

# Task-Based Language Teaching from the University Teachers' Perspectives: Myanmar Context

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## Abstract

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is an approach developed from Communicative Language Teaching. The main focus is on the learner, and it starts from what the teachers and a task need to 'do' to get learners motivated to do the task. It has become very popular worldwide and its increasing popularity has encouraged a shift in many educational contexts from the traditional teacher-centered to the learner centered classroom. This research investigates Myanmar EFL teachers' understanding of Task-based language teaching (TBLT) at universities, their views on implementing TBLT in the classrooms and the reasons they choose or avoid implementing TBLT and the main reasons of applying or avoiding task-based language teaching in the language classroom. The questionnaire is prepared based on the theories of task and TBLT. A total of 73 English language teachers from different universities in upper Myanmar participated in this survey. According to the responses, most of the teachers understand the basic concept of task and principles of task-based instructions. Moreover, they have positive views on implementing TBLT in the classroom. Although they have positive views on TBLT, they also accept the difficulties and disadvantages of TBLT. "TBLT improves learners' interaction skill."

is the major reason why the teachers use TBLT in their classroom. The reason “Large class size is an obstacle to use task-based methods.” is the major reason why the teachers avoid TBLT in the classroom.

**Keywords:** task-based language teaching, university teachers, Myanmar context

## Introduction

Task-Based language teaching strategy focuses on communication through task completion. Students get engaged with a task they are truly interested in, and they aim to carry it out only using the target language and its taught elements. Students are engaged in various tasks that could eventually lead to a presentation project, using the authentic language learned and the necessary tools, such as the internet. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is an educational framework for the theory and practice of teaching second or foreign languages (Ellis, 2003). Task-based language teaching (TBLT), also known as task-based instruction (TBI), focuses on the use of authentic language to complete meaningful tasks in the target language. Such tasks can include visiting a doctor, conducting an interview, or calling customer service for help. Assessment is primarily based on task outcome (the appropriate completion of real-world tasks) rather than on accuracy of prescribed language forms. This makes TBLT especially popular for developing target language fluency and student confidence. Within the varying interpretations of TBLT related to classroom practice, recent studies exhibit three recurrent features: TBLT is compatible with a learner-centered educational philosophy, and it consists of particular components such as goal, procedure, specific outcome, it advocates content-oriented meaningful activities rather than linguistic forms (Nunan, 2006). This research investigates Myanmar EFL

teachers' perceptions regarding understandings of some TBLT concepts and EFL teachers' views on implementing task-based language teaching (TBLT). Furthermore, an attempt was made to find the main reasons of applying or avoiding task-based language teaching in the classroom. This will provide awareness for teachers to design and implement any real communicative tasks, which are critically important for EFL learners in order to experience meaningful language use. It will also contribute to facilitating EFL teachers' practical use of TBLT techniques, thereby improving the learners' communicative abilities. EFL learners can best develop implicit knowledge of target language incidentally through their efforts to communicate. Learners can only gain in fluency by attempting to use the target language in realistic conditions. EFL teachers have to create the learners' learning environment to be a relaxed atmosphere and activate learners' interest. Task-based activities are meaningful and based on the real world and authentic materials. Task-based language teaching offers an opportunity for "natural" learning inside the classroom. It is intrinsically motivating. It is compatible with a learner-centered educational philosophy but allows for teacher input.

Researchers have defined tasks differently, but in language learning, a task has been defined as a language activity that requires students to pay attention to meaning and to how language is used in real life (Ellis, 2003). In terms of language use, Long (2016) defined tasks as students' real-world communicative uses of the target language outside the classroom that can have academic, occupational, or social survival purposes. From a pedagogical perspective, Nunan (2006) described a task as a classroom activity in which students use their grammatical knowledge to express meaning in the target language as well as to understand each other, that is, to communicate in the target language. The term "Task-based" was developed in the

1980s and 1990s as an approach which was considered as innovation in teaching when people became aware that the learner needed to be at the center of attention. It is used for teaching adults at all levels of education. What is more, the main focus of TBLT is to foster learners' communicative ability where grammar and translation are not the main focus. Task-based instruction is different from other more traditional methods of language teaching. Lessons are constructed according to the language required to perform specific tasks rather than according to the aspects of language.

