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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Task-Based Teaching and the Development of Higher-Order Thinking Skills in Moroccan Private Higher Education: A Case Study of IMBT

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ABSTRACT

This empirical research explores the use of Task-Based Teaching (TBT) and how it correlates with the acquisition of Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) in the context of Morocco's private vocational higher education institutions. Utilizing the mixed-method approach to conducting a single-case study with the predominance of qualitative data supplemented by some descriptive quantitative information, the data were obtained from a structured questionnaire survey conducted among 19 Institute of Management & Business Technology (IMBT)'s faculty members from various academic fields. The findings of this study reveal that the majority of the involved faculty members do not have any formal training in the utilization of TBT methodologies; however, the available evidence shows a significant use of these methodologies to induce high-level cognitive processes, such as analyzing, evaluating, and creating. The instructors use problem-solving activities, case studies, and collaborative projects that encourage relational thinking skills of their students rather than mere memorization of material. Nonetheless, the successful use of these pedagogical approaches is highly limited due to certain practical and institutional barriers, including lack of time, the diversity of student populations, and the issues of academic integrity and Artificial Intelligence. It can be concluded that maximizing the efficiency of TBT in developing HOTS would require some additional professional development, better technological infrastructure, and flexibility of curriculum. These findings contribute to the underexplored domain of pedagogical practices in Moroccan private higher education and establish a foundational framework for future research into student cognitive development.

KEYWORDS

Higher-Order Thinking Skills, Task-Based Teaching, Private Higher Education, Vocational Education

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1. Introduction

There has been a silent metamorphosis in the private higher education sector of Morocco. Such an evolution has been triggered by the pressures associated with a saturated higher education public sector and the demands of a developing economy needing workers skilled in technical abilities. The newly formed educational institutions include the Institute of Management and Business Technology (IMBT), which is located in Rabat, and has adopted a special approach to education through its vocational nature and professionalism. The IMBT teaches students how to gain knowledge in the fields of finance, logistics, human resources management, information technology, and marketing. A significant characteristic of this institution is the desire to produce graduates capable of becoming successful members of the professional world right away. However, this objective depends a lot on certain methods of teaching, which play a central role in vocational education.

Task-Based Teaching (TBT), within an extensive education paradigm, refers to a learner-centered teaching methodology whereby learners undertake authentic goal-oriented tasks to solve problems and develop professional competencies. Despite the initial frameworks having focused on Task-Based Teaching as a learning process within language learning (e.g. Willis, 1996), its application across disciplines requires shifting focus from the teacher as the only disseminator of

knowledge. On the contrary, it requires learners to interact with the world around them, attain a practical goal and create knowledge through their participation. However, despite the seeming similarity between TBT and competency-based instructional paradigm in IMBT, some doubts remain concerning its actual implementation by teachers.

Such questions take on special relevance in the context of the wider discussion on HOTS. According to the updated classification developed by Anderson & Krathwohl (2001), HOTS are represented by processes of analyzing, evaluating, and creating. It is those very skills that are perceived to be lacking among fresh graduates by future employers. Task-based learning, provided there is enough cognitive complexity involved, has great potential as far as the formation of HOTS is concerned. However, the full development of this potential requires certain conditions.

There is limited empirical research on TBT and HOTS in Moroccan private higher education contexts. Most research conducted so far focuses on public higher education contexts that offer courses in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or secondary TVET contexts. The private sector and the professionalized higher education context have not been adequately researched yet. This study aims to fill the gap by looking into the IMBT case and evaluates how TBT is carried out.

There are three main research questions that drive the present study:

1. To what extent is Task-Based Teaching used among the IMBT faculty?

2. How does the practice of Task-Based Teaching foster or hinder higher-order thinking?

3. What facilitates and what hinders the implementation of Task-Based Teaching?

The results from the present study will not be confined to IMBT but will also help address the more general issue of bringing teaching into line with professional goals in private higher education institutions in Morocco.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Task-Based Teaching: Conceptual Foundations

Rationale of using TBT is based on the relationship between two major theories of learning. According to constructivist theory by Vygotsky (1978), learning is not a passive process; learners are active participants who co-create meaning through interaction with their surroundings and with each other. The implementation of this theory means moving away from the teacher-centered learning model to the learner-centered one. On the other hand, experiential learning theory developed by Kolb (1984) via his four stages of learning including concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation implies that learners' practical experience is the core of education.

