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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING IN DEVELOPING EFL STUDENTS' SPEAKING SKILLS

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Abstract

Speaking remains difficult for many EFL students because classroom learning often provides limited opportunities for purposeful interaction. This literature-based article examines how Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) supports speaking development. Recent research suggests that meaning-focused tasks can strengthen fluency, accuracy, interaction, confidence, motivation, and communicative competence when they are carefully sequenced and supported. The article argues that TBLT is most effective when teachers balance meaningful communication with timely attention to language form, learner needs, and classroom realities.

Keywords: classroom interaction, communicative competence, EFL learners, fluency, speaking skills, task-based language teaching, task design

Introduction

Speaking is central to language learning because it allows learners to exchange information and participate in academic or professional life. Nevertheless, many EFL students can complete grammar exercises but struggle to express an idea in real time. Limited exposure, fear of mistakes, insufficient vocabulary, and teacher-dominated lessons can reduce opportunities to speak. Learners may consequently know English rules without being able to use them spontaneously.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) addresses this gap by organizing learning around purposeful language use. Rather than treating communication as a final reward after grammar practice, TBLT makes communication the main process through which learning occurs. Long (2016) argues that a genuine task is directed toward a non-linguistic outcome, while Ellis (2017) emphasizes that meaning is primary even though learners may also attend to form. This article examines the theoretical basis of TBLT, its contribution to speaking development, and the conditions needed for effective classroom implementation. Its central argument is that TBLT can substantially improve oral competence, but its success depends on appropriate task design, structured support, and sensitive teaching rather than the simple use of group work.

Theoretical Foundations of Task-Based Language Teaching

TBLT is a communicative approach organized around tasks. A task requires learners to use language to achieve an outcome, such as selecting an apartment, solving a travel problem, or reaching a group decision. Language becomes a tool rather than only an object of study. By contrast, a traditional exercise asks learners to reproduce a structure, fill gaps, or manipulate sentences. Such exercises may support accuracy but do not necessarily require negotiation of meaning or unpredictable communication.

Contemporary accounts do not present TBLT as an absence of grammar teaching. Ellis et al. (2020) explain that attention to form can occur before, during, or after a task without removing its communicative purpose. East (2021) similarly describes task-based teaching as a principled framework that connects meaningful outcomes with carefully planned language support. This balance is important in EFL contexts, where learners may have little contact with English outside the classroom and cannot always infer needed forms from exposure alone.

A practical lesson commonly includes three phases. During the pre-task phase, the teacher introduces the situation, activates relevant knowledge, clarifies the outcome, and may provide useful expressions. In the task cycle, learners work individually, in pairs, or in groups to complete the outcome. The post-task phase allows them to present results, repeat the task, reflect, and examine recurring language problems. Jackson (2022) notes that task sequence, conditions, and focus on form influence what learners notice and produce. The phases should therefore form a coherent learning cycle.

The Role of TBLT in Developing Speaking Skills

TBLT creates a reason to speak. Information-gap tasks require partners to exchange missing details; decision-making tasks require them to justify preferences; and problem-solving tasks make clarification necessary. These interactional demands encourage learners to ask questions, reformulate messages, signal misunderstanding, and respond to others. Such moves are essential elements of communicative competence because effective speaking involves more than grammatical sentences. It also requires turn-taking, responsiveness, strategic language use, and attention to an interlocutor.

Research reviewed by Bryfonski and McKay (2019) indicates that task-based instruction has an overall positive effect on second-language learning, although results vary according to programme and research conditions. For speaking, repeated opportunities to convey meaning can support fluency by making vocabulary and sentence patterns more readily accessible. Skehan (2018) explains that task performance involves competing demands on attention: learners must manage meaning while attempting to speak fluently, accurately, and with complexity. Expecting immediate improvement in all three areas is therefore unrealistic. Planning time may support more organized speech, while task repetition can free attention for more accurate or elaborate language on a later attempt.

Tasks can also affect confidence and motivation. A learner who solves a problem with one partner may feel less exposed than one answering an unexpected question before the class. Clear outcomes show why students are communicating, while shared responsibility reduces pressure. Lambert and Oliver (2020) show that tasks can be adapted across educational settings, suggesting that local relevance matters. Familiar, age-appropriate topics let students contribute despite limited linguistic resources. However, an enjoyable activity is not automatically productive; it must generate meaningful language use and give each learner a genuine role.