Task-based language instruction appeared in the 1980s and was implemented in teaching English primarily in Asian countries including Korea, Japan, China, Malaysia, Thailand, Bangladesh, Vietnam and Myanmar. As a subcategory of CLT, TBLT defines communication in a target language as the goal of language learning (Rodgers, 2001). TBLT is also a response to the constraints of traditional approaches that teach so that learners will master certain forms (Ellis, 2003). TBLT is of great interest in linguistics because it emphasizes meaning, real-world language use, and communicative activities (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Nunan (2006) identified six elements of an effective task, namely, goals, input data, task types, teacher role, learner role, and settings, whereas Jeon & Hahn (2006) arrived at five task components: goals, input data, classroom settings, activity types, and assessment. Common to the two research groups were task goals, input data, and settings. Goals vary broadly from general outcomes for the whole course to specific desired outcomes for each lesson. Input data refers to the teaching materials that will guide students in undertaking tasks in class. The classroom settings where students are to perform their tasks have important influences on both learners and teachers. Flexible settings that provide learners with pleasant atmospheres promote target language use and can help teachers control class activities (Jeon & Hahn, 2006).

## Objectives

1. To investigate EFL teachers' understandings on task and TBLT concepts
2. To explore the teachers' views on implementing TBLT in the classroom
3. To identify the reasons why the teachers, choose or avoid implementing TBLT in the classroom.

## Methodology

In this research, Myanmar EFL teachers from selected universities of upper Myanmar participated in responding to the research questionnaires. The questionnaire is adopted from In-Jae Jeon and Jung-won Hahn (2006) which is based on the theories of task and TBLT. Firstly, the questionnaire contains demographic questions in order to gain information about the teachers' gender, age, and teaching experience. The questionnaire composed of 15 closed type items and two open-ended items, is divided into three sections. The first section (item 1-7) deals with the basic concept of task and principles of task-based instructions in order to review teachers' practical understandings of TBLT. The second section (item 8-15) relates to teachers' positions on classroom practice of implementing TBLT. In the second and third section, teachers were asked to grade on each question with five options: "strongly agree", "agree", "undecided", "disagree" and "strongly disagree". Finally, in the third section, teachers are asked to rate their own reasons for choosing and avoiding the implementation of TBLT, with reference to a total of 11 qualitative statements.

The participants were EFL teachers for English majors in Myanmar universities. To recruit the participants, invitations were sent by email to EFL teachers using contact information. The goal of the study and the procedures were

explained in the email, and a consent was included. A total of 73 teachers from different universities in different areas agreed to participate in the study.

*Table 1*

*Participants' demographic data (n=73)*

SN	INFORMATION	PARTICIPANTS		
		No	Percentage	
1	Gender	male	21	28.77%
		female	52	71.23%
2	Age	25-29	12	16.44%
		30-39	24	32.88%
		40-49	31	42.46%
		50 +	6	8.22%
3	Total number of years in teaching English	Less than 5 years	15	20.55%
		5 to 9 years	22	30.14%
		10 to 20 years	24	32.88%
		20+	12	16.43%

Most respondents had long-term English language teaching (ELT) experience, of whom 16.43% had more than twenty years' ELT experience. All the respondents had a master's degree in English.

## Results

### 1. Section (I) of the Questionnaire

Tasks are proposed as useful vehicles for applying these principles. Activities that involve real communication are essential for language learning. Activities in which language is used for carrying out meaningful tasks promote learning. Language that is meaningful to the learner supports the learning process. Section (I) of the questionnaire includes two parts, teachers' understanding of Task and their understanding of TBLT.

#### 1.1 Teachers' Understanding of Task

Nunan (2004) defines task as 'a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than on form'. In the questionnaire survey, question items 1-4 deal with the teachers' understanding of Task.

