

# Improving the reading proficiency of mature students through a task-based language teaching approach



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**Background:** Mature age admission at universities is increasing rapidly all over the world and Ghanaian universities, both private and public, are no exception. The language proficiency of the admitted mature students, especially in reading, is often low, which affects their comprehension abilities and academic work.

**Objectives:** The purpose of the study was to evaluate the effectiveness of a task-based language teaching approach to improve the reading proficiency of mature students.

**Method:** An intervention using a designed instructional model was undertaken with a group of mature students. Control groups were included and instructed through the traditional mode. The study used a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, with pre and post-tests, interviews, and observations. The quantitative data were analysed using *t*-tests in combination with effect sizes, and the qualitative data were analysed through content analysis.

**Results:** The results showed that the mature students who participated in the intervention obtained higher post-test scores than the control groups. The improvement in their reading proficiency as shown in the test results was statistically significant, with large effect sizes. The qualitative data supported the findings of the quantitative data and provided further insight into the improvement of the experimental group. For example, frequent feedback, an enabling classroom environment, motivation, and collaborative learning were some of the factors that emerged as contributors to the experimental group's improved post-test results.

**Contribution:** The research has been beneficial in providing an alternative teaching pedagogy for mature students.

**Conclusion:** Based on the findings, recommendations are made for the use of an adapted task-based language teaching approach for improving the reading proficiency of mature age students.

**Keywords:** task-based language teaching (TBLT); reading proficiency; mature students; intervention; instructional model.

## Introduction

Reading proficiency is vital to academic success. Researchers acknowledge that low reading proficiency of students is a barrier to successful learning and, consequently, negatively affects academic performance (Bharuthram 2012; Pretorius 2002). Some researchers have emphasised a direct relationship between English reading proficiency and academic performance for students who are instructed through the English language (Lukhele 2003; Pretorius 2000; Pretorius & Bohlmann 2003). Considering the language threshold required for academic reading, there is the need for an effective teaching methodology that will improve the language and reading proficiency levels of students in order to enhance their learning and consequently academic performance.

In addition, mature students (students who are 25 years and above and are admitted through the special mature entrance admission process without university entrance examination) lag behind in academic performance, usually as a result of their low language and reading proficiency (Ryu 2020), and yet their numbers at university level are increasing rapidly. Currently, there is a high number of mature students enrolled in various tertiary institutions in Ghana (Adu-Yeboah & Forde 2011; Yusif & Ofori-Abebrese 2017). Although the enrolment of this group of students who have been known to have specific academic needs (Van Rhijn et al. 2016) is increasing yearly, there is little support in most institutions in Ghana and in Africa to help them succeed academically (Adu-Yeboah & Forde 2011). In most universities support services are general and are offered to all first-year students without any specific support for mature students. Yet these students have specific challenges that require tailored attention. Considering the challenges of mature students,

such as lack of confidence and motivation (Adu-Yeboah & Forde 2011; Amponsah et al. 2018), very low language and reading proficiency, and a high preference for socialised or collaborative learning, the task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach has been recommended as a viable approach (Carless 2009; Ellis 2017) that may help to improve the language and the reading proficiency of these students. This article therefore reports on a study using TBLT instruction to improve the language and reading proficiency levels of mature students.

Although research on TBLT has been undertaken in various contexts at different levels of education, it has not been applied to mature students in Ghana. This research, therefore, adds to the research on TBLT by including a Ghanaian setting and by focusing on first-year mature students at university level. The aim of the study was to evaluate a context-specific, task-based approach to improve the language and reading proficiency levels of mature university students in Ghana. The objectives of the study were to:

- determine the reading proficiency levels of mature students compared to non-mature students.
- investigate any significant improvement in the reading proficiency levels of the cohort of mature students after the application of TBLT.
- determine students' opinions of the TBLT intervention programme.

The article first reviews literature on the importance of reading comprehension, mature students' language and reading proficiency levels, and the importance of TBLT in improving the language and reading proficiency levels of students. The theoretical framework and instructional framework that guided the study are then presented, followed by the methodological aspects, the findings and the discussion.

## Literature review and theoretical framework

### Reading comprehension

Reading comprehension has been highlighted by many researchers as an important component in the academic context (e.g. Bharuthram 2012; Boakye 2012; Pretorius 2002). A high degree of reading comprehension, especially in the reading of academic texts in English, play an instrumental role in students' academic success in tertiary education (Andrianatos 2018; Pretorius 2000; Van Dyk 2011). Palani (2012:91) states categorically that 'effective reading is the path to effective learning', and leads to successful academic achievement. In other words, for students to achieve academic success efficient reading is crucial. One of the reasons for this is that reading helps to build and develop cognitive abilities that are essential for learning. Scott and Saaiman (2016) explain that through proficient reading, one is able to make sense of the text being read and is able to understand the purpose of the text to facilitate comprehension. Consequently, students who exhibit low

