EXAMINING THE BACKWASH EFFECT OF TASK-BASED LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT ON READING SKILLS OF EFL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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Abstract

This study primarily focused the EFL undergraduate students at a public university in Pakistan. In this study, task-based language assessment (TBLA) was used to assess reading skills because it is one of the most assessed language skills in Pakistan. Reading is an academic skill. Supposedly, students should have good reading skills at higher education. Thus, there are three courses taught specifically focusing on English language at higher education and reading is a prime focus in all three of them. However, the reading test items are criticized for testing rather the writing skills instead of reading. Thus, a Task-based Language Assessment (TBLA) was used to check its backwash effect. TBLA has not been adopted in the local context yet, specifically in a reading context. Therefore, the present study was conducted to examine the backwash effect of TBLA on reading skills. In this study, action research design was followed within the qualitative research paradigm. Sample was drawn using convenient sampling. The participants were 12 undergraduate students. Students' reading journals, exit slips and teacher's diary were used as data collection instruments. The findings revealed that TBLA has a positive backwash effect on both teaching and learning in the EFL context. Further pedagogical implications are proposed in the study.

Keywords: backwash effect, Task-Based Language Assessment (TBLA), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), reading skills

Introduction

Assessment is an essential tool to achieve the objectives of teaching and learning.[1] Without assessment, the process of teaching and learning would be vague. In the same context, 'Backwash effect' or 'Washback effect' is 'the effect of testing on teaching and learning'.[2] However, high-stakes testing area is more focused with respect to backwash effect.[3] Consequently, the low-stakes testing remains ignored which results in negative backwash at a certain level. For instance, the researchers observed negative backwash of

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1. MatiullahJaan and Ikram Saeed Khan. "Examination washback over learning and teaching." *Journal of Education and Practice* 4, no. 26 (2013).

2. Arthur Hughes. *Testing for language teachers*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1.

3. KadriyeDilekAkpinar and BekirCakildereb. "Washback effects of high-stakes language tests of Turkey (KPDS and ÜDS) on productive and receptive skills of academic personnel". *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies* 9, no. 2 (2013): 81-94.

grammar test items taught at tertiary level in a public university of Pakistan.[4] Learning improves if low stake tests refines.

In addition to that, English is being taught from elementary to undergraduate level as a compulsory subject in almost all over the world[5] and reading is one of the essential skills in academics.[6] Ample studies have been conducted on teaching and testing of reading skill but the suggestions are hardly implemented into practice.[7] In Pakistan, there is a great deal of repetition observed in teaching and assessment practices of reading skills. The test items designed for reading at tertiary level considered writing test items more than reading.[8] It shows the gap in teachers' credibility and their assessment literacy.

Similarly, in Pakistan, very limited studies have been conducted on the alternative assessments, especially in the context of reading. In teaching of reading, the teachers lead the class instead of giving an opportunity to students to read on their own in classrooms. However, when it comes to assessment, the students are supposed to comprehend the text on their own without any prior practice. In the global and local contexts, it has been recommended to improve teaching and assessment methods in English language teaching (ELT). Therefore, English language teachers should promote the new methods of assessment like TBLA.[9]

In task-based language teaching (TBLT) and task-based language assessment (TBLA), the learners acquire language by experiencing the situation in the real context instead of learning it from the academic books only. 'Task-based tests need candidates to perform an activity which simulates a performance they will have to engage in outside the test situation'.[10] Basically, test situation limits the learning of students. In a traditional examination, students are more focused on informative purpose of reading whereas in TBLA students can opt for many purposes like survival, pleasure, informative, academic and the like. Similarly, 'language use task' was also defined as 'an activity that involves individuals in using language for the purpose of achieving a particular goal or objective in a particular situation'.[11]

Furthermore, assessment had become more challenging in the pandemic. As it was also pointed out that there is no reliability in online exams because students had many

