

# An Appraisal of Novice and Experienced Iranian EFL Instructors' Conceptualizations of TBLT<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The present study examines Iranian EFL instructors' conceptualizations of task-based language teaching (TBLT) to identify whether teaching experience plays a significant role in their familiarity with the theoretical underpinnings of TBLT. One hundred sixty-two EFL instructors, reportedly practicing CLT, took part in the study; they were grouped into two categories of novice (N=74) and experienced (N=88). They were asked to fill out a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire designed by the researchers. The responses from the participants were then measured against Ellis's (2012) criteria of task. The analyses indicated that both novice and experienced language instructors lacked a clear understanding of the ins and outs of TBLT. The findings suggest that without having been fully introduced to this approach, one cannot expect teachers to perform well in a task-based classroom. Hence, not only should stakeholders, administrators, and teacher educators consider offering teaching practicum opportunities, but they also should include introductory courses and workshops at theoretical levels for all teachers, irrespective of their teaching experience.

## Resumen

El presente estudio examina las conceptualizaciones que tienen los instructores iraníes de inglés como lengua extranjera sobre la enseñanza de idiomas basada en tareas (TBLT) para identificar si la experiencia docente juega un papel importante en su familiaridad con los fundamentos teóricos de TBLT. Ciento sesenta y dos instructores de inglés como lengua extranjera, que señalaron usar métodos comunicativos, participaron en el estudio; se agruparon en dos categorías de novatos (N = 74) y experimentados (N = 88). Se les pidió que llenaran un cuestionario de cinco puntos en escala Likert diseñado por los investigadores. Las respuestas de los participantes se midieron luego contra los criterios de tarea de Ellis (2012). Los análisis indicaron que tanto los instructores de idiomas novatos como los experimentados carecían de una comprensión clara de los entresijos de TBLT. Los hallazgos sugieren que, sin haber sido capacitados en este enfoque, no se puede esperar que los maestros se desempeñen bien en un aula basada en tareas. Por lo tanto, no solo las partes interesadas, los administradores y los formadores de docentes deben considerar ofrecer oportunidades de prácticas docentes, sino que también deben incluir cursos introductorios y talleres a niveles teóricos para todos los docentes, independientemente de su experiencia docente.

## Introduction

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) built upon both the philosophy of education and empirical research in education, psychology, and applied linguistics (Long, 2015; Nunan, 2014), has been benefiting from accumulating interest from researchers in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) for the past two decades (Benson, 2016; Erlam, 2016; Ellis, 2009; Luo & Xing, 2015). Rodríguez-Bonces and Rodríguez-Bonces (2010) stated that this popularity may be due in part to the desirability of promoting real communication instead of form-focusing among teachers. TBLT, typically recognized as the strong version of communicative language teaching (CLT) (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011), draws on some of the theoretical underpinnings of CLT such as the necessity of communication, the meaningfulness of the language used, and tasks set to be carried out (Richards & Rogers, 2014). TBLT is believed to facilitate language acquisition as it provides ample opportunities for learners to interact and get involved in a negotiation of meaning by performing tasks (Ellis, 2013; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). In the expanding circle, where English is instructed as a foreign language and learners have limited exposure to authentic and real-life second language (L2) input (Kachru, 1985), employing TBLT can be effective as it provides learners with more opportunities to formulate target language utterances while giving feedback to their peers (Iwashita & Li, 2012). It develops fluency through practicing oral skills (Chacón, 2012), and reduces learners' anxiety while performing the tasks (Bao & Du, 2015). As the name suggests, *tasks* are of considerable significance and primal to this approach; yet Ellis (2003) argued that there has been a lack of consensus on what tasks are considered to be. The situation, however, may not be as chaotic as Ellis described (Erlam, 2016). Ellis's (2012) definition and criteria for task, first introduced in Ellis (2003) and then elaborated in Ellis and Shintani (2014), were set as the benchmark throughout different stages of planning, designing, and conducting the study for two main reasons. Not only is the definition provided by Ellis chronologically more recent, but it also complements the existing definitions in the literature. Ellis defined tasks in terms of perspective, authenticity, language skill, cognitive processes, and outcomes. He

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described task as a work plan which primarily focuses on meaning rather than displaying language. For Ellis, a task should comprise processes related to real-world language use that can include any of the four skills. Additionally, the work plan should necessitate the use of cognitive processes for language learners. Finally, in Ellis' opinion, tasks should produce communicative, non-linguistic outcomes serving as the goal of the activity.