reading proficiency (i.e. interpretation, comprehension and evaluation of texts) may encounter challenges in coping with their academic work. Such students may not be able to understand the text being read (Scott & Saaiman 2016). Thus, advanced reading comprehension is required for successful learning (Bastug 2014), especially at tertiary level. Reading comprehension ability is an indispensable competence, which is fundamentally interrelated to the process of education, and students need to achieve this skill in order to achieve academic success. In higher education, students are required to read large volumes of discipline-related texts independently, and to successfully analyse the information for academic work (Bharuthram 2012; Boakye 2017). To do this they need to read for interpretation, comprehension, and evaluation among other abilities. Lewin (2005) contends that the ability to read complex texts is one of the major indicators of success in higher education. In addition, Boakye (2017) argues that without an appropriate level of proficiency in reading, students cannot be said to have the required academic literacy ability to operate at the higher education level. Considering the importance of reading proficiency in successful education, it is obvious that effective learning will not occur without efficient reading comprehension ability.

### Mature students' low language and reading proficiency

The primary challenges that the majority of mature students face, especially those without secondary education, are coping with university-level education and being able to use the English language at the required level for reading and writing (Boston 2017; Burnell 2016). English is the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) at all educational levels in Ghana, and proficiency in the English language at the required educational level is therefore necessary for educational achievement. However, the majority of mature students struggle with academic reading and writing in English and their level of academic language proficiency (cognitive academic language proficiency [CALP], as introduced by Cummins 2008) is also low (Adu-Yeboah & Forde 2011, Yusuf & Ofori-Abebrese 2017). Moreover, many struggle to speak English fluently as noted by Leherr (2009) in the USAID report on Ghana. These challenges have been said to emanate from the supposed gap between basic education and university (Tones et al. 2009:509), and the fact that the majority of mature students have been out of the education system for some time (Burnell 2016). As a result, they seem to encounter difficulty in using the language of learning for academic purposes when they are back in school. They struggle to understand reading materials and are unable to write academically to the satisfaction of their instructors. Kantanis (2002) discovered that mature students enrolled in Australian universities have challenges communicating effectively in writing and speaking. Fragoso et al. (2016) reports that one of the challenges faced by mature students who transition to higher education is academic language. In a study conducted by Williams (2021), he reports that one of the

barriers to participation and success among mature students at a university in the Western Cape, South Africa, is language and academic writing ability.

However, Tones et al. (2009:507) believe that mature students have the potential to succeed in their studies, if given the relevant and appropriate support. They lament that, unfortunately, 'research on support services to assist and promote retention among this demographic is virtually non-existent'. O'Carroll et al. (2017) suggest that universities need to reassess their teaching and learning strategies to enhance mature students' learning experience in higher education. They add that a student-centred learning approach (e.g. TBLT), which ensures a collaborative and interactive environment, would be more appropriate than a teacher-centred traditional language teaching approach.

### **Task-based language teaching as a teaching approach to improve language and reading proficiency of students**

Language teaching methods have evolved over the centuries in response to new learning theories (Richards & Theodore 2014). When a language teaching method is practised over time, the needs of students or the challenges associated with the particular method cause it to give way to other newer methods, as new learning theories are introduced (Celce-Murcia 2001). Some of the approaches are similar to one another mainly because they evolve from the same original teaching method, while others differ greatly. The traditional language teaching methods are the oldest language teaching approaches that have guided language teaching for decades. Some of the traditional methods are the grammar-translation method, the audio-lingual method, and the community language learning approach. These approaches are mainly teacher centred. Communicative language teaching and TBLT are considered contemporary compared to the earlier traditional methods and are more learner centred (Celce-Murcia 2001; Richards & Theodore 2014; Schunk 2012).

Task-based language teaching is a student-centred approach and is considered to be a more appropriate outcome-based language teaching method than the traditional approaches (Mozhgan 2016). This teaching approach requires students to learn by engaging in a series of activities in pairs or in groups (Mozhgan 2016; Purna 2013; Willis & Willis 2011). The students provide an oral or written report after the task and the teacher gives them feedback. Based on the feedback received, students make corrections on their task reports. Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) indicate that when language students are engaged in tasks as characterised by TBLT, they have the opportunity to interact with their peers, which eases their learning and helps to improve their language proficiency. When students have discussions with their peers, they are able to get further understanding on learning areas that may seem challenging (Skehan 2002). Hismanoglu and Hismanoglu (2011) further explain that the TBLT approach provides students with a natural context in

which to improve their ability to communicate and share ideas, thus enhancing their language learning and comprehension abilities. McDonough and Chaikitmongkol (2007) add that learning takes place by engagement in appropriate tasks and that language is learnt by using the language. The strength of TBLT lies in the tasks, as it offers students the opportunity to use the language in completing tasks. Córdoba Zúñiga (2016) sheds more light on the efficacy of TBLT by explaining that it helps to improve productive and receptive aspects of language. Skehan (2002) further points out that through students' interaction with one another within a TBLT approach, they are afforded the opportunity to negotiate meaning, which consequentially helps them in their language learning, particularly their reception (reading) and production (writing) of language. A teaching approach that allows students to use language to engage in task activities as required in TBLT seems to be an appropriate approach to improve students' language learning and reading comprehension abilities.