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4. Kaleem Raza Khan and ShumailaShafket Ali. "Ignoring Pragmatic Competence while Testing Grammatical Competence: The Case of ELT in Pakistan", *ELF Annual Research Journal* 20 (2018): 1-22.
5. SabihaMansoor. (2005). *Language planning in higher education: A case study of Pakistan*. (USA: Oxford University Press, 2005).
6. Amy M. Elleman and Eric L. Oslund. "Reading comprehension research: Implications for practice and policy", *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 6, no. 1 (2019): 3-11.
7. Sultan Muhammad. "Second language reading instruction in Pakistan", *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* 70 (2013): 1403-1412.
8. Muhammad Kaleem Raza Khan. "Washback effects of English language testing in Pakistan", *SPELT Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (2003): 1-7.
9. Rai Zahoor Ahmed and SitiJamilahBtBidin. "The effect of task based language teaching on writing skills of EFL learners in Malaysia", *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics* 6, no. 03 (2016): 207.
10. David Nunan. *Task-based language teaching*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 114.
11. Bachman, Lyle F., and Adrian S. Palmer. *Language testing in practice: Designing and developing useful language tests*. ed. 1. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996): 44.

resources to cheat.[12] Similarly, for the reading tests, students could easily take help from different sources in the meantime. Thereupon, it drew my attention to change the whole assessment method altogether. Therefore, I chose to assess reading through task-based assessment which was easier, only if the teacher is ready to pay the labor required for TBLA to increase test reliability. Thus, the current study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the backwash effect of task-based language assessment on reading skills of EFL undergraduate students?

2. What is the backwash effect of task-based assessment on teaching in EFL context?

Literature Review

It has always been a concern of professionals to monitor where their teaching and learning practices stand, therefore, assessments are considered the major source of improvement in this process. The scholars suggested that tests have backwash effects on teaching and learning processes.[13] Rich literature has proved the influence of testing on learners, teachers, and their teaching methodologies.[14] However, all of the studies targeted large-scale, standardized tests, such as entrance exams and proficiency tests. [15] Only few of them have explored the backwash effects of small-scale testing areas. For instance, the research scholars conducted a descriptive study on secondary level students in Pakistan. They used survey method to collect the data. Total 100 students were selected using random sampling technique and 50 teachers were selected using purposive sampling technique. The instruments included questionnaire, test and observation checklist. The results pointed out that backwash effect exists for language teaching and it is heavily dependent on the teaching methodologies used by the teachers.[16]

A great deal of literature offered insight on the backwash effects of assessments in different contexts. For instance, the effect of the university entrance examination was examined on the use of the grammar-translation method in Japan through empirical research. The data was collected through classroom observation and teaching materials. The researcher found that the entrance examination failed to play any significant role in the choice of teaching methodology.[17] On the contrary, it was discovered that the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) affected language teachers on the content of

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[13]. J. Charles Alderson and Dianne Wall. "Does washback exist?" *Applied linguistics* 14, no. 2 (1993): 115-129.
[14]. David Allen. "Investigating washback to the learner from the IELTS test in the Japanese tertiary context." *Language Testing in Asia* 6, no. 1 (2016): 1-20.
[15]. Liying Cheng. *Changing language teaching through language testing: A washback study*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
[16]. Muhammad Arfan Lodhi et al. "Impact of washback on ESL students' performance at secondary level." *International Journal of English Linguistics* 8, no. 6 (2018): 227-239.
[17]. Yoshinori Watanabe. "Does grammar translation come from the entrance examination? Preliminary findings from classroom-based research." *Language Testing* 13, no. 3 (1996): 318-333.

instruction and teaching strategies.[18] In this study, classes were observed and interviews of teachers and students were conducted. In another instance, a study was conducted on backwash effect to investigate the impact of a large-scale literacy test on second language (L2) students in Canada.[19] The results of that study indicated that the reading test formats, text types, skills, strategies, and writing tasks eminent impact on L1 and L2 learners. Later, it was also investigated whether the positive backwash benefited the low-achievers. The participants of the study were 83 university students from Taiwan. Mixed method was used in the study including pre-test and post-test questionnaires and individual interviews as the research instruments. The results showed that cooperative learning with peers had a positive backwash effect on low-achievers.[20] In another study, the effects of entrance exam were also tested in Indonesia which is a standardized test to determine students' entry into universities. They investigated the teachers' attitude along with the backwash effects of the test. The teachers did not approach the methods that only focused on the contents of the test. Rather, they were more focused on the curriculum. As a result, they achieved the positive backwash effect of the tests.[21] On the other hand, the negative backwash effect of Iranian National University Entrance Exam (INUEE) on the English learning process was observed.[22] He found that the teachers aimed to pass the test with good grades and they did not follow up the real-life language use. Similarly, the findings suggested the negative backwash effect of TOEFL test in Vietnam by collecting the data through classroom observations and analyzing the teaching materials. The researcher found out that the teaching material was highly influenced by the textbook, hence it produced negative backwash effect on teaching and learning.[23]

