

# The Effect of Task Based Language Teaching on Learner Autonomy: A Case of Pre University Students at the International Islamic University Malaysia

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**Abstract**— Task based language teaching has become increasingly popular in the field of language teaching and learning. The Centre of Foundation studies, CFS, at the International Islamic University Malaysia has recently implemented task based language teaching (TBLT) in its curriculum. This study investigates the effect task based language teaching has on second language learners' autonomy. A mixed method design was adopted to address the objectives of the study. Both quantitative and qualitative methods of data analysis were employed. Specifically, data was collected using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The findings show that both teachers and learners perceived task-based language teaching in a positive light. Moreover, the majority of participating teachers believed that task-based language teaching promotes learner autonomy. It was also revealed that students were not ready to independently self-direct their own learning.

**Keywords**—Task based Language teaching (TBLT), Learner Autonomy

## I. INTRODUCTION

EDUCATION is undergoing continuous changes, this is seen in the various ways teaching and learning are perceived. Today, teacher centred, class-lecture based, and structural-syllabus instruction have become more student centred, practical, and flexible approaches. New theories and applications of language teaching are exploring the benefits of new methods and pedagogical approaches; among these is the task based approach.

Task based language teaching (TBLT) has undoubtedly become the new orthodoxy in many educational institutions all over the world. In the Asia Pacific region, survey results maintain that task based teaching is a central principle driving their language curricula. [1] The Malaysian Ministry of Education strongly encourages the use of task-based and communicative language teaching of English. The GHCBN national Curriculum has been identified as a communicative curriculum. [2]

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Task based language teaching promotes learner autonomy; it is in fact regarded as one of the most important advantages of TBLT. It has been a very popular area of study in language learning over the last two decades. Even though the concept of autonomy originated and developed in the Western social context it is not a product of a specific culture. Rather it is a universal human capacity. Autonomous learning has become a 'buzzword' in the field of language education. Generally, definitions of autonomy are based on Holec (1981), who defined it, as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" [3]. Ever since then, many researchers have dedicated themselves to researching learner autonomy [3] ,[4] ,[5], [6],[7] .

To sum up, English language learners are autonomous if they understand their needs and are clear about their learning goals. Learners should attempt to maximize opportunities to practice English inside and outside the classroom. They should also reflect on their learning critically and monitor their progress regularly; as well as identify their own preferred learning styles and strategies and make good use of them [3],[8],[9]. Hence, learner autonomy is a matter of explicit or conscious intention: one cannot accept responsibility for their own learning unless they have some idea of what, why, and how they are trying to learn. The learner must take at least some of the initiatives that give shape and direction to the learning process, and must share in monitoring progress and evaluating the extent to which learning targets are achieved. This implies the learner has to develop control over his or her own learning and his or her own role in that process.

No matter how it may be defined, autonomy is considered as one of the most important goals in second language teaching and learning. Therefore, there is a need to train students to be more autonomous learners. As teachers are not the only factor that helps learners to become more proficient in English, students have to be self-reliant and independent in order to learn effectively. The Malaysian Ministry of Education is encouraging teachers of English in particular to review their teaching strategies and produce learners who can learn independently and effectively [10].

The Centre for Foundation Studies, CFS, at the International Islamic University Malaysia has recently implemented task based language teaching (TBLT) in its curriculum. As a result, investigating how this newly implemented approach affects the learning process is vital. A

review of task based literature reveals that despite its pedagogical benefits surrounding the participatory learning culture and its popularity in Malaysia this approach remains under researched, especially in regards to its implementations and the effect it may have on learner autonomy [11],[12].

In the Malaysian context, previous studies have limited their scope of investigation to student's readiness towards autonomy [13], [14]. No studies have investigated whether the task based language teaching actually promotes learner autonomy. This study, therefore, explores learners' and teachers' perceptions towards the development of autonomy in learners within this approach.

## II. RESEARCH METHOD

This research adopted a mixed method design, a combination of quantitative and qualitative components. This method was appropriate as it provides both statistical and descriptive analysis of data. The study took place at the Centre for foundation studies, International Islamic University in Malaysia. The CFS accommodates and prepares students for entrance to degree programmes offered at the university. These students are subject to the requirements laid down by the university; one of these important requirements is mastering the English language, as it is the language of instruction at IIUM. Students have to sit for the university's English proficiency Test (EPT) and attain the right band/mark required by the programme of their study. The participants in this study were students and lecturers at the Centre. The selection of participants was based on purposive sampling. The students were 80 altogether. Bahasa Malaysia is the native language for the majority of these learners while English is their second language. As for the participating lecturers, they were 12 altogether. The majority had more than 5 years of teaching experience.

