
Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Classroom Reality: Investigating the Role of Task-Based Language Teaching in Promoting Learner Autonomy and Communicative Competence in EFL Contexts

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Abstract

This comprehensive study delves into the persistent and problematic disjunction between the theoretical underpinnings of communicative language teaching and the on-the-ground realities of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom globally. It posits Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) as a robust pedagogical framework capable of reconciling this divide by simultaneously cultivating two critical yet often neglected outcomes: communicative competence and learner autonomy. The research is grounded in the observable fact that despite decades of advocacy for communicative approaches, instructional practices in many EFL settings remain entrenched in teacher-centered, form-focused methodologies, leading to learners who are often grammatically knowledgeable but communicatively deficient and heavily teacher-dependent. This investigation adopts a mixed-methods, quasi-experimental design to be conducted over a full academic semester, involving intermediate-level EFL learners divided into an experimental group (TBLT instruction) and a control group (traditional PPP instruction). A multi-faceted data collection strategy will be employed, encompassing pre- and post-intervention assessments of communicative competence through standardized speaking and writing tasks, a validated Likert-scale questionnaire measuring dimensions of learner autonomy, systematic classroom observations, and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a purposively selected sample of participants. The anticipated results project a statistically significant superiority of the TBLT group over the control group in both targeted domains.

Qualitatively, the study expects to uncover rich, nuanced insights into the transformative classroom dynamics engendered by TBLT, including shifts in teacher and student roles, the development of strategic competence, and the emergence of metacognitive awareness. The conclusion will affirm TBLT's pivotal role in transforming EFL classrooms into dynamic, student-centered environments where language is not merely learned but lived and used authentically. The study culminates in a set of practical, evidence-based recommendations for curriculum reform, teacher professional development, and the design of pedagogical materials tailored to diverse and often challenging EFL contexts.

Keywords: Task-Based Language Teaching, Learner Autonomy, Communicative Competence, EFL, Mixed-Methods Research, Pedagogical Innovation, Curriculum Development, Teacher Development

1. Introduction

The landscape of global English language education is paradoxically characterized by a near-universal endorsement of communicative principles and a simultaneous, widespread failure to implement them effectively in classroom practice. This chasm, often referred to as the "theory-practice gap," is particularly pronounced in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, where socio-cultural factors, educational traditions, and systemic constraints frequently conspire to perpetuate traditional, transmission-based models of teaching (Li, 1998; Ellis, 2003). In such environments, instruction is predominantly focused on the explicit teaching of grammatical structures and vocabulary, with success measured by performance on discrete-point accuracy tests. The consequence of this misalignment is a generation of learners who, after years of formal study, possess a considerable knowledge *about* the English language but demonstrate a profound inability to deploy this knowledge functionally in real-world, unpredictable communicative scenarios. This results in a critical dual deficit: a lack of communicative competence and a deficiency in learner autonomy. Learners remain passive recipients of knowledge, unable to act as agents of their own learning process both inside and beyond the classroom walls. This paper, therefore, proposes Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) as a powerful and coherent pedagogical intervention designed specifically to bridge this enduring gap. By centering instruction on the concept of the "task"—a holistic activity requiring meaningful language use to achieve a non-linguistic outcome—TBLT inherently and simultaneously addresses the need for

authentic communication practice and the conditions necessary for fostering self-directed learning. This research protocol outlines a detailed empirical investigation aimed at quantifying and qualifying the precise role of TBLT in promoting these two interdependent constructs within a specific, yet representative, EFL context.

2. Significance of the Study

The import of this research extends beyond academic inquiry, holding substantial implications for a wide array of stakeholders within the EFL ecosystem and contributing meaningfully to the broader field of second language acquisition.

