



## Adoption of task-based language teaching at a primary school in Viet Nam: A case study

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### ABSTRACT

*This case study provides an account of how a Vietnamese primary school teacher carried out the task-based versions of the presentation, practice and production (PPP) speaking lessons in an authentic primary school classroom. Data were collected from digital recordings of the lessons, semi-structured interviews, and field notes. Detailed descriptions were made of each phase of the video-taped lessons and then compared with the field notes. The interview data were analyzed manually following an inductive approach to data analysis. The results indicated that the teacher and her students successfully carried out the two redesigned PPP speaking lessons in her normally scheduled classroom. The results pointed to the feasibility of redesigning the PPP lessons to reflect task-based language teaching (TBLT) principles and of implementing the task-based versions of the PPP speaking lessons in real classrooms.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Presentation-practice-production (PPP) and task-based language teaching (TBLT) are two communicative approaches to language teaching, but each takes different routes to achieve communicative competence. PPP assumes that communicative abilities are developed through explicit teaching and repetitive practice of pre-determined language items and through subsequent meaningful communicative activities. PPP treats language as the unit of instruction in language classrooms. TBLT, however, assumes that language learning is driven by communicative needs and exposure to purposeful language use rather than by explicit instruction and repetitive practice. TBLT treats tasks, not language, as the unit of instruction in language classrooms. In performing tasks, learners' attention is drawn to meaning, but they are also encouraged to shift their attention to

form when a communicative need arises (Ellis, 2003; Long, 2015).

TBLT has been increasingly adopted as an instructional approach in language teaching for young learners. Numerous studies have provided evidence to support the affordances of TBLT for young learners in ESL contexts (Gagné & Parks, 2013; Oliver et al., 2017) or small-scale, controlled conditions in EFL contexts (Garcia Mayo & Imaz Agirre, 2016; Shintani, 2016). However, little research has investigated the feasibility of this approach in naturalistic, primary EFL classroom contexts. More specifically, little research has examined the feasibility of designing and implementing the task-based version of the PPP lesson in authentic primary school classrooms, particularly in the Vietnamese primary school context. Long (2015) identifies "detailed classroom studies of the ways teachers and students perform classroom lessons" (p.371) as one of the

“obvious areas in need of serious research effort” (p.372). This case study responds to this call by exploring the implementation of TBLT in a context hitherto under-research from a TBLT perspective, namely EFL classes in primary school classrooms in Viet Nam.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research studies have reported that the implementation of TBLT in primary school contexts such as in Flanders, a Dutch-speaking region in Belgium (Berben et al., 2007; Van den Branden, 2009) has been a success. However, research into curriculum-mandated implementation of TBLT in primary schools in Asia, particularly in Hong Kong (Carless, 2002, 2003, 2004; Chan, 2012) and China (Deng & Carless, 2009; Nunan, 2003; Zhang, 2007, 2015; Zhang & Hu, 2010) reported opposite results.

Carless (2003) explored three elementary school teachers' understanding of TBLT and factors affecting their implementation. Data were collected from attitude scale surveys, focused interviews, and classroom observations. Findings showed that the teacher (Priscilla) who held a more positive attitude toward TBL and who had a clearer understanding of TBLT evidenced much greater implementation of tasks than the other two teachers (Susan and Gloria). In addition, factors such as time and resource availability did not affect her implementation due to her advanced planning and collaboration with colleagues. In a 2004 study of the same three teachers, Carless analyzed an extensive database of 51 classroom episodes in order to identify implementation issues in the three classrooms. Carless found three factors constraining the implementation of tasks in the classroom, namely pupils' use of the mother tongue, classroom management problems, and the quality of pupils' language production. Carless claimed that the implementation of TBLT in this context was congruent with task-supported language teaching rather than task-based language teaching.