Furthermore, a number of researchers confirm that the TBLT approach helps improve students' reading ability (Al Muhaimed 2013; Mao 2012; Prasetyaningrum 2018; Shabani & Ghasemi 2018). Prasetyaningrum (2018) and Shabani and Ghasemi (2014) applied TBLT in different contexts and concluded that the approach is effective and beneficial in enhancing the reading comprehension abilities of English learners. Mao (2012), Al Muhaimed (2013) and other researchers have also advocated the importance of TBLT in improving the reading proficiency of mature students. Mao (2012) concluded from his study, which used 50 learners at school level, that TBLT is an effective teaching approach for English reading.

At the tertiary level, Mozhgan (2016) applied TBLT with freshmen medical students at an Iranian university in a quasi-experimental study, in which 30 of the 60 participants received instruction through TBLT and the other 30 served as control using other language teaching methods. He discovered that the TBLT approach helped to enhance the reading comprehension ability of the 30 medical students in the TBLT group. Similarly, Al Muhaimed (2013) conducted a comparative study between TBLT and the traditional or conventional methods of English teaching. These conventional methods required practices such as memorisation, answering questions, individual learning and teacher-centredness as opposed to group learning and student-centredness evident in TBLT. The treatment group underwent 10 weeks of English language instruction through TBLT, whereas the control group was taught through traditional or conventional methods. The results showed that TBLT helped to increase students' reading comprehension scores more than the traditional teaching methods. Other benefits of the TBLT approach are shown in Chen and Wang's (2019) study that investigated students' competences in an intensive reading course. They concluded from their study that TBLT develops students' capacity for self-improvement and self-autonomy, increases their intrinsic motivation, enhances their interactive communication skills and promotes self-determination.

Considering the advocacy of the TBLT approach, the study being reported on in this article was undertaken.

Most of the studies on TBLT have been undertaken in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts and with regular students. The efficacy of the teaching approach on mature students in an English second-language context seems virtually unknown. The study, therefore sought to answer the following questions:

- What is the reading proficiency level of the cohort of mature students?
- Would there be an improvement in the reading proficiency of mature students after application of TBLT, and to what extent?
- What is the cohort of mature students' opinions on the TBLT intervention programme?

### Theoretical framework and instructional model

The study was grounded on the constructivist theory propounded by constructivists such as Vygotsky (1943), Piaget (1936) and Bruner (1984). The theory is based on observations and scientific studies concerning how people learn (Bada 2015). It propounds that individuals construct much of what they learn and understand (Bruning et al. 2004). This means that new information is reconciled with our pre-existing ideas and experiences, or perhaps changing what we believe, or possibly discarding the new information as immaterial (Bruning et al. 2004). This theory was chosen because this study concentrates on mature students who have a wealth of experiences, either from their previous studies, or from a work context or even from life in general and they can apply these experiences in their learning.

The instructional model used for this study focuses on the principles, strategies, activities, skills and knowledge that should be available for effective teaching of mature second-language students to improve their language and reading comprehension abilities. The major components of the model are fourfold. First, the principles of constructivism from Bruner (1973a); second, the phases of TBLT, adapted from Ellis (1993; 2003, 2009) and Willis (1996;1998); third, the (modified) principles of cooperative learning from Johnson, Johnson and Holubec (1991); fourth, the activities to guide the teaching and learning from Prabhu (1987) and Richards (2006). Each component has a particular element vital for effective teaching and learning of a second language by mature students.

In the instructional model for mature students, the different components work together in synergy. All four components (see Figure 1) are necessary to provide a complete instructional framework for teaching mature students. The principles of constructivism and the principles of cooperative learning collectively form the basis of the instructional model. They are the foundation on which the teaching and learning activities and the phases of TBLT are built. The model is also informed by experiential learning and non-defensive learning in relation to the mature students' experiences and need for a non-threatening environment.

Considering the challenges faced by mature students who are also second-language learners (such as low confidence levels, lack of motivation, writing problems, grammar, spelling and vocabulary challenges, among others; see Adu-Yeboah & Forde, 2011; Amponsah et al. 2018; Leherr 2009), TBLT seems to be an appropriate approach to be employed in teaching. Based on the constructivism theory and the challenges of mature students, the instructional model was proposed with the assumption that when used effectively, it will enhance effective teaching of mature university students to enable them to overcome their specific challenges and to help improve their language proficiency and reading comprehension. As explained in the previous section, with the constructivist theory, new information is reconciled with pre-existing ideas and experiences. The four phases of TBLT represent the various stages that each lesson has to undergo to help address the language needs of the mature students. During lessons, the various teaching and learning activities are employed and students work with their peers collaboratively.

## Research methods

### Research design

The study was a quasi-experimental design as the students who participated in the study were those assigned to one of the researchers. In addition, a mixed-methods approach was used for the study. In other words, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. Creswell (2014) explains a mixed study as a method of inquiry that involves both quantitative and qualitative data, merging the two forms of data and using distinct designs that may include philosophical assumptions and theoretical frameworks. Creswell (2013) proposes that the convergent parallel mixed-method design requires both qualitative and quantitative data to be collected and analysed separately, and then integrated for an overall interpretation. In line with Creswell's (2013) convergent parallel mixed-methods processes, the quantitative data from pre and post-tests were collected and analysed separately, and then integrated with the qualitative data collected from interviews and an outsider's observations for an overall interpretation.