In the same way, a study was conducted to investigate the backwash effects of intermediate English examination in Pakistan.[24] The study used qualitative data collection method and interviewed the teachers and students to understand their views. The participants were 6 teachers and 6 students. The results indicated highly negative backwash on teaching methodology, content and learning. The teachers only taught the things that were available in the past papers. Though the students scored better in the tests, they were still found inefficient in the language proficiency. Basically, in the name of language teaching and learning, the students end up doing rote learning only. In addition to that, the backwash effects of the English assessment system have also been examined

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[20]. Mei-Sheng Chao. "A study of backwash effects in English proficiency testing on university low-achieving students." *Asia Pacific Journal of Contemporary Education and Communication Technology* 4, no. 1 (2018): 1-11.

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[22]. Leila Mahmoudi. *The washback effect of Iranian National University entrance exam (inuee) on pre-university english teaching and learning*, PhD diss., University Malaya, 2014.

[23]. Melissa Barnes. "The Washback of the TOEFL iBT in Vietnam." *Australian Journal of Teacher Education* 41, no. 7 (2016): 158-174.

[24]. AsmaAftab et al. "Investigating the washback effect of the Pakistani Intermediate English Examination." *International Journal of English and Literature* 5, no. 7 (2014): 149-154.

over the new curriculum of secondary schools in Bhutan.[25] Questionnaires were used to collect data from 56 EFL secondary school teachers. The study suggested that the new curriculum and assessment system had positive as well as negative backwash effects; the teachers' motivation proved to give the positive effect and the factors affecting assessments like content validity and time management prompted negative backwash simultaneously. Furthermore, the backwash effects of English National Examination were also understood at three levels: low-level achievers, moderate-level achievers and high-level achievers in Indonesia.[26] The instruments used in this qualitative research were observation, interviews, open-ended questionnaires and documents. The research was conducted on three schools in the urban area of Indonesia. Research participants were the teachers and students of 11th and 12th grade who were associated with three schools. The researchers found out that the high-level achievers encountered more positive backwash effect in both the teaching practices and students' learning outcomes.

Moreover, it can be observed in the literature that the backwash effect has also influenced different aspects of language teaching such as teaching material, teaching methodologies, curriculum, learning strategies, learners' motivation and the attitudes of students and teachers. Teaching is directly affected by the way it is assessed, therefore it is seen to be a potentially valuable tool in persuading participants to adopt new practices.[27] There are many forms of alternative assessments which have been applied widely in the field of language assessments, such as students' journals, portfolios, self-assessment, peer-assessment, conferences, and interviews.[28] Until recently, most research has focused on the effects of task-based assessment in writing and speaking skills.[29] This assessment method has been adopted in language assessment in the Asian context as well. The researcher conducted this mixed method study in China at college level education. The underlying reasons were identified and developed a new foreign language teaching model that incorporates task-based teaching and testing based on the widely accepted testing theory.[30]In the Pakistani context, Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) has been promoted by language teachers to improve speaking skills of the learners.[31] In another study, the scholars incorporated TBLT with technology while using smartphones to teach writing skills to undergraduate students in a public university in Pakistan. The result proved that the innovative teaching methods motivated learners to participate in the

[25]. Robert Kirkpatrick and Gyem Kinley. "Washback effects of the new English assessment system on secondary schools in Bhutan." *Language Testing in Asia* 2, no. 4 (2012): 1-28.
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[27]. Anthony Green. "Washback in language assessment". *International Journal of English Studies* 13, no. 2 (2013): 39-51.
[28]. Douglas H. Brown. "*Language assessment: Principles and classroom practices"*. (London: Pearson Education, 2003).
[29]. Gabriel Albino. "Improving Speaking Fluency in a Task-Based Language Teaching Approach: The Case of EFL Learners at PUNIV-Cazenga", *SAGE Open* 7, no. 2 (2017): 1-11.
[30] Du, Mojun. "Integrating Task-based Teaching and Testing in College English Context." *International Journal of Frontiers in Sociology* 3.3 (2021).
[31] Aisha Majeed and Natasha Memon. "Task-based language teaching: An Efficacious and innovative approach to develop speaking skills and fluency of ESL". *Pakistan Journal of Educational Research* 5, no 2 (2022): 150-165.

