

# Juxtaposing Testing to Teaching through Task-Based Approach and IELTS Reading Instruction

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**Abstract.** As far back as 1980s, researchers identified the consequences of testing on instruction; but only recently has there been a renewed concern about the issue. Typically, the present paper appeared to highlight the mutual impact testing and teaching can exert on each other in light of reevaluating the views of EFL trainees towards task-based concepts within the framework of IELTS and TOEFL reading prompts. To this purpose, after dividing the learners into IELTS-Instructed (II) group and TOEFL-Instructed (TI) group, they were administered the outlined instruments. Given the fact, they were treated through IELTS and TOEFL test contents, tasks and materials joint with relevant tips and strategies. Statistically, a significant difference was displayed between both their views towards task-based concepts and their performances on task-based reading skill, affected by testing-affects-teaching incident connected to task-oriented IELTS activities and IELTS strategies. The optimism is that the current work will lead the pedagogical stakeholders and interested language learners to perceiving the mutual connection between teaching and testing.

**Key words:** Task-based approach, strategy use, wash-back, IELTS

## 1. Introduction

The speedy expansion of English language for global transaction and interaction allowed some testing and teaching practitioners to reevaluate the shaky theories and vague practices in the field and to, eventually, pave the ground for communication objectives[1,2,3,4,7,11,12]. To cope with some of the pressing problems, communicative language teaching (CLT) in the early 1980s came into play, built on which, task-based language teaching ( TBLT) with syllabus of its own nature took dominant application, the main roles of which are communication, social negotiation, interaction of the learners in task management situations, and focus of meaning and functions[2,4,5,6,7,8,9,13]. More precisely, the fundamental claim is that through tasks either in assessment task or teaching task, we can engage the learners cognitively in both inside the class and outside the class because task naturally has engaging properties[4,5,10].

Within the last few decades, the field of TEFL has witnessed a paradigm shift both in testing and in teaching. In teaching, the shift has been from atomistic component-skill orientation towards task-based teaching. In testing, too, the shift has been from discrete-point-based tests to performance-based one, from psychometrics to educational assessment, from testing and examination culture to an assessment and decision-making culture , based on which we can reach a close correlation between the test performance and non-test performance [4,10,14,15, 16,17,18,19,20]. Apparently, only recently have the educators been aware of investigating this phenomenon in practice. By the time the above-cited successful paradigm shift was undertaken, a much broader perspective came into being, called *from detachment of teaching and assessment to juxtaposition of the two*. The manifestation of the juxtaposition is lucidly reflected in implementing the findings of the present paper, the upcoming guidelines of which are richly informative.

### 1.1. METHOD

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The current work touches hence on the following problems:

- Is there any difference between the views of IELTS-instructed and TOEFL-instructed learners towards task-based concepts?
- Is there any difference between use of strategies by IELTS applicants and TOEFL applicants?
- Is there any difference between the performances of the IELTS-task-instructed learners and TOEFL-materials-instructed ones on reading comprehension?
- Is there any relationship between testing and teaching with respect to applying task-based concepts and reading strategies?

## **2. Participants**

The subjects of the study, 60 TOEFL learners and 60 IELTS learners were randomly selected and asked to participate in the present project at the research context, i.e., Iranian Foreign Languages Department as an applied linguistics department and as IELTS and TOEFL preparation center in Ardebil, Iran. In particular, detailed attention was made so as not to separate males from females. The participants were learners of English as a foreign language in strategic-competence development classes. Accordingly, the IELTS learners were instructed with task-oriented and process-centered syllabus associated with IELTS reading prompts and, on the other hand, TOEFL learners were treated with product oriented tests content associated with this certificating device. However the participants were at different ages and at various educational levels, they were characterized by learning English as Foreign Language. Of course, necessitated to cite, a successful effort was made to select the learners who were at the intermediate or upper-intermediate levels in order to make sure of the homogeneity of the learners on the one hand and to assure of the reality that they will cope with the difficulty level of IELTS or TOEFL test contents on the other hand. Also, one key point, so as to avoid some of the potential interfering variables, was that the participants' attrition was also regarded. To prevent the intervening variables associated with this event, some learners' data, before or after treatment, were set aside and disregarded.