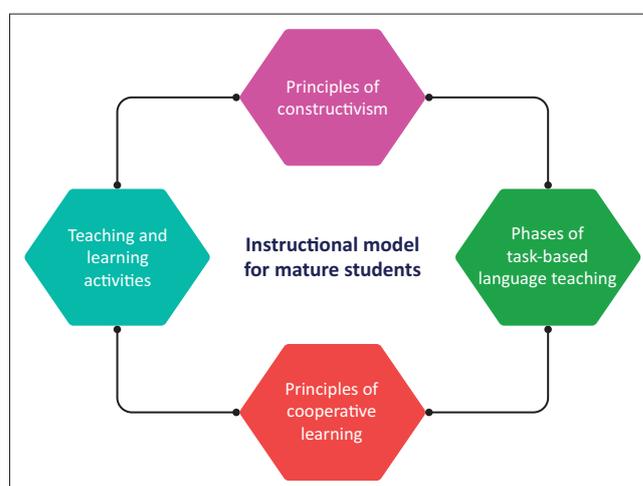


FIGURE 1: Instructional model for mature students.

## Participants

The participants were students assigned to one of the researchers for the General English language course at the institution. Three groups of first-year students participated in the study (mature experimental group; mature control group; non-mature control group). Whereas the experimental group of mature students was taught separately, the other two groups (mature and non-mature) were combined for instruction in the traditional mode. For ethical reasons, students were informed of the study and had to indicate their consent, by signing an informed consent form.

The non-mature students were admitted through the regular admission process, with their secondary or high school certificates and diplomas, and were mainly younger than 25 years. This group was instructed through the traditional teaching method of teacher centredness and served as the first control group. The mature students were admitted through a special mature student entrance examination required for students who were 25 years or older. The mature students were split into two groups: one was instructed through the traditional mode and followed the original curriculum of the course, in the same way as the non-mature group. This group served as a second control group. The other mature group was the experimental group, which was instructed through the TBLT approach.

Although students from all three groups took the tests, interviews were conducted with only 15 students who were purposely selected from the experimental group based on their performance in the pre-test (lowest, average and highest) in order to get a balanced response from all levels of performance. In total, 60 participants were used for the study and were distributed in the three groups as shown in Table 1.

## Instruments

Three main instruments were used to elicit data for the study and comprise tests (pre and post), interviews, and an outsider's observation. The pre and post-tests administered to both the control and experimental groups were taken from the Test of Academic Literacy Levels (TALL), which is managed by the Inter-Institutional Centre for Language Development and Assessment (ICELDA) based in South Africa. This test is used to determine first-year university students' literacy and reading skills to help determine their literacy levels (Le, Du Plessis & Weideman 2012). The test consists of six sections: (1) scrambled sentences that students have to reorder, (2) vocabulary section that requires students to choose the best possible answer from a list of word options, (3) verbal reasoning, which requires students to select the best statement based on how they understand the

text, (4) interpreting graphs and visual information, (5) comprehension, and (6) grammar-to-text relation. Although the test was developed to assess academic literacy levels of students, the sections are reading based, and therefore essentially test reading proficiency as well (Boakye 2012). The test was used to determine the reading proficiency levels of the students before and after the intervention programme.

The second instrument, semi-structured interviews, was used to ascertain students' views on the advantages and disadvantages of the teaching approach, the ways in which it could be improved, their overall impression of the method, and the role of the lecturer, as well as that of the students.

The third instrument was an observation inventory based on a colleague, a fellow English lecturer, observing the intervention classes. This observer did not participate in any activity but only observed as an outsider. Major themes that guided the observation were preparation, language use, students' participation (which included their confidence level), lesson presentation, classroom management and atmosphere, and use of technology. The observer wrote comments based on the themes on the observation checklist.

## Procedure and data collection

The pre-test was conducted during the first week of lectures. The subsequent 12 weeks of lectures were observed for the intervention group, while the control groups had traditional mode teaching on the General English language course. The post-test was written at the end of the 12 weeks of teaching. The interviews with selected students to solicit their views and opinions of the TBLT approach, and the intervention as a whole, were also held at the conclusion of the 12-week teaching period. The interviews were recorded for later transcription and interpretation.

Ethical considerations were observed, as permission was granted by the institution and students' consent was sought and granted.

## The intervention

Twelve weekly lessons of General English language were designed for the groups. The course consists of the applications of grammatical systems in the English language to construct grammatical sentences, paragraphs and essays. Specific topics covered during the period were avoiding sentence errors, punctuation, the writing process, modes of writing, sources of information and documentation. The control groups underwent the traditional teaching as has been done over the years. This mode of teaching is teacher-centred with the lecturer introducing the topics and explaining the concepts in a given lesson. Students participate by asking and answering questions. Assessments are mainly in the form of quizzes, an examination and occasional student presentations. Students may also work in groups, although this is not a frequent practice in traditional teaching.