activities[32]. As all the productive skills require practice, so, this method had a direct impact on learners' writing skills. Most recently, an empirical study was conducting in India with ESL learners while using TBLA. This study is significance in the context of task designing. Robinson's Cognitive hypothesis is used to design the tasks for TBLA in this study. It proved to be the evidence through empirical study that TBLA is effective assessment method for the speaking assessment.[33].Despite its growing concern in the literature, Task-based Language Learning (TBLL) is more prominent within writing and speaking skills and very less attention has been given to reading and listening skills.[34] Secondly, it is seen more popular as a teaching strategy rather than an assessment strategy in Pakistan. Thus, the present study focuses on the backwash effects of TBLA in teaching reading skills to EFL students in Pakistan.

It is evident in the literature that TBLT is very effective in language teaching, yet it is neglected by the teachers.[35] The researcher examined TBLT with respect to the attitudes of teachers while adopting it as a language assessment tool.[36] The results revealed that initially the teachers were passive towards the new approach in teaching but later when they implemented it, they found a huge difference in making the classes more interactive and interesting. In addition, a quantitative study was conducted in Iran on intermediate ESP students.[37] 30 students were divided in control group and experimental group in the treatment. The researchers studied whether task-based language teaching or the content-based language teaching is more effective. The findings of the study revealed that the students who were taught by TBLT performed better than the students who were taught by CBLT. Furthermore, another study was also carried out in Turkey on 4th grade students who were studying English.[38] The results showed that the assessment tasks significantly increased the language proficiency of the young learners. The students were seen enthusiastic and motivated in the assessment situations. Thus, it is suggested that TBLA was effective with the young learners as well.

Moreover, the researchers proposed that TBLA encourages students to make the use of language in a real and natural setting.[39] According to the scholars, it gives an opportunity

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[32] Rashid, Shaista, Una Cunningham, and Kevin Watson. "Task-based language teaching with smartphones: A case study in Pakistan." *Teachers and Curriculum* 17.2 (2017): 33-40.

[33] Tamboli, V. (2021). Using Task-Based Speaking Assessment to Measure Lexical and Syntactic Knowledge: Implications for ESL Learning. In *Task-Based Language Teaching and Assessment* (pp. 293-321). Springer, Singapore.

[34] Ahmed, Rai Zahoor, and SitiJamilahBtBidin. "The effect of task based language teaching on writing skills of EFL learners in Malaysia." *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics* 6, no. 03 (2016): 207.

[35]. Greg Ogilvie and William Dunn. "Taking teacher education to task: Exploring the role of teacher education in promoting the utilization of task-based language teaching." *Language Teaching Research* 14, no. 2 (2010): 161-181.

[36]. Ran Hu. "Task-Based Language Teaching: Responses from Chinese Teachers of English." *Tesl-Ej* 16, no. 4 (2013): 1-21.

[37]. Mohammad BagherShabani and Arad Ghasemi. "The effect of task-based language teaching (TBLT) and content-based language teaching (CBLT) on the Iranian intermediate ESP learners' reading comprehension." *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* 98 (2014): 1713-1721.

[38]. İskenderHakkıSarigoz and Fatıma NurFisne. "Integration of task-based language assessment into young learner classrooms." *Eurasian Journal of Applied Linguistics* 5, no. 3 (2019): 403-422.

[39]. Robert J. Misley et al. (2002). "Design and analysis in task-based language assessment". *Language Testing* 19, no. 4 (2002): 477–496.

to learners for acquiring language in the natural setting.[40] Task-based language assessment is formative in nature, so that, the learners improve their skills by the time of the term.[41] Furthermore, it was pointed out that the selection of the tasks for TBLA is very complex.[42] The tasks that reflect the relevant language use in the target domain should be used in TBLA. Task-based Language teaching is a constructivist practice in language teaching, therefore, it should be adopted in language testing as well. The scholar has also emphasized that in learning a foreign language, the students only read in the classroom setting and they hardly engage in reading activities outside the classroom.[43] Thus, I have also emphasized on TBLA for the similar reason as it gives the learners an opportunity to practice reading activities in the real-life context instead of reading the similar kinds of texts repeatedly. However, the task designing is considered most challenging and complex procedure which is another reason for reluctance towards the implication of this method.