Practical Implementation in the EFL Classroom

Implementation begins with a realistic communicative outcome. For an information-gap task, pairs might receive different bus schedules and agree on the best route. In a role-play, students could act as a customer and a hotel receptionist to resolve a booking problem. Small groups might rank solutions to an environmental issue, conduct peer interviews, discuss competing proposals, or create and present a collaborative project. The outcome should be possible to identify—an agreed choice, a completed plan,

a set of findings, or a proposed solution—without requiring every learner to use exactly the same grammar.

Task difficulty must match learners' proficiency. Shintani (2016) demonstrates the value of carefully designed input and interaction for learners with limited productive resources. Beginners may need pictures, key phrases, rehearsal, and a simple outcome. More proficient students can manage unfamiliar topics, several information sources, or stronger demands for justification. Teachers can also assign rotating roles such as facilitator, questioner, note-taker, and reporter to prevent confident students from controlling group talk.

The teacher's role changes but does not disappear. Before the task, the teacher creates interest, checks instructions, models procedures, and supplies only the language needed to begin. During interaction, the teacher monitors participation and records useful examples without interrupting every error. Immediate correction may be necessary when communication breaks down, but constant interruption can weaken fluency and confidence. Afterward, selected errors can become material for brief form-focused work, feedback, and task repetition. Ellis et al. (2020) regard this connection between communicative performance and reflection as a major pedagogical strength.

Assessment should reflect task goals. A short rubric may consider completion, comprehensibility, interaction, fluency, and appropriate language use. Accuracy should not be weighted so heavily that learners fear experimenting. Self-assessment and peer feedback can highlight follow-up questions, supported opinions, and interactional effort. Recordings or repeated tasks can make progress visible and encourage autonomy.

Challenges and Pedagogical Considerations

TBLT is demanding to plan. Teachers may face large classes, short lessons, mixed proficiency, examination pressure, limited materials, and expectations that teaching should follow a grammar sequence. Erlam and Tolosa (2022) show that implementation is shaped by teachers' beliefs, institutional conditions, and available professional support. In crowded classrooms, noise and monitoring are genuine concerns. Yet manageable adaptations are possible: teachers can use stable pairs, short tasks, visible time limits, clear role cards, and one outcome sheet per group. Not every lesson needs to be entirely task-based.

Unequal participation is another risk. Some learners may dominate, while anxious students remain silent or rely on their first language. Teachers should establish supportive norms, allow preparation time, and begin with pair work before moving to public reporting. Strategic first-language use may help groups understand complex content, but the task should contain a real need to use English. Mixed-level grouping, optional support cards, and extension questions can provide different levels of challenge without separating the class.

There is also a danger of prioritizing fluency while persistent errors go unnoticed. TBLT is strongest when meaning and form are connected. Post-task feedback can highlight several useful expressions drawn from learners' actual needs, followed by a second performance in which those expressions can be used. Teachers therefore need knowledge of task design as well as confidence in responding to emerging language. The evidence summarized by Bryfonski and McKay (2019) supports TBLT, but it does not justify treating it as a universal technique with identical effects in every context. Sustainable use requires adaptation, reflection, and institutional support.

Conclusion

TBLT can improve EFL students' speaking when tasks require purposeful interaction, have clear outcomes, match learners' abilities, and form part of a supported sequence. Its main strength is that learners practise building meaning under conditions resembling communication beyond the textbook. Through planning, interaction, feedback, and repetition, they can develop fluency, accuracy, confidence, motivation, and the strategic skills needed to communicate with others.

At the same time, tasks do not guarantee balanced participation or linguistic development. Poorly designed activities may produce silence, uncontrolled first-language use, superficial talk, or fluent but inaccurate speech. Teachers should therefore introduce TBLT gradually, combine communicative work with focused language support, and evaluate both task completion and the quality of interaction. Future classroom research should investigate how particular task designs work across proficiency levels, class sizes, and local EFL settings. TBLT is most convincing not as a rigid method, but as a flexible and principled way of turning speaking from occasional performance into regular, purposeful learning.

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