

The Effects of Task-Based Language Teaching on Writing Achievement at a High School in Vietnam



Dang Thi Thu Huong, Ph.D¹, Than Thu Thao, MA²

^{1,2}Thai Nguyen University – School of Foreign Languages

ABSTRACT: The current study determines the effectiveness of using task-based language instructions in teaching writing at a high school in Thai Nguyen province. The participants consist of 92 grade 10 students from Bing Yen high school, Dinh Hoa district. The study employs a mix method research design (MMR) as the plan for the research. The results of the study reveals that the results of writing performance were reported at a low level (M=3.72). The results also confirmed that the intervention worked well for the experimental group. The mean score of the pre-test (the baseline for both groups) was M=3.72. The intervention focused on TBLT instructions. After first five weeks, the means of post-test1 were M=4.96 and M=3.83 for experimental group and control group respectively. There was a significant difference between the mean of pre-test and post-test1 for the experimental group (M=3.72 compared to M=4.96), while the control group showed a little improvement (M=3.72 compared to M=3.83) the difference was not significant. After another five weeks, the difference in the mean scores of the experimental group were far more than the mean scores of the control group, M=5.56 and M=4.45 respectively. By the end of the fifteenth week of the intervention, the mean of post-test 3 of the experimental group reached M=6.41, the mean for control group was M=5.54. The difference of the mean scores in the pre-test and post-test revealed a significant improvement in both groups. However, the experimental group showed a greater improvement, M=6.41 and M=5.54 respectively. It can infer that the uses of TBLT writing instruction improved writing achievement greatly.

KEYWORDS: Task-based language instruction, effects, traditional writing instruction, cognitive, social constructions

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background to the study

Although English plays dominant role in primary, secondary and tertiary education institutions as well as foreign language centres throughout Vietnam, English competence used by Vietnamese learners still remains a problem, in which writing skill is a concerning issue.

Among the language skills, writing has been considered the most challenged skill for teachers to teach, as well as to master for language learners. The ability to express one's ideas in writing in a second or foreign language and to do so with reasonable coherence and accuracy is a major achievement; many native speakers of English never truly master this skill.

As a teacher of English at a secondary school in a remote school in Thai Nguyen province, we notice that the teaching methods need some changes to benefit learners in some ways. That is the primary reason for me to conduct the present study. **“The effects of task-based language teaching on writing achievement of grade 10 students at a high school”**. This research attempts to determine the effectiveness of task-based instructions over the old fashioned teaching methods.

1.2. Purposes of the study

The primary purpose of the present study was to determine the effectiveness (if any) of the task based language teaching (TBLT) on the achievement of writing skill compared with traditional teaching instructions such as grammar-translation, the controlled composition approach, the process-approach that have been in use at Binh Yen high school for years. The independent variable was defined as task-based instructions during one school term of teaching writing. The dependent variable was defined as writing achievement of the controlled group of students. The secondary purpose of the study was to find out some attitudes towards the uses of TBLT instructions from other teachers and students.

1.3. Research questions

From the above mentioned purpose, the study attempted to answer the following research questions:

- 1.3.1. *Is there a statistically significant difference on writing achievement between task-based instructions and traditional teaching instructions?*

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1.3.2. *What are teachers and students' attitudes towards TBLT instructions?*

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The teaching of writing at schools

Research shows that student writing poses specific challenges both for English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a foreign language. Lea and Street (1998:157) report that literacy standards in schools and higher education institutions are very low and academics often complain that students cannot write properly. Munro (2003:327) confirms this view and argues that dealing effectively with students' literacy difficulties and, in turn, poor academic writing skills, is a challenge that schools across the world have to contend with. In Vietnam, too, there are growing concerns about the high levels of poor student writing in schools and higher education. Universities report show that students entering higher education struggle to write effectively and are therefore under-prepared for studies in institutions of higher learning. Many students at universities blame that they were not well-prepared for writing at schools (Cliff and Hanslo 2009:274). Under-prepared students find it difficult to cope with the writing tasks that are expected of them in higher education teaching and learning contexts. Niven (2005:774) attributes the problems of under-prepared students' experience with writing at university to the wide gap between writing expectations and demands between school and university.

In Vietnam, the teaching of writing at schools mainly focuses on sentence level. Students are expected to figure out components of sentences so that they could write sentences grammatically correct. The composition writing devoted to strong students who wish to go to foreign language training institutions.