In the past couple of years, private English institutes in the EFL context of Iran have been attempting to follow the growing global trend towards a communicative approach to language teaching (Farhady et al., 2010; Razmjoo, 2007), an approach which acknowledges teachers' right and potential to be the designer of their classroom materials, activities, and resources (Nunan & Lamb, 1996). This is unlike the formal education of English in Iran which is generally teacher-fronted and learners are supposed to sit quietly in row upon row for a long time (Farhady & Hedayati, 2009; Kheirabadi & Alavi Moghaddam, 2014). In the case of TBLT, as Ellis (2009) stated in one of his principles regarding facilitating the successful implementation of TBLT, the issue of having a thorough understanding of the characteristics of an appropriate task would be essential to any teacher desiring to invent and provide his or her learners with some sort of task by him/herself. Although a precise conceptualization of it is one of the key factors contributing to the production of a well-shaped task-based curriculum (Butler, 2005; Clark et al., 1999; Jeon, 2006; Zhang, 2007), it may not be the sole criterion. It is well-documented in the literature that logistic and acquisitional challenges posed by TBLT, which place increased demands upon teachers (Jeon, 2006), and classroom constraints (Butler, 2011) are other major barriers to the implementation of TBLT.

Research on teachers' perception and conceptualization of task and TBLT has been extensive (e.g., Chan, 2012; Hu, 2013; Zheng & Borg, 2014); however, there has been little empirical evidence, if any, concerning how previous language teaching experience can alter the way language instructors visualize TBLT. As maintained by Tsui (2005), when differentiating between expert and novice teachers, experience is widely regarded as the benchmark for measuring expertise. While a concept as complex as expertise cannot be merely matched with '*time-on-the-job*' or '*personal experience*' (Klein & Hoffman, 1993), experience has been conceptualized with reference to the how long instructors have been teaching in the bulk of research on pedagogical expertise (e.g., Akbari & Tajik, 2009; Gatbontan, 2008; Karimi & Norouzi, 2018). Therefore, to bridge the gap mentioned above, this study aims at investigating the role of personal experience in the understanding of EFL teachers' perception of a TBLT classroom.

## Literature Review

TBLT, as mentioned above, is an offspring of CLT, which considers language a practice more than just a set of rules and words to be learned by rote (Nunan, 2004). CLT has also been under the influence of sociocultural theories based on the belief that learning is a social phenomenon (Wenger, 2009). In TBLT, one of the main issues in need of clarification is its theoretical underpinnings. There have been different models and approaches to TBLT.

Another aspect to be taken into account is the definition of task itself. Numerous definitions have been offered by experts in applied linguistics (e.g., Breen, 1987; Ellis, 2003; Long, 1985; Nunan, 2004; Skehan, 1998). As Nunan (2004) explained, although the components of these definitions differ, they all share some commonalities such as using language for communicative purposes and focusing on meaning rather than form. TBLT, similar to other methods and approaches to language teaching, has faced different critiques in respect to its definition (Widdowson, 2003), construct validity (Seedhouse, 2005), end result (Seedhouse, 1999), unsuitability for certain levels of proficiency (Littlewood, 2007), unsuitability for certain cultures and contexts (Eastern cultures and EFL settings in particular) (Butler, 2011; Carless, 2007, 2012; Swan, 2005), negligence of accuracy (Sheen, 2004; Swan, 2005), extensive use of pair and group work (Swan, 2005), and avoidance of L1 (Carless, 2004). Ellis, one of the proponents of TBLT, referred to these criticisms as misunderstandings, and misconceptions. In two articles published in 2009 and 2013, Ellis responded to criticisms except the one regarding TBLT's unsuitability for some cultures; he admitted that it is hard to implement TBLT in situations where students are used to a teacher-centered classroom, in which they speak only when they are spoken to. Ogilvie and Dunn (2010) rightly pointed out the fact that although TBLT is based on sound theories and is empirically supported, it still has not found its way into many classrooms and contexts. Ellis (2013) further suggested using modular curricula in which both TBLT and traditional approaches can be worked on in separate units since this way of presentation is less threatening to teachers accustomed to traditional approaches.

Borg (2006) asserted that research on teachers' beliefs had been mushrooming for the past twenty years. In the same vein, research into teachers' beliefs regarding TBLT and its implementation grew in the past

decade (e.g., Andon & Eckerth, 2009; Bao & Du, 2015; Chan, 2012; East, 2012; Hu, 2013; Le, 2014; Liu & Xiong, 2016; Liu, Mishan, & Chambers, 2018; Zheng & Borg, 2014). In a qualitative study, Zheng and Borg (2014) inspected three secondary school teachers' beliefs, their implementation of TBLT, and factors involved in shaping their TBLT implementation. Through interviews and class observations, the teachers' understanding of TBLT was found shallow because the participants showed little or no awareness of how TBLT is defined in the literature by scholars. Regarding their second research question, it became evident that teachers' experience can alter the extent of adherence to the guidelines in the teachers' manual regarding the implementation of TBLT. In Zheng and Borg's (2014) study, years of experience and adherence to the implementation of TBLT as intended by the curriculum had opposite effects on each other; in other words, the more experienced the teachers were, the less adherent they were to the curriculum. Through their third research question, they understood that the materials provided by the curriculum had a strong positive relationship with the decisions they took. Their decisions were influenced by beliefs and viewpoints regarding language teaching and learning as well. On a similar note, through observations and interviews, Hu (2013) examined how 30 Chinese teachers of English reacted to the implementation of a TBLT program (including lesson plans, students' book, workbook, teachers' book, PowerPoint slides, and handouts) in their classroom, ranging from negative denial (17%), passive acceptance (33%), and active application (50%) of the method proposed. The findings of her study suggested that teachers held different opinions concerning what task was; as stated by Hu (2013), "some teachers saw a task as including goal-oriented activities or self-created games, while others viewed it as the exercises listed on the textbook and the teachers' manual. Some teachers understood it as activities that served the real-life purposes" (p. 17). In another venue, McAllister et al. (2012) examined the beliefs of 14 teachers, who had been teaching a newly-introduced TBLT program for two years at Nantes University, concerning the nature of language teaching and learning and teachers' pedagogical role. The results of the interviews and the analyses indicated that by and large, the majority of teachers accepted the paradigm shift in their roles (from transmitters of knowledge to advisors and facilitators), and understanding the benefits of the program resulted in the approval of its underlying principles.