- **For EFL Learners:** This study is of paramount significance to the end-users of language education: the students. It champions a pedagogical shift towards a more engaging, relevant, and empowering learning experience. By demonstrating a pathway to genuine communicative competence, it directly addresses student frustration and lack of motivation often born from an inability to use the language practically. Furthermore, by fostering learner autonomy, it equips students with the metacognitive tools and the self-confidence necessary for lifelong learning, thereby empowering them to continue their language development long after formal instruction has ended. This is not merely about learning English; it is about cultivating adaptable, resourceful, and confident individuals.
- **For EFL Teachers and Educational Institutions:** For practitioners often caught between innovative theory and conservative practice, this research offers both validation and a practical roadmap. It provides much-needed empirical evidence to support the pedagogical risk-taking that TBLT implementation may initially represent. The findings can serve as a catalyst for departmental and institutional reflection, encouraging a move away from sterile, exam-focused drilling towards dynamic, interactive teaching. It offers teachers a structured framework (the TBLT cycle) to operationalize communicative principles in a manageable way, potentially renewing their professional satisfaction and effectiveness.
- **For Curriculum Developers and Policymakers:** At a systemic level, this study provides a robust evidence base to advocate for large-scale curricular reform. It argues convincingly for the design of national syllabi, standardized assessments, and prescribed textbooks that are organized around real-world tasks and that explicitly value communicative fluency and learner strategy development. For policymakers, it highlights the critical need to invest in long-term, sustained teacher development programs that move beyond one-

off workshops to create communities of practice focused on communicative methodologies like TBLT.

- **For the Academic Community:** Within the scholarly discourse of applied linguistics and SLA, this research makes a concerted effort to fill a notable gap. While the theoretical links between TBLT, communicative competence, and autonomy are often discussed, robust mixed-methods studies that empirically measure their intersection in specific, constraint-heavy EFL contexts are less common. This study aims to contribute nuanced, context-sensitive data that can refine existing theoretical models and inspire further localized research.

3. Objectives of the Study

This research is guided by a set of clear, hierarchical, and measurable objectives designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation:

1. **Primary Objective:** To empirically determine the comparative efficacy of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) versus traditional Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) approaches in enhancing overall communicative competence among intermediate-level EFL learners.

Secondary Objectives:

- a. To quantify the impact of TBLT on specific sub-components of communicative competence, namely grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies, as defined by Canale and Swain (1980).
- b. To assess the degree to which a TBLT intervention fosters the development of learner autonomy, measured through metrics of self-motivation, metacognitive strategy use, and preferences for learning management.
- c. To conduct a comparative analysis of the learning outcomes (both competence and autonomy) between the experimental (TBLT) group and the control (PPP) group at the conclusion of the instructional period.
- d. To identify, through qualitative means, the specific phases and components of the TBLT framework (e.g., task planning, collaborative problem-solving, post-task reflection) that are perceived by learners as most instrumental in promoting their communicative ability and sense of autonomy.

e. To document and analyze the perceived challenges, barriers, and facilitating factors associated with the implementation of TBLT from the dual perspectives of the learners and the instructor.

4. Research Questions

To operationalize the objectives, the study is guided by the following overarching and sub-questions:

1. To what extent, and in what ways, does the implementation of a TBLT methodology lead to a greater improvement in the overall and componential communicative competence of intermediate EFL learners compared to those taught through a traditional PPP methodology?
2. How does a sustained TBLT intervention impact the development of learner autonomy among participants?
3. What are the salient perceptions, experiences, and lived realities of the students and the teacher regarding the implementation of TBLT in their EFL context?

5. Hypothesis

Based on the theoretical foundations of TBLT and the findings of prior research, the following directional hypothesis is proposed:

H₁: EFL learners who receive instruction through a Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) framework will demonstrate a statistically significant greater improvement in both (a) overall communicative competence and (b) overall learner autonomy scores from pre-test to post-test, compared to a matched group of learners who receive instruction through a traditional Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) framework.

H₀: There will be no statistically significant difference in the improvement of communicative competence and learner autonomy between the TBLT group and the PPP group.

6. Literature Review

6.1. The Theoretical Evolution and Praxis of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)

TBLT emerged from the broader Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) movement, shifting the focus from learning *about* language to learning *through* language use. Grounded in psycholinguistic theories of second language acquisition (e.g., Long's Interaction Hypothesis, 1996), TBLT posits that language is best acquired when learners are engaged in comprehending, manipulating, and producing the target language to achieve a communicative goal. The central unit

of analysis is the "task." Ellis (2003) provides a robust definition, characterizing a task as an activity where meaning is primary; there is a communicative gap to resolve; participants rely on their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources; and there is a clear, real-world outcome. The pedagogical framework, most famously articulated by Willis (1996), provides a clear structure: the Pre-task phase (topic introduction, task instructions), the Task Cycle (task performance, planning, and report), and the Language Focus (analysis and practice of salient linguistic forms). This cycle ensures a balanced focus on both fluency (during the task) and accuracy (during the language focus), making it a more comprehensive approach than earlier strong versions of CLT.