In the context of literature discussed on backwash effects and task-based Language assessment, it is observed that both of the terms are considered very important in the paradigm of language teaching, testing and learning. However, there are very few studies in the literature which concern both the issues under one study. Hence, I decided to conduct a research which examines both the backwash effects and the implementation of TBLA in a language classroom to improve foreign language teaching, testing and learning. The examination of backwash is one of the finest ways to improve both the teaching and learning practices simultaneously. It is also closely associated with validity. Therefore, it is another advantage of investigating backwash to confirm the validity of teaching and learning practices. A great emphasis has been given to the backwash effects in the literature but there is very limited work done on reading skills, especially in the context of alternative assessments. Thus, this study aims to fill the gap by examining the backwash effects of task-based assessments of reading skills on EFL students at a public sector university in Pakistan. The findings of this study will benefit the ELTs in implementing the different strategies of teaching and testing of reading skill.

Methodology

The present study followed qualitative research paradigm. Qualitative research collects, analyzes and interprets non-numerical data in order to obtain insight that evolves the understanding of the context. The author emphasized that action research provides an opportunity for the teachers to conduct a research in their own context.[44] Since I am a language teacher, therefore I decided to use action research design for the study. I was also one of the participants in the study including 10 females and 1 male student. They were enrolled in the first year of undergraduate program in a public university in Karachi.

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[40]. Marta González-Lloret and Katharine B Nielson. "Evaluating TBLT: The case of a task-based Spanish program", *Language Teaching Research*, 19, no. 5 (2014): 525-549.
[41]. John M. Norris. *30 Task-Based Teaching and Testing: The handbook of language teaching,* (*Oxford, UK: Blackwell*, 2009): 578.
[42]. Susan D Benson. "Task-based language teaching: An empirical study of task transfer." *Language Teaching Research* 20, no. 3 (2016): 341-365.
[43]. Siao-cingGuo. "Using Authentic Materials for Extensive Reading to Promote English Proficiency." *English Language Teaching* 5, no. 8 (2012): 196-206.
[44]. Anne Burns. *Doing action research in English language teaching: A guide for practitioners*, (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2009).

They had studied English as a foreign language for twelve years. However, Urdu is the common language of the selected participants. Only two students had Sindhi and Punjabi as their mother tongues. The data was drawn from convenient sampling. Eventually, there was sudden switch to virtual teaching due to Covid-19 pandemic, which instantly decreased the sample size of the study. Nonetheless, ethical issues were taken into consideration. The informed consents were signed by the students before conducting the study. It was assured that the participation of the students was voluntary. Data was collected in the duration of two weeks within four sessions, each 45 minutes long. Due to the pandemic situation, the teaching mode was online. Moreover, three instruments were used in the study: students' reading journals in which they recorded their tasks performed outside the classroom, students' feedback in the form of exit slips which was the reflection on the tasks performed inside the classroom and the researcher diary.

Single action research cycle was used in this study. Initially, I observed the gaps in students' reading practices by conducting the pre-test of reading to measure the proficiency level and the reading speed of the participants. Then, I instructed the students about the tasks that were going to be conducted inside and outside the classroom. Later, when the participants attempted all the tasks, they were assessed on the activities. Wherever the gap was observed in the task practice, the improvement was brought in the teaching practices as well. Lastly, the post-test was conducted and the backwash effect was examined on the basis of their performances in pre-test and post-test.

The validity and reliability of the task assessment was also taken into the consideration. The participants had the free hand to explore the reading texts in the real-life context. The author points out 'action researchers don't need to worry about the generalizability of findings because they are not seeking to define the ultimate truths'.[45] Precisely, the students were advised to restrict themselves to the formal and academic texts to preserve the worth of learning. The teacher constantly monitored the activities of the students by interacting with them. Furthermore, in order to maintain the reliability of the scores, the scoring rubric was developed.

Analysis and Discussion

In the present study, qualitative research paradigm was used for data collection. Action research was preferred for this study because I am an ELT practitioner and I wanted to examine my own students in TBLA. I have been teaching English compulsory courses since a while now and I have noticed a great deal of reluctance for reading in our culture. In fact, I have always pointed it out to the students that improving reading skills will prove to be fruitful for them, but still I found them demotivated towards reading. The reason might be that the students were never taught to attempt reading for Target Language Use (TLU). However, they were more attentive towards the traditional comprehension practices through which they were likely to be assessed. The scholar discusses the characteristics of TBLA mentioning the authentic real-life task as its major concern. It

[45]. Geoffrey E. Mills. *Action Research: A Guide for the Teacher Researcher*. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 2011): 118.

necessitates language use that is goal-directed and meaning-focused and the like.[46]Thus, I decided to introduce task-based language teaching and assessment in reading classes in order to improve their motivation.

