Title of Project:
Task-based Teacher Training: Implementation and
Evaluation in Central American Bilingual Schools

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Final Report

Motivation for the Research

This study investigated the experiences of a cohort of novice English-speaking teachers participating in a task-based teacher training program at a network of bilingual schools in Honduras. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is an approach to language teaching that utilizes tasks, driven by the authentic needs of the learners, as the basis of language curricula, syllabi, instruction, and assessment (e.g., Long, 2015). This approach is in contrast to traditional language teaching, which typically organizes instruction around grammar, vocabulary, or other discrete language forms.

Due, in part, to its theoretical grounding in SLA research, TBLT has garnered global attention, and successful programmatic implementations have been reported in contexts worldwide (e.g., González-Lloret & Nielson, 2015; Müller-Hartmann & Schocker-von Ditfurth, 2011; Van Avermaet & Gysen, 2006). However, the majority of this research represents economically developed contexts, and TBLT has not been widely examined in lower- or middle-income southern hemisphere countries, known as the Global South.

Furthermore, much of what we know about the role of teachers in task-based classrooms comes from a body of research that has examined the various issues teachers face when attempting to implement TBLT for the first time (e.g. Carless, 2004; McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007). Less empirical research has examined the connections between teacher education programs, teachers' beliefs, and subsequent successful TBLT implementation. Despite some previous studies on training teachers to implement TBLT (e.g. Ogilve & Dunn, 2010), few have adequately described the training teachers received and, then, connected training practices to successful TBLT implementation.

Research Questions

The study investigated the following research questions:

1. To what extent are language teachers' beliefs about task-based language teaching and second language learning impacted by the teacher training program?
2. To what extent are teachers able to successfully implement TBLT in their classrooms following the task-based training program?
3. How useful was the training for the teachers immediately following the training and during their first-year of teaching?

Research Methodology

The study utilized a mixed-methods design to investigate the experiences of a cohort of preservice teachers preparing to teach English at three different bilingual schools in Honduras. The schools all partner with Bilingual Education for Central America (BECA), a U.S.-based nonprofit that recruits, trains, and supports English-speaking teachers placing them in bilingual schools at a very low cost or no cost to rural, under-resourced communities. BECA partners with three community-run schools in western Honduras, collectively supporting quality English-Spanish bilingual education for over 600 students from preschool to 9th grade. The participants in the current study included 19 newly recruited English-speaking teachers and a small group of community stakeholders that were all parents of children in one of the participating bilingual schools.

Participating teachers took part in a four-week training program designed specifically for first-year English-speaking teachers at BECA schools. The training was approximately 160 hours and divided into two parts. In part 1, teachers attended whole-group and grade-level specific training sessions on topics related to task-based language teaching and general pedagogy. These sessions were themselves task-based, in that trainers modeled TBLT strategies in a student-centered, interactive format. During this time, teachers also participated in one-on-one advising sessions with trainers. The second part of the training program was a teaching practicum, where teachers designed and implemented tasks with students and were observed by trainers and peer-teachers.

Pre- and post-training surveys and follow-up interviews measured changes in teachers' beliefs about TBLT after training. Data were triangulated with daily teacher reflections on their experiences during training and follow-up surveys after two months of in-service teaching. Video-recorded observations of teachers in their classrooms during training were used in stimulated-recall interviews and to assess implementation of task-based pedagogy. Implementation was also evaluated by interviewing family members of students enrolled in the bilingual school.

Quantitative responses to Likert-scale survey items were examined statistically for changes in beliefs pre-to-post training. Qualitative responses to open-ended survey items, interview questions and written reflections were transcribed and coded for emergent themes using a grounded approach (following suggestions in Mackey and Gass, 2015). Classroom videos and teachers' stimulated recall interview responses were coded against the 10 methodological principles of TBLT outlined in Long (2015). Individual teachers' responses were compared with background characteristics, such as their L1, age, prior teaching experiences, and assigned grade-level. Trained coders coded a proportion of the video observations, stimulated recall and qualitative data to provide interrater reliability estimates.