**TABLE 1:** Participants distribution.

Group	<i>n</i>
A. Non-mature students (control)	20
B. Mature students (control)	18
C. Mature students (experimental)	22

The TBLT intervention group had task-based lessons, which were specifically designed to promote frequent independent reading by the students. Students had to read around each weekly topic and present reports orally and in writing. The lessons were based on real-life situations and included an underlying element of explicit grammar instruction. Because of the weekly task assigned to students, there was a lot of pressure on them to read which kept them focused.

The three phases (pre-task, during-task and post-task) of the TBLT approach as postulated by Willis (1998), with an additional phase (preparatory phase) included by the researchers, were used in the intervention. The *preparatory phase* set the tone for actual class activities, and was used to engage with the students informally on their academic and non-academic lives and to motivate them for the task ahead. This stage is essential as it helped to create an enabling environment and to get the students into a relaxed mood before lessons began. The second phase, the *pre-task phase*, was where actual teaching took place. Students were introduced to the task for the week and were told what was expected of them. The *during-task phase* required students to do their assigned tasks. Students collaboratively planned how their work would be presented, and a write-up was done to that effect in pairs and in groups. Finally, the *post-task phase* was used for reporting and evaluation. This stage is where the language needs of the students were addressed. The observations took place in the *pre-task*, *during-task* and *post-task* phases.

The experimental and the two control groups had a two-and-a-half-hour class per week and were taught by the same lecturer. The same lesson content was used in all three groups. The only variable that distinguished the experimental group from the control groups was the teaching approach – teacher-centred versus learner-centred, autonomous, TBLT approach. A post-test was written by both control and experimental groups at the end of the semester to determine the impact of TBLT on the experimental group and the extent of the impact.

## Data analysis

The pre-test and post-test results were analysed with both descriptive and inferential statistics. The descriptive analysis provided the general performance of the participants in terms of their mean scores and standard deviations. The inferential analysis allowed the researchers to understand the nature of the students' performance. For instance, the independent and paired *t*-tests were used to establish if the differences in the mean scores between the pre-test and the post-test were statistically significant. Cohen's *D* was further applied to determine the effect sizes. The interviews and outsider's observations were analysed through content analysis. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the responses were categorised under the emerging themes of *benefits*, *motivation*, *participation* and *challenges*. The

observation notes were analysed and grouped into pre-existing themes (preparation, language use, student participation, classroom management and atmosphere, use of technology and level of presentation).

## Results

### Test results

The results from the pre-test indicated that all the three groups had low reading proficiency levels before the intervention. However, the non-mature students started off better than the mature students. The scores of the two mature groups were similar. The non-mature group had a mean score of 35.76. The mature control group had a mean of 26.75, and the mature experimental group had a mean score of 25.96.

The results of the descriptive analysis show that before the intervention, although all three groups scored low, the two mature groups had similar scores, but the non-mature students scored higher.

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) test was conducted for statistical significance and showed that the difference between the non-mature and mature students was statistically significant with a *p*-value of 0.016. The difference between the two mature groups was not statistically significant, and thus the two mature groups started off on a similar level, though all three groups had low average scores of less than 50 out of 100.

The results of the post-test, however present a different picture. The mean scores are higher and indicate better performance from all three groups, as shown in Table 2. The non-mature group had a mean score of 38.20, the mature control group had a mean score of 28.56 and the mature experimental group had a mean score of 43.50. The mean score of the experimental group thus improved with a large margin from 25.96 in the pre-test to 43.50 in the post-test. Although all three groups showed improvement, the mature experimental group performed far above the other two groups. The descriptive analysis shows that the mature experimental group performed better than the mature control group and the non-mature group.

Based on the mean scores, a *t*-test (paired samples test) was conducted to determine whether the improvements were statistically significant. The results from the paired samples test show a statistically significant improvement for the mature intervention group at  $p < 0.00$  but not for the control mature group and the control non-mature group as shown in Table 3.

**TABLE 2:** Descriptive statistics of reading test results.

Reading test Total score 100	Participants	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Pre-test	A. Non-mature	35.76	13.038	11	69
	B. Mature control	26.75	11.438	4	53
	C. Mature experimental	25.96	11.468	6	49
Post-test	A. Non-mature	38.20	14.226	13	70
	B. Mature control	28.58	14.845	12	64
	C. Mature experimental	43.40	15.154	18	77

**TABLE 3:** Independent *t*-test, paired samples test and effect sizes.

Participants	Pre and post-tests 100	Mean	Standard deviation	Difference in means (level of improvement)	<i>p</i> -value	Effect size (Hedges's correction)
Non-mature	Post-test	38.20	14.226	2.05	0.41	0.185
	Pre-test	36.15	13.252	-	-	-
Mature control	Post-test	28.56	14.845	3.17	0.37	0.212
	Pre-test	25.39	10.176	-	-	-
Mature experimental	Post-test	43.50	13.154	16.36	< 0.001*	1.144
	Pre-test	27.14	11.184	-	-	-