In the beginning, I introduced the process of task-based language teaching and assessment to the students. First, the pre-test was conducted to note their current proficiency level in reading. Second, they recorded their reading tasks in the reading journals. I asked them to mention date, time, purpose and source of the readings that they performed outside the classroom setting. Third, they were asked to write a detailed feedback on the class lectures which helped both the teacher and students in reflecting on the tasks performed inside the classroom setting. The backwash effect on learning was observed on the basis of their performance in pre and post-test. In order to examine the backwash effects of task-based language assessment, the researcher diary was maintained as the main source for the reflections. The diary included the critical understanding of the process at the part of the instructor.

Due to sudden shift to the online mode of teaching, both the teacher and the students had to face many problems in implementing the action plan. The students were found alien with technology as they lacked many resources, for instance, they did not have laptops and they attended the classes through their smartphones. Thus, performing reading activities on the small screen of smart phones proved to be very challenging for the students. They were camera conscious which became the major hindrance in virtual interaction. In contrast, online teaching for the teacher was very useful as all the teaching materials were instantly available on laptop and internet. However, the assessment was a bit challenging because of the distant interaction with the learners. In addition to that, the low bandwidth interconnection was sometimes very frustrating for both the teacher and the students.

Furthermore, the validity and reliability of the tasks was the matter of concern in the research as the students had enough freedom to select the reading texts on their own. The scholars proposed the characteristics for designing the reading test tasks.[47] I considered all four characteristics from their findings: rubric, input, response and the relationship between input and the response, to develop the tasks myself. Yet it is another debate but the students had to follow the instructions very strictly. The validity of tasks is highly considered in qualitative methods. They have offered few models for language assessment from which I have followed Task Model (TM) in the study because it is directly interlinked with task-based language assessment. The researchers defined it as, 'A task model (TM) is a schema for constructing and describing the situations in which examinees act'.[48] I have adopted that model in the current study. The researcher emphasized on task-based approach that it only focuses on the way the tasks are performed by the students.[49]

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[46] Noroozi, Majeed, and Seyyedmohammad Taheri. "The Distinguishing Characteristic of Task-based Language Assessment." *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* 12.5 (2021): 688-695.
[47]. Almas Ashraf and Sajida Zaki. "Analyzing characteristics of reading test tasks designed for undergraduate language assessment." *Journal of Independent Studies & Research: Management & Social Sciences & Economics* 14, no. 1 (2016).
[48]. *Ibid*.. 35.
[49]. Lyle F. Bachman. "Some reflections on task-based language performance assessment." *Language Testing* 19, no. 4 (2002): 453-476.

Thus, I evaluated the students based on their task performance only. To maintain the reliability in the results, I designed the rubric. The items of the rubric were selected from different sources to fulfill the requirements of task-based assessment. The analysis was done with reference to the research questions discussed earlier.

There are some students who have natural anxiety for the exams, however, task-based assessment proved to be an opportunity for such students. As one of the students commented:

> 'I am always nervous in reading exam. I know the reading skills but I can't apply them, I end up reading and rereading the text' (SA).

It showed that students knew some reading strategies but they were unable to use them in the real contexts. Another student commented:

> 'For the first time I am feeling like learning a language instead of just studying it as other subjects' (BR).

Using a language in real life tasks is far more motivating than learning it for the limited functions. In the class tasks, for instance, I asked the students to read the brochure and share some details, the students had a chance to perform scanning skill in that task. One of the students commented:

> 'I actively performed the tasks inside the class. I learned the scanning skill unconsciously in the task' (BS).

It depicted that students had a chance to build up reading skill in the natural setting. It helped in motivating the students to activate their reading skills. Nonetheless, it emphasized on the assessment to be taken in the normal setting.

Furthermore, the students maintained a reading journal which helped me assess their readings performed outside the classroom setting. As the participants were the students of Mass Communication department, therefore they read the newspapers on daily basis. One of the students was interested in fiction reading and she commented:

> 'The exam is taken on the subject that are not of my interest at all but I got a chance to be tested on my pleasure reading and I am so happy about it' (AH).