Table 2

Teachers' understanding of task (n=73)

SN	Statement	Responses					Calculation		Interpretation
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	SD	
1	A task is a communicative goal directed.	13%	14%	14%	27%	32%	3.5	1.40	Partially understand
2	A task involves a primary focus on meaning.	22%	24%	29%	15%	10%	2.6	1.25	Partially understand
3	A task has a clearly defined outcome.	10%	13%	12%	31%	34%	3.6	1.33	Partially understand
4	A task is any activity in which the target language is used by the learner.	25%	31%	23%	11%	10%	2.5	1.25	Partially understand
<i>Average</i>		18%	21%	20%	21%	22%	3.0	1.40	Partially understand

Note:

1.00-2.33=Not understand

2.34-3.66=Partially understand

3.67-5.00=Fully understand.

## 1.2 Teachers' Understanding of TBLT

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) refers to an approach based on the use of tasks as the core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching (Willis 1996). Question items 5-7 deal with the teachers' understandings of TBLT.

Table 3

*Teachers' Understanding of TBLT (n=73)*

SN	STATEMENT	RESPONSES				CALCULATION			INTERPRETATION
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	SD	
5	TBLT is consistent with the principles of communicative language teaching.	12%	20%	20%	24%	24%	3.28	1.34	Partially understand
6	TBLT is based on the student-centered instructional approach.	11%	13%	22%	24%	30%	3.49	1.33	Partially understand
7	TBLT includes three stages: pre-task, task implementation, and post-task.	16%	24%	20%	23%	17%	3.01	1.34	Partially understand
<b>AVERAGE</b>		<b>13%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>3.26</b>	<b>1.35</b>	<b>Partially understand</b>

## 2. Section II of the Questionnaire

## 2.1 Teachers' Views on Implementing TBLT (Positive statements)

In this section, items 8-11 are constructed in positive statements which are related to the teacher's views and classroom practice of implementing TBLT.

Table 4

Teachers' views on implementing TBLT (Positive statements) (n=73)

SN	STATEMENT	RESPONSES				CALCULATION			INTERPRETATION
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	SD	
8	I have interest in implementing TBLT in the classroom.	13%	15%	17%	20%	35%	3.49	1.42	Effective
9	TBLT provides a relaxed atmosphere to promote the target language use.	22%	24%	29%	15%	10%	2.67	1.25	Effective
10	TBLT activates learners' needs and interests.	10%	13%	12%	31%	34%	3.66	1.33	Effective
11	TBLT pursues the development of integrated skills in the Classroom.	15%	12%	13%	20%	40%	3.58	1.48	Effective
<b>AVERAGE</b>		<b>15%</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>3.35</b>	<b>1.43</b>	<b>Effective</b>

## 2.2 Teachers' Views on Implementing TBLT (Negative statements)

In this section, items (12-15) are constructed in negative statements which are related to teacher's views and classroom practice of implementing TBLT.

Table 5

Teachers' views on implementing TBLT (Negative statements) (n=73)

SN	STATEMENT	RESPONSES				CALCULATION		INTERPRETATION
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean SD	
12	TBLT gives much psychological burden to teacher as a facilitator.	10%	11%	25%	28%	26%	3.49 1.26	Not so satisfied
13	TBLT requires much preparation time compared to other Approaches.	12%	14%	20%	24%	30%	3.46 1.36	Not so satisfied
14	TBLT is proper for controlling classroom arrangements.	18%	15%	22%	21%	24%	3.18 1.42	Not so satisfied
15	TBLT materials should be meaningful and purposeful based on the real-world context.	10%	11%	20%	24%	35%	3.63 1.32	Not so satisfied
<b>AVERAGE</b>		<b>13%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>3.44 1.35</b>	<b>Not so satisfied</b>

### 3. Section (III) of the Questionnaire

#### 3.1 Reasons why Teachers Use TBLT in the Classroom

According to the data, most of the teachers (82.19%) use TBLT in the classroom. The data have been shown in the following table.

Table 6

*Participants' responses on the use of TBLT in their teaching (n=73)*

SN	Question item	Responses	
		Yes	No
1	Do you use TBLT in your teaching?	60 (82.19%)	13 (17.81%)

Out of the 73 participant, 60 teachers use TBLT in the classroom for their own reasons.

In particular, TBLT is useful for the development of speaking skills and for learners to increase the fluency, complexity, and accuracy of their spoken output. Task-based work helps students to build more self-confidence to use the target language (both inside and outside the classroom).