## **3. Research Design and Procedures**

After specifying the design of the study, i.e., experimental, two procedures were taken into consideration: First, the questionnaire of views towards TBLT with trivial changes was prepared based on the work of some researchers in the field [11] and a training attempt, during treatment course, was exclusively made to raise the awareness of the learners towards TBLT concepts through clear explanation of some of the terminological points. Pursued by this, the TBLT-view questionnaire was administered to both groups of learners divided into II group and TI group. Then, the teacher gave the learners pre-test of reading so as to be certain of their reading knowledge for the homogeneity purposes. Next, some strategic tips and strategies for IELTS and TOEFL developed by McCarter were taught to the learners similarly. After posttest, the data resulting from think-aloud prompts and strategic questionnaire associated with both of the groups were also worked out through t-test in order to, qualitatively and descriptively, get aware of the inner attitudes of the participants in addition to statistical data, triangulation considered. Finally, a t-test was run on post-test and task-based view and the raised hypotheses, in the end, were either supported or rejected.

## **4. Instruments**

The triangulated instrumentation elements included task-based questionnaire, strategy-for-reading questionnaire, pre-test and post-test of reading and also a think-aloud descriptive prompt 1. A questionnaire for specifying the views of learners towards task-based language teaching; it is worth citing that the present questionnaire was obviously explained to the learners in order for them to get conscious of the terminology in the field, 2. A pre-test 9 including 40 questions, with the total score of 20, was employed as a proficiency test for examining the entrance knowledge of the learners 3. The strategic tips for IELTS and TOEFL reading, through which the learners were instructed, were also used. 4. Post-test was finally used for calculating and assessing the possible effect of task-based treatment on the reading performance of the applicants. 5. After treatment, a think-aloud open ended answer complementary to statistical data and in support of rejection of this was collected and analyzed; the question regarding this is clear in Table 5. The

point follows that for ease of comparison, the five-point scales were merged into a two-point simplified scale (strongly disagree & disagree and strongly agree & agree).<sup>5</sup> The content of the treatment was elicited from Cambridge Standard tests for IELTS and Cambridge TOEFL test. This was owing to getting assured of their reliability. However the content of the tests used as teaching materials were supposed to have had high reliability, a pilot testing was administered to reach certainty regarding reliability estimates. So, the following is more informative.

|   |   |
|---|---|
| IELTS test content used for teaching purposes | TOEFL test content used for teaching purposes |
| Alpha=0.87                                    | Alpha=0.79                                    |

## 5. Results

First, a description of learners' view toward TBLT Concepts, before treatment (BT) and after treatment (AT), is presented in Table 1.

Table1: learners' views towards TBLT Concepts

| Views towards Task Concepts                     |        | N  |    | Mean Score of S.DisAg/ Dis |       | Mean Score of S.Ag/ Ag |       |
|---|--------|----|----|----------------------------|-------|------------------------|-------|
| Statements                                      | Groups | BT | AT | BT                         | AT    | BT                     | AT    |
| 1. It has relaxing atmosphere                   | II     | 73 | 60 | 11.36                      | 2.04  | 8.64                   | 17.96 |
|   | TI     | 69 | 60 | 14.07                      | 13.19 | 5.93                   | 6.81  |
| 2. Its primary focus is on use and meaning,     | II     | 73 | 60 | 13.48                      | 5.68  | 6.52                   | 14.32 |
|   | TI     | 69 | 60 | 15.36                      | 14.18 | 4.64                   | 5.82  |
| 3. It considers interaction and communication.  | II     | 73 | 60 | 5.21                       | 1.62  | 14.79                  | 18.38 |
|   | TI     | 69 | 60 | 13.96                      | 10.74 | 6.04                   | 9.26  |
| 4. TBLT activates learners' needs and interests | II     | 73 | 60 | 11.60                      | 4.01  | 8.40                   | 15.99 |
|   | TI     | 69 | 60 | 16.99                      | 11.30 | 3.09                   | 8.70  |
| 5. It gives them intrinsic motivation.          | II     | 73 | 60 | 14.20                      | 1.23  | 5.80                   | 18.77 |
|   | TI     | 69 | 60 | 15.98                      | 11.45 | 4.02                   | 8.55  |
| 6. It is cooperative.                           | II     | 73 | 60 | 11.34                      | 3.52  | 8.66                   | 16.48 |
|   | TI     | 69 | 60 | 16.78                      | 13.20 | 3.22                   | 4.80  |
| 7. It is learner-centered.                      | II     | 73 | 60 | 13.94                      | 0.45  | 6.09                   | 19.55 |
|   | TI     | 69 | 60 | 13.91                      | 14.40 | 4.09                   | 5.60  |
| 8. It is suitable for group work.               | II     | 73 | 60 | 13.79                      | 12.98 | 6.21                   | 7.02  |
|   | TI     | 69 | 60 | 17.01                      | 16.99 | 2.99                   | 3.01  |
| 9. It is suitable for pair work                 | II     | 73 | 60 | 14.39                      | 14.27 | 5.61                   | 5.73  |
|   | TI     | 69 | 60 | 16.51                      | 15.01 | 3.49                   | 4.99  |
| 10. It has engaging properties                  | II     | 73 | 60 | 12.56                      | 0.22  | 7.44                   | 19.78 |
|   | TI     | 69 | 60 | 15.12                      | 10.31 | 4.88                   | 9.69  |

