The Task-based Learning Framework and Its Implications in Language Learning and Teaching

Mohammad Yousuf Uddin Khaled Chowdhury
Lecturer, Department of English Language and Literature, International Islamic University Chittagong
154/A, College Road, Chawak Bazar, Chittagong-4203, Bangladesh
Email: mkhaled1974@gmail.com

Abstract
Willis (1996) argues that 'there are three essential conditions (exposure, use, and motivation) and one desirable condition (instruction) for successful learning'. Before going to express my agreement or disagreement with her we should rather recapitulate the answers to some questions emerging from the argument. As this argument has originated from 'A Framework for Task-based Learning' by Willis (1996), very naturally we should analyze first what we get after reviewing the book. What is Task-based Learning? How does it work? Is it learning or acquisition? Does it cover the learning of all ages? What are the advantages of TBL? What are the disadvantages of TBL? Can it be implemented everywhere? Has it been validated? After arriving at a clear understanding of the answers to these questions we will try to relate her opinions with the traditional PPP (Presentation, Practice and Production) approach of learning. We will further explore the conventional understanding of exposure, use, motivation and instruction in order to compare and contrast Willis(1996) with the other scholars in the related field which will lead the readers of this paper to my personal stand for and against Willis at some points.
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1. Introduction

What is a task? We get different definitions of a task. The most cited ones are following: i. According to the Cambridge International Dictionary of English (1995), a task is a piece of work to be done, esp. one done regularly, unwillingly or with difficulty. ii. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a task is a piece of work imposed, exacted, or undertaken as a duty or the like,' or 'a portion of study imposed by a teacher'. Williams and Burden (1997: 168) defines a task as 'any activity that learners engage into further the process of learning a language'. Barren(1997, p. 23)defines task as a range of learning activities ' from the simple and brief exercise type to more complex and lengthy activities such as group problem-solving or stimulations and decision making'. Again Estaire and Zanon(1994: 13-20) distinguish two main categories of task- firstly 'communication task' in which the learners' attention is focused on meaning rather than form' and secondly 'enabling tasks' in which the main focus is on linguistic aspects(grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, functions and discourse)'. R.Ellis uses the term 'exercise' for any activity in which the learners have no communicative purpose. Here we observe that Ellis' 'exercise' corresponds to Estaire and Zanon's 'enabling task' (in contrast to communication task).According to Willis (1996:23), 'tasks are always activities where target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome'(p. 23)

In fact, tasks have been used by teachers and learners for hundreds of years though in relation to foreign language learning and teaching it has come into notice since the mid-1970s and has gained currency after the publication of Jane Willis' 'A Framework of Task-based Learning', published in Willis and Willis. (ed.) – Challenge and Change in language Teaching (Macmillan Heinmann). Willis has placed tasks in the nucleus of the language learning system. She wants the learners to use the target language spontaneously and to get opportunities for learning themselves. She proceeds with the ideas of her predecessors namely Candlin, David Nunan, Prabhu, Sinclair and Willis and experiments their ideas to make a framework for learning and teaching of her own which is clear, practical and flexible. She not only theorises the framework by suggesting principles and guidelines to practise but also provides practical, trial-based examples of real classroom situations around the globe. This book (1996) serves as a 'complete guide of task-based language teaching', an approach in which the target language is used by the learners freely and the goal is achieved finally.

The book itself is a distinctively unique example of task-based learning and teaching style. Before going to elaborate discussion, it focuses a point, creates interest by questioning the readers and finally proceeds to the main points with a detailed presentation to reach her goal. The book begins with a questionnaire (What are your views on language learning?) in Chapter 1 to exemplify the necessity of creating the best possible environment for language learning. The first chapter starts by examining the traditional beliefs about language learning (both foreign and second languages). She doesn't deny the traditional beliefs though expresses her disagreement about the suitability of the traditional principles and methods by providing her personal observation and reasoning. She raises the questions and then answers herself. She asserts that a learner 'can learn to speak a foreign language

quite well without lessons'. By being exposed to real-life situation learners achieve the language ability which can satisfy their needs. In a controlled learning situation, learners may be motivated but they are strongly motivated if they receive a lot of exposure to the target language. Thus we come to an agreement that controlled classroom instruction is not a prerequisite for language learning.