In Hong Kong, Chan (2012) investigated how TBLT was implemented in primary school classrooms. The study focused on the way the teachers managed linguistic, cognitive and interactional demands of tasks. Multiple data sources were collected including 20 lessons taught by four teachers, interviews with the teachers, teaching materials, and students' completed task work. The author found that the teachers differed in implementing TBLT, particularly in the way they managed the linguistic, cognitive and interactional demands of tasks. Chan

suggested that timely and appropriate scaffolding strategies given when the needs arise is more important for task-based learning than the task per se. Overall, like Carless' studies, Chan's study suggested that the version of TBLT implemented in primary schools was less strong than what was envisaged by the official government documentation and guidelines.

Studies in mainland China, however, described how teachers struggled to implement the current TBLT innovation in primary schools (Deng & Carless, 2009; Zhang & Hu, 2010; Zhang, 2015). Deng and Carless (2009) examined how a Year Four primary school teacher implemented activities in her classroom. Data were collected from classroom observations and interviews. The analysis of classroom activities was based on Littlewood's (2004) continuum of communicativeness of activities in order to examine the extent to which the activities reflected principles of task-based learning. Results showed little evidence that teaching practices were compatible with principles of task-based teaching. The teacher's lack of uptake of TBLT was attributed to two major constraining factors: traditional examinations and the teacher's limited understanding of how to implement TBLT. According to the authors, teacher development activities were one way to enhance teacher understanding of how to carry out communicative activities in the classroom. Support from teacher educators who were familiar with the theory and practice of TBLT was instrumental.

Further insights into the extent to which TBLT has been implemented in primary school classrooms in China and factors that shape the implementation were provided by Zhang's 2015 study conducted in South China. Zhang (2015) investigated how three primary school teachers implemented the TBLT innovation in their classroom practices. Results show that two of the three teachers rarely used tasks in their teaching, while the third teacher adopted a medium-to-strong form of TBLT. Factors inhibiting the implementation of TBLT of the two teachers were explained in terms of limited opportunities for professional development, their experience in learning English and their perceptions of students. In contrast, these factors did not apply to the case of the third teacher (Helen) who was able to successfully carry out TBLT in her practices. Regarding the case of this positive teacher, Zhang concluded that TBLT was not necessarily inappropriate or incompatible in China's EFL cultural contexts. This study highlights the fact that successful implementation of TBLT

depends on teachers' confidence and capacity to carry out tasks in the classroom.

With regard to the Vietnamese context, while several studies have investigated TBLT implementation at high school and tertiary levels (e.g., T. B. T. Nguyen et al., 2015; G. V. Nguyen et al., 2015; Phuong, 2016; A. T. Nguyen et al., 2018), no study has investigated TBLT in primary schools.

This study addressed this gap by addressing the following questions:

- a. How did a Vietnamese EFL primary teacher implement the task-based versions of the PPP speaking lessons in her normally scheduled classroom?
- b. How did the teacher explain her implementation decisions?


### 3. THE STUDY

#### 3.1. The two task-based lessons



























The two task-based lessons implemented in this study were developed from the two presentation-practice-production (PPP) speaking lessons in a textbook unit 8 for Grade 4 students (nine years old) (Hoang et al., 2015). These two lessons are similar in design and follow the same topic of timetable with each having the specific topic: "What subjects do you have today" and "When do you have....?", respectively. The overall aim of both lessons is for students to share information about their class timetable. The topic of the redesigned lessons facilitated the revisions of the PPP speaking lessons to reflect principles of TBLT. This revision could have been conducted with other topics in the same textbook. At the time of this study, the participant teacher was implementing Unit 8 in the textbook for Grade 4