### 3.2 Reasons why the Teachers Avoid TBLT in the Classroom

There are a few teachers who avoid TBLT in the classroom for their own reasons. They avoid TBLT because they have some difficulties in implementing TBLT in the classroom.

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is one of the widely discussed teaching approaches at present. Teaching a lesson using tasks needs careful consideration of the age and interests of the learners. Participants who have other reasons wrote them down as shown in the following table.

Table 7

*Reasons why the teachers avoid TBLT in the classroom mentioned in open-ended items (n=13)*

SN	DESCRIPTION
1	<p>Teacher 6</p> <p><i>Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is one of the widely discussed teaching approaches at present. Teaching a lesson using tasks needs careful consideration of the age and interests of the learners. Characteristics and advantages of TBLT; teacher and student roles; and teachers' perceptions of task-based language teaching are to be considered. Though English language teachers hold positive attitudes on task-based language teaching as a current EFL approach, they are not well aware of the methods of using this approach in their classrooms.</i></p>
2	<p>Teacher 7</p> <p><i>I'd like to report on teachers' knowledge of TBLT and difficulties in deploying TBLT. Teachers' understanding of TBLT was limited and varied in Myanmar. The implementation gap was attributed to various contextual constraints such as exams, teachers' beliefs, and pressures and challenges from the university. Teachers disseminated both similar and differentiated views towards problems and solutions.</i></p>
3	<p>Teacher 8</p> <p><i>In Myanmar, the primary role of the teachers is to transmit profound knowledge, and the students receive the authoritative knowledge passively, without challenging or interrupting their teachers, whereas in TBLT, teachers should employ learner-centered methods to facilitate the learning process. The conventional view of learning languages as a process of knowledge memorization and accumulation rather than a process for practical purposes has been accounted for the failure of nurturing students' communicative competence.</i></p>

Table 7 (Continued)

SN	DESCRIPTION
4	Teacher 9 <i>I know nothing about TBLT. I never listened to the trainings even if I went there. But I try to provide as many activities as possible for students.</i>
5	Teacher 10 <i>When I organized some pair or group activities, some students from my class would be highly demotivated and would ask me to teach grammar points for exams.</i>

With this study, the perceptions of task-based language teaching among a group of EFL lecturers at universities in Myanmar have been explored firstly. The quantitative and qualitative study findings revealed that most of the teachers held positive views of TBLT and had at least a basic understanding of the approach. In section (I), the collected data shows that Myanmar EFL teachers partially understand and rate in high means to the definition of the task that “a task has a clearly defined outcome.”

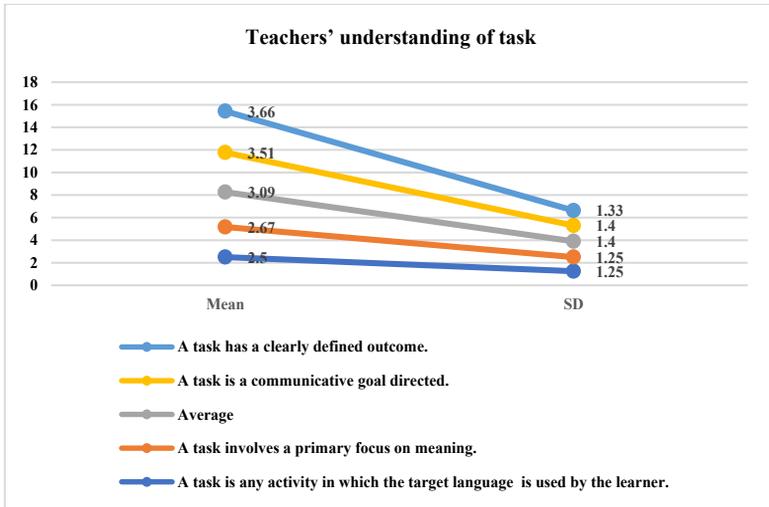


Figure 1: Teachers' understanding of task (n=73)

As shown in Figure 1, regarding the definitions of TBLT, the highest mean went to the definition that TBLT is based on the student-centered instructional approach.