2.2 TBT and TBLT: A Necessary Distinction

One of the main sources of ambiguity within literature results from lack of differentiation between TBT as a general teaching methodology and TBLT. While both methodologies are rooted in the concept of task-based philosophy, they apply to different fields. TBLT methodology refers to a particular approach that is aimed at teaching languages using communicative tasks, employing the theories developed by Long (2015) and Nunan (2004).

In turn, TBT represents a general teaching methodology that can be applied in any field such as engineering, management, or science. Within vocational training, it is practiced through laboratory simulations, professional project designing, case studies, and problem solving. From the perspective of IMBT as a college where the majority of subjects are technical and professional, TBLT methodology applies only to a small part of language teachers while TBT applies to all teachers.

2.3 HOTS and Bloom's Revised Taxonomy

Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) involve higher order levels of the cognitive domain such as analysis, evaluation, and creation, according to Anderson and Krathwohl (2001). These skills differ from low order processes such as remembering, understanding, and applying because learners need to relate to complicated ideas and create new products through these skills. Also, a clear definition of high order thinking needs interrelations among various variables and schemas to enable interpretation, analysis, or manipulation of information to solve new problems (Lewis & Smith, 1993). These skills are increasingly becoming important graduate attributes in the study of management because of expectations of innovative thinking among employees.

2.4 TBT as a Vehicle for HOTS Development

The connection between TBT and HOTS does not automatically exist in its nature. According to empirical research done regarding the task-based approach, it has been found that the critical thinking can be brought about through tasks only if such tasks are designed in a way that would ensure cognitive complexity and certain cognitive demands (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004). In other words, what matters here is not just the use of tasks but rather how such tasks will challenge the learner cognitively. With regard to the IMBT approach, the teachers might use the reports and projects without having them as the sources of analytical and evaluative skills development at HOTS level.

2.5 TBT in Moroccan Higher Education: The Research Gap

Studies regarding pedagogy in Morocco's private higher education sector have been few and far between. While research has been carried out with regard to ICT integration in TVET pedagogy, such research is predominantly focused on the public OFPPT system without much attention being paid to the private institutions. Hence, the current research makes a significant contribution to an understudied area by focusing on task-based teaching and HOTS in a privately owned management and technology institute.

3. Methodology

Methodological Approach for TBT Implementation and HOTS Development

The current chapter outlines the methodological approach used in analyzing the implementation of TBT as well as its impact on HOTS development in the private higher educational institution. In order to study this phenomenon in the practical context, it was necessary to apply the single case study design with the use of a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The study is mainly qualitative, and the quantitative data is used as supporting information only.

3.1 Research Design

In this research, a mixed-method single case study approach will be utilized with the qualitative being more dominant while there are some descriptive quantitative data included. According to Yin (2018), the case study approach is an empirical investigation of a phenomenon occurring in its real-life context. In particular, the single case study focuses on IMBT for detailed examination of its context. Quantitative data have been collected using a teacher questionnaire and provide illustrative data rather than any inferential ones.

3.2 Study Site

IMBT is a privately owned and state-accredited institute which provides programs ranging from Specialized technician to Executive MBA. The programs provided include finance, logistics, human resource management, information technology, and marketing. The institute uses competency-based approach aimed at developing employable graduates.

3.3 Participants

The pool of participants included both full-time and part-time lecturers teaching various courses offered by IMBT. To ensure varied participation from different subjects, years of experience, and contract nature, a purposive sampling technique was used. In all, 19 lecturers took part in the research.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

A structured questionnaire for teachers was used to investigate the level, type, and fit of tasks to HOTS along with other institutional barriers. In the questionnaire, HOTS were operationalized as measures of constructs that correspond to the revised taxonomy framework developed by Anderson and Krathwohl. Analysis was assessed based on whether tasks required the students to analyze information instead of just memorizing (Item D1). Evaluation was evaluated by the need to evaluate different alternatives and solutions (Item D2). Creation was evaluated based on the need to create something new (Item D3).

Data collected from the quantitative section was analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency, mean, and standard deviation). Open-ended questions in the questionnaire were coded using the thematic analysis method introduced by Braun and Clarke (2006).

3.5 Positionality and Ethics

The researcher adopted an outsider perspective in relation to IMBT. Issues related to this perspective were dealt with through the gatekeeping mechanisms of the institution. Clearance and permissions were received before data was collected.

4. Results and Discussion

In this chapter, the findings that were gathered from the structured questionnaire conducted among 19 faculty members of IMBT have been presented. Through these data, empirical observations can be made about the link between teaching techniques and the demands of cognition within a professionalized and private higher education setting. These findings will be presented in an organized manner in order to answer the research questions on the extent of use of TBT, its impact on higher order thinking skills development, and the institutional constraints surrounding its use.