students. The two speaking lessons in this Unit 8 were thus chosen due to school schedule and teacher availability. The revision of the two PPP speaking lessons (Bui & Newton, 2020) drew on Willis's (1996) TBLT framework which involves three phases: a pre-task phase, a main-task phase, and a post-task phase. The pre-task phase in both lessons consists of a vocabulary priming activity and an input-based listening task. First, the vocabulary activity for Lesson 1 was a listing task in which students brainstorm the school subjects in groups before racing to the board to mind map them. In Lesson 2, students listen to a song "What day is it today?" to review vocabulary about days of the week. In both lessons, the textbook presentation activity *Look, listen and repeat* was turned into an input-based listening task. In Lesson 1, the input-based listening task took the form of a guessing game. This task is preceded by a pre-listening activity. From a set of eight picture cards provided, students in groups guessed which three subjects the textbook character Nam has in a day and select the three cards. To check whether their guesses are right or wrong, students listen to the recording of the dialogue provided in the textbook. This task in Lesson 2 involves the students listening to a recorded dialogue in the textbook and fill in the blanks in the timetable as they do so (Fig.1).

Similarly, in both lessons, the textbook practice activity *Point and Say* was turned into an information-gap task. For this task in Lesson 1, the students were paired up and each was given a complete class timetable that their partner needed information from, as well as a second blank timetable for another class for which they needed to get information from their partner (Fig. 2).

	ENGLISH				
	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
	<p>Nam's English teacher is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Ms Lan</li> <li>b. Ms Nga</li> <li>c. Ms Hien</li> </ul>				
















**Fig. 1. Handout for input-based listening task for Lesson 2 (Bui & Newton, 2020)**







Class 4B timetable				Class 4A incomplete timetable			
Monday				Monday			
Tuesday				Tuesday			
Wednesday				Wednesday			
Thursday				Thursday			
Friday				Friday			

**Fig. 2. Handouts for the main task in Lesson 1 (Bui & Newton, 2020)**

In Lesson 2, students were paired up to exchange information they hold about the timetables to







complete the worksheets (Fig. 3).

CLASS 4A TIMETABLE			
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			

CLASS 4B Worksheet	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
					
					
					
Teacher ...					
					
Teacher ...					
					
Teacher...					
					
Teacher...					

**CLASS 4A TIMETABLE**

Monday	 Teacher Lan		
Tuesday			
Wednesday			 Teacher Ba
Thursday	 Teacher Nhung		
Friday			 Teacher Nga

CLASS 4A Worksheet	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
					
					
					
Teacher ...					
					
Teacher ...					
					
Teacher...					
					
Teacher...					

**Fig. 3. Handout for the main task in lesson 2 (Bui & Newton, 2020)**

In both lessons, when the timetables and worksheets were completed, students compared them to find three differences and two similarities. Finally, for the post-task phase in both lessons, the bland text-book production activity in each lesson was made into a public performance of the main task by pairs of learners in front of the class, followed by such language analysis and language practice activities.

The development of the task-based versions of the two PPP speaking lessons took issues of linguistic and cognitive demands of tasks into consideration given the fact that the students in this study were unfamiliar with speaking English without a pre-teaching of the target structural pattern. Linguistic demands were managed by means of preparatory activities in the pre-task phase. These activities exposed students to the target language items necessary for performing the tasks. Cognitive demands were managed by the activities and tasks in the two task-based lessons being sequenced in a logical order. In other words, the order of tasks and activities moved from more guided input-based tasks to more demanding production tasks with the input-based tasks in the pre-task phase acting as a facilitating task (Willis & Willis, 2007).

These two task-based versions of the PPP lessons were designed to fit into the usual lesson time (40 minutes) and addressed all the same key language

and communicative outcomes of the PPP lessons while following principles of TBLT. The lessons were trialled in a class not involved in the study and further refined on the basis of this experience.

### 3.2. Participants

The study was conducted at a semi-rural primary school in a Mekong Delta province in Viet Nam. The participant teacher Nhu had eight years of experience. She was considered as a master teacher in the district, well-known and recognized for her innovative teaching skills and her strong classroom management. The school was classified as an A school which indicates that it is one of the best schools in the district. Her classroom was well-equipped with an overhead projector, a computer and two whiteboards and there was a room reserved for English classes only. Both Nhu and her students had given their informed consent before the research procedure started.

