THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING (TBLT) IN DEVELOPING SPEAKING SKILLS OF UNIVERSITY EFL STUDENTS

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Abstract. This study will investigate whether task-based language teaching (TBLT) improves the speaking skills of EFL students at an international university in Uzbekistan more than traditional teaching. Two groups of about 30 students will be compared over one semester. Data will come from speaking tests, questionnaires and interviews. The study will provide new evidence from Central Asia and practical advice for English teachers.

Keywords: task-based language teaching, speaking skills, EFL, higher education, Uzbekistan

Introduction

Speaking is often the skill that students want most and feel least confident about. Many learners can read academic texts and pass grammar tests, yet they hesitate when they need to talk in class, give a presentation or join a discussion. In my own teaching, I see students who know the rules of English but cannot use them quickly and naturally in real conversation.

One reason is the way speaking is often taught. Many classrooms still follow a presentation-practice-production (PPP) model: the teacher presents a structure, students practise it in controlled exercises, and only then use it freely.

TBLT offers a different path. Students work on meaningful tasks, such as planning a trip, solving a problem or comparing information, and the language they need grows out of the task. Attention to grammar and vocabulary comes during and after the task, not only before it (Willis[1], 1996). Supporters argue that this makes classroom talk closer to real-life communication.

Uzbekistan has made foreign language learning a national priority. President[2]ial Decree No. 1875 (2012) introduced major reforms in foreign language teaching at all levels of education. Universities now expect graduates to communicate confidently in English, which makes effective speaking instruction more important than ever.

Problem statement and research gap

The problem is clear: many university EFL students in Uzbekistan still struggle to speak fluently and accurately, and we have little local evidence on which teaching methods help them most.

Research on TBLT has grown fast over the last thirty years. A meta-analysis by Bryfonski[3] and McKay (2019) found that task-based programmes generally had a positive effect on learning outcomes. However, most of this research comes from East Asia, Europe and North America. Studies in Asian

[1] Willis, J. (1996). *A framework for task-based learning*. Longman.

[2] President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. (2012). *Decree No. 1875 on measures to further improve the system of learning foreign languages* (10 December 2012).

[3] Bryfonski, L., & McKay, T. H. (2019). TBLT implementation and evaluation: A meta-analysis. *Language Teaching Research, 23*(5), 603–632.

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classrooms also show that teachers face real challenges when they try TBLT, such as large classes, exam pressure and students' habit of using their first language (Carless[4], 2007; Butler, 2011).

Very few published studies have tested TBLT with university students in Central Asia. Learners in Uzbekistan often speak Uzbek, Russian or both, and they study in an education system with its own traditions. We cannot simply assume that results from China or Spain will apply here.

This study will help fill that gap. It will provide experimental evidence from an Uzbek university and look at both the results and the experiences of the people in the classroom.

Aims and research questions

The main aim is to find out whether TBLT helps university EFL students in Uzbekistan speak better than PPP-based teaching, and how students and teachers experience it.

The study will answer four questions:

1. Does TBLT lead to greater gains in overall speaking performance than PPP-based instruction?
2. How does TBLT affect the fluency, accuracy and complexity of students' speech?
3. Does TBLT change students' speaking anxiety and willingness to communicate in English?
4. How do students and teachers view TBLT, and what difficulties do they meet when using it?

Hypothesis: Students taught through TBLT will show greater improvement in speaking performance, especially in fluency, than students taught through PPP.

Literature review

The literature suggests that TBLT can improve speaking, but its success depends strongly on the local context and on how teachers put it into practice.

From communicative teaching to TBLT

TBLT grew out of communicative language teaching, which put real communication at the centre of the classroom (Richards[5] & Rodgers, 2014). One of the first large projects was Prabhu[6]'s (1987) Bangalore Project in India, where learners worked on problem-solving tasks instead of grammar drills. Later scholars developed the approach into a full framework for course design (Long[7], 2015).

What is a task?

Ellis[8] (2009) describes a task as an activity where the main focus is on meaning, there is some kind of gap (in information, opinion or reasoning), learners use their own language resources, and there is a clear outcome beyond language itself. This separates a task from an exercise, such as filling in verb forms, where the focus is on form.

Frameworks for teaching with tasks

Willis[9] (1996) proposed a three-stage framework that many teachers use:

Pre-task: the teacher introduces the topic and prepares students.

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[4] Carless, D. (2007). The suitability of task-based approaches for secondary schools: Perspectives from Hong Kong. *System, 35*(4), 595–608.

[5] Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2014). *Approaches and methods in language teaching* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

[6] Prabhu, N. S. (1987). *Second language pedagogy*. Oxford University Press.

[7] Long, M. (2015). *Second language acquisition and task-based language teaching*. Wiley Blackwell.

[8] Ellis, R. (2009). Task-based language teaching: Sorting out the misunderstandings. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics, 19*(3), 221–246.

