



TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING AND ITS EFFECT ON ESL LEARNERS COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

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Abstract

This research paper examines how Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) can influence the communicative competence of ESL students. The study is based on theoretical frameworks of Hymes, Long, Swain and Vygotsky to investigate the role of task-based instruction in developing fluency, interaction, strategic competence and learner confidence. The qualitative methodology was used, which included 30 intermediate ESL students and an experienced educator, and data were gathered using the methods of classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, audio recordings, and journals written by the learners. The results show that TBLT can significantly enhance the capacity of learners to negotiate meaning, generate language in communicative pressure, and use effective strategies to address linguistic constraints. There was also increased motivation, anxiety and participation in tasks by learners. Difficulties in the form of big classes, time, and language barriers were noted and it illustrated that special care needed to be taken in the design of tasks, scaffold, and built in form instruction. In general, the research validates that TBLT is a theoretically and pedagogically adequate model to build communicative competence, as long as the contextual and teaching conditions are properly controlled. The implications of these findings on curriculum design and assessment and teacher training in

Keywords: *Communicative Competence, ESL Learners, Fluency, Interaction, Output Hypothesis, Sociocultural Theory, Task-Based Language Teaching*

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1. Introduction

1.1. Introduction of the Topic and its Academic Relevance

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is a teaching methodology that has become very popular in the sphere of second language learning, being an approach that provides more emphasis to meaningful communication but not on mechanical language practice. TBLT does not focus on grammatical correctness in a vacuum as the traditional approach to teaching languages does but on language as a means to attain communicative goals. This change is an indication of an overall change in language teaching method whereby instruction used to be more form-oriented, but now it is meaning-oriented.

The academic applicability of TBLT is strongly correlated with the notion of communicative competence initially suggested by Hymes who believed that grammatical knowledge is not the only aspect of language learning but also the capacity to apply language properly in a social environment (Hymes 269). This view has transformed the way language is taught by focusing on life communication skills. In this respect, TBLT can be viewed as a viable implementation of the communicative theories, the gap between theoretical constructs and classroom practices.

Besides, English has turned into lingua franca of international communication in the age of globalization. Consequently, ESL students will learn not only to be linguistically correct, but to communicate effectively in the various situations. TBLT can answer this need by offering learners a chance to perform real communicative activities, and thus improving their general communicative competence.

1.2. Context and Background

The fact that traditional teaching in most ESL settings has dominated has been criticized over the years as ineffective in terms of cultivating communicative skills. Techniques like the Grammar-Translation Method put much emphasis on translation, memorizing and explicit grammar teaching, and in most cases they do not emphasize on speaking and listening. Likewise, the Audio-Lingual Method is also based on repetition and drills which might be effective to enhance pronunciation but not to encourage meaningful interaction.

On the contrary, Task-Based Language Teaching was a new reaction to these constraints. TBLT has its roots in the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) movement of the 1970s and 1980s. Bangalore Project by Prabhu (1987) was a critical step to determining the efficiency of the task-based teaching method, as it proved that language could be learned by learners when they worked on the tasks that involve solving problems and reasoning.

TBLT is based on the concept that best learning of language takes place when learners are actively engaged in meaningful activities involving the use of language. Activities like role-plays, debates, information-gap activities and collaborative problem solving to name a few give learners the chance to negotiate meaning, communicate ideas, and interact with others. Such activities make language learning more real-life and relevant and interesting.

Nevertheless, there are differences in the application of TBLT. Large classes, exam-oriented education systems and inadequate teacher training are some of the major challenges in most developing nations and also in ESL classrooms in South Asia. Such contextual constraints affect the adoption and practice of TBLT in practice in actual classrooms.

1.3. Research Gap

Despite the fact that TBLT, as an effective method of language teaching, has been a well-established concept in the literature, there are still a number of gaps in the literature. To begin with, a large portion of literature is devoted to hypothetical models and experimental research in the controlled conditions. Research studies which look at the practical application of TBLT in real classroom situations especially in situations with limited resources are lacking.