6.2. Deconstructing Communicative Competence: Beyond Grammatical Accuracy

The ultimate goal of TBLT, and of modern language education itself, is the development of communicative competence. This concept, first coined by Hymes (1972) in opposition to Chomsky's purely linguistic competence, was systematically operationalized by Canale and Swain (1980). Their model, which will form the analytical backbone of this study, consists of four distinct but interrelated components:

- **Grammatical Competence:** Knowledge of the language code itself (vocabulary, syntax, phonology).
- **Sociolinguistic Competence:** Knowledge of the social rules of use, such as appropriateness, register, and cultural norms.
- **Discourse Competence:** The ability to achieve coherence and cohesion in spoken and written texts, connecting sentences into a meaningful whole.
- **Strategic Competence:** The verbal and non-verbal communication strategies used to compensate for breakdowns in communication and to enhance the effectiveness of communication. A critical critique of traditional PPP instruction is its overwhelming, and often exclusive, focus on grammatical competence, thereby neglecting the other three competencies essential for real-world interaction.

6.3. Learner Autonomy: The Capacity for Lifelong Learning

Learner autonomy is a multifaceted construct, definitively described by Holec (1981) as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning." This involves a complex combination of attitudes, skills, and behaviours. It is not merely learning without a teacher; it is learning with a heightened awareness of one's own learning processes (metacognition) and the ability to make critical decisions about one's learning

(planning, selecting resources, self-monitoring, self-assessment). Little (1991) firmly establishes that autonomy is not an inborn trait but a capacity that can be explicitly fostered through pedagogical practices that encourage reflection, choice, and responsibility. In teacher-centric classrooms, this capacity remains dormant and underdeveloped.

6.4. Synthesizing the Constructs: TBLT as a Unifying Framework

The literature strongly suggests a symbiotic relationship between TBLT, communicative competence, and learner autonomy. TBLT creates the necessary conditions for this synergy:

- By requiring learners to complete tasks, it *necessitates* the use of all facets of communicative competence, especially strategic and discourse competencies.
- By devolving responsibility for task completion onto the learners (in pairs or groups), it *compels* them to make decisions, negotiate meaning, and manage their own interaction, thereby directly practicing autonomous behaviours.
- The post-task reflection phase is a direct exercise in metacognition, a core component of autonomy.

6.5. Identifying the Research Gap

While the theoretical connections are well-argued, there is a identified scarcity of empirical studies that employ a rigorous mixed-methods design to investigate the *simultaneous* development of communicative competence (with its sub-components) and learner autonomy in authentic, constraint-laden EFL settings (e.g., those with large classes, limited resources, and exam-centric cultures). This study aims to fill this gap by providing a holistic, data-rich account of TBLT's impact.

7. Research Methodology

7.1. Research Design and Rationale

This study will employ a **mixed-methods, quasi-experimental design**. The quasi-experimental approach, featuring a pre-test/post-test control group design, is selected because random assignment of individual students to groups is not feasible in an intact school setting. This design allows for the quantitative comparison of outcomes between the two instructional approaches. The mixed-methods component is crucial, as it enables the researcher to not only quantify the differences (the "what") but also to understand the underlying processes, perceptions, and contextual factors (the "why" and "how"). The qualitative data will provide depth and explanation for the quantitative results, following a complementary model.

7.2. Participants and Sampling

The study will be conducted in a public high school in [Specific Country/Region context, e.g., Vietnam]. Participants will include:

- **Students:** 60 intermediate-level EFL students (aged 16-18) from two intact classes. One class will be randomly assigned as the Experimental Group (n=30) and the other as the Control Group (n=30). The intermediate level is targeted as students at this stage possess a sufficient linguistic base to engage in meaningful task-based communication. Permission will be sought from parents, guardians, and the students themselves.
- **Teacher:** The same certified and experienced EFL teacher will teach both groups to control for teacher variability and personality effects. The teacher will receive intensive training on TBLT principles and practice prior to the study.

7.3. Research Instruments and Materials

A multi-instrument approach ensures data triangulation and enhances validity.

