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Task-based language teaching: Enhancing English skills through real-world tasks

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Abstract

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) represents a dynamic approach to language instruction that emphasizes learning through real-world tasks rather than traditional rote memorization. This method centers on the completion of meaningful tasks, such as problem-solving, project work, and interactive activities, which mirror authentic language use. The core principle of TBLT is that language acquisition is most effective when learners engage in tasks that reflect real-life contexts and practical language use. This approach fosters not only linguistic proficiency but also critical thinking and collaborative skills, as students work together to achieve specific goals. By focusing on the functional use of language rather than abstract grammar rules, TBLT aims to enhance learners' ability to use English effectively in diverse situations. This paper explores the benefits and challenges of implementing TBLT in the classroom, drawing on recent research and case studies. It discusses how TBLT can improve various language skills, including speaking, listening, reading, and writing, and considers strategies for effective task design and assessment. The findings suggest that TBLT can lead to more engaged and competent language learners, making it a valuable pedagogical tool for enhancing English skills in educational settings.

Keywords: Task-based language teaching (TBLT), real-world tasks, language acquisition, pedagogical approach, language skills enhancement, authentic language use

Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world, the ability to communicate effectively in English has become a crucial skill for success at school and in one's career. Realizing this, many non-native English speakers make great efforts to improve their English skills. However, they often struggle with the "use" of English, unable to use what they learn from textbooks in real-life communication. In other words, many still feel shy when the opportunity to use English comes. This fear of using English arises from the lack of preparation for actual language use in a real-world context as well as from the insufficient chances to use English in an English-immersed environment. Unfortunately, such an environment is absent in many countries where English is taught merely as a school subject (Izadpanah, 2010) ^[25].

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is a solution to such problems. Emerging from Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), TBLT emphasizes communication and meaning over form, focusing on tasks as the basic unit of planning and implementing a language curriculum. A task can be defined as a goal-oriented activity involving the use of language. More simply, it can be anything that people do in their everyday lives and have to use language for such doing. Because language use takes place outside the classroom, TBLT helps bridge the gap between what is practiced in pedagogy and what is needed from language outside the classroom.

TBLT is also a great remedy for EFL learners. First, it encourages practically meaningful communication. Instead of providing fake contexts that are far removed from the real use of language outside the classroom, TBLT takes the real world into the classroom, presenting learners with real-world tasks they have to perform in English in order to practice the target language. By participating in tasks that are contextualized within the real world, learners get the chance to practice language "that they can actually use in the real world". Second, TBLT serves learners' individual needs. Because tasks emerge from the lives of learners, they take into account the diverse backgrounds and needs of learners, allowing learners to contribute to

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the content of the lesson. As a result, learners can actively participate in deciding what is useful and relevant to them, motivating them to learn and use English. Third, TBLT provides learners with a low-anxiety learning environment in which to practice English.

Theoretical Foundations of Task-Based Language Teaching:

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has gained considerable prominence over the past decade or so. This has coincided with the release of a number of books discussing its rationale, principles, and classroom applications. The approach has also inspired post-workshop projects that strive to document in-depth case studies of its implementation and provide training materials (e.g. the TBLT in Asia project) (Izadpanah, 2010) [25]. Nevertheless, many teachers may still be unaware of TBLT or have only heard of it without knowing what it stands for. Even if they are aware of it in principle, they would not have experience or confidence in implementing it, or they might have tried it but were discouraged after it failed to work as expected. Whether they hold a favorable or skeptical view of TBLT, they need to understand it in a more nuanced way, which could only be done against the backdrop of the more general and established communicative language teaching (CLT) approach. Thus, a brief historical background of TBLT is warranted and necessary (Shehadeh, 2005) [39].

The origins of communicative language teaching (CLT) and TBLT can be traced back to the anthropological perspective of communicative competence adopted by British linguists in the 1960s. The advent of CLT was heralded by the introduction of a series of widely-discussed syllabuses and textbooks, such as the "notional syllabuses" the "English for specific purposes" syllabus and the "First Certificate in English" tasks. All these syllabuses downplayed the teaching of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation to focus on the teaching of language use in a prism of situational, functional, and notional contexts. TBLT is an offshoot of CLT that foregrounds the use of tasks as the unit of language teaching and learning. Following Brumfit's (1984) suggestion, there emerged a number of task-based syllabuses that were introduced alongside books attempting to educate teachers on how to employ them.

