STUDENTS' PERCEPTION TOWARDS TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING (TBLT) APPROACH IN LEARNING ARABIC LANGUAGE: CFS, IIUM EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is a new approach in teaching second language particularly in Arabic language. The approach, which employs student-centred approach, is viewed as more effective than the traditional way. This approach is slowly gaining its popularity among Arabic language educators and learners all around the world. In Malaysia, the Centre for Foundation Studies, International Islamic University Malaysia (CFSIIUM) is one of the first institutions of education to implement this new way in teaching Arabic language. As such, this study was conducted in order to find out the students' perception towards the implementation of task-based language teaching (TBLT) in this learning institution. 313 respondents were randomly selected from the students in Arabic elementary level studying at CFSIIUM. The instrument used in the survey was survey questionnaires. The quantitative results were used to examine students' perception towards the implementation of task-based language teaching (TBLT) in Arabic language. The findings indicated that the respondents were positive in learning Arabic language using this approach and they were motivated to learn this language.

Keywords: Students' perceptions, Task-based language teaching (TBLT), Arabic as a second language

1   INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on students' perceptions of Task-based language teaching (TBLT) in learning Arabic language as a second language. The topic was chosen because it is related to the implementation of the new approach in the Centre for Languages & Pre-University Academic Development (CELPAD), IIUM. CELPAD, IIUM is the centre responsible for offering language courses which is also a graduation requirement for all students in IIUM. Among the language courses offered are Arabic proficiency courses. In 2012, CELPAD started to use TBLT approach in Arabic language teaching. The introduction of the new

approach has created major changes in the way of Arabic language teaching and learning in IIUM. Students have to adapt to a totally different approach than what they were accustomed to in their secondary school. Outside the Arabic speaking world, particularly in Malaysia, there are hardly any institutions that employ such approach in Arabic language teaching. Thus, it is interesting to find out how this new implementation is perceived by the students themselves. Since this approach is rather new in Arabic teaching, the researchers have yet to find any studies in Malaysia that report on perceptions of students studying Arabic using similar approach. This is the prime reason that had prompted the current study. Understanding the students' perception of TBLT seems to be the most important step for any institutions undertaking this new approach for it would give a better understanding and preparation in delivering the curriculum.

1.1 Arabic Language Requirement in IIUM

IIUM is an international university which uses English language as the first medium of communication and instruction, while Arabic language comes as a second medium of communication and instruction. All new students registering in IIUM, are required to sit for language placement examinations namely English Placement Test (EPT) and Arabic Placement Test (APT) administered by the Centre for Languages and Pre Academic Development (CELPAD). The purpose of the examinations is to determine their level of English and Arabic language proficiency. Those students who meet the language requirement may continue their core courses according to their programme. Meanwhile, those who do not meet the language requirement must learn English and Arabic language courses before they can pursue their studies. The language requirement for English and Arabic language varies according to their programme. Those students who intend to pursue their studies in Arabic based programme like Bachelor in Arabic or Bachelor in Shari'ah Law will have to undergo six levels of Arabic, while those who are majoring in English based programme will only need to undergo two levels of Arabic.

1.2 Background of Arabic Language Teaching and Learning

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is not a common approach in teaching Arabic language for non-native speakers of Arabic in Malaysia. Most Arabic language teachers in Malaysia still rely heavily on grammar drills or knowledge-giver via grammar-translation method. Before 2012, teachers of Arabic language courses in CELPAD mostly used traditional method in their classrooms. Students depended totally on their teachers: from explaining the subject, translating the text, preparing the language practises to choosing the groups of vocabularies that they must memorize. Students were not trained to think and to expand what they have learned. Meanwhile, teachers relied totally on textbooks. They only taught what is written in the textbook using grammar-translation method. Most of them did not use their creativity to attract students nor motivate them to use and learn more outside classroom. They failed to realize what has been stressed by Leaver and Willis (2004) and that of the findings of Chomsky (1959, as cited in Leaver & Willis, 2004) who have demonstrated convincingly that both language learning and language use must be a creative process. Chomsky (1959, as cited in Leaver & Willis, 2004) stipulates that a basic rule system that underpins all languages is innate and that, given exposure to a specific language, children will naturally create the specific rules of that language for themselves. Learning is thus seen as a process of discovery determined by internal processes rather than external influences.

In the past, teaching focused more on reading and writing skills in CELPAD. Only students in the upper levels were exposed to speaking and listening skills. Many believe that this approach is among the reasons why IIUM graduates who are not majoring in Arabic based programs cannot communicate in Arabic language not even converse in the most basic phrase such as 'how are you' (كيف حالك). Grammar-translation based approach which had been practiced for many years have failed to have the desired effect of helping learners to practically use the language learned. Instead of acquiring a sense of when and how to use which vocabulary, learners only learn all the carefully selected words that they will need for the exams and then promptly forget them.