2.2. An overview of task based language teaching

Task-Based Language Teaching is theoretically framed by Piagetian (cognitive) and Vygotskian (sociocultural) perspectives as they both emphasize the role of social interaction in cognitive development (Piaget, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978) and which is a fundamental component of TBLT (Lee, 2000). For clarification, the cognitive and sociocultural perspectives of learning, the psychological (cognitive) theories trace the arrows from the person to the external objectified culture while sociological (sociocultural) learning theories start with objectified culture and point inwards to the individual and, hence, learning should be seen from both perspectives (Jarvis, 2009).

(TBLT) uses meaningful, inquiry-based, real world activities (Brown, 2007; Willis & Willis, 2007). Many researchers view this method as emerging from Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Brown, 2007; Ellis, 2003). Others see it as a new approach to English language teaching and learning (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). In TBLT, priority is placed on the completion of tasks that are assessed in terms of outcome (Brown, 2007; Willis & Willis, 2007). Also, students pass through three stages when adopting TBLT in an English language lesson. In the first stage, groups of students engage in real life situations that are similar to the task they will perform in the classroom (pre-task stage). In the second stage, groups of students perform the main task of the associated lesson or content (running task stage). In the third stage, groups of students display or provide an indicator that they have successfully completed the task for the purposes of assessment and evaluation (task completion stage). The task as a work plan (Breen, 1989; Ellis, 2003) is specified by the four competencies it can serve: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic (Canale, 1983). The inner design or "complexity" of the task itself can be viewed from both cognitive and socio-cultural perspectives (Skehan, 1998).

Cognitively, the task is a means of carrying topics into classrooms, setting the discourse motion, and encouraging students to produce an output (Wright, 1987). Tasks require that learners build (a) an exemplar-based system that is lexical in nature and includes both discrete lexical items and—importantly—ready-made formulaic chunks of language; and (b) a rule-based system that consists of abstract representations of the underlying patterns of the language, requires more processing, and is best suited for more controlled, less fluent language performance (Skehan, 1998). When performing tasks, learners pass through three stages during the process of producing the language: conceptualization, formulation, and articulation (Levelt, 1989).

2.3. Task-based language teaching versus traditional teaching method

History of language teaching proved that most language learners taught through methods that emphasize mastery of grammar do not achieve an acceptable level of competency in the target language. Language learning in the classroom is usually based upon the belief that language is a system of wordings governed by a grammar and a lexicon. However, it is more productive to see language primarily as a meaning system. Halliday's (1975) description of his young son's acquisition of his first language is significantly entitled 'learning how to mean'

Apart from highly gifted and motivated students, most learners working within a structure-based approach fail to attain a useable level of fluency and proficiency in second language (L2) even after years of instruction (Skehan, 1996). In India, Prabhu (1987: 11) notes that the structure-based courses required "a good deal of remedial re-teaching which, in turn, led to similarly unsatisfactory results".

American government language institutions (AGLI) found that with task-based instruction and authentic material, learners made far more rapid progress and were able to use their new foreign language in real-world circumstances with a reasonable level of efficiency

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after quite short courses. They were able to operate an effective meaning system, i.e. to express what they wanted to say, even though their grammar and lexicon were often far from perfect (Lever and Willis, 2004).

Recently, a number of researchers, syllabus designers and educational innovators have called for a move in language teaching toward task-based approaches to instruction (Prabhu, 1987; Nunan, 1989, Long and Crooks, 1991; Ellis, 2003).

Since the advent of communicative language teaching and the belief that language is best learned when it is being used to communicate messages, the communicative task has ascended to a position of prominence as a unit of organization in syllabus design. Nunn (2006), for example, proposed a task-based unitary framework because it “leads to student-led holistic outcomes in the form of written reports, spoken presentations and substantial small-group conversations that lead to decision-making outcomes” (p.70). This interest in the task has been motivated to a considerable extent by the fact that ‘task’ is seen as a construct of equal importance to second language acquisition (SLA) researchers and to language teachers (Pica,1997).

The rise of task-based language teaching has led to a variety of different interpretations of what exactly constitutes a task. Central to the notion of a communicative task is the exchange of meanings. Willis (1996) defined task as an activity where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome. Here the notion of meaning is subsumed in ‘outcome’. Likewise, for Nunan (2006) tasks have a non-linguistic outcome. He defines task as a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, middle and an end (p.17).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

This study targets students who are studying at grade 10. The total number of participants is 92, from two classes that the researcher is in charge of teaching. These students come from nearby regions in Dinh Hoa district. Some of them live in town centre. However, most of them come from mountainous areas. They belong to different ethnic minority groups such as Tay, Thai and Kinh.

