Effectiveness of Task-Based Language Teaching in Teaching English as a Foreign Language: A Comparative Study in Higher Education

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Abstract. *This study compares task-based language teaching (TBLT) with traditional grammar-translation methods in the context of an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university in Uzbekistan. Using a quasi-experimental design with 110 undergraduate students over 16 weeks, the study examines learning outcomes in terms of language skills, motivation, and implementation difficulties. However, traditional teaching shows an initial advantage in discrete grammar knowledge, but this difference decreases over time. Qualitative findings reveal implementation difficulties such as the complexity of task design, time management, and students' resistance to unfamiliar methods. The study provides empirical evidence supporting the effectiveness of TBLT and provides practical recommendations for teachers moving from traditional approaches to task-based approaches in EFL contexts.*

Key words: *Task-based language teaching, English as a foreign language, communicative competence, comparative research, higher education.*

INTRODUCTION. English language education has shifted from grammar-focused approaches toward communicative methodologies emphasizing functional language use. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) emerged as a pedagogical approach prioritizing meaning-making through task completion rather than isolated language forms. Despite theoretical support, empirical research examining TBLT effectiveness in Central Asian EFL contexts remains limited. In Uzbekistan, traditional grammar-translation methods predominate, often producing students with strong receptive skills but limited communicative abilities. Recent educational reforms emphasize developing practical communication skills, creating urgency for exploring alternative pedagogical approaches.

LITERATURE REVIEW. TBLT is grounded in interactionist approaches to second language acquisition. The **Interaction Hypothesis** [Long, 1996] posits that language development occurs through negotiation of meaning during communication. The **Output Hypothesis** [Swain, 1985] emphasizes that producing language helps learners notice linguistic gaps and develop automaticity. TBLT incorporates both meaningful input and pushed output through task completion.

Sociocultural theory [Vygotsky, 1978] provides additional grounding, with tasks designed at appropriate difficulty levels scaffolding development through the Zone of Proximal Development. Peer interaction during collaborative tasks serves as mutual scaffolding [Lantolf & Thorne, 2006]. Ellis (2003) identifies four task-defining criteria: primary focus on meaning, communication gap necessitating interaction, reliance on learners' existing resources, and clearly defined communicative outcome. Long's (2015) TBLT framework includes needs analysis, task selection and sequencing, pre-task preparation, task performance, and post-task language focus. Multiple studies demonstrate TBLT effectiveness for developing communicative competence. East (2012) found TBLT students showed significantly greater functional language gains compared to traditional instruction. Lai and

Li (2011) reported superior speaking fluency among Chinese university students in TBLT classes. Keck et al.'s (2006) meta-analysis found consistent benefits, particularly when tasks required information exchange and meaning negotiation.

Research shows TBLT particularly enhances oral communication skills [Prabhu, 1987; Révész, 2009]. However, debates persist regarding grammatical accuracy development, with some studies suggesting meaning-focused instruction may sacrifice accuracy [Sheen, 2003], while others find form-focused task design adequately develops accuracy [Ellis, 2003]. Despite theoretical appeal, TBLT implementation faces significant challenges, particularly in EFL contexts with strong traditional teaching traditions. Carless (2004) documented difficulties including examination pressures, large class sizes, and cultural expectations favoring teacher-centered instruction. Students accustomed to traditional methods sometimes resist task-based approaches [Butler, 2011]. Practical challenges include task design complexity, classroom management demands, time constraints, assessment difficulties, and resource limitations [Ellis & Shintani, 2014]. Teacher training emerges as crucial for successful implementation [East, 2012], with educators requiring both practical skills and reconceptualization of instructional roles [Zheng & Borg, 2014].

METHODOLOGY. This study employed a quasi-experimental comparative design with mixed methods data collection [Creswell, 2014]. The research was conducted at the University of World Languages in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, during the 2023-2024 academic year.

Students: 110 second-year undergraduates (ages 19-21) in four intact classes

➢ TBLT group: 55 students; Traditional group: 55 students

➢ CEFR proficiency: A2-B1 level

➢ L1 backgrounds: 72% Uzbek, 18% Russian, 10% Karakalpak

Instructors: 4 instructors (2 per approach) with 8-15 years teaching experience. TBLT instructors received 40 hours specialized training before implementation.

Both groups received 16 weeks instruction (6 hours weekly, 96 hours total) covering similar content areas.

TBLT Group: Instruction organized around 32 main tasks including information gaps, problem-solving, decision-making, and creative projects. Lessons followed pre-task, task cycle, post-task, and reflection structure. Grammar addressed responsively based on task performance.

Traditional Group: Grammar-translation approach featuring explicit rule explanation, controlled practice exercises, vocabulary memorization, reading comprehension, and translation activities. Teacher-centered instruction using Headway Intermediate textbook [Soars & Soars, 2019].