1.3   The Implementation of TBLT in Arabic Language Courses

Realizing this problem, CELPAD has taken a drastic action to change the approach of teaching to become more student-centered (ie. TBLT approach), in which it allows for more meaningful communication, and provides for practical extra-linguistic skill building. TBLT is a way of tapping into learners' natural mechanisms for second-language acquisition (Leaver & Willis, 2004). Some other practitioners have adopted TBLT out of desire for a meaning-focused approach that reflected real-life language use. They believe that language needs to be transferred to real-world activities and that is best accomplished by doing some of these activities in the classroom (Brown et al, 1989). In foreign language learning contexts where students have little exposure to the target language outside the classroom, TBLT can be specifically helpful (Jeon & Hahn, 2006). Others, like Prabhu (1987), adopted tasks because they firmly believed that task-based interaction stimulated natural acquisition processes. There are special characteristics offered by TBLT approached as stated by Larsson (2001) when he describes about the advantages of TBLT. According to him, TBLT helps to:

1- Improve students' communicative skills.
2- Increase general ability of social interaction.
3- Encourage students to gain deeper sense of understanding.
4- Activate student to be actively acquire the knowledge and not passive receivers.
5- Motivate students to learn in a way that the prospect of a final examination rarely manages to do.

The basic principle of TBLT is that by having learners perform tasks, it will help them to develop knowledge and skill in the second language in accordance with the way their own language learning mechanisms work. According to Ellis (2002), the task function in TBLT works as 'devices for creating the conditions required for language acquisition'. Thus, it is not the content of the lesson that is the focal point but the process of classroom interaction that generates opportunities for learning. The focus is not on the product or on what to learn, but rather on the process or on how to learn. TBLT offers what traditional method failed to accomplish. This is the main reason why CELPAD has decided to adopt TBLT as a new approach in the second language learning in IIUM.

2   PROBLEM STATEMENT

Over the last few decades, TBLT approach has been used in many countries in second and foreign language learning. Nevertheless, this approach is not widely followed and practised as an educational approach in Arabic language teaching in Malaysia. In fact, the

educational culture of the task-based learning/teaching (TBLT) is completely new to Malaysian students especially in Arabic as a second/foreign language learning even though Arabic language has been taught in Malaysia for decades. Hence, there are little discussions of TBLT in teaching and learning Arabic in Malaysian context. The closest attempt to study TBLT approach in Arabic language teaching is that of Salih Tinggari (2012). The study focuses on teachers' perception of TBLT which had been conducted at the Centre for Foundation Studies IIUM Petaling Jaya and IIUM Gombak campus, as well as their opinion of the effectiveness of this methodology for teaching Arabic language. However, the issues related to learners' perception of language learning especially for Arabic language learning have not been explored; whereas, language learners' beliefs surrounding language learning processes have an undeniable impact on their learning. Due to this information gap regarding learners' perceptions, the present study seeks to examine CFS IIUM students' perception of TBLT in this learning institution. As such, this makes the current study the first study conducted in Malaysia.

3   OBJECTIVES

Thus, the aim of this present study is to examine the perceptions of the students in the Elementary level on the TBLT approach in Arabic language learning in CFSIIUM. Specifically, the objectives of this research are to find out learners' preferred tasks and motivation after learning Arabic via TBLT.

4   RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present study is an attempt to investigate the students' perception of TBLT approach in the Centre for Foundation Studies, IIUM. For this purpose the following research questions were formulated:

1- What are the Arabic language tasks that the students prefer?
2- How has learning Arabic using TBLT motivated them?
3- In what ways have speaking and writing tasks helped them?

5   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.1   Participants

A total of 313 students of Elementary Level studying Arabic language at the Centre For Foundation Studies of International Islamic University Malaysia participated in the survey. These participants were chosen randomly from different programs with the age range of 18-19 years old. All the participants have had at least one semester (4 months) of learning Arabic language as a foreign language.

5.2   Survey Instrument

A perception questionnaire was used to measure students' view of TBLT in this institution. This questionnaire was adopted from Jeon and Hahn (2006). According to Jeon

and Hahn (2006), the questionnaire items are partly adapted from Nunan's (2004) checklist for evaluating communicative tasks. The questionnaire included some Likert-type items and one open ended questions. It consists of four parts: the first part included questions to collect information about their program and language learning level. The second section asked questions to gain insights into students' acceptance towards task based approach. The third section, sought to find students' views on classroom TBLT practice. In the second and third sections, students were asked to answer each question using a 5-point scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. In the fourth part, students describe how TBLT approach has motivated and encouraged them in learning Arabic language as a foreign language.

5.3   Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaires were distributed to the 313 participants from the Elementary Quranic Language at the Centre For Foundation Studies of IIUM. They were asked to fill out the questionnaire and they were assured that the information provided by them would be kept confidential. The students' perceptions were gathered by assessing their responses to the questionnaires.