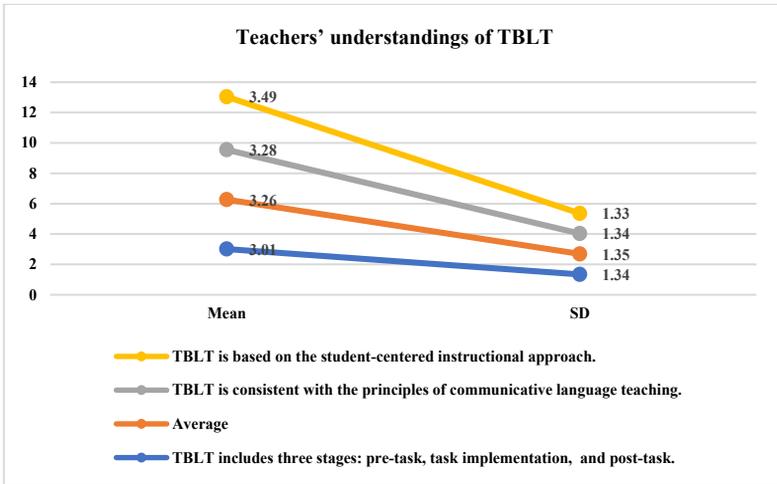


Figure 2: Teachers' Understanding of TBLT (n=73)

Teachers cited as strengths of TBLT that it encouraged students' target language use and increased their language competence as TBLT is consistent with the principles of communicative language teaching.

In section (II) of the questionnaire, the results show that most of the Myanmar EFL teachers have interest in implementing TBLT in the classroom. And they also have positive views on implementing TBLT in the classroom.

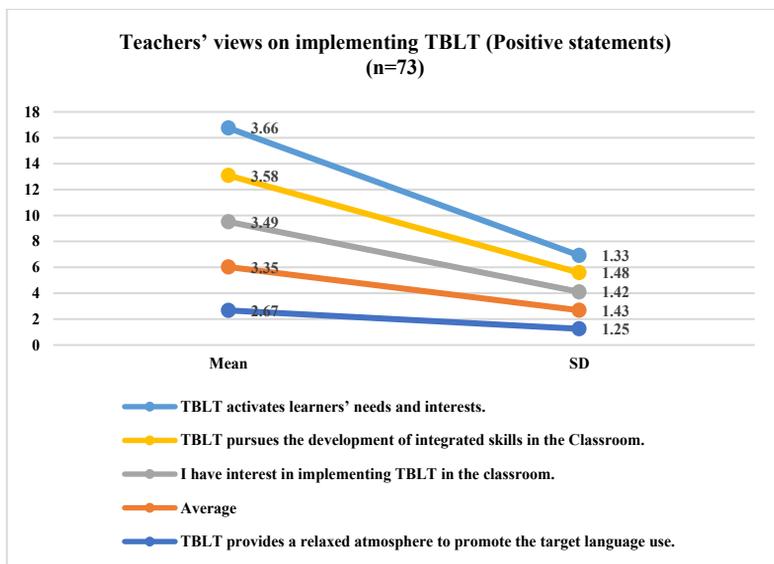


Figure 3: Teachers' views on implementing TBLT (Positive statements) (n=73)

The statement "I have interest in implementing TBLT in the classroom." (Mean=3.49) is related to the teachers' view on implementing TBLT. In the negative statements, they are not so satisfied that TBLT materials should be meaningful and purposeful based on the real-world context. The results of the question items (12) and (15) show that some teachers have negative views on implementing TBLT.