The teacher Nhu was briefed on the theoretical and pedagogical principles of task-based teaching and then instructed on how to carry out the two task-based lessons in her classroom. At this briefing, Nhu and the researcher discussed the lesson plans and practiced giving task instructions until Nhu felt confident. Given Nhu's concern about her mix-ability students, the researcher suggested that more capable

and less capable peers be paired up. Nhu paired her students on the basis of her own rating. The researcher also encouraged Nhu to adjust the demand of the tasks to suit her students and provide necessary linguistic assistance.

### 3.3. Data collection and analysis

The two lessons were observed and video-recorded. Shortly after each observed lesson (either the same day or the following day), a stimulated recall interview (SRI) was carried out following guidelines suggested by Borg (2006), and Gass and Mackey (2000). In the SRIs, the teacher was provided with samples of recordings from a lesson or a description of part of a lesson and asked to comment about her decision making and thinking processes related to this. Finally, a follow-up interview was conducted after the second lesson. The primary purpose of the interviews was to discuss with Nhu the pedagogical options she used during the observed lessons and her explanation for her options.

The digital recordings of the lessons generated rich data and enabled a careful process of moment-by-moment data analysis and interpretation. These recorded lessons were carefully watched and detailed

**Table 1. A summary of the two lessons**

Phase	Lesson 1	Time (53 mins)	Lesson 2	Time (50 mins)
Pre-task	Teacher-led listing task	6	Classifying game	7
	Input-based listening task	14	Input-based listening task	12
Main task	Information-gap task	21	Information-gap task	20
	Language performance and analysis	9	Language performance and analysis	9
Post task	Ask-and-answer activity: Teacher asks, students answer.	3	Ask-and-answer activity: Teacher asks, students answer.	2

*Pre-task phase.* The pre-task activities in each lesson were carried out with some modifications and required a considerable amount of organization. As an experienced teacher, Nhu successfully gained control of her class right from the beginning. Instead of having the class brainstorm the school subjects in groups and then raced to the board to mind map them, Nhu led the listing task by asking the whole class to tell her the subjects in their daily timetables. When a pupil could describe a subject in English, she asked that pupil to go to the whiteboard and write it down in the form of a mind map. She then used picture cards to elicit some other subjects that her students could not talk about in English before involving them in a pronunciation practice activity. She commented that this teacher-led activity helped her control her large class and enable her to better control the class time.

descriptions were made of each of the phases of the lesson. The descriptions were compared with the field notes. All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and translated into English. A Vietnamese EFL university teacher checked the translations. The interview data were analysed manually following an inductive approach to data analysis (Dörnyei, 2007). The teacher was also given the chance to read and comment on my interpretations of her work. Finally, all data sources were pulled together for a moment-by-moment description of what happened during the implementation process and how the teacher explained her implementation decisions.

### 4. RESULTS

Results show that the teacher and her students successfully carried out the two task-based lessons in their daily scheduled classrooms. The teacher closely followed the lesson plans, but in some cases she modified it to suit her own circumstances. Table 1 below summarizes the phases in the two observed lessons and indicates how long each lasted. The following sections detail how each of the phases in each lesson was carried out.

For the same reason, in Lesson 2, instead of having the class sing along the song “*What day is it today?*” to review the vocabulary related to school subjects, Nhu involved the students in a classifying task. Two groups of students were provided with a set of word cards mixed between the school subjects and days of the week. They then classified the cards in two groups of school subjects and days of the weeks in two separate columns. Nhu explained that the classifying game was more effective at reviewing target vocabulary for the main task.

