. If Sig (F-test) is greater than .05, the value of 'Equal variances assumed' row is used. Otherwise, the result of 'Equal variances not assumed' row is accepted. In Table 2, Sig

Table 2. The comparison of CG and EG in pre-test

Group statistics

	Class	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-test	CG	40	4.83	1.78	.28
	EG	33	4.85	1.62	.28

Independent Samples T-test

F		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					
		Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference		
Pre-test	Equal variances assumed	.00	.98	-.06	71.00	**.95**	-.02	.40	
	Equal variances not assumed			-.06	70.27	.95	-.02	.40	

(F-test) =.98 >0.5, so the output in the '*Equal variances assumed*' row was selected.

As can be seen in Table 2, the difference between CG's mean score (M=4.83, SD = 1.78) and EG's mean score (M=4.85, SD = 1.62) are not significant. Furthermore, there was no significance in the difference between two groups (t=-.06, p>.05). In conclusion, the pre-test results from both groups were equal, demonstrating that the students in both groups had a similar level of reading proficiency.

3.1.2. The results of students' reading comprehension at the post-test in both groups

After 17 weeks of treatment, the post-test was delivered to students in both CG and EG. Then, the post-test results of both groups were compared to see whether TBLT had more positive effects on students' reading comprehension than GTM. After that, the scores were analyzed, and the post-treatment results of the two groups were compared utilizing the Independent Samples T-test as in Table 3.

Table 3 demonstrates the comparison between the results of reading post-test in CG and EG with the total score of 10. As observed in the table, the mean score of EG (M=6.52, SD=1.15) is 1.92 which is higher than that of CG (M=4.60, SD=1.37). Additionally, the difference between the two mean scores of the post-test in both groups was statistically significant (t=-6.38, p=.00<.01). Therefore, it can be concluded that

TBLT had more positive impacts on students' reading proficiency than GTM.

In conclusion, the findings indicated that the majority of students' reading comprehension improved after they attended the TBLT-based class. The mean scores from the pre-test and post-test were used to analyze the students' vocabulary knowledge and reading strategies. The outcomes demonstrate that all parts of the reading test improved after attending the TBLT approach courses.

3.1.3. A comparison of students' reading results in pre-test and post-test in the control group

In order to check whether GTM had some impact on students' reading comprehension in the control group, the researcher compared the results by employing paired sample t-test, as illustrated in Table 4.

Pair 1a, the pre-test and post-test in CG, demonstrates the test results of 40 students of the CG in the pre-test and post-test. As can be seen from the table, the mean score of the post-test (M=4.60, SD=1.37) is 0.23 lower than that of the pre-test (M=4.83, SD=1.78). However, the difference between the two mean scores was not statistically significant (t=1.85, p>.05) with a total score of 10. Therefore, the results point out that GTM did not affect students' reading performance in this study. Regarding Pair 1b – the results of the vocabulary part in the pre-test and post-test, the mean score of that in post-

Table 3. The comparison of CG and EG in post-test

Group statistics

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Post-test	CG	40	4.60	1.37	.22
	EG	33	6.52	1.15	.20

Independent Samples T-test

F		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
		Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	
Post-test	Equal variances assumed	1.19	.28	-6.38	71.00	.00	-1.92	.30
	Equal variances not assumed			-6.49	70.98	.00	-1.92	.30

Table 4. The comparison of CG in pre-test and post-test

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1a	PreC	4.83	40	1.78	.28
	PostC	4.60	40	1.37	.22
Pair 1b	VocabpreC	2.33	40	1.02	.16
	VocabpostC	2.17	40	.87	.14
Pair 1c	TFpreC	2.50	40	1.20	.19
	TFpostC	2.42	40	.87	.14

Paired Samples T-test

		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1a	PreC - PostC	1.85	39	.07
Pair 1b	VocabpreC - VocabpostC	1.29	39	.20
Pair 1c	TFpreC - TFpostC	.65	39	.52

PreC = Pre-test of CG; PostC = Post-test of CG; VocabpreC = Vocabulary performance in the pre-test of CG; VocabpostC = Vocabulary performance in the post-test of CG; TFpreC = True/False part performance in the pre-test of CG; TFpostC = True/False part performance in the post-test of CG

test (M=2.17, SD=.87) is 0.16 lower than that in pre-test (M=2.33, SD=1.02). Nevertheless, the difference between the two mean scores was not statistically significant (t=1.29, p>.05) with a total score of 10. Therefore, it states that GTM did not impact students' vocabulary enhancement in this study. Regarding Pair 1c - the results of the True/False part in the pre-test and post-test, the mean score of that in post-test (M=2.42, SD=.87) is 0.08 lower than that in pre-test (M=2.50, SD=1.20). However, the difference between the two mean scores was not statistically significant (t=.65, p>.05) with a total score of 10. Therefore, the results point out that GTM did not have any effect on students' reading strategy in this study.

3.1.4. A comparison of students' reading results in pre-test and post-test in the experimental group

To check whether TBLT affected students' reading performance in the experimental group, the researcher compared the results in terms of pre-test and post-test, the results of the vocabulary part, and the results of the True/False part in both tests by using paired samples t-test, as illustrated in Table 5.