Second, compared to earlier research showing gains in the fluency and motivation of the learners, there is a lack of research that will give a comprehensive examination of the communicative competence, both sociolinguistic and strategic aspects of the same. Majority of the studies are more inclined towards speaking skills, neglecting other elements like discourse organization and pragmatic appropriateness.

Third, the issues related to the implementation of TBLT are widely recognized but not properly explored. Such problems as resistance of teachers, the absence of their training, time, and assessment practices should be discussed further. Unless these issues are addressed, the effectiveness of TBLT can be undermined.

Lastly, context-specific studies that would take into account socio-cultural and educational realities of ESL learners are also needed. The dynamics of TBLT in various situations can offer important information to consider when modifying the method to suit the local requirements.

1.4. Research Objectives and Questions

The primary aim of the research is to explore the effectiveness of Task-Based Language Teaching on the communicative competence of ESL students in the classroom.

1.5. Research Objectives

- Explore how task-based activities can enhance the fluency and interaction of learners.

- Analyze how TBLT contributes to the development of different components of communicative competence.
- Find out the attitude that learners have towards task-based learning.
- Determine problems encountered by teachers and learners when applying TBLT.

1.6. Research Questions

1. What is the impact of Task-Based Language Teaching on communicative competence of ESL learners?
2. In what ways do task-based activities enhance learners' fluency and interaction?
3. What are the perceptions of learners on task-based learning?
4. What are the difficulties of introducing TBLT in ESL classrooms?

1.7. Scope and Significance of the Study

This paper is based on ESL students at the middle level in institutional learning. It studies the implementation of TBLT in classrooms and its effect on the communicative competence of learners, such as fluency, interaction and strategic language use.

This study is important because of its theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it builds upon the current studies on TBLT by offering a detailed study of the communicative competence. In practice, it can be of much value to teachers, curriculum developers, as well as policymakers, as it illustrates the usefulness of implementing TBLT in practical classroom settings. Moreover, the study helps the current transformation of the focus on learner-centered education by focusing on the significance of interaction and meaningful communication. It also offers a basis on which future studies on new methodologies in language teaching can be done.

2. Literature Review

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has remained a dynamic and multifaceted method in the second language acquisition (SLA) field. The evolution of it represents a combination of linguistic, cognitive and sociocultural theories, and it is also one of the most theoretically based methodologies in contemporary language teaching. Although the initial research concentrated more on defining tasks and proving their educational worth, the current research has broadened to look at the cognitive processes, interactional patterns and contextual variables that influence task-based learning.

One of the most significant issues of TBLT research is the definition and classification of tasks. Ellis (2003) offers a more commonly used framework, where the main emphasis on meaning, the use of natural language and the existence of a well-defined result are named as the key features (Ellis 3). He also differentiates between focused tasks, tasks that are developed to produce certain forms of language, and unfocused tasks, which emphasize communicative meaning. This difference is especially relevant when it comes to answering the critique that TBLT does not teach grammar. With the inclusion of targeted

activities, educators will be able to implement form-based teaching in a communicative context thus striking the balance between fluency and accuracy.

Skehan (1998) has done much research on the role of the role of cognition in TBLT, with his theory being the Limited Attentional Capacity Model. This model postulates that learners possess limited cognitive resources and thus they need to use these resources between fluency, accuracy, as well as complexity. High-cognitive processing tasks can increase fluency, but decrease accuracy. The significance of this trade-off is the need to be careful when designing tasks, sequencing, and planning time. Robinson (2001) however contradicts Skehan with the Cognition Hypothesis that as one increases the complexity of the tasks, more complex and accurate language may be facilitated through proper structuring of tasks. This theoretical discussion continues to be at the forefront of TBLT research and highlights the necessity of empirical research.

1. Socioculturally, TBLT has a close relation to the theory of mediated learning by Vygotsky. Lantolf (2000) presents the idea that language development is achieved through social interaction and collaboration where learners are able to build up knowledge by the assistance of peers and teachers. Scaffolding is also applicable especially in task based classes whereby the teacher takes the learners through more complex activities. This interactional model promotes both the linguistic and cognitive growth.