4.1 Demographic Profile of Participants

Data was collected from a sample of 19 teachers at IMBT. Of all the teachers, 42.1 percent of them belonged to the domain of Business/Management, while 21.1 percent belonged to Engineering, 15.8 percent to Language and Communication, and

21.1 percent to other domains. The sampled teachers are highly experienced, 47.4 percent of them have more than 15 years of experience in teaching, and 31.6 percent of them have 8 to 15 years of experience.

4.2 TBT Familiarity and Pedagogical Training

In spite of their experiences, 47.4 percent of instructors surveyed claimed to not have undergone any kind of formal training in task-based teaching (TBT). The other half was equally divided in that 26.3 percent of them received formal training while the other 26.3 percent of them had partial training. However, self-perceived competence about the principles of TBT is still very high among these instructors as they easily differentiated between tasks and regular exercises and strongly agreed (5 scale) that they could develop TBT lessons.

4.3 Frequency and Nature of Task-Based Practices

Quantitative data shows that there is effective use of TBT among this sample with instructors regularly scoring their use of problem solving and professional cases at a 4 or 5 in Likert scale. This is supported by qualitative data in the following manner:

Business/Management: Students did an analysis of simple financial statements via excel calculations on liquidity and profitability ratios and ended up making analysis tables.

Engineering/IT: Instructors helped in developing web application and operating systems practically.

Communication: The activities included poster making and oral presentation.

4.4 Alignment with Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)

Reported tasks demonstrated a strong alignment with HOTS:

• **Analysis & Evaluation**: Of the 19 participants surveyed, 13 people agreed very strongly (rated 4-5) that their tasks required students to analyze rather than memorize information.

• **Creation**: 12 participants rated the demand for producing an innovative product, plan, or solution by rating the item 4 or 5.

• **Lower Order Skills**: Opinions about the requirement to concentrate on memorization and comprehension of materials are widely varied, showing that the usage of basic cognitive skills is context-dependent.

• **Institutional Obstacles and Curricular Difficulties:** The most crucial obstacle to TBT was related to motivation and engagement of students. This obstacle has received the highest proportion of '5' (very strong influence). Among the qualitative obstacles listed, several of them should be mentioned:

• **Diversity of Students:** The existence of different skills among students makes cooperation complicated, especially with particular software.

• **Time Constraints:** Educators pointed out limited time frames and excessive curriculum pressure.

• **Generative AI Challenge**: It is worth mentioning that the management of unauthorized use of Artificial Intelligence in the process of completing the task was listed among the challenges. Considering the modern academic situation, the usage of AI poses a serious threat to the cognitive struggle that facilitates the development of HOTS.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Summary of Findings

The current research focused on task-based teaching methods and their correlation with the usage of higher order thinking skills by the selected group of instructors at IMBT. According to the results obtained, although the faculty members do not have any training on task-based teaching, due to their great experience, they naturally use complex task-based methods. It was found that instructors tend to often focus on the need to analyze financial data, assess the situation, and create unique projects, thus avoiding mechanical memorization. However, all these methods are greatly affected by many limitations including diversity of students, time, technology, and generative AI disruption.

5.2 Practical Implications and Recommendations

To improve the efficiency of TBT usage for educational purposes within IMBT, the following recommendations regarding the institution have been identified:

- Professional Development Training: Introduce formal programs of training related to HOTS tasks' development and minimizing the misuse of AI tools.

- Resource Improvements: Revise computer labs and provide access to professional databases and software (for instance, Power BI, Excel).

- Flexible Scheduling: Adjust the schedule to enable long-term project-based learning activities.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

Some constraints need mention. First, the small purposive sample (n=19) seriously limits the statistical generalizability of the quantitative results to the institution, and even more to the larger higher education domain in Morocco. Significantly, this work is based solely on instructor data and lacks any data from students or classroom observations. Since the main assumption deals with HOTS—cognitive skills of students—the gap between the intended cognitive skill elicitation through task designing by instructors and the cognitive skill demonstrations by students should be noted. In addition, there are new challenges associated with the emergence of AI tools that avoid the cognitive load associated with task-based learning.

Future research would do well to shift attention to the learner. Studies involving vocational training students' perceptions of these methods, analysis of the cognitive outcomes observable in them, and influence of AI on their interaction with tasks would produce an all-around understanding of the pedagogy efficiency in the private sector.

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