\*, The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

**TABLE 4:** Bonferroni multiple comparisons among the groups.

Dependent variable	Group	Group	Mean	<i>p</i> -value
Post-test /100	B. Mature control	C. Mature experimental	-14.944*	0.004
		A. Non-mature	-9.644	0.116
	C. Mature experimental	B. Mature control	14.944*	0.004
A. Non-mature	A. Non-mature	B. Mature control	5.300	0.680
		C. Mature experimental	9.644	0.116
	B. Mature control	C. Mature experimental	-5.300	0.680

\*, The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

The Hedges's (1981) correction (small 0.2; medium 0.5; large 0.8) was further used to determine the effect sizes of the differences. Table 3 shows that the effect size for the improvement of the mature intervention group was large. The other two groups had minimal variations, which were not statistically significant and had small effect sizes.

Considering the differences in the pre-test and post-test mean scores of 2.05 for the non-mature, 3.17 for the mature non-intervention, and 16.36 for the mature intervention group, the mature experimental group showed comparatively bigger improvement. To determine whether the differences in the improvements of the groups were statistically significant, *t*-tests results with *p*-values showed that the improvement of the non-mature group was not statistically significant. Similarly, the improvement of the mature non-intervention group did not show a statistically significant difference between the pre and post-tests. However, the mature intervention group, which underwent the experiment, showed a statistically significant improvement with a difference of 16.36, at a *p*-value of < 0.001 and an effect size of 1.144.

In addition to the paired *t*-tests, independent *t*-tests were conducted among the three groups to determine whether the differences among the groups were statistically significant; the results showed a significant value of  $p = 0.006$ . The Bonferroni multiple comparisons were used to determine the specific differences. Table 4 provides the *p*-value for the statistically significant difference between the two mature groups in the post-test. However, there was no statistically significant difference between the mature intervention group and the non-mature group. In other words, the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant. Although the mature experimental group had a vast improvement, and the non-mature students had minimal improvement, the performance of the two groups in the post-test was not statistically significant, as the non-mature students had started off with higher scores in the pre-test.

A significant difference is observed between the mature intervention and the mature non-intervention (control) group with a significant *p*-value of 0.004. However, there was no difference between the mature intervention group and the non-mature group which puts the two groups on the same level. The interview responses shed light on the improvement of the mature intervention group and provide insight into how the improvement was achieved.

## Participants' responses from the interviews

Fifteen participants from the intervention class were interviewed to give their opinions on the intervention. Five students each were selected from those with high marks, average marks, and low performers to obtain a balanced view. From the responses, although all 15 participants had indicated that they had not heard about the TBLT approach before, they were highly impressed with the approach and gave different responses on how useful the approach was.

The respondents also shared their impression on the role of the lecturer and how their peers applied themselves and participated within the TBLT approach. To them, the teacher created an enabling environment for effective teaching and learning by motivating them, giving prompt feedback and engaging them at the preparatory phase. They also indicated that the weekly tasks developed their cognitive ability and also helped them improve their language and reading ability. They reported that although it was a bit challenging to get all the students to participate in the group assignments, nevertheless a significant number was available at any given time.

As expected from every teaching approach, the students shared their opinion on the challenges they observed with the approach. Most of them complained of time constraints which made it difficult for them to complete their task obligations within the stipulated time. Examples of responses are presented under the categories of benefits, motivation and challenges.

On how the weekly tasks benefited them, a number of students mentioned cognitive achievement and improved confidence:

'The weekly assignments were helpful. They made me think critically.' (Participant 19, High level, Male)

'The numerous tasks and assignment given were beneficial because the more I did the tasks, the more exposure I had with the language.' (Participant 1, Average level, Female)

'It was good. My confidence has increased because I had several opportunities to use the language during task activities.' (Participant 7, Low level, Female)

With regard to how the approach motivated them, the students shared on the preparatory phase and feedback:

'It was exciting to come to class early because we knew we would have time to talk to you informally before classes began. The interactions we had and the feedback you gave motivated us to work harder. Your human relation was perfect and I like it.' (Participant 17, Low level, Male)

'I was impressed with how you took your time to answer questions. Thank you.' (Participant 6, High level, Female)

The students shared their experiences on how their peers participated and the challenges they encountered during the programme:

'My fellow students did well. Most of them were very active for discussion [*sic*].' (Participant 4, Low level, Male)

'Not all my mates were willing to participate at all times especially with the take-home assignments. Sometimes, you had to call them severally before they respond [*sic*].' (Participant 3, High level, Female)

'It was difficult to complete the tasks because we had to go to work and also combine them with the weekly tasks as well.' (Participant 13, Low level, Male)

'There were other courses we were also taking so it was difficult to combine the tasks and the other courses.' (Participant 8, Low level, Male)

The interview responses indicated that the students were satisfied with the TBLT approach despite the challenges they encountered. The notes from the outsider's class observation aligned with the interview responses. The six preset themes used for the observations and the accompanying reports are presented below.