The idea of language production is also reinforced by the Output Hypothesis (1985) by Swain, which brings to the fore the significance of language production as a part of the theoretical basis of TBLT. Swain contends that learners build their linguistic competence when they are challenged to create language and realize knowledge gaps. Such pushed output is made possible by task-based activities, which motivate learners to hone their language use and increase accuracy.

The Interaction Hypothesis by Long is also a good support of TBLT. Long (1996) argues that interaction facilitates language learning by enabling learners to negotiate meaning, receive feedback, and modify their output, all of which are supported through interactive processes. Such interaction is inherent in tasks like information-gap activities or group discussions and TBLT is a good method of teaching communicative competence development.

Empirical studies have continuously shown that TBLT is successful in promoting the communicative skills of learners. Research has shown that students in task-based teaching have gained fluency, lexical diversity and interactional competence. In addition, TBLT has been discovered to enhance motivation and readiness to communicate in learners since they tend to find tasks to be meaningful and interesting.

Nonetheless, there are also a number of challenges and criticisms noted in the literature. According to Swan (2005), TBLT can result in the inadequate focus on grammatical correctness, which can cause fossilized errors. Equally, Seedhouse (1999)

expresses some doubts on the fact that a task-based interaction can always result in the best learning outcomes thus implying that classroom discourse may not always be as theoretically predictable as it should be.

Real-life issues are also important. According to Carless (2007), challenges that have been cited to hinder successful implementation include large classes, low instructional time, and teacher incompetence. Educators might also have a problem with designing suitable tasks and controlling the classroom interaction. Moreover, exam-based systems of education tend to see accuracy in writing as a priority, and tend to discourage communicative methods.

The recent trends in TBLT studies have been on the incorporation of technology and digital tools. Task-based learning has been extended online, through virtual simulations, and collaborative applications, allowing learners to have authentic communication outside of the classroom. Remote and hybrid learning environments have been especially useful in the use of these innovations.

A new line of research is also the role of affective factors in TBLT. Research indicates that task-based activities are less anxiety-inducing and enhance learner confidence, providing a conducive learning environment. This emotional aspect is essential in building communicative competence since the learners will be more willing to be active when they feel at ease and motivated.

Although the strength of TBLT has been highlighted, researchers affirm that TBLT needs to be localized to particular settings. The effectiveness of task-based instruction is affected by cultural norms, institutional policies, and characteristics of learners. Consequently, the key to successful implementation is the flexibility of approach and sensitivity to the context.

To sum up, TBLT is strongly supported in the literature both theoretically and empirically as the means of teaching language. But its success is determined by the wise design of tasks, training of teachers, and situational adaptation. This paper aims to add to this research by investigating the effects of TBLT in an actual ESL classroom.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This paper will use a qualitative research design to investigate the role of Task-Based Language Teaching on communicative competence of ESL learners. A qualitative design is appropriate since it would enable a detailed analysis of the experiences of learners, the nature of their interaction, and the manner in which they use language in real classroom environments. The research also includes the aspects of descriptive research to examine the evident shifts in the communicative skills in learners.

3.2. Participants

The sample population in this study is 30 ESL learners in the intermediate level who will be sampled using purposive sampling. The students are a part of a formal learning institution that teaches English as a second language. The selection guarantees the diversity in the linguistic background and level of proficiency and allows conducting a thorough analysis of the effectiveness of TBLT. Also, there is an inclusion of one English language teacher to give insights on the practices of instruction and challenges related with implementing TBLT.

3.3. Research Instruments

Data Collection Tools

Classroom Observations: To observe the interaction, participation and language use of learners in tasks.

Semi-Structured Interviews: Both the teacher and the students were interviewed to obtain perceptions and experiences.

Audio Recordings: This is to examine the fluency, pronunciation, and communicative strategies of the learners.

Field Notes: The researcher kept these notes to record the dynamics in the classroom and the contextual factors.