Similarly, in the local context of Iran studies have been conducted on both teachers and students' perception of TBLT (Hadi, 2012; Mahdavi-rad, 2017; Tabatabaei & Hadi, 2011; Zare, 2007) as well as its implementation (Birjandi & Malmir, 2011; Najjari, 2014; Sarani & Sahebi, 2012; Shabani & Ghasemi, 2014; Tale & Goodarzi, 2015). Hadi (2012) investigated the perceptions of 51 teachers from a well-known language institute in Isfahan, Iran by assessing their understanding of TBLT principles, their attitudes towards the implementation of TBLT, and the reasons they choose to incorporate or avoid TBLT in their classrooms. The results of the questionnaire revealed that the teachers show a proper understanding of the linguistic characteristics of task and adopted a positive attitude towards the implementation of TBLT in their classrooms because of its interactional and cooperative essence. The same results were obtained in Mahdavi-rad's (2017) study, in which she investigated 160 Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of TBLT concepts and their views on its implementation in the classroom. Nevertheless, there are many language teachers and policymakers who prefer to stick to traditional methods (Iwashita & Li, 2012). The reasons for the unwelcome attitude to new approaches such as TBLT vary from doubts in their effectiveness, uncertainty about the nature of the tasks, comfortability with teacher-fronted classrooms, and unfamiliarity with implementation methods.

As evidenced in the literature, conducted scientific studies, especially those carried out in Iran, have been concerned more with the implementation and incorporation of TBLT into the educational system to date, without having a clear picture of teachers' understanding of the general principles of TBLT. Thus, the present study proposes to discover whether teachers' conceptualizations of the nature of TBLT aligns with Ellis's (2012) principles based on their teaching experience. Research of this kind may shed light on our understanding of the mismatches between theory and the opinions of teachers. Furthermore, it can pave the way for language instructors who wish to develop expertise in TBLT. Therefore, the current study poses the following research question:

Does Iranian EFL teachers' conceptualizations of TBLT differ from those proposed by Ellis (2012) based on their years of experience in teaching English as a foreign language? To what extent, if any, does novice and experienced Iranian EFL teachers' conceptualizations of TBLT differ from those proposed by Ellis (2012)?

## **Methodology**

### Participants

This study means to understand how the personal experience of Iranian EFL teachers affect their conceptualizations of TBLT measured against those proposed by Ellis (2012). To this end, data from 162

EFL teachers, 89 of which were teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) students/ graduates and 73 non-TEFL students/graduates (i.e., 46 English language and literature, 13 translation studies, and 14 miscellaneous fields of study), was collected through convenience sampling. This non-probability sampling method was employed largely due to the fact that the researchers were involved in the teaching profession and had access to English language teachers with a wide range of teaching backgrounds suitable for the purpose of the study. A number of studies (e.g., Gatbonton, 2008; Richards et al., 1998; Tsui, 2005) provided the benchmark for the distinction between 'novice' and 'experienced' language teachers in this paper. Therefore, Iranian EFL instructors were identified as novice or experienced based on their years of experience in teaching English, that is, novice teachers (N=74) were those who spent fewer than four years in TEFL profession, and experienced teachers (N=88) were those who were involved in the profession for four years or more. Furthermore, the majority of the participants (91 participants) held a bachelor's degree, 62 of them held a master's degree and nine participants held a Ph.D. Moreover, none of the participants, whose ages ranged from 21 to 53, had taken any prior special training courses in TBLT.