## Findings from class observation

Six preset categories that relate to TBLT (*preparation, language use, student participation, classroom management and atmosphere, use of technology and level of presentation*), from Al Muhaimed (2015), were modified and adapted to guide the observation. Under *preparation*, the observer recorded that materials were ready for classes to commence. There were also records of students being asked to sit in their groups of four for lessons. More importantly, the reports stated that students were engaged before lessons began.

On *language use*, it was recorded by the observer that at the pre-task phase, students had to engage with the topic for the day through reading and discussion. They were given texts to read and, occasionally, video clips to watch. These activities got students engaged throughout the lesson which enabled them to effectively participate in the lessons.

The observation report on how students were involved in class and their enthusiasm to participate indicate that students' participation and enthusiasm were high and increased progressively. Students were confident in their interactions. The word 'enthusiastic' occurred in almost all of the 12 observations. The fourth category for observation was *classroom management and atmosphere*. This category focused on how the lecturer ensured that the lessons ran smoothly and were orderly without distracting behaviours from students. From the observation notes it is evident that classroom management was a little challenging. Besides the first lesson, where students were still getting to know each other and thus not having much interaction, the subsequent weeks were noted to be very interactive and engaging. The high levels of

interaction and engagement created an exciting atmosphere for the students, but became noisy at times. Although student participation is helpful for language development (Tavoosy & Jelveh 2019), it may also create a noisy environment. A strategy that was used to lower the noise and bring order was for the lecturer to raise her hand when the room got noisy. Any student who saw the raised hand was to stop all activities and also raise their hand. This brought silence. On the *use of technology*, the observation notes indicate that smartphones, projectors and computers were used. Links to short videos and reading materials were provided to students in groups and pairs for them to read or watch using their electronic devices. For the sixth category, *level of presentation*, which considered the lecturer's presentation, the observer stated that the lecturer had total control over the subject area and made smooth and efficient presentations. The records indicated that the lecturer took time to explain concepts to the students and also allowed them to present their own views. Relevant information that students needed for their tasks was also provided. Some examples from the observer's notes are presented below:

**Week 1:** All materials needed for lessons were ready (reading materials, laptop, projector, markers etc.). Lecturer encouraged students that they should not be apprehensive and that they "would be able to make it".

**Week 2:** Students were getting used to each other but teacher managed class well.' Students were not shy of their peers. They understood they were all mature students and may have similar challenges. They began to have conversations on other topics outside class but lecturer reminded them to be focused.

**Week 2:** Smartphones, computers, projector were used which were very helpful for downloading lesson materials.

**Week 2:** Teacher was confident and delivered class smoothly. She was able to answer questions without difficulty.

**Week 3:** Very enthusiastic and confident students. They were excited about their task and took part in all discussions.

**Week 4:** Lecturer asked students to feel comfortable with the lessons. She inquired about their well-being and encouraged them to get in touch if there were any challenges.

**Week 4:** Lessons well delivered. Lecturer took time to repeat instructions. She asked appropriate questions and allowed students to think through and come out with new ideas.

**Week 5:** Not much of a challenge. Students comported themselves better than previous week. Lecturer was able to manage class.

**Week 11:** Delivery was on point. The lecturer provided all relevant information that was needed for the task and gave clarity on the task.

From the observations, it was recorded that adequate preparation was done before lessons began and the students,

full of enthusiasm, willingly participated in the weekly tasks in an enabling lesson environment. The activities engaged students in reading and reporting, thus frequent use of the English language. Frequent feedback was also given on their reports.

## Discussion

The pre-test results that were used to determine the homogeneity of the groups before the intervention show that students in all three groups, mature and non-mature, scored low marks in the reading test, as shown in the mean scores. However, the non-mature students performed better than the two mature groups. The Bonferroni multiple comparisons showed no statistically significant difference between the results of the two mature groups, but there was a statistically significant difference between the non-mature group and the two mature groups. The fact that the two mature groups did not show any significant difference indicates that the two mature student groups started off at the same level. Their low scores compared to the non-mature students indicate that the mature students had lower reading proficiency, which confirms studies by Burnell (2016) and Leherr (2009) that showed that mature students have serious reading challenges when they enter higher education. Although all the three groups performed poorly in the pre-test, indicating a general first-year student poor reading proficiency, the mature students performed even worse. This finding indicates that this group of students' reading challenges cannot be ignored and should be given serious attention through appropriate teaching support.

The post-test results showed that students in all three groups improved in their reading proficiency. However, while the non-mature students improved by 2.05, and the mature control group improved by 3.17, the experimental group improved by 16.36. The improvement of the experimental group was large and showed a better performance than the other two groups at a  $p$ -value of 0.00 and a large effect size of 1.144. The  $t$ -test, which compared the pre-test and post-test results showed statistically significant improvement. With regard to whether there will there be a significant improvement in the reading proficiency of mature students after application of TBLT, the test results show that there was a large improvement in the reading proficiency levels of the mature students after the TBLT intervention, and that this was statistically significant. The results show that the intervention had positive results on the reading proficiency of the intervention group. The Bonferroni multiple comparisons showed that the difference between the mature intervention group and the mature control group was statistically significant. The results further showed that the intervention had helped the experimental group to improve to the level of the non-mature group and better than the control group.