### A. Instruments

The learner autonomy questionnaire adopted for this research was developed by [15]. It has been proved to have high content validity and high reliability [16]. It consisted of 21 questions which were divided into two sections; the first section was composed of 11 statements and learners were asked to indicate the frequency of various statements on a five-point likert scale; 5 indicating "Always", 4 indicating "Often", 3 indicating "Sometimes", 2 indicating "Rarely", and 1 indicating "Never". The second section has 10 statements with 5 choices provided for each statement. A pilot questionnaire was administered before administering the questionnaire to ensure the questions were relatively suitable in terms of difficulty and length.

The Semi structured interview was designed based on Nunan's checklist for evaluating tasks (2004) and the concept of autonomy as defined by Benson (2001). The interview used in this research collected information regarding learner autonomy and its development as a result of task based language teaching. It was divided into two parts according to the themes; the first part gathered information regarding the teacher's understanding of autonomy. The second part provided the teacher's views on whether learner autonomy is

developed as a result of task based language teaching. The information obtained helped support the data gathered from the Learner Autonomy questionnaire. The purpose was to elicit the teachers' views and evaluations of the development of learner autonomy within the task based approach.

## III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### A. Findings

The analysis of findings showed that teachers generally have a good understanding of learner autonomy. It was also revealed that students possess some characteristics of autonomous learners, for instance, reflecting on their learning and keeping record of their study, yet it was revealed that these learners were not ready to independently self direct their own learning. The students were requested to indicate their perceptions on autonomy. Descriptive statistics were used to present the percentages and frequencies of the items. Table 1 below displays the percentages and frequencies of students' responses to various aspects of autonomy.

TABLE I  
STUDENTS PERCEPTION ON VARIOUS ASPECTS OF AUTONOMY  
(N=82)

Statements	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree	Neutral	Strongly Agree/ Agree
I think I have the ability to learn English well.	6.94%	24.4%	69.5%
I make good use of my free time in English study.	17.07%	63.4%	19.51%
I preview before class	35.3%	48.8%	15.85%
I find I can finish my task on time.	3.7%	42%	53.65%
I keep record of my study, such as keeping a diary, writing a review, etc.	31.7%	34.1%	34.1%
I make self-exam with the exam papers chosen by myself.	40.2%	40.2%	19.51%
I reward myself such as going shopping, playing etc. when I make progress	36.5%	28%	35.36%
I attend out-class activities to practice and learn the language	36.5%	35.4%	28.04%
In class, I take part in activities such as pair/group discussion, role play, whenever I get the chance	6.43%	24.4%	69.5%
I know my strengths and weaknesses in my English study.	3.7%	24.4%	71.95%
I choose books, exercises which suit me,	10.9%	35.4%	53.65%

The semi structured interviews inquired about the participants understanding of learner autonomy and its importance in learning and whether they thought their learners were acting autonomous. They were also asked elaborate on whether they thought task based language teaching promotes learner autonomy. The findings from the interviews were categorized into two main themes: (1) Teachers' understanding of learner autonomy, (2) Teachers' views on the development of learner autonomy as a result of task based language teaching.

The results indicated that most of the teachers understood the concept of learner autonomy. One of the teachers had the following belief, "In my opinion learner autonomy means that most of the responsibility is on the learner instead of the instructor or teacher, the bulk of the work (learning) is actually done by the students where as the teachers and lectures are just merely instructing or advising the learners on which is appropriate. In addition, teachers consider learner autonomy to be an important concept. The majority of respondents (85.71%) believed that learner autonomy is important. However, in regards to learner readiness for autonomy, the respondents were asked whether they thought their learners were ready to act autonomously. Many of the teachers (71.42%) stated that their learner were not ready for autonomy while (28.57%) had a more positive attitude in regards to learner readiness for autonomy.

The second section of the interview explored teachers' views on the extent task based language teaching develops learner autonomy. These aspects included cooperative learning, learner confidence, motivation, and responsibility. The main points extracted from the interview are as follows:

#### *1. Description of materials used and the tasks assigned*

The teachers mentioned various materials used in class, and these include; text books, story books, hand-outs, newspaper articles, magazines such as Readers digest, comics, movies, Internet Pod casts and games (video games). According to all of the seven interviewees, the materials used are meaningful, purposeful and based on real-world context. One teacher claimed "the materials are usually meaningful, today we had video games, I hope to find issues that students relate to and find meaningful" From their responses, it is noticed that the teachers generally believe tasks used are meaningful and purposeful.