In order to compare the effectiveness of TBLT instruction, the participants are divided into two groups; Control group (CG) and Experimental group (EG). The description of the participants could be found in the table 1 below;

Table 1: Frequency Table for Nominal Variables

| Variable | <i>n</i> | % |
|-------------------------|----------|-------|
| Control Group (CG) | | |
| female | 22 | 23.91 |
| male | 23 | 25.00 |
| Missing | 0 | 0.00 |
| Experimental Group (EG) | | |
| female | 20 | 21.73 |
| male | 27 | 29.34 |
| Missing | 0 | 0.00 |

Note. Due to rounding errors, percentages may not equal 100%.

Apart from student group, the researcher selected six English teachers from Binh Yen high school and 4 teachers from ... school for interviewing. The participation of these teachers help the researcher find out their uses of variety of teaching techniques that they exploit during writing classes.

3.2. Research design

The purposes of the current study include investigating the effectiveness of TBLT and the attitudes of the teachers and learners about the task-based writing instructions. We realized that a purely quantitative methodology would be inadequate. A mixture of both quantitative and qualitative data analysis would be appropriate for the questions posited in this study. It is obvious that data produced by mixed method research (MMR) is more authenticated, replicable, valid and verifiable as compared to any other approach producing data singly. Creswell and Clark (2007: p. 5) define MMR as “it involves philosophical assumptions that guide the direction of the collection and analysis of data and the mixture of qualitative and quantitative data in a single study. Its central assertion is that the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches in combination provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach can do alone”.

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3.3. Data collection instruments

The main instruments for data collection are (a) a pre-test to document the level of students' English writing performance they have at the beginning of the study; (b) post-tests to evaluate the effectiveness of TBLT.

Pre-test

The primary purpose of the pre-test is to function as the main covariate. It is used to provide a baseline for the students' current level of writing performance so this study can examine the effect of treatment. The pre-test also helps increase the power of the study by reducing the error that can be attributed to prior differences among students and its relation to the outcome. It is not used to place students in certain levels or groups.

Post-tests

Post-tests are administered at the end of each two weeks to assess students' writing achievement on the content covered in each five weeks. This process continues for fifteen weeks, which is the duration of the study.

The secondary instruments that are used to collect data for the second research questions are (c) attitudinal questionnaires that are delivered to experimental group to specify their opinions as well as feedbacks after the treatment. The questionnaires consist of 15 items using Likert scale continuum from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" ranging from 1 to 5. The feedback was obtained in order to find out research participants' opinion about three subcategories: (1) Student (2) Materials (3) Teacher.

For triangulation purpose, some interviews are conducted among 10 teachers of English in Binh Yen high school and ... school. The interviews employ semi-structure questions to gather data from teachers and some selected students.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Research question 1: *Is there a statistically significant difference on writing achievement between task-based instructions and traditional teaching instructions?*

In order to determine the statistically significant difference on writing achievement between task-based instructions and traditional teaching instructions a two-tailed paired samples *t*-test was conducted to examine whether the mean difference of Pre-test and Post-test EG1 was significantly different from zero.

Results

The result of the two-tailed paired samples *t*-test was significant based on an alpha value of 0.05, $t(91) = -8.31, p < .001$. This finding suggests the difference in the mean of Pre-test and the mean of Post-test EG1 was significantly different from zero. The mean of Pre-test was significantly lower than the mean of Post-test EG1. The results are presented in Table 2. A bar plot of the means is presented in Figure 1.

Table 2: Two-Tailed Paired Samples *t*-Test for the difference between Pre-test and Post-test EG1

| Pre-test | | Post-test EG1 | | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>d</i> |
|----------|-----------|---------------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|
| <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | | | |
| 3.72 | 1.04 | 4.96 | 1.29 | -8.31 | < .001 | 0.87 |

Note. N = 92. Degrees of Freedom for the *t*-statistic = 91. *d* represents Cohen's *d*.