The large improvement of the experimental group compared to the control mature group and control non-mature group could be attributed to the TBLT approach, as all other factors

were controlled and the groups started off at a similar level. The results confirm studies by Mozghan (2016), Al Muhaimeed (2013), Chen and Wang (2013), Prasetyaningrum (2018), and Mao (2012). These researchers concluded from their studies that TBLT is effective in improving the reading proficiency of students after applying them in their various contexts.

The quantitative data from the tests were corroborated by the qualitative data from the interviews and observation. In other words, the large improvement observed in the experimental group was further explained in the interviews and the class observations. The interview reports indicated that all three groups of students (low, average and high) responded that the approach was helpful and had helped to increase their language and reading proficiency. Despite the different emphases by the different groups on how the approach had been helpful, it was evident that students from all three performance groups (high, average and low) had benefited from the use of the TBLT approach. Although the high performers did not report any significant challenges, the average and low performers had several opinions on the challenges they faced and how they overcame them. Both the average- and low-performing groups complained of time allocation, which was experienced to be insufficient for the tasks. They also complained of some of their peers not participating and the low performers also complained of the difficulties in combining other courses with their tasks. The predominance of tasks is a hallmark of TBLT and students have to frequently complete tasks within limited time periods. As students engaged in these tasks, which reflected real-life situations, they were exposed to the language which effectively improved their proficiency. It seems that as efficient as these tasks were, they put a lot of demands on students. The students were however excited about the fact that they could work with their peers collaboratively to achieve their task goals.

Despite the challenges, all three groups (high, average, low) of students were impressed with the lecturer's role during the intervention and how they were engaged and motivated to work. Both the average and low performers indicated that the teacher pressured them to accomplish their tasks, which was helpful as it kept them on their toes. Both groups (average and low) were also highly impressed with how the teacher devoted time to answering questions and giving prompt feedback. As reported by Sogunro (2015), timely feedback furthers adult learning and this targeted TBLT for mature students was designed with feedback as an integral component of the post-task phase. The low performers also commented on how the lecturer cared about their well-being and academic progress. The preparatory phase, which was introduced in this targeted TBLT approach, created the atmosphere for such interactions between the teacher and students. The essence of such engagements was the lecturer's efforts to identify students' needs and tendencies so that the students could be guided for better results. The frequent engagements with tasks and with peers also helped to reduce

the anxiety often experienced by mature students, as reported by Baharudin et al. (2013).

The observation data which was also qualitative pointed out that the lecturer prepared adequately for lessons and also created an enabling environment for effective teaching and learning. Additionally, the preparatory phase allowed the lecturer and students to have informal interactions before classes began to get them comfortable and motivated. The observation report further stated that a lot of reading took place during the intervention classes. This was necessary, as the TBLT approach requires students to engage in frequent reading and research in order to be adequately prepared for the tasks. Furthermore, the observation notes showed that the lecturer reviewed previous tasks, allowed students to present new ideas, and used simple and clear language. Technology was vital for a successful intervention programme, and was consistently utilised, as recorded in the observations.

The observation notes reported on students' enthusiasm and willingness to participate in the tasks, as a result of being highly motivated, which ultimately resulted in the large improvement of the group. The enabling classroom environment in addition to the weekly tasks seems to have played a vital role in the students' language and reading development. The findings from the observations and interviews have been indicated by other researchers as well (Abla & Fraumeni 2019; Boakye 2012; Chen & Wang 2019; Córdoba Zúñiga 2016; Ellis, 2017; Le 2014; Hismanoglu & Hismanoglu 2011; Karim, Husain & Weda 2014; Mohanraj 2013; Skehan 2002; Wicking 2010). These researchers found increased affective levels of students that resulted in positive language and reading outcomes due to the TBLT approach.

The two data sets, both quantitative and qualitative, corroborated each other to show how the reading proficiency of the experimental group improved after the intervention. From the data sets, it was discovered that classroom environment and affective factors, such as frequent feedback, enabling classroom environment, weekly tasks, collaborative learning and motivation, were vital in improving the students' reading proficiency.

## Conclusion

In this article insight has been given on how TBLT could be used to improve the reading proficiency of mature students. Data from three instruments, which are pre and post-tests, interviews and observations, were used for the study. The results from the tests showed that the mature experimental students, who were weaker in reading compared to the non-mature students prior to the intervention, significantly improved in their reading proficiency after the intervention. Their improvement was significant compared to the mature control group and non-mature group. Responses from the interviews and class observations corroborated the test results. From the data, frequent feedback, students' enthusiasm and willingness, weekly tasks, collaborative learning, motivation, enabling classroom environment, and preparatory phase

played a significant role in obtaining improvement in the post-test results of the experimental group. Based on the findings, it is concluded that creating an enabling classroom environment and instructing mature students through the TBLT approach can improve their reading proficiency levels, and consequently improve their learning and academic achievement.

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The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Authors' contributions

S.A.-M. and N.Y.B. conceptualised, wrote and edited the article. A.M. did the analysis and also edited the methodology and presentation of analysed data.

### Ethical considerations

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### Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article, as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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