### Instrument

Although Jeon and Hahn (2006) developed a questionnaire enabling researchers to evaluate one's understanding of TBLT, the researchers of the current study felt the necessity of developing a new one for one main reason: Jeon and Hahn's (2006) questionnaire is composed of 15 statements, seven of which are related to the perception of TBLT, and the rest assess teachers' views on its implementation. The researchers believed that the small numbers of statements does not enable one to thoroughly tap into teachers' perception; thus, to fulfill the aim of the study, a 16-item, Likert scale questionnaire ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree was designed by the researchers based on Ellis's (2012) criteria of task. The questionnaire was divided into two sections; the first section included demographic information with respect to license status, defined by Karimi (2011) as standard licensed (ones holding certification in TEFL from institutes of higher education), alternatively licensed (ones majoring in English-related fields such as English language and literature or translation studies), and non-licensed (ones who have studied English merely in the context of language institutes and may have not taken any courses in EFL pedagogy), university major, and years of experience. The second section was separated into four main categories, which are focus, gap, resources, and outcome. Finally, three to five statements were itemized for each category. The statements were written in a fashion preventing the elicited responses to constantly fall on the upper side of the continuum; consequently, if the participants chose strongly agree for a statement, it would not necessarily mean it is concordant with Ellis's (2012) criteria. Afterward, the questionnaire was reviewed by an applied linguist whose feedback helped the researchers to revise the questionnaire; the instrument was then finalized and pilot-tested among 30 EFL teachers.

### Data Collection

After analyzing the results of the pilot test, the questionnaire was distributed among EFL teachers manually and electronically via *Google Docs*. The teachers were asked to read the questionnaire and mark the scale which best reflected their attitude towards the TBLT principles. This led to 162 responses collected both manually (58 responses) and electronically (104 responses).

### **Data Analysis**

The pilot test data were entered into SPSS and structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted. SEM procedures allowed the researchers to provide, through confirmatory factor analysis, solid evidence for the questionnaire (see Geng, 2014). Responses to each question were entered and the variable of experience was also defined. First, the item-total correlation of the items of the questionnaire was measured to ensure the consistency in each item in comparison with the average behavior. As represented in Table 1, all item-total correlations enjoyed large effect sizes; that is, they were higher than .50; except for item 15 whose contribution to the total score was almost large (.493). Table 1 also displays the composite reliability (CR) indices for the four factors of focus, gap, resources, and outcome. Given that all CR indices were higher than .60 (Tseng et al., 2006), it can be concluded that the four factors enjoyed acceptable CR values. Furthermore, the table shows the Cronbach's Alpha for each of the four factors as well as the overall reliability of the questionnaire, which is 0.79, indicating that the questionnaires enjoyed an acceptable level of reliability.

Variable	Item-Total Correlation	Composite Reliability of Factors	Cronbach's Alpha
<b>Focus</b>			
Q1	0.836	0.912	0.82
Q2	0.710		
Q3	0.731		
Q4	0.799		
Q5	0.797		
<b>Gap</b>			
Q6	0.747	0.878	0.80
Q7	0.789		
Q8	0.753		
<b>Resources</b>			
Q9	0.605	0.804	0.84
Q10	0.626		
Q11	0.551		
Q12	0.676		
<b>Outcome</b>			
Q13	0.516	0.735	0.78
Q14	0.525		
Q15	0.489		
Q16	0.545		
<b>Overall reliability</b>			0.79

Table 1. Item total correlations and composite reliability

Next, four measurement models for focus (five items), gap (three items), resources (four items), and outcome (four items) were developed to realize how they relate to the latent variables. All items had large contributions (i.e.,  $\geq .50$ ) to their latent variables. The standardized regression weights ranged from a minimum of .61 to a maximum of .90.

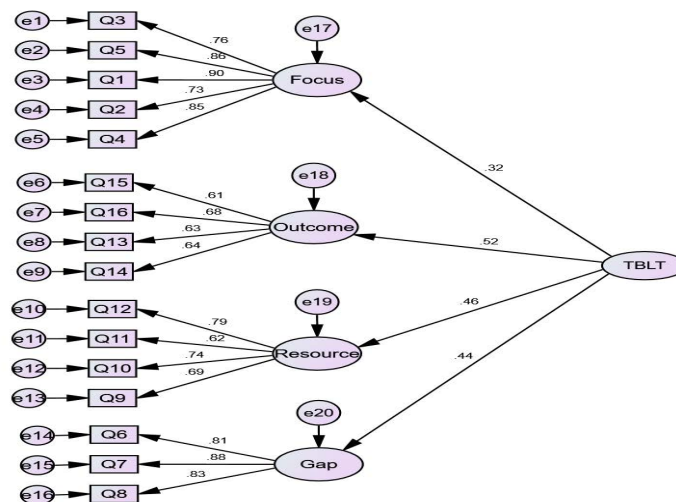


Figure 1. TBLT structural equation model

The models above and the overall model enjoyed good fit indices (Table 2). The absolute fit indices of chi-squares were non-significant for the focus ( $\chi^2 (5) = 5.719, p > .05$ ), gap ( $\chi^2 (1) = 2.023, p > .05$ ), resources ( $\chi^2 (2) = .483, p > .05$ ), and outcome ( $\chi^2 (2) = .399, p > .05$ ). The overall model also showed a non-significant chi-square value ( $\chi^2 (100) = 104.51, p > .05$ ). The ratios of chi-square values over the degrees of freedom were lower than three for all five models (i.e., focus = 1.144, gap = 2.023, resources = .241, outcome = .200, and the overall model = 1.045). All indices proved the fit of the overall model and the four-measurement-models.