Willis(1996) supplies the answer to the question 'Why do many secondary students who have studied a foreign language leave school unable to communicate in it?', 'What prevents students' learning?. Usually the answer is the 'lack of motivation' but she goes forward to seek some more reasons out. She continues answering questions as 'Why do learners make the same error even after being corrected many times?', 'Why do learners cannot use the rules of grammar in real-life situation although they can use them correctly in the classroom?'. She agrees N. S .Prabhu here. Prabhu writes : Developments in the grammatical theory and description had shown clearly that the internal grammatical system operated subconsciously by fluent speakers was vastly more complex than was reflected by, or could be incorporated into , any grammatical syllabus.(N S Prabhu, 1987,p. 17 cited in Willis 1996 p.6). Thus we come to know that if the learner's developing language system cannot accommodate the target language grammar rule, it will not become internalised and as a consequence s/he will fail to use it properly.

Willis (1996) suggests the speaking of the target language freely without being anxious of making errors as the basic need for a language is to communicate meaningfully. She firmly believes that learners will reach an acceptable level of competence gradually. Therefore, the TBL framework aims at giving the learners ample scope to experiment with the learners spoken and written language. Willis(1996) advocates for less continuous monitoring of the learners' spoken language as this impedes the fluency of the learners though sometimes it is necessary to correct the errors. She emphasises on the learners' knowledge to know the distinction of private and public use of language i.e. when to be free in using a language and when to be accurate. To gain accuracy of using a language she agrees with the habit of reading extensively though it has limitations as it does not ensure the accuracy of spoken language, rather it helps listening. Willis believes that 'people of all intellectual abilities can successfully learn another language' if natural learning conditions are recreated in the classroom with the help of high quality teaching environment. We realise that exposure to and involvement with the target language are important irrespective of age factors. Researches show that extrovert learners usually learn faster than the introvert learners as they take risk which proves that personality, learning style and strategy differences of different learners may play a role in language learning. The TBL framework favours the learning style of the holistic learners though learners who have learning difficulties may also be accommodated using the TBL framework in a different way.

By this time we are convinced that adopting certain principles and under certain conditions effective language learning is stimulated. Exposure, use and motivation are the essential conditions and instruction is the 'desirable' condition though not essential. Willis summarises the TBL framework with this diagram.

2. Exposure: Exposure is the first of the three essential conditions for language learning. It is observed that most of the successful language learners make the best use of their exposure to the target language. Exposure involves an acceptable comprehension of meaning and the conscious observation of other people's use of the target language in reading and speaking. Learners isolate words and phrases understanding the meanings and usages during their exposure to the target language. 'It is only when such features are noticed, processed in the learner's mind and understand that they are likely to become part of their internalised language system'(Schmitt,1990).The internalised and modified exposure becomes comprehensible input helping acquisition of the target language.

The quality and quantity of exposure to the target language has to be carefully maintained to ensure a holistic development of the learning process. The textbooks that fit some group of learners may not be suitable for others. The TBL framework can help the teacher to diagnose the development and the difficulties of learners immediately and thus s/he can provide a suitable guideline with a different task even from a different textbook. In chapter 5 and 6 of 'A Framework of Task-based Learning', Willis(1996) illustrates some basic ways to design communicative tasks emphasising on printed and audio-visual materials. Chapter 5 gives direction of selecting and balancing exposure; how to choose course-books and satisfy students' needs; what are the sources of useful materials; how to grade the tasks not the texts.

Some language teachers feel the necessity of using supplementary course materials observing the unsuitability and limitations of the prescribed course-books. In selecting supplementary course- materials the variety, grade and quality of both the language in the selected materials and the learners' language status must be considered. The course-book and materials must ensure the possible end-of-course objectives(of learners) and the