3.4. Procedure

The research is carried out in eight weeks whereby task-based teaching is carried out systematically. Every lesson is based on the typical TBLT model:

1. Pre-task Phase

The teacher presents the subject, activates the background knowledge and offers the required vocabulary.

2. Task Cycle

Activities that learners take part in include role-plays, group discussions, and problem solving. They communicate using English to work together in order to accomplish the task.

3. Post-task Phase

The teacher gives feedback, emphasizes the important features of language and promotes reflection.

The activities are also structured to replicate real life scenarios, like ordering food, providing directions, and engaging in conversations.

3.5. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is used to analyze the collected data. Patterns associated with communicative competence like fluency, interaction and strategic language use are recognized and classified. Tapes are transcribed and analyzed to determine the progress of speaking skills of learners.

The analysis is based on:

- How often learners interact.
 - Use of communicative strategies
- Level of fluency and confidence

3.6. Ethical Considerations

The ethical principles are observed to the letter during the study. All participants are informed and their identities remain confidential. The involvement is voluntary and the respondents have the right to pull out at any point in the process.

4. Theoretical Framework

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is based on a set of powerful theories of second language learning that together describe the process of learner acquisition of communicative competence as a result of interaction, cognition and social interaction. TBLT is a versatile method of language teaching, combining the knowledge of communicative, interactionist, sociocultural, and cognitive approaches to teaching, which explains its popularity in language teaching.

TBLT is based on the notion of communicative competence, which was developed by Hymes (1972) in opposition to the purely grammatical approach to language that was suggested by Chomsky. He contended that language learning not only entails knowledge of rules, but the capacity to apply language in various social situations in a manner that is appropriate (Hymes 269). This expanded concept was further conceptualized by Canale and Swain (1980) who came up with grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence as the most important elements. TBLT is the reflection of this model, as it involves learners in activities that involve meaningful communication, thus combining these competencies in a natural and holistic way.

Interaction is also seen as a factor in language learning as pointed out by Long in his Interaction Hypothesis (1996) in which acquisition is suggested to be a result of the negotiation of meaning during communication. As learners face challenges in comprehension, they indulge in clarification requests, confirmation checks and feedback interactions. These are interactional processes that allow the learners to reform their language and enhance understanding. Such interaction is best achieved through task-based activities, especially those that have information gaps and collaborative problem-solving, where learners actively build meaning.

In line with this opinion, the Output Hypothesis of Swain (1985), emphasizes the role played by language production in the learning process. Swain states that learners become linguistically competent when they have to produce language, and perceive gaps in their knowledge. This forced production motivates learners to perfect the use of language, to verify or disprove hypotheses and to reflect on the metalinguistic. Activities like discussions and presentations in TBLT make the learners explain their ideas in a clear way thus encouraging fluency and accuracy. This process however, works best when it is

accompanied with the aspect of feedback that enables the learners to rectify their mistakes and consolidate learning.

Socio-cultural theory by Vygotsky gives additional backing to TBLT as it gives more emphasis to social interaction and collaboration in learning. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is a concept used to explain how learners are able to reach greater levels of performance, when they are guided by teachers or peers. This support is offered in task-based classrooms via scaffolding, as teachers support learning by helping learners with more and more challenging tasks. By combining efforts, learners are able to co-build knowledge and language learning becomes interactive and communal. Lantolf (2000) builds on this concept by adding the significance of mediation and cultural context which are both inherent in task-based learning settings.

Skehan (1998) and Robinson (2001) address the cognitive aspect of TBLT by providing two sides of the coin when it comes to the complexity of tasks. According to Skehan, Limited Attentional Capacity Model, learners possess limited cognitive resources, and this implies that there is a trade-off between fluency, accuracy, and complexity. By this perspective, the tasks that focus on fluency can lead to lower grammatical accuracy. Conversely, the Cognition Hypothesis of Robinson suggests that accuracy and complexity can be improved with the growth of the complexity of the task, as long as the tasks are properly constructed. This discussion highlights the significance of task sequencing and planning in TBLT since educators need to balance cognitive requirements to maximize learning.