Summary of Findings

Results showed variability between teachers in terms of their changing beliefs about TBLT and SLA principles before and after training. Quantitative changes to teacher beliefs were not statistically different post-training, a similar finding to a variety of previous work (e.g., Mattheoudakis, 2007). However, teachers did indicate they felt more prepared to implement TBLT in their classrooms following the training. Qualitative findings from open-ended survey items and interviews also shed additional light on teachers' changing perceptions in relation to grammar teaching and TBLT concepts post-training and indicated that teachers' perspectives did shift toward task-based approaches and away from grammar-based approaches.

Video recordings uncovered variability in teachers' ability to implement TBLT immediately following their participation in the task-based training program. Teachers were overall successful at elaborating input and encouraging inductive learning through repetition and less successful at providing negative feedback, respecting learner syllabi and developmental processes and individualizing instruction. Implementation scores were linked with prior education and teaching experiences with higher scores from teachers with prior related degrees or teaching experiences– a similar finding to prior work (e.g., Polio, Gass, & Chapin, 2006) extended in the current study to TBLT contexts. Stimulated recall findings found that the majority of teacher recalls focused on promoting a cooperative and collaborative learning environment, reflecting documented criticism that TBLT classrooms are more difficult to manage than traditional language classrooms (e.g., Carless, 2004).

The first language of the teachers was not found to be significantly linked to task implementation, however teachers who considered themselves nonnative speakers of English raised concerns about parents' perceptions of nonnative English-speaking teachers. Parents, in a focus group interview, discussed their desire for their children to have a native-like accent in English and their fear that nonnative English-speaking teachers would model a nonnative English accent for their children. This phenomenon of preferring outsiders who are native speakers, rather than qualified locals, has been documented previously, primarily in Asian contexts (Braine, 2012), and seems to also extend to the context where the current study took place. Teachers called for more training on supporting and valuing bilingualism within the teaching team and within in the school community.

Qualitative results from daily teacher reflections, semi-structured interviews conducted post- TBLT training, and responses to open and closed-ended survey items post-training and during the academic year indicated that teachers most valued the utility of mentorship, modeling and observation in the training, reflecting the suggestions of prior researchers (Brandl, 2016; Chan, 2012; Han, 2018). The teachers also indicated they appreciated the active-learning style of the training with a focus on hands-on teaching and collaboration. Teachers also highlighted the need for more specific training in lesson planning, specific tools/resources for developing tasks and more training on working with curricula and assessments.

Implications

Previous investigations of TBLT as a potential pedagogical innovation in language teaching and learning have focused on examining language programs as they attempted to implement TBLT. Much less work has investigated the role of teachers and teacher training programs in task-based contexts despite being considered a critical issue for the pedagogy (Long, 2016). The current

study contributes to this line of inquiry by shedding light on how novice teachers experienced a task-based training program and documented their struggles and successes and the factors that contributed to their implementation. The study is the among the first to align implementation and stimulated recall data to the ten methodological principles laid out by Long (2015) in order to assess teachers' implementation and cognitions about their own teaching practices.

Results suggest teacher trainers should pay attention to trainees' individual differences in prior teaching experiences and investigate the ways these differences could impact on how they implement tasks for the first time. Trainers and programs should also consider dedicating more training time to areas shown to be difficult for teachers to implement, such as reactive practices like providing negative feedback and individualizing instruction. The experiences of the nonnative English teachers underscore the need for teacher training programs to recognize the perspectives of teachers from other language backgrounds and work to support them. In order to hear the concerns of parents, but at the same time work to upend stereotypes about NNSs, teachers, trainers and administrators must work to promote and uphold a standard that bilingualism is an advantage—not a disadvantage—for language educators.

Overall, this study adds to the growing body of research on TBLT's applicability in worldwide contexts, however, more research is needed to better understand TBLT implementation in understudied Global South contexts such as Latin America.

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