Fit Indices	Main	Focus	Gap	Resources	Outcome	Criteria
$\chi^2$	104.510	5.719	2.023	0.483	0.399	---
df	100	5	1	2	2	---
p	0.359	0.334	0.155	0.785	0.819	> .05
ratio	1.045	1.144	2.023	0.241	0.200	<=3
RMSEA	0.017	0.030	0.080	0.009	0.000	<= .05
90 % CI	[.000,.045]	[.000,.117]	[.000,.242]	[.000,.101]	[.000,.094]	<= .05
PCLOSE	0.978	0.549	0.235	0.850	0.874	>= .05
SRMR	0.035	0.017	0.013	0.009	0.010	<= .05
IFI	0.996	0.999	0.996	1.000	1.000	>= .90
CFI	0.996	0.999	0.996	1.000	1.000	>= .90
GFI	0.928	0.986	0.992	0.998	0.999	>= .90
TLI	0.995	0.997	0.988	1.000	1.000	>= .90

Table 2. Model fit indices

The root mean square of error approximation (RMSEA) for the overall model, focus, resources, and outcome was lower than .05. RMSEA index for the measurement model of gap was .080, which is considered reasonable by Byrne (2010). P-values for the tests of close fit (PCLOSE) for all models were higher than .05. These results proved the fit of the model as well.

The standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) for all of the models was lower than .05, and the fit indices of comparative (CFI), incremental (IFI), goodness of fit index (GFI), and Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) were all higher than .90 and proved the fit of the models. To analyze each item separately, we had to group them into two categories according to how similar or dissimilar they were to the yardstick, that is, Ellis’s (2012) criteria for task against which they were measured. Therefore, items 1, 5, 7, 9, 11, 12, 14, and 16 were grouped together since in order to accord with the yardstick, one had to (strongly) disagree with these items. The items were compared against a mean of 1.5 (1 for strongly disagree, 2 for disagree). Conversely, items 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 10, 13, and 15 were bundled together to be compared against a mean of 4.5 (4 for agree, 5 for strongly agree) to satisfy the criteria set by Ellis (2012). To recapitulate, a higher level of agreement with a statement would not necessarily demonstrate a good understanding of task and TBLT; however, to delve into teachers’ grasp of the whole idea, we had to compare the item against the relevant mean decided on earlier (1.5 or 4.5).

Teachers with four years of experience or more

Subsequently, the items in the questionnaire were compared against the criteria set by Ellis (2012) in two phases. At first, items 1, 5, 7, 9, 11, 12, 14, and 16 were compared against a mean of 1.5. As Table 3 displays, the means of all eight items were higher than 1.5.

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
<b>Q1</b>	88	3.41	1.131	.121
<b>Q5</b>	88	3.39	1.066	.114
<b>Q7</b>	88	3.28	1.039	.111
<b>Q9</b>	88	3.45	1.268	.135
<b>Q11</b>	88	3.52	1.250	.133
<b>Q12</b>	88	2.27	.919	.098
<b>Q14</b>	88	2.83	.665	.071
<b>Q16</b>	88	3.73	1.172	.125

Table 3. Teachers’ with four or more years of experience: Means on items (Criterion of 1.5)

As demonstrated in the table above, the means of Q9, Q11, and Q16 are the farthest from the criteria (1.5), at 3.45, 3.52, and 3.73 respectively. Overall, items 9, 11, and 16 pinpointed that experienced teachers were of the opinion that in a TBLT lesson, language learners should make use of the language learned recently (Q9), and tasks can provide them with some model sentences to use (Q11). In addition, they consider tasks to be mainly output-based rather than input-based (Q16). Accordingly, it could be postulated that the

participants drew on their knowledge of PPP model (presentation-practice-production) to respond to these items and that their perception of item 16 is based on the misunderstanding that Ellis referred to in 2009. On the other hand, the mean of Q12 (i.e., TBLT’s rejection of teaching grammar) and Q14 (i.e., completion of a task means a display of correct language form) were closest to the criteria. In short, while making real communication mattered most to teachers, they also believed that TBLT lessons should involve teaching grammatical rules to some extent in order to develop accuracy.

To discover whether the difference in means was statistically significant or not, a one-sample *t*-test, whose results are shown in Table 4 below, was run. As displayed, all items proved to be significantly higher than the set criterion.