- **Quantitative Instruments:**
 1. **Communicative Competence Test (CCT):** A self-developed but validated test administered as a pre- and post-test. It will include:
 - A **Speaking Task:** A 10-minute paired role-play based on an unpredictable scenario (e.g., resolving a problem with a hotel booking). Performances will be audio-recorded and rated by two independent trained assessors using a analytic rubric aligned with Canale and Swain's (1980) model, with separate scores for each competency.
 - A **Writing Task:** A 30-minute argumentative essay or a formal email. This will be scored using a similar rubric focusing on grammatical accuracy, discourse structure, and appropriacy.
 2. **Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (LAQ):** A 5-point Likert scale questionnaire (1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree) adapted from established instruments (e.g., Zhang & Li, 2004). It will have sub-sections measuring: Motivation for Learning, Metacognitive Strategy Use (planning, monitoring, evaluating), and Learning Preferences (preference for collaborative work, self-directed study).
- **Qualitative Instruments:**
 1. **Semi-structured Interview Protocol:** Developed for in-depth interviews with 8-10 purposively selected students from the experimental group post-intervention. Questions will probe their experiences with TBLT, perceived

changes in their confidence and strategy use, and views on the challenges and benefits (e.g., "Can you describe a moment during a task when you felt you successfully communicated an idea? How did you do it?").

2. **Classroom Observation Checklist:** A structured checklist will be used by the researcher to observe 10 sessions of each group. It will focus on quantifying and qualifying teacher talk time, student talk time, instances of student-initiated communication, use of communication strategies, and patterns of collaboration.

7.4. Data Collection Procedure

The procedure will be phased over a 16-week academic semester:

1. **Phase 1: Pre-intervention (Weeks 1-2):** Administer the CCT and LAQ to both groups to establish a baseline. Conduct teacher training on TBLT.
2. **Phase 2: Intervention (Weeks 3-14):**
 - **Experimental Group:** Receives instruction based on a series of 10 carefully designed TBLT lesson plans, following the Willis (1996) framework. Topics are aligned with the curriculum (e.g., "Plan a community project," "Design a travel itinerary for a foreign guest").
 - **Control Group:** Continues with the standard curriculum delivered via the PPP approach, using the same core vocabulary and grammar points but through traditional drills and controlled practices.
3. **Phase 3: Post-intervention (Weeks 15-16):** Re-administer the CCT and LAQ to both groups. Conduct the semi-structured interviews with the experimental group participants and a debriefing interview with the teacher.

7.5. Data Analysis Plan

- **Quantitative Data Analysis:** All quantitative data will be analysed using SPSS (Version 28). Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) will be calculated for all pre- and post-test scores. To test the hypothesis, a series of Independent Samples t-tests will be conducted to compare the *gain scores* (post-test score minus pre-test score) of the experimental and control groups on the CCT and LAQ. A significance level of $p < .05$ will be set. A Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) may also be considered, using pre-test scores as a covariate to increase statistical power.
- **Qualitative Data Analysis:** All interviews and observation notes will be transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis, following the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), will be employed. This involves familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing

themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. NVivo software will be used to assist in managing and coding the qualitative data.

8. Ethical Considerations

The research will be conducted under the strictest ethical guidelines:

- **Informed Consent:** Written informed consent will be obtained from the school principal, the participating teacher, all student participants, and their parents or guardians. The consent forms will clearly explain the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, the right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and confidentiality assurances.
- **Confidentiality and Anonymity:** All participants will be assigned pseudonyms. Any identifying information will be removed from transcripts, recordings, and the final report. Data will be stored on a password-protected computer, and hard copies will be kept in a locked cabinet.
- **Minimization of Harm:** The study design poses minimal risk. However, the researcher will be vigilant for any student anxiety caused by the more communicative, performance-oriented TBLT class. The teacher will be instructed to maintain a supportive and low-anxiety classroom environment.
- **Debriefing and Reciprocity:** Upon completion of the study, all participants will be fully debriefed. The control group will be offered a special workshop on the TBLT strategies used in the study to ensure they also benefit from the research.