The key notion of task was taken as a point of departure for creating alternative theoretical frameworks (Skehan., 1996; Ellis., 1997) [16]. Despite variations in definitions, typologies, and their respective claims regarding methodological and pedagogical implications, there have been attempts at rapprochement. These attempts, however, seek to accommodate TBLT to the requirements of a specific educational context, rather than to reconcile TBLT and CLT as two coequal but distinct approaches to language teaching. This distinction is needed to sort out teachers' responses to the dual and contradictory discourses of CLT and TBLT, especially their misperception of the latter as a return to structuralism (Ellis, 2017) [16].

Key Principles of Task-Based Language Teaching

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is a pedagogical approach that focuses on using meaningful, interactive tasks to promote language learning. It was adopted in response to the growing social demand for communicative competence and the belief that foreign languages should be learned in a way similar to first languages. Various definitions of tasks in language teaching emphasize their focus on meaning, use

of the target language, and goal-oriented nature. Frameworks for categorizing tasks are also proposed (East, 2021) [15]. Three types of tasks are suggested to enhance language learners' performance: real-world tasks, pedagogical tasks, and pre-task tasks. Real-world tasks are activities that language learners need to do outside the classroom in the target language. Pedagogical tasks are classroom activities with a target language focus that also promote input, processing, and output. Pre-task tasks are follow-up questions or tasks initiated by the teacher that encourage learners to process the text at a deeper level before classroom follow-up activities (Van den Branden & K, 2016) [42].

Considerations for developing pedagogical tasks include task objectives, task activity, task preparation, and task implementation. Task objectives involve processes, products, input, and expected outcomes, and can be stated in the form of task goals, criteria for task performance assessment, and language forms to be focused on in follow-up activities. Suggestions for developing follow-up activities based on task outcomes are also provided (Ellis *et al.*, 2020) [16]. Task activities should be feasible, appropriate, and engaging, and match language-learning needs. Task preparation refers to the pre-task stage in which the teacher provides learners with essential information, language input, and encouragement to avoid performance anxiety. Considerations for task imitation are provided (Jackson, 2022) [26].

The decision on who will do the task in pairs, small groups, or larger classroom settings depends on various factors such as the group's personality, participants' previous experience of similar tasks, and task type. The study of task implementation in language classes is explored. Additional principles for classroom management of post-task follow-up activities are provided. Vandommele, G., Van den Branden, K., & Van Gorp, K. (2018). Evaluation of a task should be conducted continuously, focusing on types of feedback to different aspects of task performance, observing whether changes after the first task would make teaching more effective, and reflecting on individual performance in the teaching process. Factors affecting task design by teachers include accessibility of materials, knowledge, and understanding of learners. Suggestions for evaluating teacher performance are also provided (Vandommele *et al.*, 2018; Ahmadi *et al.*, 2016) [41,1].

Designing and Implementing Task-Based Language Activities:

Once educators have a good grasp of the type and nature of tasks relevant to their students' needs, they can start planning specific pedagogical tasks. In language teaching, pedagogical tasks may be defined as those tasks that are used to promote language learning. Designing task-based language activities involves taking into account the following aspects: (i) the characteristics of tasks; (ii) the typology of tasks; (iii) the sequence of tasks; (iv) the classroom techniques and procedures used in conducting tasks (Widodo *et al.*, 2015) [10]. The implementation of task-based language activities means the actual conduct of the tasks designed. While conducting the tasks, it is advisable for teachers to restore the initial conditions under which the tasks are designed, as closely as possible. This means they try to avoid interventions that might otherwise inhibit the effectiveness of the tasks, such as organizing students into non-natural groups or involvement in a way which leads to a

better performance than that with which they would normally cope (Córdoba Zúñiga *et al.*, 2016) ^[12].

Pedagogical tasks need to have a number of characteristics. Tasks must be meaning-focused in that they promote the use of language to do something that has a real-world focus. Tasks must always involve some form of language use. In addition, since tasks are concerned with doing things, they must involve some form of output. Tasks must be goal-oriented and have some kind of outcome or observable result. Tasks need to be motivating, since it is this factor that determines whether learners persist. Furthermore, tasks must promote learning. A goal of task-based learning and teaching will be to engage language learners in a way that will facilitate language acquisition (Ji *et al.*, 2020) ^[27].