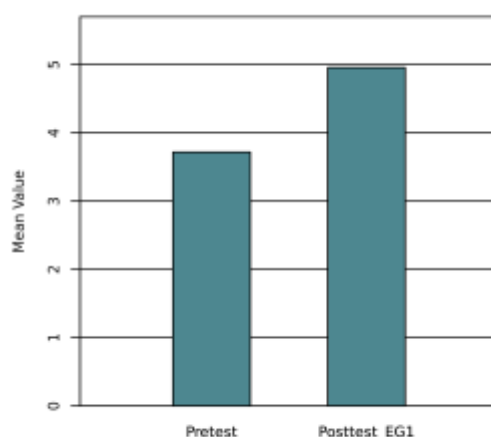


Figure 1: The means of Pre-test and Post-test EG1

A two-tailed paired samples *t*-test was conducted to examine whether the mean difference of Pre-test and Post-test CG1 was significantly different from zero.

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Results

The result of the two-tailed paired samples *t*-test was not significant based on an alpha value of 0.05, $t(91) = -1.12$, $p = .266$. This finding suggests the difference in the mean of Pre-test and the mean of Post-test CG1 was not significantly different from zero. The results are presented in Table 3. A bar plot of the means is presented in Figure 2.

Table 3: Two-Tailed Paired Samples *t*-Test for the difference between Pre-test and Post-test CG1

| Pre-test | | Post-test_CG1 | | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>d</i> |
|----------|-----------|---------------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|
| <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | | | |
| 3.72 | 1.04 | 3.83 | 1.03 | -1.12 | .266 | 0.12 |

Note. $N = 92$. Degrees of Freedom for the *t*-statistic = 91. *d* represents Cohen's *d*.

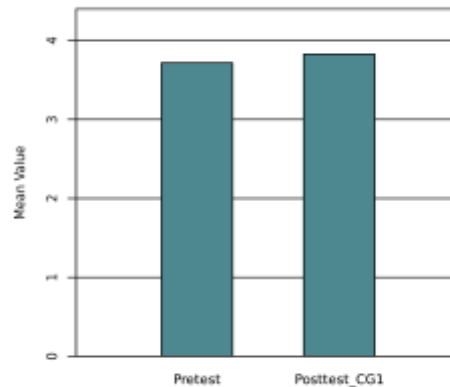


Figure 2: The means of Pre-test and Post-test CG1

A two-tailed paired samples *t*-test was conducted to examine whether the mean difference of Post-test EG2 and Post-test CG2 was significantly different from zero.

Results

The result of the two-tailed paired samples *t*-test was significant based on an alpha value of 0.05, $t(91) = 6.76$, $p < .001$. This finding suggests the difference in the mean of Post-test EG2 and the mean of Post-test CG2 was significantly different from zero. The mean of Post-test EG2 was significantly higher than the mean of Post-test CG2. The results are presented in Table 4. A bar plot of the means is presented in Figure 3.

Table 4: Two-Tailed Paired Samples *t*-Test for the Difference between Post-test EG2 and Post-test CG2

| Post-test EG2 | | Post-test CG2 | | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>d</i> |
|---------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|
| <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | | | |
| 5.60 | 0.85 | 4.54 | 1.10 | 6.76 | < .001 | 0.70 |

Note. $N = 92$. Degrees of Freedom for the *t*-statistic = 91. *d* represents Cohen's *d*.

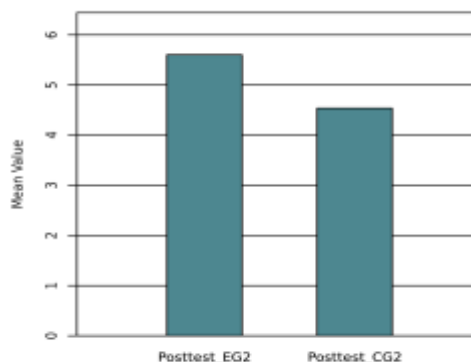


Figure 3: The means of Post-test EG2 and Post-test CG2

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A two-tailed paired samples t-test was conducted to examine whether the mean difference of Post-test EG3 and Post-test CG3 was significantly different from zero.

Results

The result of the two-tailed paired samples t-test was significant based on an alpha value of 0.05, $t(91) = 10.51$, $p < .001$. This finding suggests the difference in the mean of Post-test EG3 and the mean of Post-test CG3 was significantly different from zero. The mean of Post-test EG3 was significantly higher than the mean of Post-test CG3. The results are presented in Table 5. A bar plot of the means is presented in Figure 4.

Table 5: Two-Tailed Paired Samples t-Test for the difference between Post-test EG3 and Post-test CG3

| Post-test_EG3 | | Post-test_CG3 | | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>d</i> |
|---------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|
| <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | | | |
| 6.41 | 0.76 | 5.45 | 0.92 | 10.51 | < .001 | 1.10 |

Note. $N = 92$. Degrees of Freedom for the *t*-statistic = 91. *d* represents Cohen's *d*.