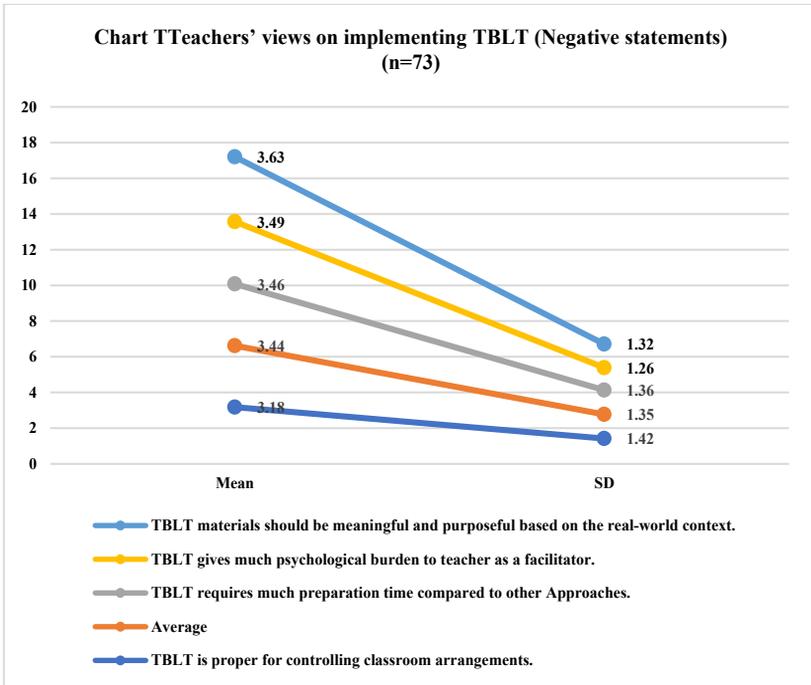


Figure 4: Teachers' views on implementing TBLT (Negative statements) (n=73)

This may have resulted from the fact that most of the Myanmar EFL teachers use TBLT methods although TBLT requires much preparation time compared to other Approaches (Mean=3.46). The section (III) of the questionnaire identifies the major reason that teachers use or avoid TBLT in the classroom. Most of the teachers use TBLT for the reason that TBLT improves learners' interaction skills. Some teachers also give other reasons namely that carrying out the task is enjoyable and TBLT helps develop the mutual understanding between the learners.

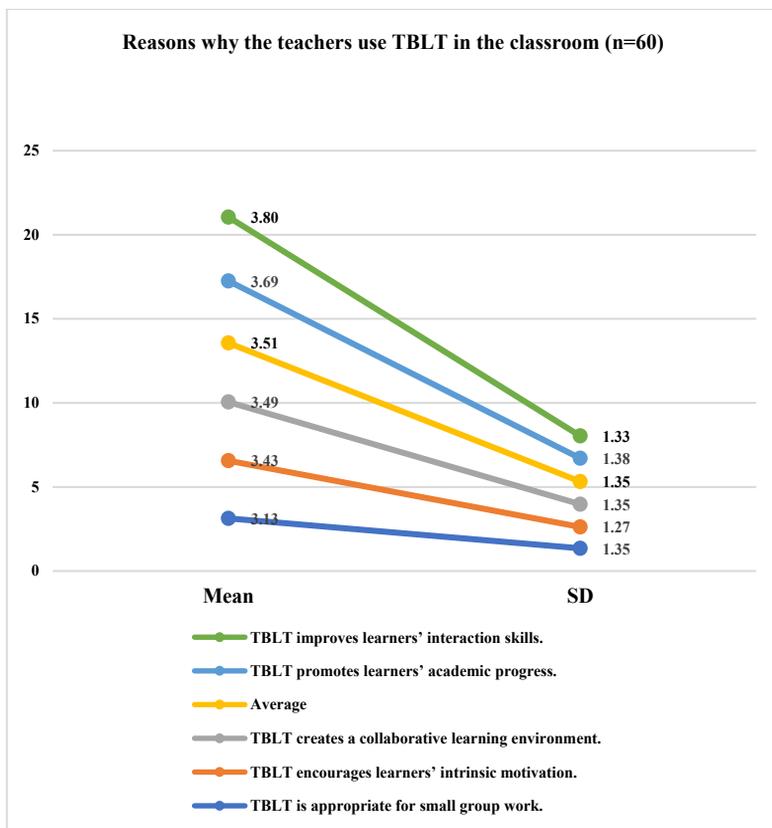


Figure 5: Reasons why the teachers use TBLT in the classroom (n=60)

And some teachers believe that TBLT is appropriate for small group work, TBLT makes the learner's academic progress, TBLT promote learners' interaction skills, and TBLT can provoke the students' intrinsic motivation. The most important reason is that TBLT improves learners' interaction skills (Mean=3.80).