5.4   Data Analysis

The Likert-type items of questionnaires, which were constructed to find out students' preference of language tasks, their views on motivation as well as speaking and writing tasks were given a numerical score (e.g., strongly disagree = 1, disagree =2, neutral =3, agree =4, strongly agree =5). The returned questionnaires were then analyzed by using descriptive statistical tool to show percentages, mean and standard deviation.

6   FINDINGS

Table 1: The Language Tasks Preferred By The Respondents

	TASK	N	MEAN	SD
1	Participating in language games	313	3.91	0.943
2	Producing personal dictionary	313	3.72	0.956
3	Producing videos	313	3.69	1.008
4	Conducting interviews	313	3.62	1.019
5	Producing greeting cards	313	3.56	0.966
6	Participating in role-plays or dramas	313	3.56	1.005
7	Participating in demo presentations	313	3.34	1.051
8	Producing/Presenting scrap books	313	3.27	0.96
9	Participating in forums or debates	313	3.23	1.099

SD – Standard Deviation

Table 1 lists and ranks the language tasks favoured by the respondents in Arabic class using TBLT approach. The respondents were to answer the following questions: I like ... (Producing greeting cards/producing personal dictionary/conducting interviews/producing videos/producing scrap books/participating in demo presentation/participating in role plays or dramas/participating in debates or forums/participating in language games). They had to choose the degree of agreement from strongly disagree (1); disagree (2); neutral (3); agree (4); strongly agree (5). Their responses were calculated into mean and standard deviation, which means the closer the mean to 5, the more favourable this task is to the respondents.

It is evident from the table that all the language tasks are favoured by the respondents (mean ranges from 3.23 to 3.91). While language games (mean 3.91), personal dictionary (mean 3.72) and producing videos (3.69) merge as the top three most preferred tasks, the least preferred task is participating in debates or forum (mean 3.23). It is also important to note that the preferred language tasks are passive activities and less stressful (games, dictionary, videos, greeting cards). In contrast, the more stressful and more demanding tasks (debate, demo presentation, role play or drama) are not favoured much by the respondents.

Table 2: The Motivation after Learning Arabic Using TBLT

	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEUTRAL	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
I have been motivated to learn Arabic on my own by participating in the language tasks given.	0.3%	3.2%	0%	65.5%	31%
Language tasks given help me improve my Arabic vocabulary.	0%	0.3%	0%	53%	46.7%
I apply the language skills learned in other subjects.	2.2%	22%	0.6%	56.6%	18.6%
I apply the language skills learned in my daily life.	1%	16.5%	1%	64.2%	17.3%

Table 2 displays the responses for questions on motivation in learning Arabic using TBLT approach. There are four statements for students to state their agreement from strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree to strongly agree. Their responses were tabulated in percent. It is clear from the table that most students agree with the statements regarding motivation that respondents obtain from learning Arabic through TBLT approach.

Table 3: The Motivation after Learning Arabic Using TBLT (summary)

	DISAGREE	AGREE
Language tasks given help me improve my Arabic vocabulary.	0.3 %	99.7 %
I have been motivated to learn Arabic on my own by participating in the language tasks given.	3.5 %	96.5 %
I apply the language skills learned in my daily life.	17.5 %	81.5 %
I apply the language skills learned in other subjects.	24.4 %	75.2 %

Table 3 summarizes the degree of agreement into two categories – agree or disagree, in which the percentages of strongly agree and agree have been merged, while strongly disagree and disagree are added together. It is obvious from this table that the responses sway heavily to the agreement rather than disagreement. 99.7 % of the respondents agree that the language tasks given have helped them to improve their Arabic vocabulary. 96.5 % states that they have been motivated to learn Arabic on their own by participating in the language task given. Meanwhile, many respondents have also agreed that they could apply the language skill learned in their daily life (81.5 %). And some concur that they could apply the language skills learned to other subjects (75.2 %). From these it can be said that most respondents have opined that learning Arabic through TBLT has motivated them to learn more on their own and to apply the language use in their daily life.

Table 4: The Responses to Speaking Tasks

Speaking tasks in class help me to:	N	MEAN	SD
Develop confidence in communicative skills.	313	4.45	0.587
Develop confidence in presentation skills.	313	4.38	0.669
Respond appropriately to simple questions.	313	4.37	0.591
Participate in simple conversations.	313	4.31	0.638

SD – Standard Deviation

The responses to Speaking tasks are shown in Table 4. Again students were asked to rate their agreement based on the four statements about the speaking tasks conducted in class. They had to choose the degree of agreement from strongly disagree (1); disagree (2); neutral (3); agree (4); strongly agree (5). Their responses were calculated into mean and standard

deviation, which means the closer the mean to 5, the more the respondents agree with the statement.