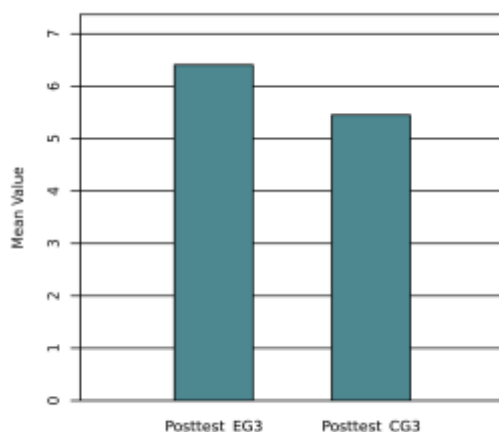


Figure 4: The means of Post-test EG3 and Post-test CG3

A two-tailed paired samples t-test was conducted to examine whether the mean difference of Pre-test and Post-test EG3 was significantly different from zero.

Assumptions

Normality. A Shapiro-Wilk test was conducted to determine whether the differences in Pre-test and Post-test EG3 could have been produced by a normal distribution (Razali & Wah, 2011). The results of the Shapiro-Wilk test were significant based on an alpha value of 0.05, $W = 0.89$, $p < .001$. This result suggests the differences in Pre-test and Post-test EG3 are unlikely to have been produced by a normal distribution, indicating the normality assumption is violated.

Homogeneity of Variance. Levene's test was conducted to assess whether the variances of Pretest and Posttest_EG3 were significantly different. The result of Levene's test for was significant based on an alpha value of 0.05, $F(1, 182) = 18.68$, $p < .001$. This result suggests it is unlikely that Pre-test and Post-test EG3 were produced by distributions with equal variances, indicating the assumption of homogeneity of variance was violated.

Results

The result of the two-tailed paired samples t-test was significant based on an alpha value of 0.05, $t(91) = -18.53$, $p < .001$. This finding suggests the difference in the mean of Pre-test and the mean of Post-test EG3 was significantly different from zero. The mean of Pre-test was significantly lower than the mean of Post-test EG3. The results are presented in Table 6. A bar plot of the means is presented in Figure 5.

Table 6: Two-Tailed Paired Samples t-Test for the difference between Pre-test and Post-test EG3

| Pre-test | | Post-test EG3 | | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>d</i> |
|----------|-----------|---------------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|
| <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | | | |
| 3.72 | 1.04 | 6.41 | 0.76 | -18.53 | < .001 | 1.93 |

Note. $N = 92$. Degrees of Freedom for the *t*-statistic = 91. *d* represents Cohen's *d*.

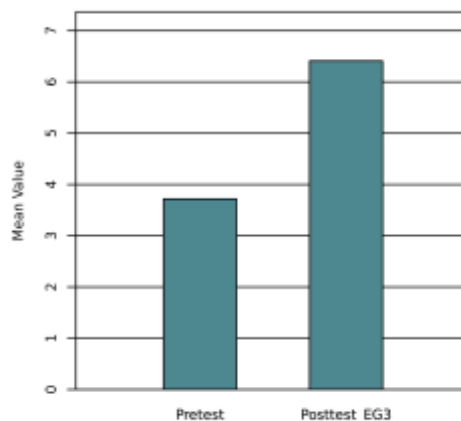


Figure 5: The means of Pre-test and Post-test EG3

A two-tailed paired samples t-test was conducted to examine whether the mean difference of Pre-test and Post-test CG3 was significantly different from zero.

Results

The result of the two-tailed paired samples t-test was significant based on an alpha value of 0.05, $t(91) = -15.65$, $p < .001$. This finding suggests the difference in the mean of Pre-test and the mean of Post-test CG3 was significantly different from zero. The mean of Pre-test was significantly lower than the mean of Post-test CG3. The results are presented in Table 7. A bar plot of the means is presented in Figure 6.

Table 7: Two-Tailed Paired Samples t-Test for the difference between Pre-test and Post-test CG3

| Pre-test | | Post-test CG3 | | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> | <i>d</i> |
|----------|-----------|---------------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|
| <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | | | |
| 3.72 | 1.04 | 5.45 | 0.92 | -15.65 | < .001 | 1.63 |

Note. *N* = 92. Degrees of Freedom for the *t*-statistic = 91. *d* represents Cohen's *d*.