independent open use of the learning by the learners at the end of the course. These should motivate them to make use of their exposure to the target language and use the resources outside. By selecting various authentic types of exposure, for example, face-to-face communication in a one-to-one situation or recorded communication through radio or television, learners can be expected to be able to control the flow of the language that suits their level of understanding though in some cases such materials lack the representation of natural language use for the sake of authenticity. Different published sources too may be helpful to add variety in exposure. In a good course-book, a variety of texts from published sources is available considering the level of the learners. News items, articles, extracts on different contemporary issues etc. may motivate the adult learners to a good exposure. On the contrary, child-learners can be supplemented by comics, story books, activity books etc. While providing these supplementary resources encouragement to extensive reading has to be ensured. Unpublished resources too can help learners to develop their language in various ways. Letters from pen-friends, different data collected from different specialist sources, e-mails from the users of the target language, internet resources- all these sources can be made available for learners to facilitate them to expose themselves to the target language. However, while selecting these materials, the teacher should be careful of the exploitability, the variety of the topic, the length or chuck-ability, the linguistic complexity, the accessibility and the copy-right of the materials so that the quality, effectiveness, efficiency and authenticity of the materials are not invalidated.

Effective exposure is associated to successful grading of the tasks aimed for different learner groups. As the understanding of the text and the purpose of the task are inseparable, the teacher may have to grade the tasks according to the needs and status of learners making the text and the tasks interesting and easier. Because of ambiguity and inconsistency sometimes some simple tasks are difficult to accomplish. Again, some others are difficult because of the topic, for example, a special scientific report on cosmology may seem to be very boring though they may understand the words or at least guess the meaning. Therefore, the TBL framework puts emphasis on the grading of the tasks rather than the grading of the texts.

As exposure to the target language is crucial, strategies should be adopted carefully so that learners are exposed randomly. Reading and listening are two different ways to be exposed to the target language. Reading must not reduce motivation. Sometimes readers are found struggling with words trying to know and match the dictionary meaning. By doing so, they lose the speed and ultimately feel frustrated. The teacher should give the notion to the learners that knowing and using the lexical meaning of every individual word is not very necessary to understand the context, rather the contextual meaning is much more important sometimes. The summarised assumption may work in most of the cases. So reading exercise should be done at ease targeting the satisfactory exposure to the target language. Similarly listening materials may also create some confusion among the learners. Sometimes learners may face more trouble as they cannot replay a TV or radio programme. But it should be noted that by trying to listen to the same thing time and again, they are lagging behind the real-time exposure. In real, it does not happen usually. So the best thing to do here is to take the risk of being misunderstood   and to use the context to get the information or chunk back that seemed to be difficult or lost. Thus, in case of both reading and listening, carefully designed tasks on well-chosen texts can help learners to come out of these confusions and to be motivated to proceed with the level of understanding they have gained so far. Moreover, learners need to be able to improve their reading and listening skills gradually. The TBL framework can be used flexibly to facilitate learners to make the best use of their exposure.

Recording tasks for use in the class and interviewing people can provide extra exposure to the target language. Recording tasks provide samples of everyday interaction and thus learners get experience of real life spoken language and opportunities to use the language themselves. Moreover, they get the necessary confidence by comparing the recordings with the language used by the fluent speakers of the target language. On the other hand, by interviewing people learners become motivated to continue developing their language skills with a firm confidence that they too can achieve the level of the fluent speakers of the target language. Different studies specially studies in a country like Bangladesh where a classroom is the basic source of exposure, this type of tasks are found to be satisfactory.

3. Use: While 'exposure' is mainly associated with reading and listening, 'use' is basically concerned with speaking and writing. Through exposure learners get the necessary input and through the use of the target language learners are pushed to make the expected output. The expectation is the core motivation in a sense as this motivation prepares the learners to take in what they read or hear more consciously and thus they can process the input more analytically and notice the useful features of the target language. Generally it is believed that learners may require some silent period to be exposed to the target language and to process the language in

their own way so that they can use it efficiently at the time of speaking or writing but studies show that the opposite may also take place. If the learners feel frustrated because of the obligatory silent period without getting scope to speak immediately, the belief behind the principle of providing silent period becomes questionable. The teacher must not impose this silent period rather the best way is to facilitate learners who are willing to start speaking even if there may be the possibility of false start, slip or other linguistic developmental errors.