Test Value = 1.5						
T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
				Lower	Upper	
<b>Q1</b>	15.836	87	.000	1.909	1.67	2.15
<b>Q5</b>	16.600	87	.000	1.886	1.66	2.11
<b>Q7</b>	16.110	87	.000	1.784	1.56	2.00
<b>Q9</b>	14.463	87	.000	1.955	1.69	2.22
<b>Q11</b>	15.179	87	.000	2.023	1.76	2.29
<b>Q12</b>	7.889	87	.000	.773	.58	.97
<b>Q14</b>	18.763	87	.000	1.330	1.19	1.47
<b>Q16</b>	17.831	87	.000	2.227	1.98	2.48

Table 4. Teachers’ with four or more years of experience: One-sample t-test (Criterion of 1.5)

Afterward, based on the criterion developed from Ellis (2012), items 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 10, 13, and 15 were compared against a mean of 4.5 (see Table 5).

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
<b>Q2</b>	88	3.76	1.250	.133
<b>Q3</b>	88	3.84	1.154	.123
<b>Q4</b>	88	3.30	1.095	.117
<b>Q6</b>	88	3.25	.997	.106
<b>Q8</b>	88	3.32	.989	.105
<b>Q10</b>	88	3.16	1.038	.111
<b>Q13</b>	88	3.75	1.243	.133
<b>Q15</b>	88	3.72	1.134	.121

Table 5. Teachers’ with four or more years of experience: Means on items (Criterion of 4.5)

As can be seen in Table 5, Q2, Q3, and Q13 are closest to the criterion set. The results of these items accurately reflected the opinions the participants held for Q12 and Q14 as explained before. This means teachers presumed learners should not only work on developing their accuracy, but they also have to attend to the fluency of their output (Q2 and Q3). Besides, they believed tasks ought to be purposeful and have clear goals (Q13), which is in line with Ellis’s notion of TBLT. Furthermore, a one-sample *t*-test was conducted for each item to determine statistically significant preferences of the respondents and they all turned out to be significant (see Table 6).

Test Value = 4.5						
T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
				Lower	Upper	
<b>Q2</b>	-5.542	87	.000	-.739	-1.00	-.47
<b>Q3</b>	-5.360	87	.000	-.659	-.90	-.41
<b>Q4</b>	-10.319	87	.000	-1.205	-1.44	-.97
<b>Q6</b>	-11.760	87	.000	-1.250	-1.46	-1.04
<b>Q8</b>	-11.210	87	.000	-1.182	-1.39	-.97
<b>Q10</b>	-12.116	87	.000	-1.341	-1.56	-1.12
<b>Q13</b>	-5.658	87	.000	-.750	-1.01	-.49
<b>Q15</b>	-6.486	87	.000	-.784	-1.02	-.54

Table 6. Teachers’ with four or more years of experience: One-sample t-test (Criterion of 4.5)

Teachers with less than four years of experience

The same procedure was repeated for language teachers whose experience in the job was less than four years. First, the means of items 1, 5, 7, 9, 11, 12, 14, and 16 were compared against 1.5 as depicted in Table 7. The means suggested that the participants in this group, similar to their more experienced colleagues, had higher means in comparison with the benchmark.

	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>Std. Error Mean</b>
Q1	74	3.14	1.011	.118
Q5	74	3.19	.975	.113
Q7	74	3.32	1.035	.120
Q9	74	3.49	1.230	.143
Q11	74	4.07	.984	.114
Q12	74	2.41	.992	.115
Q14	74	2.88	.682	.079
Q16	74	3.81	1.257	.146

Table 7. Teachers' with less than four years of experience: Means on items (Criterion of 1.5)

As reported in Table 7, cases similar to the ones in Table 3 were observed. Analogous to their experienced counterparts, novice teachers had the closest means to the criteria in Q12 and Q14 while they were farthest from the criteria in Q9, Q11, and Q16 on the same grounds. That is to say, both novice and experienced language instructors thought alike in terms of TBLT and its conceptualizations. A one-sample *t*-test was further conducted to understand the (in)significance of the results above. The *t*-test suggested that the differences in means were statistically significant (Table 8).

	<b>Test Value = 1.5</b>					
	<b>T</b>	<b>Df</b>	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>	<b>Mean Difference</b>	<b>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</b>	
					<b>Lower</b>	<b>Upper</b>
<b>Q1</b>	13.910	73	.000	1.635	1.40	1.87
<b>Q5</b>	14.908	73	.000	1.689	1.46	1.92
<b>Q7</b>	15.161	73	.000	1.824	1.58	2.06
<b>Q9</b>	13.890	73	.000	1.986	1.70	2.27
<b>Q11</b>	22.449	73	.000	2.568	2.34	2.80
<b>Q12</b>	7.851	73	.000	.905	.68	1.14
<b>Q14</b>	17.398	73	.000	1.378	1.22	1.54
<b>Q16</b>	15.814	73	.000	2.311	2.02	2.60

Table 8. Teachers' with less than four years of experience One-sample *t*-test (Criterion of 1.5)

The procedure was repeated once more for items 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 10, 13, and 15. The means of the participants were lower than the criterion measured against (i.e., 4.5) (see Table 9).