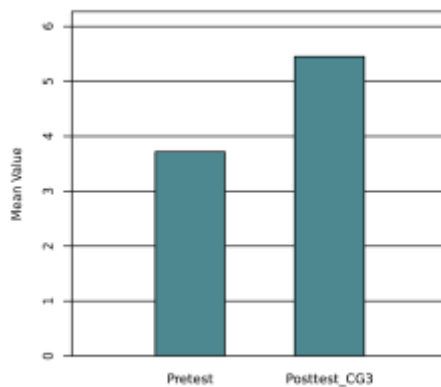


Figure 6: The means of Pre-test and Post-test CG3

Research question 2: What are teachers and students' attitudes towards TBLT instructions?

The information needed to answer the research question 2 can be found through qualitative data analysis.

Students of the experimental group provided feedback to express their views about TBLT treatment and to determine answer of second research question in present study. Student feedback based on Likert scale continuum from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" ranging from 1 to 5. The feedback was obtained in order to find out research participants' opinion about three subcategories: (1) Student (2) Materials (3) Teacher

Respondents were also provided with facility to write down their suggestions and comments about the experimental teaching based on TBLT. Few students opined TBLT as an interesting way of learning and teaching. While some wrote teacher was very punctual and others wrote TBLT, a new method of teaching. Table 9 presents students' responses.

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CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSIONS

This study attempted to evaluate the effectiveness of TBLT instructions on teaching writing. The treatment consisted of a series of TBLT writing instructions. In this study, the researcher implemented a 15 week intervention for two groups grade 1 students at Binh Yen high school. The results of the study reveals that the results of writing performance were reported at a low level ($M=3.72$). The results also confirmed that the intervention worked well for the experimental group. The mean score of the pre-test (the baseline for both groups) was $M=3.72$. The intervention focused on TBLT instructions. After first five weeks, the means of post-test1 were $M=4.96$ and $M=3.83$ for experimental group and control group respectively. There was a significant difference between the mean of pre-test and post-test1 for the experimental group ($M=3.72$ compared to $M=4.96$), while the control group showed a little improvement ($M=3.72$ compared to $M=3.83$) the difference was not significant. After another five weeks, the difference in the mean scores of the experimental group were far more than the mean scores of the control group, $M=5.56$ and $M=4.45$ respectively. By the end of the fifteenth week of the intervention, the mean of post-test 3 of the experimental group reached $M=6.41$, the mean for control group was $M=5.54$. The difference of the mean scores in the pre-test and post-test revealed a significant improvement in both groups. However, the experimental group showed a greater improvement, $M=6.41$ and $M=5.54$ respectively. It can infer that the uses of TBLT writing instruction improved writing achievement greatly.

In terms of the attitudes towards the uses of TBLT instructions, the researcher finds that most participants were happy with the new approach in teaching writing at the selected school (Yen Binh). Most of the participants (69.92%) strongly agree that TBLT focuses more on learners. It is also infer that they become more active in participating in the instructions given by the teachers. The teacher's involvement in teaching was also noted as a strong point (68.08%) appreciated the individual assistance from teachers. 62.56% of the participants evaluated that the class atmosphere was friendly. 61.64% said that "learning was more interesting than my earlier schooling". 54.28% strongly agreed that teachers talked clearly and understandable. They are also happy that they are all participated in the class actively (51.52%) instead of only strong students as in classical class.

The data obtained from teachers' interview showed that most of them (8 out of 10) are bored with grammar translation teaching method because students are not very concentrated, except for strong students.

Some teachers (3) confess that they have heard about TBLT but they know little about the method. They expect some extra training about the method.

Most of the teachers agree that the TBLT is a better way to teaching language skills in schools, especially in teaching writing.

The findings from the study can be used as a reference for language teachers in Vietnam to pay more attention to the teaching of listening comprehension, especially for students at the International School, Thai Nguyen University where the language of instruction for all disciplines is delivered in English.

Limitations of the study

Generalizability

The current study was conducted at a school in the remote area of Thai Nguyen province with only 92 grade 10 students so the findings might not be generalized in a large scale.

Internal validity

The researcher was just a novice learner in carrying out study, so the internal validity might not be assured. It has been illustrated though data analysis that TBLT shows better results when compared with traditional teaching method, however, there may be other factors did some effects to the findings

Finally, regardless of some limitations, researcher hopes that this would be a reference for teachers at schools when teaching writing.

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