As regards Pair 2a – the pre-test and post-test in EG, the mean score of the post-test (M=6.52, SD=1.15) is 1.67 higher than that of the pre-test (M=4.85, SD=1.62). Additionally, the difference between the two mean scores of both tests was statistically significant (t=-9.38, p<.05) with a total score of 10. As a result, it points out that TBLT had positive effect on students' reading performance in general. Concerning Pair 2b – the results of the vocabulary part in the pre-test and post-test, the mean score of that in post-test (M=3.52, SD=.71) is 1.07 higher than that in pre-test (M=2.45, SD=1.06). In addition, the difference between the two mean scores of vocabulary results in both tests was statistically significant (t=-7.37, p<.05) with a total score of 10. Therefore, it states that TBLT had a positive impact on students' vocabulary improvement. Regarding Pair 2c – the results of the True/False part in the pre-test and post-test, the mean score of that in post-test (M=3.00, SD=.75) is .61 higher than that in pre-test (M=2.39, SD=1.09). Moreover, the difference between two mean scores of True/False results in both tests was statistically significant (t=-4.66, p<.05) with a total score of 10. As a result, it shows that TBLT positively affected students' reading strategies.

Table 5. The comparison of EG in pre-test and post-test

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 2a	PreE	4.85	33	1.62	.28
	PostE	6.52	33	1.15	.20
Pair 2b	VocabpreE	2.45	33	1.06	.19
	VocabpostE	3.52	33	.71	.12
Pair 2c	TFpreE	2.39	33	1.09	.19
	TFpostE	3.00	33	.75	.13

Paired Samples T-test

		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 2a	PreE - PostE	-9.38	32	.00
Pair 2b	VocabpreE - VocabpostE	-7.37	32	.00
Pair 2c	TFpreE - TFpostE	-4.66	32	.00

PreE = Pre-test of EG; PostE = Post-test of EG; VocabpreE = Vocabulary performance in the pre-test of EG; VocabpostE = Vocabulary performance in the post-test of EG; TFpreE = True/False part performance in the pre-test of EG; TFpostE = True/False part performance in the post-test of EG

3.2. Discussion

In this research, the pre-test and post-test were employed to highlight the significant differences in terms of reading comprehension development in a TBLT-based reading class. The outcomes demonstrated an improvement in the students' reading comprehension scores. The post-test results of the experimental group were better than their pre-test results, and they were also better than those of the control group. These results are similar to earlier research, in which numerous researchers (Chalak, 2015; Chen & Wang, 2019; Demirel & Amer, 2017; Okcu, 2015; Poorahmadi, 2012) discovered that students' reading comprehension greatly increased after engaging in task-based learning activities.

Additionally, the results showed that after implementing the TBLT strategy, students' ability to expand lexical items significantly increased. The TBLT approach taught students how to deduce the topic of difficult-to-understand passages, expose their prior vocabulary knowledge, and comprehend the meaning of vocabulary from the reading contexts. The task-based instructions that the students were exposed to during the experiment have contributed to the striking improvement in the students' vocabulary

acquisition skills in this study. In the TBLT-based class, the students' vocabulary performance improved noticeably. In other words, the results of this study demonstrate how vocabulary success among students is affected by task-based vocabulary instruction, which is consistent with the previous findings (Khoshsima & Saed, 2016; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018; Nychkalo et al., 2016; Sarani & Sahebi, 2012).

Moreover, the results of the reading comprehension tests showed a slight change between the pre-test and post-test results regarding recognizing the main idea and supporting ideas in the reading passages. This finding was consistent with the findings of Demirel and Amer (2017) which showed that students who received reading instruction using TBLT outperformed their peers academically and had better reading comprehension. In addition, the findings of this research correlate with those of Chen and Wang (2019), who argued for task implementation and emphasized the numerous benefits of teaching with TBLT. They also verified the significant merit of TBLT. There was a general agreement across many research findings, including the findings of this study, indicating TBLT implementation had a good effect on students' reading comprehension.

4. Conclusion and implications

It can be concluded that TBLT had positive effects on students' reading comprehension. Based on the findings, TBLT lessons empowered students in reading skills regarding expanding vocabulary knowledge as well as reading strategies. Also, through the tests, the results of students' performance in the vocabulary part are slightly better than that of the True/False part, which indicated that students had better improvement in vocabulary knowledge than reading strategies through TBLT in reading class. Additionally, the students' reading comprehension in the experimental group outperformed the ability of those in the control group.

The following instructional implications are suggested on the basis of the aforementioned findings. Regarding the students, to get the optimal learning outcomes, students should be motivated and have the enthusiasm to study. This means they should focus on setting and achieving learning objectives, being creative while studying, participating actively in class discussions, and interacting with teachers and peers. As regards teachers, they should be aware that most of the tasks are student-centered. Moreover, the tasks they designed should be meaningful and purposeful, which can help the students to link the knowledge to real-life situations. Teachers should develop reading activities and supervise reading phases carefully and rationally to inspire students. Only when students are highly motivated can learning become simpler and more efficient (Garrett, 2008). With regard to the administrators, they should encourage English teachers to employ TBLT for high school students in reading classes, as it could bring positive results to students' reading performance.

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