#### *2. Tasks encourage cooperative learning*

In response to interview question 7, all of the seven teachers believed that most of the tasks assigned encourage cooperative learning. Even though the teachers claimed that tasks promote cooperative learning, they reported that most learners are still not accustomed to it and need a lot of encouragement to engage in it. One teacher stated, "In the beginning learners refused to be cooperative then after all of the encouraging they did it." Moreover, teachers stated that learners with higher proficiency level are in favour of cooperative learning compared to learners with lower proficiency level.

#### *3. Tasks encourage learners to make decisions in regards to their learning process*

Teachers were asked whether tasks assigned encouraged learners to make their own decisions in regards to their learning process. Five teachers (71.42%) responded positively. Two teachers, however, had a different view as one teacher believed that learners are dependent and rely on the teacher to make decisions for them. She replied to the question as follows, "Not really, the learners are usually not sure what to do and they expect the teachers to teach."

#### *4. Tasks teach life-long learning skills*

Most of the teachers also believed that tasks teach learners to continue learning English as a life-long skill. However, some teachers stated that learners do not perceive life-long learning as the aim of tasks assigned. This was emphasized by a respondent, who stated, "Yes, we teachers see it that way but the students don't see it in that way and refuse to do tasks because they feel it won't help them prepare for exams, for example they will say why do we have to make a holiday pamphlet? How is it going to help me pass the EPT? So some students miss the point of the whole exercise or task"

#### *5. Tasks encourage peer teaching and self assessment*

Regarding peer teaching and self-assessment, teachers' answers showed that all seven of them believed tasks encourage both of these skills. One teacher mentioned an example of a peer teaching task that she planned to carry out, "I am planning to do peer teaching, by separating them into groups, one group would have to do on the past tense, they have to cover everything on past tense, and they have to teach other and supply the exercises for other students, and they have to be the teacher and help the others and then discuss with the class."

#### *6. Tasks are interesting and motivating*

Most of the learners find the assigned tasks interesting and motivating. The following are one teacher's comments, and they are indicative of this, "I can see the students' attention in class because they know when they come to class the teacher gives them interesting tasks." Yet, some teachers reported that not all students seem to find task-based language teaching motivating. As indicated by one respondent, "Some learner find tasks interesting yes but some no, they feel it's a waste of time because they are more exam-based."

#### *7. Tasks encourage learners to take an active role in their learning process*

All of the teachers interviewed affirmed that tasks encourage learners to take an active role in their learning process. As maintained by one respondent, "Learners are more active and enthusiastic about if compared to the traditional mode of teaching." Also another stated, "Some students are able to take an active role and sometimes when they are working in groups, they will somehow dominate the discussion and the decisions." Nevertheless according to the majority of teachers, it is the learners who are still not accustomed to taking an active role in their learning. In addition, these respondents felt that their learners are not able

to evaluate and reflect on their work. The teachers believed their learners are only able to reflect on their work if encouraged or prompted to do so.

#### *8. Learners are dependent on the teacher*

Furthermore, the teachers were also asked whether they thought their learners were able to learn without their help, surprisingly the responses revealed that most of the teachers did not believe their learners were able to learn without their help, especially those with lower proficiency levels. One Respondent's commented, "For the upper yes, but for the lower level I would have to be always there for them." However, one teacher claimed that her learners were able to learn without her help stating, "I think so, it boils back to the instruction, and I will definitely instruct them clearly on whatever matter or assignment I asked them do"

As for learners' ability to solve most learning difficulties independently, the teachers all seemed to agree that their learners are not able to solve most learning difficulties by themselves. On the other hand, the findings also indicated the learners have the confidence to ask the teachers to explain when something is not clear. That is to say, teachers believed that their learners have the confidence and do ask for their help and guidance. One respondent pointed this out by saying, In conclusion, the participating teachers claim that cooperative learning, learner confidence, motivation, and responsibility are developed as a result of task-based language teaching. Thus this indicates that TBLT promotes learner autonomy.

#### *B. Discussion*

Several interesting points were observed from the analysis of findings. First, it was discerned that teachers do have a good understanding of learner autonomy. Secondly, it was revealed that some students possess characteristics of autonomous learners to a particular extent but the majority of students were not ready to independently self direct their own learning, as they depended on their teachers to take control of their learning. Thirdly, the majority of participating teachers believed that task based language teaching could promote learner autonomy.