[9] Willis, J. (1996). *A framework for task-based learning*. Longman.

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Task cycle: students do the task, plan a report and present it.

Language focus: students analyse and practise useful language from the task.

Nunan[10] (2004) and Samuda[11] and Bygate (2008) offer further guidance on designing and sequencing tasks for different levels.

Researchers often measure speaking through three dimensions: complexity, accuracy and fluency, known as CAF (Skehan[12], 1998; Housen[13] & Kuiken, 2009). Skehan argues that learners have limited attention, so a task may push one dimension up while another goes down. For example, planning time before a task often improves fluency and complexity. This study will use CAF measures alongside a holistic speaking rubric.

Speaking is closely linked to emotions. Horwitz[14], Horwitz and Cope (1986) showed that foreign language anxiety can block learners from speaking. MacIntyre[15] et al. (1998) introduced the idea of willingness to communicate, meaning a learner's readiness to start speaking when given the chance. Because tasks give learners a real reason to talk in small groups, they may lower anxiety, but this needs testing.

Studies of TBLT in Asian classrooms report mixed experiences. Carless (2007) found that teachers in Hong Kong supported the idea of tasks but worried about noise, discipline and exams. Butler[16] (2011) and Littlewood[17] (2007) described similar tensions across the Asia-Pacific region, where teacher-centred traditions remain strong. East[18] (2012) showed that teachers' beliefs strongly shape whether TBLT succeeds. Recent overviews (Ellis[19] et al., 2020) argue that TBLT works best when it is adapted to local needs, not copied from elsewhere.

Methodology

The study will use a mixed-methods, quasi-experimental design: a pre-test/post-test comparison of two groups, followed by interviews (Creswell & Plano[20] Clark, 2018).

Participants

About 60 first- or second-year students at an international university in Uzbekistan will take part, in two intact classes at a similar level (around B1 on the CEFR). One class will be the experimental group (TBLT) and the other the control group (PPP). Both groups will follow the same syllabus topics and have the same number of hours. A small number of English teachers will also be interviewed.

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[10] Nunan, D. (2004). *Task-based language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
[11] Samuda, V., & Bygate, M. (2008). *Tasks in second language learning*. Palgrave Macmillan.
[12] Skehan, P. (1998). *A cognitive approach to language learning*. Oxford University Press.
[13] Housen, A., & Kuiken, F. (2009). Complexity, accuracy, and fluency in second language acquisition. *Applied Linguistics, 30*(4), 461–473.

[14] Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal, 70*(2), 125–132.
[15] MacIntyre, P. D., Clément, R., Dörnyei, Z., & Noels, K. A. (1998). Conceptualizing willingness to communicate in a L2. *The Modern Language Journal, 82*(4), 545–562.
[16] Butler, Y. G. (2011). The implementation of communicative and task-based language teaching in the Asia-Pacific region. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 31*, 36–57.
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Over 12-14 weeks, the experimental group will learn through tasks based on Willis[21]'s (1996) framework. Examples include:

Information-gap tasks: students hold different parts of a picture or timetable and must share information to complete it.

Problem-solving tasks: groups agree on solutions to a campus or city problem.

Decision-making tasks: students rank options, such as choosing the best candidate for a job.

Opinion and presentation tasks: students prepare and present a short group report.

The control group will study the same topics through PPP lessons.

Table 1. Instruments, Measures and Timing of Data Collection

Instrument	What it measures	When
Speaking test (recorded, scored with an analytic rubric such as the IELTS speaking descriptors)	Overall speaking performance	Weeks 1 and 14
CAF analysis of recorded speech	Complexity, accuracy, fluency	Weeks 1 and 14
Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz et al., 1986)	Speaking anxiety	Weeks 1 and 14
Willingness to communicate questionnaire	Readiness to speak	Weeks 1 and 14
Semi-structured interviews (about 10 students, 4-5 teachers)	Views and challenges	After week 14
Classroom observation notes	How tasks work in practice	Throughout

Two trained raters will score the speaking tests separately, and their agreement will be checked.

Data analysis

Quantitative data: descriptive statistics, then ANCOVA to compare post-test scores while controlling for pre-test scores. Effect sizes will be reported. Analysis will be done in SPSS or R.

Qualitative data: interview recordings will be transcribed and analysed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The two types of results will then be compared to give a fuller picture.

Significance, timeline, ethics and limitations

Significance

For research: the study adds evidence on TBLT from Central Asia, a region that is almost missing from the literature.

For teachers: it will produce a set of tested speaking tasks and practical advice for using TBLT in Uzbek university classrooms.

For institutions: results can inform curriculum design and teacher training in line with national language education reforms.

participants, a colleague will collect consent and a second rater will score tests to reduce bias. The control group will be offered TBLT materials after the study ends.

[21] Willis, J. (1996). *A framework for task-based learning*. Longman.

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