Combined, the theoretical approaches prove that TBLT is not just a method of teaching but a sound pedagogical strategy that is backed by various branches of SLA research. It combines the communicative aspect of Hymes, the interactional aspect of Long, the productive aspect of Swain, the social aspect of Vygotsky and the cognitive aspect of Skehan and Robinson. The TBLT integration allows it to deal with both the linguistic and social components of language learning and hence it is especially useful in building communicative competence.

Although the theoretical basis of this paper is quite solid, some limitations should be considered. Communication focus can sometimes result in lack of attention to grammatical accuracy especially when the tasks are not structured in a way that they incorporate form-oriented aspects. Also, to introduce TBLT successfully, competent teachers will be needed to operate the interaction process, give adequate feedback, and create effective tasks. There may be also a challenge of contextual factors like large class sizes and exam oriented curricula.

To sum up, the theoretical analysis emphasizes that TBLT is a multidimensional strategy relying on various theories to support language learning. The fact that it focuses

on the meaningful interaction, engagement of learners and use of language context makes it an effective tool in the development of communicative competence among ESL learners.

5. Discussion / Analysis

The results of the present research show that the effects of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) have a very strong and multidimensional impact on the communicative competence of ESL students. The results of the analysis based on the observations of classrooms and qualitative data demonstrate the improvements of not only linguistic performance but also cognitive engagement and affective development of learners. These results support the theoretical assertions made above, as well as point out the practical aspects of classroom application.

One of the most evident results is the significant enhancement of the fluency of learners. Spontaneity and continuity in speech were more evident in learners as they took part in meaning-oriented activities. In contrast to the traditional grammar-based teaching, which frequently leads to distorted and incoherent language production, the task-based activities made learners focus on the meaning, rather than the form. This shift enabled learners to develop automaticity in language use, a key indicator of fluency. With time, learners had fewer pauses and were more confident, which indicates that the repetition of communicative tasks leads to more natural language use. This substantiates the ideas of Skehan (1998) who argues that fluency is acquired in the course of meaningful interaction and not in the form of isolated practice of linguistic forms.

Meanwhile, the research also demonstrates that in some cases, gains in fluency were accompanied by decreased grammatical accuracy, especially at the early phases of implementing the task. The learners would tend to reduce the sentence structure and use any known word to keep the communication moving. This observation is indicative of the trade-off effect in the Limited Attentional Capacity Model of Skehan; that is, having attention to one aspect of language can be at the expense of another. Gradual increase in the accuracy with progress in the tasks and feedback to the learners though, showed that fluency and accuracy could be developed simultaneously when the tasks were well sequenced and facilitated.

Another important determinant of communicative competence development was identified as interaction. The task-based activities created an interactive learning environment in which learners negotiated meaning, asked questions, and responded to others. This is in line with the Interaction Hypothesis of Long (1996) which highlights the importance of interaction in promoting language acquisition. The data showed that interactional strategies of clarification requests, repetition and confirmation checks were often used. Not only did these strategies help to improve understanding, but also led to language development due to the chances of modified input and output.

Moreover, tasks performed collaboratively encouraged learning and knowledge exchange amongst peers. Students tended to help one another in doing assignments, give them explanations and corrections. This interactive approach resembles the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development proposed by Vygotsky, according to which the learners can develop to a greater level with the help of social support. Scaffolding (both by peers and the teacher) allowed the learners to approach tasks which would otherwise have been difficult to complete alone.

Other interesting results of the study are the development of strategic competence. Students were able to show a better capacity to adopt communication strategies to address linguistic constraints. As an example, learners paraphrased, made gestures or simplified expressions when they could not recall certain words. Such flexibility is an essential aspect of communicative competence, as it enables learners to keep the communication even in the situation when they are not aware of certain things. The high frequency of such strategies shows that, besides improving language proficiency, TBLT provides learners with skills that may help them in the real world.