The results obtained from the learner autonomy questionnaire were similar to the results obtained from the semi-structured interview. The teachers seem to have a very-well constructed notion of learner autonomy. Teachers view learner autonomy as an important prerequisite for language learning as most of the teachers in the study believed that the classroom application of task based language teaching fosters learner autonomy. These findings conform to results from studies conducted by [3],[17], [18].

Moreover, the majority of students indicated that they possess a strong belief in their ability to learn English. They claimed to study English because of their interest in English culture as well as the opportunities it provides in regards to getting a good job and doing well at university. These findings are in line with [19] who found that after the implementation of task based language teaching, most students agreed that mastering English increases their opportunities to get a job in the future. He also added that these learners have become interested in reading about the

culture of native speakers of English. Students who are motivated to learn English usually appeared to do more than their peers and are more inclined to becoming autonomous learners. Even though this study suggests that most of the students perceive themselves as motivated, they neither seek challenges nor are often willing to engage themselves in activities out of the classroom.

In addition, both teachers and learners claimed that task based language teaching could foster autonomy as it introduces language learners to cooperative learning, for example; group presentations, conversational partners, group discussion, and role play. It was revealed that the majority of students took part in cooperative learning inside the classroom, whenever they got the chance to do so. Through these learning activities, teachers will be able to transfer the locus of control to learners and help them become autonomous. This suggest that the teacher somewhat believe in the potential of task based language teaching towards promoting autonomous learners. Even though learners took part in cooperative learning, most teachers reported that their learners were still new to it and needed a lot of encouragement. This finding indicates that learners have been accustomed to the traditional methods of learning and are in need of encouragement in order to break away from the norm and to become active participants in their learning process.

Furthermore, many learners claimed to keep a record of their study such as keeping a diary, writing a review, making summaries while they were studying English. These learners also claimed they are able choose books, and exercises which suit their level, and are neither too difficult nor too easy. However, in regards to self evaluation and monitoring, the majority of students were still unaware of their importance in language learning. More than a third of these learners stated they do not self assess themselves nor keep records of their study and evaluate their progress. They also stated that they do not preview and prepare before every English class. This suggests that students do not take the time to prepare before their English lesson possibly because they spend many hours a day in the English language classroom.

In other words, many students still depend on teachers to manage, monitor, and evaluate their learning. This finding is supported by research conducted by [20]. The survey of native English teachers in Korea indicated that they considered their students to over rely on authority figures and are reluctant to take risks through participation in class [20]. This is not surprising as students at these levels of English proficiency do not have the ability to assess and evaluate their own learning process. As much as teachers need to be exposed and trained in TBLT, learners also need to be guided on managing and monitoring their learning progress.

The findings of this study reveal that students would like to be given the chance to design the teaching plan with their teachers. Since the implementation of task based language teaching is still in its infancy, the teachers could not hand over the responsibility to design the teaching plan to the students. However, the students' confidence towards such tendency suggests they should be given this opportunity as it will develop learner autonomy.

It is also interesting to note that these same students seemed to have a traditional view in regards to the teacher's role in the classroom. A large number of respondents perceived the teachers as authority figures and claimed that the learner-teacher relationship is that of a receiver and giver. Over two thirds of the students preferred the correction of their mistakes to be done by their teachers. Learners were unsure of their ability to check their work for mistakes. The reason could lie in the belief that they have inadequate knowledge of English thus they surrender almost all the responsibility to their teachers.

From a cultural point of view, Malaysians display high respect for teachers. For example, it is a very common practice in the Malay culture for parents to give a cane to the teachers when they send their children to school or to religious classes in the past. This practice symbolizes power, trust and respect granted to the teachers and in return the children were trained to respect and accept the knowledge of the teachers [21]. Another possible explanation for student's lack of autonomy is the wash back effect of the 'spoon-feed' system operating in most Malaysian primary and secondary schools[13].

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it was revealed that teachers have a good understanding of learner autonomy. This investigation led to the inference that the majority of participating teachers believed that task-based language teaching promotes learner autonomy. It was also revealed that students were not ready to independently self-direct their own learning. This is because learners are more accustomed to the traditional methods of learning where they depend on their teachers to take control of their learning process. As shown in the research, the most notable point is that students had characteristics that were not typical of autonomous learners, as they were more teacher-centred. They preferred their teachers to control their learning, for instance; they wanted their teachers to manage, monitor and evaluate their learning. According to the teachers, learners depend very much on them and generally expressed a preference for teachers to empower them and make them aware of the correct language learning strategies. On their part, the teachers also did not give responsibilities or trust their learners to become more autonomous. However, most teachers agreed that in general terms, task based language teaching encourages students to become more autonomous even though it might take some time for them to get accustomed to it.

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