'Nature' or 'nurture' – these are two positions of language learning on which there is a debate. The naturists believe that learners learn a language using the innate capability and the people who support 'nurture' approach hold the belief that language learning is triggered by the environment as learners engage in interaction and thus they come to learn.Ellis(1994) defines interaction as sharing similar linguistic needs between participants of equal linguistic status and making an effort to communicate each other. Here meaning negotiation is inhibited as the role relationship is asymmetrical. Ellis finds that some other factors that influence interaction , except status, are the nature of the task, characteristics of participants and participant structure. At present, it is believed that language learning emerged through interaction and negotiation for meaning as language processing is considered a vital element in language acquisition. Thus interaction plays a role in language learning as during negotiation works, the learners' attention is concentrated on the discrepancy between the linguistic knowledge of himself or herself and the fluent language user and consequently s/he gets a chance of modification. However, interactional perspective has some restrictions too. Ellis (1999) argues that the early version of Interaction Hypothesis (IH) in which its followers believe that comprehensible input leads to interaction, has several weaknesses. He carried out a study and some of the results are written below:

i. interaction facilitates comprehension(not cause it); when learners have opportunity to signal their non-understanding and try to ask for clarification.

ii. there are individual differences with regard to the amount of their participation.

iii. comprehension does not depend on negotiation. Learners may benefit from the dialogic interaction by other learners.

iv. modified input facilitates acquisition of word meanings.

v. the most important factor to acquisition of word meaning is range(different context).

These studies provide limited support for the claim that interaction contributes to learning. Despite the limitations as mentioned by R. Ellis(1999), it can be argued that through interaction and interpersonal relationships, creative language use plays an important role as the learners involve in conversation to meet the mutual needs. If we are to claim that our language learning is meaningful, it should be embedded in conversation. By providing technological aids, software and realia in the classroom, even traditional textbooks and exercises like drills would be beneficial and promote language learning. J. Willis points out, 'learners need opportunities to communicate what they want to say and express what they feel or think'. Through verbal communication learners get scope to hear and recall what they hear and to use the language they know and also to modify if necessary. It greatly help the learners with deficiency and less confidence to build up a supportive and stress-free atmosphere that inspires risk-taking which is an essential strategy to gain the satisfactory fluency in the target language. Willis (1996) says that through the use of language verbally learners acquire the range of discourse skills they need to continue their oral communication and to manage the level and kind of input they receive. Thus, they gather skills to open and close a conversation, to interact and turn-taking, to organise the discourse in advance and finally to reach to an agreement cooperatively and to shift the topic. These skills encourage the learners to acquire a language faster and more efficiently. According to Skehan, teachers have also noted ample evidence that learners who are pushed or challenged to 'go public' will strive harder to improve.

So, use of language through tasks prepare learners to make free and meaningful use of the target language. But it should be remembered that while using the language, they should not be stereotyped to written form of the language as there is stylistic and strategic difference between spoken and written languages. The teacher should design the tasks to familiarise learners with these differences. In my classroom I have observed that students sometimes fail to recognise the difference and interact peculiarly but when they are informed their language becomes more developed and strategic. In chapter 8 and 9 of 'A Framework for Task-based Learning' J. Willis gives a clear guideline and explanation of the ways to introduce the task-based use of the target language. By following the TBL framework language learners can be motivated and motivating positively is another essential condition for successful language learning.

4. Motivation: Willis says, 'The third essential condition students need is motivation to learn, motivation to process and exposure they receive, and motivation to use the target language as often as possible, in order to

benefit from the exposure and use.'