9. Limitations of the Study

While carefully designed, this study acknowledges several inherent limitations:

- **Generalizability:** The use of a quasi-experimental design with intact classes in a single specific context limits the generalizability (external validity) of the findings to other EFL settings with different cultural, educational, or demographic profiles.
- **Intervention Duration:** A single semester (12 weeks of intervention) may be insufficient to instigate profound and lasting changes in learner autonomy, which is a complex psychological construct that develops over a long period.
- **The Hawthorne Effect:** Participants, knowing they are part of a study, may alter their behaviour, potentially trying harder or acting in ways they believe the researcher desires.
- **Researcher Bias:** Despite rigorous protocols, the researcher's role as the observer and interpreter of qualitative data introduces a potential for

subjective bias. The use of inter-rater reliability for scoring the CCT and member-checking for interview transcripts will be employed to mitigate this.

- **Instrument Validity:** While efforts will be made to validate the self-developed Communicative Competence Test, it may not capture the full complexity of the construct compared to a commercially available, standardized test.

10. Expected Outcomes

Based on the theoretical framework and prior research, the following outcomes are anticipated:

1. **Quantitatively**, the TBLT group is expected to show statistically significant greater gain scores in the overall Communicative Competence Test, with particularly strong effect sizes anticipated for the Strategic and Discourse Competence sub-scales. The improvement in Grammatical Competence may be more comparable between groups, but the TBLT group is expected to demonstrate a superior ability to use grammar accurately *in context*.
2. The Learner Autonomy Questionnaire is expected to reveal significantly higher post-intervention scores for the TBLT group, especially in the "Metacognitive Strategy Use" and "Learning Preferences" sub-sections, indicating a greater propensity for self-directed learning.
3. **Qualitatively**, the interview and observation data are expected to yield rich themes illustrating the transformative process. These may include: "From Dependence to Interdependence: The Role of Collaboration," "Noticing the Gap: How Post-task Analysis Drives Learning," "The Teacher as Facilitator: A Shift in Classroom Dynamics," and "Initial Resistance Overcoming by Growing Confidence."

11. Findings (Projected)

The findings chapter would be structured to present the integrated quantitative and qualitative results.

- **Section 11.1: Quantitative Impact on Communicative Competence.** This section would present tables of pre-test/post-test means and standard deviations, followed by the results of the t-tests, confirming or rejecting the hypothesis related to communicative competence. It would detail which sub-components showed the most significant differences.
- **Section 11.2: Quantitative Impact on Learner Autonomy.** Similarly, this section would present the statistical analysis of the LAQ data, highlighting

the specific areas of autonomy (e.g., self-monitoring, motivation) where the TBLT group showed marked improvement.

- **Section 11.3: Qualitative Thematic Analysis.** This would be the narrative heart of the findings, weaving together participant voices and observation notes to explain the numbers. For instance, the quantitative jump in strategic competence would be illustrated by qualitative excerpts where students describe using circumlocution or gestures to get their meaning across. The growth in autonomy would be evidenced by students' own accounts of starting to plan their learning outside of class or taking more initiative during tasks.

12. Conclusion and Implications

The conclusion will synthesize the projected findings to affirm the central thesis: that TBLT serves as a powerful and effective bridge across the theory-practice gap in EFL education. It is anticipated that the study will demonstrate that TBLT does not sacrifice linguistic accuracy but rather embeds it within a more meaningful and motivating context, while simultaneously cultivating the crucial life skill of learner autonomy. The implications will be drawn for three key areas:

1. **Pedagogical Implications:** Teachers should be supported through continuous professional development to adopt TBLT principles. They should be encouraged to start with "TBLT-lite" incorporating smaller tasks into their existing curriculum and gradually move towards a full task-based syllabus.
2. **Curricular Implications:** Ministries of education and curriculum designers should consider reorganizing syllabi around holistic, real-world tasks rather than lists of discrete grammar points. Textbooks should be developed or adapted to support a task-based learning journey.
3. **Assessment Implications:** High-stakes examinations must evolve to include performance-based assessments that measure communicative competence in authentic ways. This would create a positive "washback" effect, encouraging teachers to adopt communicative methodologies like TBLT in their daily practice.

Finally, the study will conclude by suggesting directions for future research, such as longitudinal studies tracking autonomous behaviour over years, action research projects where teachers investigate TBLT in their own classrooms, and studies exploring the use of digital tools to facilitate task-based learning in online or blended environments.

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