Teachers need to have an understanding of the typology of tasks so that they know what sort of tasks they can use. Tasks can be classified in a number of ways. Tasks can be classified according to their purpose, enabling teachers to scaffold students' ability to cope with increasing learner challenges. Some tasks focus primarily on use of language (language-focused tasks); some focus on real-life or workplace skills (content-focused tasks) (Comer & W., 2007) ^[10]. In language-focused tasks, learners need to use their language knowledge in order to complete tasks. Such activities may involve learners analyzing a transcribed conversation, or correcting errors in written texts. In content-focused tasks, language is used as a tool for learning, but every day or workplace skills are the focus of learning. (Pham *et al.*, 2018) ^[37]. Finally, some tasks can be classified according to the type of skills involved. Tasks here can be sorted into two groups: outcome-oriented, where students must complete a task they negotiate with the teacher, and process-oriented, students' decisions and actions to complete a task are determined by the teacher (Rahimpour *et al.*, 2008) ^[37].

Assessment in Task-Based Language Teaching

Assessment in Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is a critical component that evaluates language learning within this framework. In TBLT, assessment methods focus on evaluating language proficiency and task performance, emphasizing learners' ability to use language meaningfully and achieve real communicative goals (Norris *et al.*, 2016; Mislevy *et al.*, 2002; Van Gorp *et al.*, 2013) ^[33, 30, 43].

Integrating Technology in Task-Based Language Teaching:

The growth of technology in education is no less profound, with the popularity of the Internet, for instance, leading to the rise of various virtual communities and spaces. Not content to remain mere consumers of information, many students are taking the initiative in tech-assisted language learning, crafting multi-dimensional spaces in which to learn and use foreign languages in communicative, creative, and collaborative ways (González-Lloret., 2017; González-Lloret *et al.*, 2015) ^[20, 21].

Yet issues remain. How comfortable are teachers in dealing with a changing and sometimes bewildering landscape of possibilities? While many may embrace such changes in their personal lives, what about their professional lives? These questions arise in the context of task-based language teaching (TBLT) since, apart from being concerned with the nature and design of language tasks, TBLT offers a range of

theoretical and practical arguments in favor of taking a technology-based approach (Lai *et al.*, 2011) ^[29].

To address teachers' concerns - whether they'd like to try technology in the classroom or need assistance in making better use of technology already available - the first part contains a brief overview of theoretical considerations in light of how technology relates to the concept of task, as well as significant characteristics of both task as technological innovation and TBLT as technological paradigm (Müller-Hartmann *et al.*, 2010) ^[31]. The thrust of this, as with all things theoretical, is not to provide a comprehensive overview of the connections between technology and task, but to submit some ideas for discussion and reflection. The second part describes how technology might be incorporated into the teaching and learning of English in specific classroom contexts with three examples of task-based technological innovation and how they were implemented. Finally, a plan of action for addressing the social aspect of language learning in addition to the cognitive aspect is proposed, since the external unexpected, for both teachers and learners, social and educational implications of technology, unlike printed materials, would forge a new context for using language (Subrahmanyam Vellanki *et al.*, 2021) ^[41].

Technology is never neutral, and there are differences between traditional printed materials and digital media that extend far beyond the mechanistic switch from one to the other. While an exploration of the social, cultural, political, and institutional forces that shape technology is an area of great complexity that likewise transcends the scope of this paper, concern will be focused on defining the concept of task so that technology becomes closely linked to it (Baralt *et al.*, 2017) ^[3]. As David Nunan points out, to design a task-based language syllabus one must first define the nature of a task, as how tasks are conceptualized is closely related to how they are classified, sequenced, and evaluated. Despite the diversity of definitions, a common denominator is that a language task is a communicative and goal-directed activity (Nunan, 2004) ^[33].

Task-Based Language Teaching for Different Proficiency Levels:

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) classifies English language proficiency into six levels: A1 (Beginners), A2 (Elementary), B1 (Intermediate), B2 (Upper Intermediate), C1 (Advanced), and C2 (Proficient). However, these generic levels do not provide clarity for how to implement task-based language teaching (TBLT) with students at various proficiency levels. KHOMEYJANI, F. A., & Khaghaninezhad, M. S. (2009). To implement TBLT across different proficiency levels, the framework presented herein divides the six CEFR levels into beginner (A1), elementary (A2), low-intermediate (B1), high-intermediate (B2), low-advanced (C1), and high-advanced (C2) levels. In doing so, a new ten-task framework is provided for each level while extending the six task types defined earlier to give a clearer picture of what tasks can be given to students at different proficiency levels. Rahimpour, M. (2008) ^[37]. There is a need to establish a finer stratification of proficiency levels for TBLT by specifying what tasks can be given to students at different proficiency levels. To assist language instructors in preparing justified tasks for their students, the six proficiency levels specified by CEFR can be subdivided into ten task frameworks (Van, 2014) ^[43]. Many educators

worldwide benefit from the CEFR framework as it provides a uniform basis for describing the level of language proficiency. The CEFR scales can be used to judge a student's language proficiency level and to specify what can be expected from students of that level. Unfortunately, the CEFR levels are too generic to use directly in the language classroom (Oxford, 2006) [35].