 Learners may be motivated either or both integratively and instrumentally .Whatever the form of motivation is, if it is utilised properly, language learning will be accelerated to a considerable extent though it is not validated by evidence whether motivation really plays a very influential role in language learning. Generally motivation is defined as a psychological quality that enables learners or people to reach the target and in case of language learners, to get a confident to use the language successfully is the target .Many researchers have postulated different language learner motivation models in the field of linguistics, socio-linguistics, second language acquisition and above all applied linguistics. Gardner, Clement, Usioda, Dornyel, McIntyre are most cited in this regard. Gardner and Lambert (1959) were pioneers in showing that there is a considerable independent relationship between motivation and language learning specially second language learning. There ideas were greatly influenced by Mowrer(1950). According to Mowrer, a child acquires the mother tongue as s/he wants to get an individual and distinctive identity primarily in the family and the surrounding . It means it is a process to prove his or her existence in the family or the society. The integrative motivation inspires the child to be a successful user of the target language. This kind of motivation refers to a learner's spontaneous desire to gather more knowledge and experience about the target language so that s/he can cope with the target language community. The child feels it important to increase his or her affiliation with the target language community. Contrarily, instrumental motivation is related to utilitarian goal. It indicates the desire of the learners to learn the language for utilitarian purposes, such as improving social status, furthering education, developing economic status etc. Both integrative and instrumental motivations may lead to a learner's success but the lack of any one causes problems. Gardner's hypothesis showed that integratively oriented learners were more motivated than other learners. An integratively motivated learner is likely to have a stronger desire to learn the target language. S/he has more positive attitude towards the learning situation and thus s/he will be interested to exert more effort to learn the language. Studies show that in second language learning both integrative and instrumental motivations play a vital role though there are some counter evidence. Spolsky (1969) can be cited here. He discovered that the students' greater desire to be like speakers of English than like speakers of their own language was significantly correlated with the students' English proficiency. This led Spolsky to conclude asserting that 'learning a second language is a key to possible membership of a secondary society; the desire to join that group is a factor in learning'(1969, p.282).Macnamara (1973) said, 'More pressing for more students than a general desire to be able to communicate at a future date is a specific desire to be able to able to communicate in some actual situation where what is being communicated is of vital concern to the persons involved.(p.64-65).Thus we find   both agreement and disagreement on the influence of integrative and instrumental motivations among the researchers but almost all of them agree that motivation plays a role in language learning. From my personal experience, I can say that motivation specially integrative motivation plays a vital role in second language learning if the learners are placed in the target language society and instrumental motivation is found more effective in a situation where learning a second language is a part of personal upgradation.

 The TBL framework can be used to motivate learners. Motivation to a particular subject or point may not continue for a long time automatically. So, learners can be involved with easier tasks at the beginning level such as making new friends, socializing etc. that usually require less time and effort. Teachers can motivate learners by selecting topics and activities that they may find easier and interesting. Students get more motivation through success. If they see that they can accomplish the tasks given to them easily and these tasks are really helpful to satisfy their needs in the target language, they will be motivated durably and will look for more tasks. Now the teacher can set a higher goal and facilitate them to reach that goal. Thus teachers can help students to be more confident users of the target language. Teachers should select the tasks considering the age levels and the language status of the learners. Teachers can participate with the learners' language use just as a facilitator or benign floating source in the classroom so that learners get useful help to practise the tasks spontaneously. Through exposure, use and motivation learners' command on the target language is sure to improve to a great extent. Accuracy may not be acquired only through motivation, rather it depends on the use and the exposure i.e. the level or standard of the situation where learners are exposed to. The TBL framework in chapter 9 of Willis(1996) can be an effective approach that will motivate learners. It is undeniable that motivation is one of the most authentic conditions to successful language learning. Therefore, to motivate learners to be successful, language teachers should introduce, innovate and adapt the TBL framework.

 Now we see motivation can be influenced by instruction. Swan says,
'*Task-based instruction(TBI) is frequently promoted as an effective teaching approach, superior to 'traditional' methods, soundly based in theory and research. The approach is often justified by the claim that linguistic regularities are acquired through 'noticing' during communicative activity and should therefore be addressed*

primarily by incidental 'focus on form' during task performance. However, this claim is based on unproved hypotheses, and there is no compelling empirical evidence for the validity of the model.'(OUP: Applied Linguistics 26/3: 376-401).