After the vocabulary priming activity, Nhu quickly directed her students’ attention to the input-based listening task in each lesson. In Lesson 1, Nhu involved her students in a guessing game which served as a pre-listening activity for the listening task. After she had delivered the picture cards to the groups, she asked them to discuss and choose three

cards. When the cards had been selected, the students listened to the recording to check their guesses. During this stage, I noted that the students were highly focused on finding out whether they had made a correct guess. In Lesson 2, Nhu presented the task handouts on PowerPoint slides. She attracted the students' attention to the table on the slides where there were pictures of Nam and Tom next to the weekdays. After asking the students to listen to the recording three times, she asked them to tell her the days when each of the textbook characters Tom and Nam had English. My observation notes showed that most students were able to tell the target days. Some students shouted out the days loudly. Nhu then invited two volunteers to report the results. Finally, she guided the class as they filled out the table in the handout before asking the students to indicate the three days when English was taught to both Nam and Tom. At the interview, Nhu also highly valued the input-based tasks for both lessons. She commented that these tasks prepared her students well for the main tasks because they served as a schema that provide her students with important preliminary ideas about how to perform the main tasks.

*Main task phase.* The instructions for the main tasks were in Vietnamese. In Lesson 1, after giving clear instructions, Nhu modeled the performance of the main task with a strong pupil using slightly different task handouts. In Lesson 2, Nhu explained the instructions without providing task modeling because, as she explained, her students were able to grasp the task instructions after familiarizing themselves with the input-based listening task.

Before the students performed the main task in each lesson, Nhu decided not to leave any elicited vocabulary items on the board for her students' reference to do the main task. She explained her decision as follows:

I did not want to leave the target vocabulary items on the board because I expected the students to try to recall the vocabulary items they had learned. [...]. They will remember the words better if they attempt to do so. (Interview 1)

However, this does not mean that no support was needed or that Nhu had little concern about her students' performance. When asked about this, Nhu said that she was quite worried that her students might say nothing or very little without such vocabulary support. Therefore, as a way to help her students cope with this challenge, Nhu encouraged them to draw pictures to illustrate the meaning of the

words if they failed to write them down in English. Likewise, the *givers* of the information were encouraged to use gestures or hints to express their meaning if they were unable to tell their peers the target vocabulary items. During the task performance, Nhu moved around to remind students to speak English and encourage the stronger students to help their weaker peers. She stopped at some dyads to clarify task instructions. In the interview, Nhu mentioned explicitly that she was particularly happy with the results of her students' taking up her guidance. As she said:

The tasks could help my students speak English with confidence. They were able to use different communication strategies to get their meaning across. I also noticed that they tried to mobilise their language resources to do the tasks. I am very satisfied with this. (Interview 2)

*Post-task phase.* There remains a concern that students may focus on fluency at the expense of accuracy when they engage in task-based interaction (Skehan, 2018). However, what Nhu did in the post-task phase and her perceptions of this phase suggest that this is not necessarily the case. The post-task phase went smoothly. For both lessons, Nhu asked her students to carefully notice the performance of two dyads so that they could report back the language the performers used to exchange information about the timetables. Nhu then focused the students' attention on the target pattern while she was writing them on the board. She then asked the whole class to tell the meaning and use of the patterns. Such a decision might have enabled a focus on form to take place, as Nhu commented:

When it came to the post-task stage, by analysing their output, the students would be able to notice the appropriate ways to express their meanings. I like this idea. (Interview 1)

Also at this stage, Nhu made another notable decision, asking the students to notice some of the question and answer forms that she picked up from their interactions. One example is that she asked the students to comment on the acceptability of the alternative question "*English teacher's name, please?*" for the target question "*Who is your English teacher?*" Nhu expressed that she was satisfied as she found that in their efforts to find the language to express themselves, her students were able to construct different possibilities of expressing meaning. This result provides evidence to support previous claims that through peer interaction, learners are



able to comprehend and use language in different ways (Philp et al., 2014).

Because of the limited time available, Nhu was not able to involve her students in the language practice activity after the analysis activity. However, she took the last few minutes to call on some weaker students to ask about their real timetable of the day. Her purpose was to check whether the goals of the lessons had been achieved. She said that she was happy as those students were able to respond confidently to her questions.