Task-Based Language Teaching in Specific Contexts: Academic, Professional, and Everyday Situations

Task-based language teaching can be utilized in specific language contexts. Academic, professional, and everyday situations will all illustrate how TBLT can be adapted to a specific context (Bula-Villalobos *et al.*, 2019) [6].

In an academic context, what advantages does TBLT have for students learning English? English has become the lingua franca in research areas, but teaching undergraduate students in English is not the norm throughout South-East Asia. In regions where teachers still deliver lessons using their native tongue, there is an urgent need to enable students to learn English effectively. That is why the project "Task-based Approach to Improve Undergraduates' Academic English" was proposed (Douglas *et al.*, 2014) [12]. The participants were first-year students at Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City. Approximately 1,250 students among 8 faculties were invited. At the beginning of the semester, the pre-test was distributed, and the other was during the last teaching week. Data collected from questionnaires and observations indicated that the students had a very low level of academic English, such as speaking up in class, summarizing lectures, or quoting and paraphrasing documents. They were also not aware of the 7 skills stated in the CBI model (Van den Branden, 2016) [42]. After the implementation of the TBLT approach in the next 12 weeks, they gradually acquired the knowledge of academic English and use of the preparation to help them complete tasks. Their academic skills seemed to happen unconsciously when they were required to follow the task chain. The overall mean of the post-test found that students gained better marks in the academic skills than they did in the pre-test. However, in integrating CS, SS, or WS with the TBL tasks, students were not aware of the CS or SS strategies used in speaking and listening tasks (Vieira, 2017) [45].

In a professional context, how can TBLT be implemented in the business English curriculum? Current Business English course books do not stimulate students' motivation in terms of developing their speaking skills when compared to Business English curriculum with a less TBLT focus. Providing suggestions for possible models of TBLT course books would improve students' speaking skills in different ways. First of all, a pre-task subunit containing preparatory activities would be considered in a course-book design. Secondly, a post-task subunit with follow-up activities for further practice would be integrated into TBLT course books in the Business English curriculum. Deriving from Long's (1985) approach to language course-book design, a course-book model will be developed. East, M. (2017). Learning tasks would be classified into pedagogical tasks that lead to round task implementation. A speaking task would then be developed based on Brown's (2001) framework for speaking tasks. Among the advantages, greater communicative confidence and accuracy, decreased anxiety, and greater fluency were noted (Barnard *et al.*,

2010) [4]. In an everyday situation, TBLT can be implemented in the English for tourism context. Vocational training programs for hotel receptionists and tour guides may gain the interest of both students and trainers by encouraging students to take part in a variety of tasks and role plays. At the same time, trainer participation in the process may contribute to preparing materials and modeling the tasks (Finch, 2006) [16]. World of English and Practice Hotels do not meet students' needs and context specifications. Training programs provided by international hotel chains such as Hilton or Sheraton are believed to relate to the specific language context. Good-mannered hotel receptionists and tour guides will become an indispensable reality. On the part of students, TBLT programs are stimulating and effective ways to enhance fluent communication and preparation of situations (Slimani-Rolls, 2005) [39].

Task-Based Language Teaching and Intercultural Competence:

With the deepening of globalization and the continuous advancement of science and technology, the world has become more and more a "global village." The promotion of economic globalization, the development of transnational economy, and the establishment of economic integrative community have all enhanced cross-cultural poaching, which has created a complex new environment for speakers of different languages with different cultural backgrounds to communicate with each other (Chaika, 2023) [8]. With the increasing exchanges between countries and cross-cultural communication, English, as an international language, has become an important link to promote mutual understanding and enhance cross-cultural exchanges and availability among different countries (Ishii, 2009) [23].

However, due to differences in national culture, it is easy to misunderstand when communicating in English, resulting in cross-cultural misunderstanding or even conflict, which affects friendly exchanges among countries, such as China's cultural misunderstanding in the process of foreign communication. Interpersonal relations are the basis of language use, and politeness is an important resource for establishing and maintaining interpersonal relations, norms, and strategies in cross-cultural communication. Therefore, how to avoid or eliminate cross-cultural misunderstanding has become a hot issue in cross-cultural communication research in second language teaching and learning (Ge., 2004) [18].