It means though instruction is not the essential condition for language learning, it may accelerate language learning. Willis (1996) says, 'There is also one additional condition that is desirable, though not essential' (p.11). She confirms the assertion saying, 'So, we have a fourth condition: instruction, which, although not totally essential, is highly desirable'(p.15). She believes that if the learners are provided adequate exposure and the right conditions, they can learn the language following the same developmental sequence of the people who acquire it naturally. Therefore, a syllabus should be designed in such a way that encourages learners to learn the language spontaneously. Observing the different developmental sequences of the learners, teachers will devise different syllabus for different levels. They are to be prepared for noticing specific features of the target language such as grammatical and lexical patterns, forming hypotheses about their use and meaning. Tasks that make learners active to think and use the target language spontaneously are more beneficial in the long run. Learners must not be made frustrated with practising specific patterns monotonously. So, the form of instruction plays a role in learning. The traditional PPP (Presentation, Practice and Production) approach is inconvenient as it targets to teach a specific language form i.e. a syntactic pattern or the understanding of a popular function or notion. Usually the PPP approach starts the instruction by presenting a specific language item and begins practice focusing on that particular form. The students are expected to internalise the form and finally, they are expected to shoe their development in using the new pattern freely in sentences of their own. This approach is seen to be effective but there are some limitations. Willis (1996) believes that the PPP cycle restricts the learner's experience of language by focusing on a single item. The PPP approach is based on the behaviourist view of learning. According to this view learning is processed through practice and repetition of the same behaviour. But the naturists or Chomsky's view of learning disagrees this view. According to the naturalist view, a holistic language experience where the learners are free to communicate using the form or forms of the target language is more realistic for the success of language learning. The TBL framework offers a holistic language experience. The framework can be summarised as Pre-task →Task Cycle→ Language Focus structure. As the communication task is the central point to the framework, it is more useful than the PPP cycle. J. Willis says that A TBL approach may not be fit instantly to the views of classroom learning as introducing it is not always easy. But students and teachers in many parts of the world are satisfied or positive at least with the TBL approach (Willis 1996, p.137). As the TBL framework aim at stimulating the use of the target language, it motivates learners to expose themselves freely with the skills they have already gathered .The teacher plans the tasks and presents them to the learners and then learners practise the tasks and finally report the class by producing the expected language forms of the target language. This cycle of instruction creates an opportunity for learners to learn naturally. Through exposure they can gather personal experience and also assess their production and thus systematise their knowledge of the language form. The TBL approach is closer to acquisition than learning in a sense as it does not limit the exposure and the us of the target language though sometimes the limitations of a classroom or the lacking in qualitative teaching may hinder the acquisition. It is true that formal instruction will not change the sequence of acquisition that is done through acquisition Ellis points out, '[..]instruction draws learners' attention to language features and permits them to develop knowledge of these features, but that learners will not incorporate such features into their knowledge until they reach the requisite developmental stage'(cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2005,p.103). It means explicit knowledge does not convert into implicit knowledge. SLA (Second Language Acquisition) theories suggest that formal instruction is not adequate for the acquisition of the target language. But the TBL approach cannot be denied at it proposes the natural way of learning through providing adequate exposure, use and motivation. It gives less emphasise on instruction considering it to be an additional condition.

5. Conclusion

Despite the limitations, the TBL framework may be recommended to all language teachers so that they can evaluate this approach on the basis of their teaching knowledge and experience and thus it will pave the way to gather more evidence for us to come to an end of the debate 'Whether to follow the TBL approach or not'. Some teachers may find it as a ready-made teaching approach, some others may come forward with another approach that contrasts this approach but which is more effective. From my personal experience, I agree with Willis almost at every point but she seems to be more confident than naturally expected her to be as the evidences to support the TBL framework are not strong enough or are still being tested and sometimes there are some counter arguments too. Sometimes the principles contradict herself. She advocates to create a comfortable environment in which learners can use the target language freely but she suggests the teacher to highlight useful words and

phrases before the learners do the work. This will fix the objectives of language learning. Thus the learners are not free to use the target language in their own way. The TBL framework emphasises on reporting group activities but I have found it impossible in a large class. Moreover, fluency in communication is given priority than accuracy specially n a classroom situation but tasks help learners to use language correctly, effectively and appropriately without hampering fluency. I agree with Tomlinson when he disagrees with Willis saying that 'Another feature of the framework I disagree with is the teacher-conducted practice at the of phase 3. It means that many teachers would begin and end the task cycle with overt teaching of language which could confirm the belief of teachers and students that language instruction is what language learning is really about.'.(ELT Journal, Vol.52/3,OUP) In spite of all these agreement and disagreement, Willis' argument carries weight. The value of her assertion is realised seeing the conscious and spontaneous participation of linguists and language teachers in the debate emerged from it. Most teachers including me and students, though not all, will agree that adequate exposure, free use and strong motivation play a vital role in successful language learning and instruction usually facilitates learning.

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The researcher is a faculty in the Department of English Language and Literature at International Islamic University Chittagong, Bangladesh. He specializes in ELT. His areas of interest include TBLT, Sociolinguistics and Phonetics. He may be reached at : mkhaled1974@gmail.com