Note: BT= before treatment; AT= after treatment; S.DisAg/ Dis (%) = strongly disagree/ disagree; S.Ag/ Ag (%) = strongly agree/ agree; IELTS-Instructed (II); TOEFL- Instructed (TI)

As Table 1 is demonstrative, the overall mean of II group and TI group scores is the lowest standing at 7.02, 3.01, respectively, regarding group-work associated with TBLT. On the other hand, the mean scores of II group and TI group reached at 5.73 and 4.99, respectively, with respect to pair-work. Clearly enough,

other TBLT concepts from the II group such as relaxing atmosphere and learner-centeredness are strong evidence suggesting that the engaging property of task-based activities keeps the minds of the learners involved in the task. So far, answer to the first research question gets clear. For further investigation about the attitudes of the learners towards TBLT concepts Table 2 underlying t-test is more suggestive.

Table 2: The difference between the TI and II group’s view toward TBLT Concepts

|             | N  | Mean  |        | Std. Deviation | t    | df  | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|-------------|----|-------|--------|----------------|------|-----|-----------------|
|             |    | BT    | AT     |                |      |     |                 |
| IELTS Group | 60 | 8.114 | 15.398 | 2.40           | 2.21 | 141 | 0.003           |
| TOEFL Group | 60 | 4.253 | 6.698  | 6.81           |      |     |                 |

As Table 2 indicates, the results of t-test demonstrated a significant difference ( $t = 2.21$ ;  $P > 0.003$ ) between the view of TI group and II group toward TBLT concepts before treatment and after instruction. The finding indicates that there is a dramatic increase in the scores of the II group, rather than TI group. So, the first research question is clarified.

Table 3: An independent t-test for the reading strategy of the learners

| Strategy-using groups | N  |    | Mean  |       | Std. Deviation | t    | df  | Sig.(2-tailed) |
|-----------------------|----|----|-------|-------|----------------|------|-----|----------------|
|                       | BT | AT | BT    | AT    |                |      |     |                |
| II                    | 60 | 59 | 24.1  | 83.45 | 1.60           | 4.62 | 120 | 0.002          |
| TI                    | 59 | 57 | 25.86 | 39.3  | 6.13           |      |     |                |

As for the second research question, we statistically notice that there is significant difference ( $P > 0.002$ ; Mean=83.45 and 39.3) between the two groups’ strategy use in handling the questions of reading. In effect, IELTS-task-instructed learners outperformed the TOEFL learners on reading. Also, it gets axiomatic that the latter group had an unimportant increase before treatment (Mean=25.86), but the former had high overall performance.

Table4: An independent t-test for the pre-test and post-test of the learners’ reading performance

|           |          | N  | Mean    | Std. Deviation | t     | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|-----------|----------|----|---------|----------------|-------|----|-----------------|
| Pre-test  | II group | 60 | 5.8954  | 2.41305        | 0.257 | 41 | 0.10            |
|           | TI group | 58 | 5.1523  | 3.7023         |       |    |                 |
| Post-test | II group | 56 | 14.3653 | 4.8750         | 3.639 | 41 | 0.002           |
|           | TI group | 59 | 8.1286  | 5.9012         |       |    |                 |