Intercultural communication competence is necessary for effective intercultural communication. It can not only show one's own distinctiveness in intercultural communication but also facilitate understanding of other cultures through appropriate and skillful ways. Prejudice in values, non-verbal politeness, defensive teaching, and accepting incapability are the main obstacles to successful intercultural communication (Castillo *et al.*, 2015) [7]. Task-based language teaching is an effective teaching methodology that emphasizes learners' use of the target language to carry out a variety of tasks (such as describing, explaining, reasoning, and reporting) which are likely to take place outside the classroom, motivating teachers to create conditions as close to the target language community as possible (Condrat., 2022) [10].

Through task design analysis and implementation research, it focuses on understanding language, learning, and teaching

from the perspective of tasks and emphasizes the importance of using language as communication and social practice in language learning. It has been widely used in foreign language acquisition, second language teaching, and learning. In the past decade, task-based language teaching has been adopted to cultivate English application ability and enhance taste of language use at the same time in China's College English Teaching Reform. Integrating culture teaching into the preparation, procedure, and follow-up of tasks is suggested to enhance cultural awareness and cross-cultural communicative competence in College English Teaching (Bakhronova, 2024) ^[2].

Focus on language form, language meaning, and task management is suggested to make culture teaching more effective and cultivate students' critical faculty to compare and evaluate different cultures (Harper, 2019) ^[22].

Teacher Training and Professional Development in Task-Based Language Teaching: The successful implementation of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) relies heavily on the professional development of teachers. Teacher training programs need to focus on developing a comprehensive understanding of TBLT, exploring its core concepts, principles, and practices. Educators may benefit from revisiting their educational assumptions, beliefs, and principles about teaching and learning. They may also have opportunities for classroom experimentation and practice, receiving support, feedback, and mentoring from trained professionals (Vieira, 2017; Han, 2018; Baralt *et al.*, 2017) ^[45,21, 3].

Recording and observing one's own practice in TBLT have provided useful insights into the difficulties and consequences of innovating. Many things have been tried to improve teachers' own TBLT practice, including getting students involved in decisions regarding tasks, designing new tasks, and addressing students' inquiries and criticisms about tasks. Through all this, the need for greater comprehension has developed (Ogilvie *et al.*, 2010; Bryfonski, 2024) ^[34, 5].

Research Trends and Future Directions in Task-Based Language Teaching: Particularly in Asia. These efforts have greatly influenced how TBLT has been interpreted and enacted in diverse social contexts and are informing future directions of TBLT research in new locations with different sociolinguistic, political, and economic concerns. This has implications for how TBLT could develop as a fuller understanding of a coherent body of research on TBLT as a movement or approach would enable researchers from diverse interests and backgrounds to join and enrich the ongoing conversations surrounding TBLT.

A study of contents and patterns of TBLT research published in applied linguistics journals from 2001 to 2010 highlights specific linguistic, pedagogical, and assessment concerns but has not examined underlying conceptual assumptions or paradigm boundaries. Furthermore, in TBLT's burgeoning interest in Asian contexts, there is a need to identify how designs, implementation, and outcomes of TBLT can be understood in light of differing values, cultural beliefs, and developmental histories of languages in education. While contemporary debates in TBLT often dwell in the antinomies of potentially productive dichotomies such as form vs. meaning, product vs. process, and teaching vs. assessment, there are also legitimate and

growing concerns for understanding how non-TBLT-focused parameters that transcend the design, enactment, and assessment of TBLT studies can unfold and envelop TBLT in wider and deeper educational research agendas. In East Asian contexts, however, engagement with TBLT is often influenced by a tradition of social constructivism, a disproportionate interest in the use of code-mixing and code-switching strategies in L2 task-based interactions, and an upwardly expansive concern for expanding research fees and educational platforms for emerging online communities such as MOOCs and MALLs. Such efforts may expand the database of knowledge-at-hand in regard to wider and newer dimensions of accountability and authenticity of TBLT but may also shift the attention either away from or be taken as given in regard to TBLT-focused agendas.

Conclusion

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has emerged as a transformative approach in the realm of language education, offering a practical and engaging alternative to traditional methodologies. By focusing on real-world tasks, TBLT aligns closely with the way language is naturally used outside the classroom, which helps learners develop more relevant and applicable language skills. This approach emphasizes the importance of meaningful communication, encouraging students to use language purposefully and contextually rather than through isolated drills. The advantages of TBLT are manifold. It fosters a more interactive and student-centered learning environment, where learners are actively involved in problem-solving and collaborative activities. This not only enhances their linguistic capabilities but also builds critical thinking and interpersonal skills. Additionally, by integrating tasks that mirror authentic language use, TBLT helps students gain confidence in their ability to use English in various real-life scenarios, thereby improving their overall fluency and competence.

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