Regarding the major reason that Myanmar EFL teachers avoid implementing TBLT in the classroom is that large class size is an obstacle to use task-based methods.

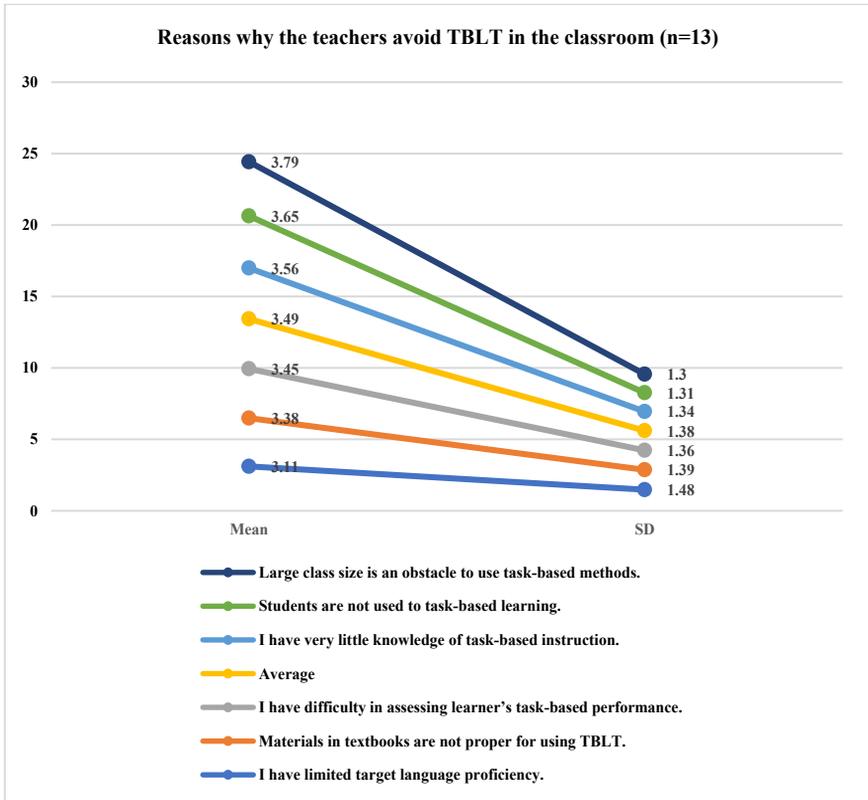


Figure 6: Reasons why the teachers avoid TBLT in the classroom (n=13)

Large class size, teachers' lack of task-based instruction knowledge and teachers' difficulty in assessing learner's task-based performance are considerable

challenges to implementing task-based learning approaches. The alignment and differences can be explained by the fact that the teachers lack trainings and professional development programs to be proficient in the understanding of TBLT and that the perceptions and performance of TBLT also depend on the context where language learning and teaching are taking place. It is important that EFL teachers have to create the learners' learning environment to be a relaxed atmosphere and activate learners' interest. Task-based activities are meaningful and based on the real world and authentic materials. Thus, the findings echoed previous studies in those constraints like teachers' proficiency, large class size, the evaluation system of the teachers, were all identified within the context. The in-service trainings and demonstration classes were reflected as ineffective and impractical in teachers' individual context.

### **Recommendations**

This study investigated EFL teachers' attitudes toward task-based language teaching (TBLT), regarding their familiarity with the idea of TBLT, their actual use of TBLT, and contextual factors that impede the implementation of TBLT in the higher education context of Myanmar. Results of this study are derived from discussion concerned with qualitative and quantitative data. The findings in the study show that though there are constraints from various aspects (including, the teaching materials, large class size etc.) for the successful implementation of TBLT, TBLT as a communicative teaching approach received very positive feedback from teachers. The majority of the teachers in this study hold positive views towards TBLT even though they have a low-level understanding of principles and practices of TBLT. The results addressed the issues existed in the training of EFL teachers. This study also

highlighted the need for the ELT teachers to further develop their professional skills in terms of their competence to deal with large class size teaching, material development and English proficiency. Based on the findings, this research is intended to yield informative insights regarding sustainable curriculum change management, policy implementation and professional development of English teachers in the EFL context of Myanmar.

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