The results visibly show that the majority of the participants agree that the speaking tasks have helped them in developing their confidence and responding in Arabic (all mean is more than 4). As can be seen plainly from the table, the speaking tasks carried out in class have developed their confidence in communicative skills, in which this is the highest degree of agreement (mean 4.45). This is followed by developing confidence in presentation skills (mean 4.38), responding appropriately to simple questions (mean 4.37) and participating in simple conversations (mean 4.31). All in all, the respondents agree that their level of confidence have been developed through the TBLT tasks. Furthermore, the tasks have assisted them in responding and participating in simple conversations in Arabic.

Table 5: The Responses to Writing Tasks

Writing tasks help me to:	N	MEAN	SD
Write simple sentences.	313	4.49	0.589
Write simple paragraph.	313	4.30	0.654
Apply basic grammatical rules at sentence and paragraph levels.	313	4.26	0.681
Identify and correct common errors in sentence structures, grammar and vocabulary.	313	4.24	0.727

SD – Standard Deviation

Table 5 summarizes the respondents' feedback on writing tasks. They were asked to respond the same way as they did for speaking tasks. The participants were instructed to rate their agreement based on the four statements about the writing tasks conducted in class. They had to choose the degree of agreement from strongly disagree (1); disagree (2); neutral (3); agree (4); strongly agree (5). Their responses were calculated into mean and standard deviation, which means the closer the mean to 5, the more the respondents agree with the statement.

The findings noticeably demonstrate that the majority of the respondents concur that the writing tasks done in class have helped them in writing simple sentences (mean 4.49) and writing simple paragraphs (mean 4.30). Not only that, writing tasks have also assisted them in applying basic grammatical rules at sentence and paragraph levels (mean 4.26) as well as identifying and correcting common errors in sentence structures, grammar plus vocabulary (mean 4.24). In short, writing tasks through TBLT approach have assisted the participants in their writing activities and in applying and correcting their own errors.

7 DISCUSSIONS

The results of the present study have revealed that the learners from the elementary level of Arabic actually held positive views on learning Arabic using TBLT approach. Although majority of them did not have any basic Arabic when they first started the semester, they still perceive that TBLT approach have helped them in learning speaking, writing and vocabulary. This finding seems to contradict the finding on staff perceptions study carried out by Salih Tinggari (2012), which shows that TBLT is not suitable for elementary level.

In addition to that, the respondents also feel that TBLT approach has motivated them in learning Arabic more on their own outside class. Moreover, they believe that they could apply the language skills that they learn in class into their daily life and other subjects. This is in line with the literature review that says TBLT approach, which is student centred, allows for more meaningful communication and could provide more practical extra-linguistic skill building (Brown et al, 1989).

The findings from this study also reveal the types of tasks that they prefer. It seems that the learners highly favour language tasks which are more passive and less demanding such as language games, producing personal dictionary, producing videos and making greeting cards. Meanwhile, language tasks, which require more productive skills like debates, demo presentations, role plays or dramas are less preferred by the respondents. It is understood that for beginners to participate in tasks like these could be stressful as these tasks require proficiency in Arabic and self-confidence of the learners. This knowledge is imperative to curriculum designers and teachers when lesson plans are made for the beginners of Arabic.

More importantly, teachers must have a clear understanding about TBLT and its principles. They must definitely be open and ready to implement TBLT, so necessary experience and mastery of the approach could be acquired. It is vital to recommend that continuous trainings, workshops and sharing sessions be conducted for teachers to guide and motivate them to implement TBLT because teachers play a pivotal role in facilitating, guiding, encouraging and inspiring their students to successfully learn the language. This is in line with the suggestion made by Salih Tinggari (2012) that conducting trainings and workshops is significant in moulding effective teachers.

8 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings of the study seem to have demonstrated that students in CFS IIUM embrace TBLT approach in a positive way. Their willingness to adapt to the new methodology of teaching has definitely shown good effects in enhancing their interests toward Arabic language learning. It is learned from the study that the participants prefer language tasks which are less demanding and passive like participating in language games, producing personal dictionary and producing videos, while demanding tasks such as participating in debates and presentation are not much favoured by them. The respondents also view the language tasks through TBLT in class has motivated them to discover more on their own and to apply the language use in their daily life. In addition to that, the respondents believe that their level of confidence have been developed through the TBLT tasks, which have assisted them in responding and participating in simple conversations in Arabic. As far as writing

skills are concerned, writing tasks through TBLT approach have helped the participants in their writing activities and in applying and correcting their own mistakes.

Understanding the learners' perceptions, may help teachers in developing a suitable module for teaching Arabic language to the elementary level students and as such contribute to the success of the new approach. This study is far from perfect since there were many limitations. For future research, it is recommended that the study use other sensitive tools to tap more direct data rather than on beliefs or perceptions only.

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