In both lessons, due to time constraints, Nhu did not set the task of identifying the differences and similarities between the timetables as a desired task outcome. However, she did not consider this a limitation. She argued that for her students, being able to complete the timetables was already a success outcome. Given her students' lower level of proficiency and the availability of time, she commented:

The outcomes could be varied depending on the proficiency level of the students. If the students had been stronger and more familiar with learning with tasks, and if time allowed, I would have set the task outcomes as planned. However, I think completing the timetables also means that the outcome has been achieved. (Interview 1).

## 5. DISCUSSION

The results showed that this teacher successfully implemented TBLT in her normally scheduled classroom. The following prominent factors could have attributed to the success. The most important factor was the teacher factor. Results showed that Nhu successfully managed her large class of mix-proficiency learners, whereas large class size is a major factor that hindered the implementation of TBLT in the primary classrooms, as identified in studies such as Carless (2002, 2004) and Zhang (2015). Furthermore, it is interesting to note that additional issues of noise and discipline which were also raised by Carless (2002, 2004) as factors constraining TBLT implementation in primary schools in Hong Kong were not observed in Nhu's class. Her success in managing her class was a result of her experience and the consequent well-developed classroom management skills such as setting up effective group work and settling noise. These results corroborate the basic insight that when it comes to promoting the use of tasks in the FL classroom, the teacher is the key figure (Pica, 2012).

Lesson design was also identified as another success factor. The finding that students were able to deal

with task demands could be attributed to the scaffolding value of the pre-task activities which ease both cognitive and linguistic demands of tasks. It is important to note that in this study, the researcher designed the lesson plans. The teacher, however, had an opportunity to comment on the lesson plans and then worked with the researcher to prepare for the implementation. Without support from the researcher in terms of ready-made lesson plans and rehearsal, the teacher might not have been able to implement TBLT. This suggests such factors as support for teachers and collaboration between teachers and researchers should be also taken into consideration.

Finally, peer assistance played an essential role in facilitating task completion. The strategy to pair a lower proficient student with a stronger one facilitated task performance and eventually led to task completion.

The results show two major changes Nhu made to the planned lessons. First, the pre-task activity in Lesson 1 was turned into a more teacher-led activity in order to facilitate classroom management and restricted class time. The second variation concerns the ultimate outcomes of the two main tasks being partially achieved. That is, task completion was limited to completing the two timetables in lesson 1 and the two worksheets in lesson 2. Researchers (Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 2018) have argued that task completion has priority over performance outcomes. Therefore, success and failure of task performances should not only be judged in terms of performance outcomes, but "the cognitive and linguistic processes involving in reaching the outcome that matters" (Ellis, 2003, p.8). Moreover, results from the interviews reveal Nhu's motives to minimize the task outcomes: to reduce task demands to match her pupil's competences and to avoid tensions with regards to time management. Nhu's implementation decisions were aligned with those made by the teachers in Berben et al. (2007), suggesting that the teachers deviated from the intentions of the task designers and transformed the tasks in a way that suited their own situations.

Several limitations of the current study should be acknowledged. One limitation is that this case study was limited to the implementation of two lessons by one teacher in one classroom. Another limitation concerns the issue of the observer's paradox. Despite initial measures to address this issue, the teachers may still have seen the researcher as an expert and this might have influenced the way she taught

and the views she expressed in interviews. Further research is needed to repeat the tasks in different school contexts over a longer period of time to more fully evaluate the effectiveness of the lessons. Finally, the teacher in the current report was strong in both pedagogical skills and language skills. The findings, therefore, should not be generalised to teachers with lower proficiency and less pedagogic training.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The results of the study indicate that the introduction of TBLT in EFL primary schools is feasible if factors concerning task design and implementation, teachers' linguistic and pedagogic skills, support for teachers, and collaboration between teachers and researchers were all taken into consideration. This study thus suggests the role for the development of pre-service and in-service teacher education and training in Viet Nam in order to support more effective implementation of the new textbooks for primary English education.

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