	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>Std. Error Mean</b>
<b>Q2</b>	74	3.84	1.098	.128
<b>Q3</b>	74	3.76	1.291	.150
<b>Q4</b>	74	3.23	1.014	.118
<b>Q6</b>	74	3.31	.992	.115
<b>Q8</b>	74	3.28	1.027	.119
<b>Q10</b>	74	3.41	1.006	.117
<b>Q13</b>	74	3.89	1.054	.123
<b>Q15</b>	74	3.97	1.060	.123

Table 9. Teachers' with less than four years of experience: Means on items (Criterion of 4.5)

Novice teachers' beliefs were subtly different from their experienced counterparts. Q2, Q13, and Q15 were closest to the criterion (4.5). In item 15, which had the highest mean of all, the participants felt that students should accomplish an objective at the end of the task (Q15). Quite the contrary, Q4 (3.23), Q6 (3.31), and Q8 (3.28) had means farthest from the set criterion. This could have stemmed from teachers' unfamiliarity



with technical terms in applied linguistics (e.g., linguistic/communicative gap, and focused/unfocused tasks, to name a few) and their incapability to distinguish them from one another. Moreover, the one-sample *t*-test (Table 10) showed that the means above were significantly higher than 4.5.

	Test Value = 4.5					
	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
<b>Q2</b>	-5.186	73	.000	-.662	-.92	-.41
<b>Q3</b>	-4.953	73	.000	-.743	-1.04	-.44
<b>Q4</b>	-10.774	73	.000	-1.270	-1.51	-1.04
<b>Q6</b>	-10.311	73	.000	-1.189	-1.42	-.96
<b>Q8</b>	-10.184	73	.000	-1.216	-1.45	-.98
<b>Q10</b>	-9.362	73	.000	-1.095	-1.33	-.86
<b>Q13</b>	-4.962	73	.000	-.608	-.85	-.36
<b>Q15</b>	-4.279	73	.000	-.527	-.77	-.28

Table 10. Teachers' with less than four years of experience: One-sample *t*-test (Criterion of 4.5)

## Discussion

Overall, the present study was conducted to evaluate EFL teachers' understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of TBLT in Iran with regards to their teaching experience. The results indicated that neither novice teachers nor their more experienced counterparts have a clear understanding of TBLT's theoretical background. As demonstrated by the tables provided in the results section, the mean of the responses for almost all the items of the questionnaire fell between 3 (don't know) to 4 (agree). CLT and TBLT share certain commonalities as the former is believed to be an overarching concept of which TBLT is a realization (Nunan, 2004); therefore, teachers who allegedly practice CLT are expected to have a basic understanding of TBLT. However, based on the studies conducted by Lee (2002), Prapaisit de Segovia and Hardison (2008), and Yukawa (2002), it was revealed that teachers have difficulty implementing CLT accordingly, mixing communicative activities with the audio-lingual method (ALM) and/or explicit focus on form approaches. On this account, despite falling outside the scope of this paper, it could be further assumed that while the teachers were purportedly providing a CLT approach to classroom language learning, their understanding of what constitutes CLT seems to be open to question. Owing to what was just mentioned and the fact that a little less than half of the participants (73 out of 162) were non-TEFL students/graduates, their uncertainty about TBLT's underlying principles is understandable. Both novice and experienced teachers in this study had divergent assumptions about task and TBLT compared with those proposed by Ellis (2012).

The findings of this study is in line with that of Zheng and Borg (2014), and Liu et. al (2018) who employed questionnaires and interviews to delve into EFL teachers' acquaintance with TBLT in Chinese higher education. The self-reports indicated that around 80% of the teachers' felt unconfident of their understanding of TBLT principles. Yet they took a welcoming attitude towards training and education on this matter. The finding also agrees with that of Liu and Xiong (2016) who looked into a range of different aspects of TBLT in Chinese colleges, including teachers' familiarity with TBLT and its implementation. The finding of the study further corroborates the opinion of Nunan (2004) who believes that although TBLT principles have started to emerge in commercial materials designed for the public-school sector, teachers themselves do not have a firm grasp of TBLT. Additionally, Van den Branden (2016) contends that to presume that language teachers have a proper understanding of both tasks and TBLT in general, is yet an unwarranted assumption. The limited understanding of TBLT principles might be a by-product of constraints from administrative systems and limited resources available. The constraints imposed by the decision-makers and administrators could impede equipping language teachers with proper tools to implement TBLT in their classrooms. In this regard, the literature suggests that the quantity and the quality of the resources (Apple, 1983; Sarason, 1982), principals, administrators, and human capital management in general (Dreeben, 1970; Kennedy, 2010; Lortie, 2002) can affect or shape the way teachers work.