In light of Table 4, the results of the analysis presents that there is no significant difference ( $P < 0.10$ ; Mean= 5.89 and 5.15) between the pre-test performances of II and TI groups. Followed by treatment, on the contrary, a statistically significant difference between the two groups was revealed ( $P > 0.002$ ; Mean= 14.36 and 8.12). As a consequence, the statistical response to the third research question is provided. Generally viewed, as Table 1 indicates, the mean scores of II group stood statistically at 19.78 (out of 20) and those of TI group was 9.69, pointing out the pedagogical fact that the engaging property of task-based tests such as IELTS, rather than TOEFL, -related treating materials together with application of strategies, as Table3 displays, contributed to the outperformance of the IELTS learners in sharp contrast with TOEFL learners.

So as to provide a qualitative and explanatory answer to the final question, a think-aloud explanatory prompt was presented with the learners: Is there any relationship between testing and teaching with respect to applying task-based concepts and reading strategies? How was the content of instruction and task concepts?

As the following Table stands, for ease of calculation and understanding, the learners' answers were organized into two-fold category:

1. There was a relationship. //// there was no or little relationship. 2. It was enjoyable, useful or so. ////Task concepts and test content were at the beginning, ambiguous, but later, more understandable.////It was not understandable.

Table 5: II group and TI groups' think-aloud Protocol

| <i>Think-aloud production (1)</i>  | IELTS applicants                     |         | TOEFL applicants |         |
|--|--------------------------------------|---------|------------------|---------|
|  | N(60)                                | Percent | N(60)            | Percent |
| There was a relationship   | 50                                   | % 83.3  | 17               | % 28.3  |
| There was no or little relationship  | 10                                   | %16.6   | 43               | % 71.6  |
| <i>Think-aloud production (2)</i>  | //////////////////////////////////// |         |                  |         |
| It was enjoyable, useful or so)  | 48                                   | % 80    | 13               | % 21.6  |
| Task concepts and test content were at the beginning, ambiguous, but later, more understandable) | 8                                    | % 13.3  | 22               | % 36.6  |
| It was not understandable)   | 4                                    | % 6.6   | 25               | % 41.6  |

In a response to the fourth research question, a think-aloud explanation by the learners indicated that II group expressed the existence of a strong relationship (%83.3) between testing and teaching with respect to applying task-based concepts and reading strategies. According to the classified production in second question, the majority of the learners (% 80) of them viewed that content was enjoyable, useful or so. Conversely, just 16 percent of the II group voiced the idea that there was no relationship between testing and teaching with respect to applying task-based concepts and reading strategies. In sharp contrast to the findings of II group, TI group data revealed a statistically decreasing percent (% 28.3). Also, with respect to second think-aloud production, Contrary to II group (% 6.6), TI group's statistics displayed a sharp comparison standing at % 41.6. As a result, answer to the question four gets clearer.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

What comes from the data, all pieces of evidence in the paper, task-concept questionnaire, strategy use questionnaire, and performance on reading prompts stand on a unanimous consensus as relates the reflection of testing content in teaching process; the analysis of the results is traced back to the actuality that the nature of performance-based tests is supportive of and complementary to teaching and learning.

Lucidly taken, the change of II group's views towards task-based language teaching was undertaken as a function of task in performance test. Because once they perceived that the process of the learning through task based instruction is interesting and the result of the learning is productive, the role of task-based language testing and teaching got more highlighted. Attentively considered, the applicants were instructed through test content, namely test content was employed as teaching content and no demarcation was stricken between the testing content and teaching content. That is to say, however there is a phenomenon that teaching-to-the-test may lead to score pollution(Gipps, 1994), here a quite separate incident took place; since the content of teaching itself was also content of testing and inseparable from each other, so it is meaningless to say ' we taught to help the learners to pass IELTS test'. What should we say? We should put the point in a different way and provide a supportive account, claiming that task-based language testing together with task-based language teaching engages the learners in the learning process and draws a balance balance between real world performance and test performance. What is more to notice, If instruction happens in an appropriate context, an indispensable part of instruction will be then testing with all its consequential and evidential implications. Drawing on the points argued so far, we safely called the paper *Juxtaposing Testing to teaching through Task-Based Approach and IELTS Reading Instruction*. In conclusion, testing is not detached from teaching rather attached to and inseparable from it, provided that we place both of them into a fitting context.

## 7. References

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