The traditional test items had negative impact on students' psychology. In TBLA, students were more contented on the nature of tasks used as test items. Another student wrote:

> 'I never felt English was being taught as a language, rather it always seemed to be a very dry subject for which I was bound to read and therefore I was never able to perform well due to the lack for vocabulary in that specific genre. In task-based language assessment, my overall reading skills are assessed and that's very interesting and motivating for me' (AB)

When the students were asked to prioritize their Target Language Use (TLU), they were found far more motivated and active readers. One of them mentioned that she read a blog on *'How to convert a percentage into CGPA' (MJ)*. This reflected the reading attempted

for TLU. Likewise, the students also mentioned the readings of social media posts, text messages, cooking recipes and reviews on different subjects as well. Many of them also mentioned the readings of the course books and handouts for the academic purposes. The overall performance of the students throughout the sessions was remarkable. After the implementation of action plan for two weeks, the students showed up very motivated and improved their skills which was finally tested in the post test. In the post test, the students outperformed the pretest which reflected the positive backwash. Thus, it can be said that task-based language assessment was effective in language teaching. Therefore, it should be implemented widely in ELT.

During the analysis, it was noted that the participation of teachers is equally significant in task-based language assessment. The teachers' labor increased in TBLA because designing the tasks was a very complex process. Moreover, when it is an action research, the results automatically depend on teachers' participation to design the tasks which engage the learners effectively in reading comprehension process inside and outside the classroom. Likewise, I as a teacher-researcher had to face many difficulties. Since, I had to switch to the online mode of teaching due to Covid-19 pandemic, it caused many problems in the research process. For instance, the number of participants instantly decreased in the online sessions. The problem of internet connectivity constantly remained with us. In order to monitor the tasks performed outside the classroom, I had to engage in personal interaction with students to monitor their reading activities performed outside the classroom. However, it was worth doing it because the students became habitual of reading very soon. It also helped me monitor the students while performing the tasks, but I was overburdened as I had to remain in contact with students all the time. Thus, if the teachers are facing problems in assessing students in the outside setting then they may assess the students on their performance inside the classroom only. The main idea is to engage the students in real life task situation enable them to use language in context.

In addition to that, I believe explaining a task is very challenging. Sometimes, I felt that students must have understood what they were supposed to do but after reading the feedback of students I realized that proper explanation on the tasks is essential in task-based activities. The researcher also seconds on this point and provides three stages of task planning; at the first stage, it is the responsibility of the teacher to give clear instructions to the students.[50] Secondly, students discussed the tasks with the teacher and among peers to confirm if they have understood it completely. Lastly, the teacher had to explain if students had any difficulty in comprehending the task. Hence, I followed the stages right after the second session.

Moreover, in task-based language teaching and assessment, I felt more connected to the students during the process. I was not acting as the instructor or the examiner only, but I was able to communicate with them as their peers. It provided students the comfort zone and they were very confident and motivated. It also provided a chance to overcome the barriers in performing the tasks. I was able to see the gaps in their skills. I was able to instantly resolve the problems. However, it can be said that the positive backwash was

[50]. Jane Willis. *A framework for task-based learning*. (Harlow: Longman, 1996).

achieved in teaching as the teacher was constantly in engaged in the process of improvement.

Conclusion

To sum up, it can be said that task-based language assessment for teaching reading skills proved to be effective as it gave positive backwash effect on both teaching and learning. The teachers should look for the available opportunities to improve their teaching practices instead of following the traditional and ineffective methods blindly. Task-based language assessment had visible impact on students' learning. They were motivated to engage in tasks which helped them implement the reading skills in the target language use. Moreover, the assessment took place within learning environment which made the students emotionally active towards assessments. While the teacher's labor increased in order to design the tasks, the students were observed far more relaxed in performing the tasks.

However, the validity and reliability of the tasks have to be taken into consideration while designing the tasks. For instance, if the reliability of the tasks performed outside the class is complicated then the teacher can only assess the students on the basis of the tasks performed inside the classroom setting. To draw the attention of future researches, there were a few limitations in the study: the teaching mode was online and the sample size was small. The research gaps could be filled up by considering the tasks in a more detailed manner. Other language skills could also be used in TBLA. It is also evident from the findings that formative assessments must be followed as it proved beneficial for both teaching and learning.

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