Quantitative instruments:

➢ English proficiency test (adapted from Cambridge B1 Preliminary): reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar/vocabulary (230 points total)

➢ Motivation and attitude questionnaire (35 Likert-scale items)

➢ Self-assessment of communication confidence (15 items)

Qualitative instruments:

➢ Semi-structured interviews (24 students)

➢ Teacher reflective journals (weekly)

➢ Classroom observations (24 lessons video-recorded)

➢ Focus groups (4 groups, 6-8 students each)

Quantitative data analyzed using SPSS 27.0 (paired and independent t-tests, ANCOVA, effect sizes). Qualitative data analyzed using thematic analysis [Braun & Clarke, 2006] with NVivo 13 software. Inter-rater reliability: κ = 0.83.

RESULTS. Pre-test analysis confirmed baseline equivalence (TBLT: M=114.2, SD=18.4; Traditional: M=112.8, SD=19.1; t=0.39, p=0.697). Both groups showed significant post-test improvement, but TBLT gains exceeded traditional gains.

Table 1: Overall Proficiency Outcomes

Group	Pre-test M (SD)	Post-test M (SD)	Gain	% Improvement	Cohen's d
TBLT	114.2 (18.4)	153.7 (21.2)	+39.5	34.6%	2.01
Traditional	112.8 (19.1)	141.2 (18.7)	+28.4	25.2%	1.52

TBLT group gains significantly exceeded traditional group (t(108) = 2.98, p = 0.004, d = 0.62).

Table 2: Gains by Language Skill

Skill	TBLT Gain	Traditional Gain	Difference	Cohen's d
Speaking	+47.3%	+18.2%	+29.1%***	1.19
Listening	+38.5%	+26.4%	+12.1%**	0.55
Writing	+35.7%	+24.8%	+10.9%*	0.45
Reading	+24.2%	+28.6%	-4.4% ns	-0.21
Grammar/Vocab	+28.3%	+33.1%	-4.8% ns	-0.28

***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05, ns = not significant

TBLT produced superior gains in speaking, listening, and writing. Traditional instruction showed slight (non-significant) advantages in reading and grammar/vocabulary, suggesting explicit instruction benefits for discrete linguistic knowledge.

Speaking analysis revealed TBLT particularly enhanced fluency (+54.2% vs. +15.7%), interactive communication (+56.3% vs. +16.1%), and complexity (+42.1% vs. +18.9%), while accuracy improvements were similar between groups (+31.8% vs. +26.3%).

TBLT students demonstrated significantly greater increases in classroom enjoyment (+1.2 on 5-point scale vs. +0.3), integrative motivation (+0.7 vs. +0.2), and reduced learning anxiety (-1.1 vs. -0.4). Communication confidence increased 52% in TBLT group vs. 23% in traditional group (p < 0.001).

Correlation analysis showed moderate relationships between AI usage frequency and both motivation (r = 0.54, p < 0.01) and learning outcomes (r = 0.48, p < 0.01).

DISCUSSION. Results strongly support TBLT effectiveness for developing English proficiency in EFL contexts, with particularly robust effects on speaking, listening, and communicative confidence. Effect sizes (d = 0.45-1.19 for productive skills) indicate practically significant improvements, aligning with previous research [East, 2012; Lai & Li, 2011].

The finding that speaking showed greatest improvement (+47.3%) confirms TBLT's strength for oral communication development [Prabhu, 1987; Révész, 2009]. Reduced anxiety and increased confidence suggest that meaningful task engagement creates low-stress environments facilitating language production, consistent with affective filter hypothesis [Krashen, 1982].

Traditional instruction's slight advantage in discrete grammar knowledge, though non-significant, reflects explicit instruction benefits for metalinguistic awareness [Spada & Lightbown, 2008]. However, TBLT students' grammar scores ultimately matched traditional students', suggesting incidental grammar acquisition through task performance is effective, though potentially slower initially. Qualitative findings provide crucial implementation insights. Student resistance during early weeks indicates need for explicit orientation to TBLT principles and gradual transition from familiar methods. Teacher challenges highlight importance of comprehensive professional development, not merely technical training but pedagogical reconceptualization [Zheng & Borg, 2014]. The study's main limitation is its single-site design, limiting generalizability. However, detailed context description enables transferability assessment, and findings resonate with international research while providing Central Asia-specific insights.

CONCLUSION. This study demonstrates that TBLT significantly enhances English language proficiency, particularly communicative competence, in an EFL university context. While traditional

instruction maintains value for developing discrete linguistic knowledge, TBLT more effectively prepares students for authentic English communication. Future research should examine long-term effects, optimal task sequencing, and TBLT effectiveness across different proficiency levels and cultural contexts. As English education in Uzbekistan and globally continues evolving toward communicative goals, empirical evidence regarding effective pedagogical approaches becomes increasingly valuable.

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