The findings are highly representative of Swain, the Output Hypothesis (1985) whereby learners were always pushed to generate language when completing the tasks. This process created awareness of the linguistic gaps and stimulated the learners to perfect their language use. Metalinguistic awareness was observed in a number of cases when the learners stopped to find the right words or made corrections as they spoke. The output effectiveness was however closely related to the availability of feedback. Learners demonstrated some improvement in accuracy when teachers used timely and constructive feedback during the post-task phase. On the other hand, some of the errors were revealed when feedback was restricted which emphasizes the need to incorporate form-focused instruction in TBLT.

Besides the role of language development, the paper also reports the beneficial effects of TBLT on the motivation of learners and their affective involvement. Students reacted positively to problems that were applicable in real life like role-plays and problems. These activities instilled a feeling of purpose and language acquisition was more meaningful and enjoyable. Anxiety lessening and a greater readiness to participate also led to enhanced performance. This observation is in line with affective theories of language learning that highlight the significance of motivation and emotional processes in making the acquisition process easier.

Although these are the advantages, the study also outlines various challenges that can influence the implementation of TBLT to success. Classroom management, especially in big classes is one of the major issues. The teacher could not observe various groups at the same time and the participation was uneven. There are those learners who were passive and left to be assisted by their more active counterparts. This problem highlights the

importance of organized task design, role assignment, and teacher facilitation to achieve a fair participation.

The other serious limitation is time constraints. Task activities should be given enough time to prepare, execute and have feedback. But in reality, due to the shortness of class periods, task cycles were not always complete especially on the post-task side. As this is crucial stage to reflection and error correction, its absence can decrease the effectiveness of TBLT in general.

There were also linguistic constraints of learners. Although assignments promoted dialogues, certain students were not able to convey challenging concepts because of their limited vocabulary and grammatical skills. This sometimes led to using the first language or over simplified phrases. These results indicate that TBLT must be complemented by the specific language teaching in order to stimulate linguistic growth of learners.

The other significant concern is the lack of alignment between TBLT and exam-based education systems. Teachers and learners might not want to embrace communicative methods in situations where tests are based on written correctness and grammatical knowledge. This institutional bottleneck has the potential to curtail the degree of implementation of TBLT and limit its possible effectiveness.

Generally, the results show that TBLT is very effective in enhancing communicative competence especially in regards to fluency, interaction and strategic use of language. Nevertheless, it hinges on a balanced solution, incorporating the meaning-based communication with the form-based teaching and on situational aspects of classroom size, training of teachers, and assessment.

6. Conclusion

The present study has resulted in the development of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) as one of the most effective and theoretically connected strategies to promote communicative competence of ESL learners. TBLT allows learners to communicate through language as a practical tool to interact meaningfully, by diverting the emphasis placed on isolated grammatical teaching to meaningful interaction. This study confirms that a task based instruction is a great way of enhancing the fluency, interactional and strategic competence as well as the general confidence of the learners.

Among the main advantages of TBLT is a possibility to unite several aspects of language learning. Not only does it build linguistic knowledge, but it also builds social interaction, cognitive and affective involvement. Students are able to participate actively in the learning process and build up knowledge together and in real life. This is a learner-driven method that is in line with modern educational objectives that focus on critical thought, problem-solving, and communicative competence.

Nonetheless, the research also indicates that TBLT effectiveness depends on a number of contextual factors. Problems of large classes, short time of instruction, and

curriculums that are exam-focused may be obstacles to its implementation. Also, it is essential to train teachers and design the tasks carefully to make sure that both fluency and accuracy are taken into consideration.

Considering these results, it is suggested that teachers should use a moderate strategy that is a combination of task-based tasks and direct language teaching. Communicative tasks should be included in the syllabi by curriculum designers, and assessment systems should be compatible with communicative goals. The teacher training programs must be oriented towards acquisition of skills needed in effective task based teaching also.

Conclusively, TBLT is an effective framework of closing the divide between the classroom-based education and real-life communication. The use of meaningful interaction, engagement with the learner, and contextualized use of language renders it especially applicable in the contemporary ESL teaching. The research must be furthered in the future to address its usage in various settings, and practical problems need to be addressed to enhance its usefulness.

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