At the same time, the finding of this study is in contrast with that of studies by Tabatabaei and Hadi (2011) and Mahdivard (2017) which demonstrated that the majority of the participants showed a thorough understanding of concepts and principles of TBLT. Nevertheless, in the former study, the awareness of TBLT principles reflected by the instructors might have originated from the erstwhile education received on TBLT since the researchers stated that the institute in which they conducted the survey had recently held a teacher training course on TBLT to commence incorporating it into their classrooms. Accordingly, it could be

reasonable to expect them to be familiar with the principles of TBLT at the very least. In contrast in the study conducted by Tabatabaei and Hadi (2011), the participants did not receive any form of education in that respect, relying solely on their past classroom experience, pre-service, and in-service CLT training courses, if any, in view of the fact that in-service training programs in Iran are not held regularly and in an orderly manner (Baniasad-Azad et al., 2017). In addition, none of the aforementioned studies categorized the participants in terms of their teaching experience or other variables. Consequently, the results of the current study indicated that the participants, irrespective of their teaching experience, do not fully grasp the concept of TBLT. Additionally, the incongruence observed between the findings of the present study and the ones mentioned above could be generally attributed to different instrumentation techniques. While the above studies both adopted a survey from Jeon and Hahn (2006), the researchers in the present study designed their survey as discussed in the methodology section.

In the final analysis, should policymakers, language institute owners, or any other individuals or groups affiliated with the ELT industry decide to integrate TBLT into the everyday teachings of language instructors working under their supervision, it is warranted to first lay the groundwork by providing ongoing formal education (e.g., training courses, workshops, and seminars) since first-rate professional development is a requirement for introducing new curricula and developing teachers' knowledge of content and pedagogy (Wilson, 2013). According to a body of articles (e.g., Buczynski & Hansen, 2010; Ermeling, 2010; Levine & Marcus, 2010; Van Keer & Verhaeghe, 2005; Vogt & Rogalla, 2009, to name but a few), planning such teacher professional development programs could result in improved curricular knowledge, student motivation, and positive effect on learning outcomes. Nonetheless, we should bear in mind that the implementation of TBLT is a gradual process for language instructors needing trial and error, reflecting, and revising to develop confidence and expertise (East, 2012; Müller-Hartmann & Schocker-von Ditfurth, 2011).

## Conclusion

The present study was set to investigate Iranian EFL teachers' understanding of TBLT principles provided by Ellis (2012) based on their years of experience in teaching English. Two groups of experienced (N= 88) and less experienced (N=74) teachers participated in this study. The analysis concluded that both groups lacked sufficient understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of TBLT. This suggests that though for the past decades teachers have been practicing CLT, of which TBLT is deemed to be a strong version, they are not quite cognizant of TBLT's fundamentals. In the end, it could be concluded that teachers, irrespective of their teaching experience and the approach they have been practicing, should be provided with introductory courses at both theoretical and practical levels prior to undertaking holding a TBLT session. To overcome the possible limitations of the present study, future studies could take the possible effect of teachers' license status on their understanding and/or the implementation of TBLT into consideration. Eventually, in order to explore these issues, an in-depth qualitative study with different teachers, through maximum variation, is needed.

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## Appendix

Dear Respondent,

We truly appreciate your taking the time to answer the following 16 item questionnaire on EFL teachers' beliefs concerning criteria for **task-based language teaching and learning**. Your answers will help us to shed light on the aspects under research. Your cooperation is appreciated in advance.

### Section 1: Demographic information

**Instruction:** please circle  or highlight your answer in Section 1.

1. What is your degree?
  - a) Bachelor's degree
  - b) Master's degree
  - c) Doctorate degree
2. What is your university major?
  - a) English language and literature
  - b) Teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL)
  - c) Translation studies
  - d) Applied linguistics
  - e) Others:.....
3. How long have you been teaching English?
  - a) 1-4
  - b) 5-9
  - c) 10-14
  - d) 15-9
  - e) 20+

### Section 2: TBLT questionnaire

**Instruction:** Please read the items carefully and put an **X** where you think matches your belief.

Focus	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Don't know	Agree	Strongly agree
1. In designing a task, the ultimate goal should be on the accuracy of utterances					
2. In a TBLT classroom, students should focus on conveying the message					
3. In a TBLT lesson, students can work both on their accuracy, and their fluency					
4. TBLT makes use of both focused and unfocused tasks					
5. A TBLT classroom is always learner-centered					
Gap					
1. In designing a task, there should always be a lack of knowledge (communicative or linguistic) between participants					
2. When doing the task, there should be a linguistic gap between learners doing the task					
3. When doing the task, there should be a communicative gap between learners doing the task					
Resources					
1. In a true TBLT lesson, learners should draw on what they've learned recently					
2. Completing a task is not restricted to any specific language aspects (specific grammar, vocab...)					
3. Tasks can include some model sentences so that students can use them in completing the task					
4. A TBLT classroom rejects the necessity of teaching grammar					
Outcome					
1. Doing a task should always result in solving a problem, achieving an outcome, or coming up with a decision					
2. Completion of the task means that students have displayed a correct form of language					
3. There is always a sense of achievement at the end of the task					
4. A TBLT lesson should result in output production					