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Developing Communicative Competence Through Task-Based Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in developing communicative competence among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in an authentic classroom setting. Motivated by the persistent gap between traditional, form-focused instruction and learners' limited communicative ability, the study employed a qualitative descriptive design involving classroom observations, audio-video recordings, interviews, and analysis of student task outputs. Findings indicate that TBLT substantially improved four major components of communicative competence: grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence. Students produced more accurate and varied structures, organized ideas more coherently, used socially appropriate expressions, and applied communication strategies to maintain interaction. Learners also reported increased motivation and confidence due to the meaningful, collaborative nature of tasks. Despite minor challenges such as uneven participation and vocabulary limitations, TBLT proved effective in promoting natural communication and active engagement. The study contributes to existing literature by demonstrating how TBLT operates in real classroom conditions and highlights its potential as a pedagogical approach for fostering holistic communicative competence in EFL contexts. Implications for classroom practice and suggestions for future research are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Developing communicative competence has become an essential priority in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, particularly in contexts where opportunities for authentic language use outside the classroom remain limited. Despite years of formal study, many learners still struggle to express ideas, negotiate meaning, or participate confidently in real communication. This situation emerges largely because classroom practices continue to rely heavily on teacher-centered

instruction, grammar translation, and textbook-driven drills that emphasize linguistic accuracy more than meaningful interaction. As a result, learners often possess considerable knowledge of vocabulary and grammar but fail to transfer this knowledge into spontaneous, functional communication. The persistent gap between classroom instruction and communicative demands indicates an urgent need for more interaction-focused pedagogies, and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has gained increasing attention as a promising solution.

Research on TBLT consistently highlights its potential to enhance communicative competence through meaningful tasks that mirror real-life communication. Ellis (2017) shows that requiring students to complete authentic tasks encourages negotiation of meaning, which leads to increased fluency and interactional skills. Carless (2018) finds that task-based activities foster higher student participation, particularly in Asian EFL contexts where learners are often passive in traditional lessons. Similarly, Nunan (2019) reports that TBLT promotes learner autonomy, allowing students to take greater responsibility for producing and managing language during communication. Studies in Indonesia also show positive outcomes: Rahmawati and Hapsari (2021) find that task-based activities significantly improve speaking fluency when tasks are related to familiar, authentic themes. Supporting this trend, Kim and Park (2022) report that learners show higher motivation and engagement when participating in tasks they perceive as meaningful and relevant to daily communication. These findings collectively affirm that TBLT has strong potential to improve learners' communicative performance.

However, previous studies often focus on controlled experimental environments or short-term interventions, leaving limited understanding of how TBLT functions in real classroom settings where time constraints, instructional habits, and varying learner readiness may influence effectiveness. Additionally, most studies tend to emphasize fluency, while other essential dimensions of communicative competence—such as sociolinguistic appropriateness, discourse management, and strategic competence—receive far less attention. This creates a research gap concerning how TBLT contributes holistically to communicative competence within authentic school environments.

To address this gap, the present study investigates the effectiveness of Task-Based Language Teaching in developing communicative competence among EFL learners. The study aims to explore how task-based activities influence multiple components of communicative competence and how students respond to the incorporation of tasks during classroom interaction. Guided by this objective, the study addresses the following research questions: (1) How does TBLT influence students' overall communicative competence? (2) Which components of communicative competence show the most notable improvement through task-based instruction? (3) How do students perceive the use of tasks in their learning process? and (4) What challenges emerge during TBLT implementation in an actual classroom?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to investigate how Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) contributes to the development of communicative competence in an authentic EFL classroom context. The design was chosen because it allows the researcher to explore natural instructional processes, learner interactions, and classroom dynamics without manipulating variables or imposing experimental controls. The study was conducted at a senior high school where English is taught as a compulsory subject, and one intact class consisting of 28 students was purposively selected as the research setting. The selection was based on the teacher's implementation of task-based activities and the students' varied proficiency levels, which provided rich opportunities to examine changes in communicative performance.

Data were collected over a six-week instructional period during which the teacher implemented a series of task-based lessons designed around real-life communicative goals, such as giving opinions, solving problems collaboratively, and completing information-gap tasks. Multiple data collection techniques were used to ensure triangulation and strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings. Classroom observations were conducted to document teacher–student and student–student interactions during task performance, focusing on the fluency, appropriateness, and strategies students used to communicate. In addition, audio and video recordings of classroom activities were gathered to capture detailed language use that could be analyzed later. Semi-structured interviews with both the teacher and selected students were also conducted to explore their perceptions of TBLT implementation, learning challenges, and perceived improvements in communication. Furthermore, students' task outputs—such as group reports, spoken presentations, and reflective notes—were collected as supporting evidence of their communicative development.

The data analysis followed Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) interactive model, which includes data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. All observational notes and interview transcripts were read repeatedly to identify emerging patterns related to the development of communicative competence. The recordings were analyzed to examine students' grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence during task performance. Themes were then categorized and interpreted to determine how TBLT influenced different components of communicative competence and what factors supported or constrained its effectiveness. To ensure credibility, the researcher used triangulation across data sources, member checking, and peer debriefing. Ethical considerations were strictly followed by obtaining consent from the participants, ensuring confidentiality, and informing them of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

RESULTS

The findings of this study revealed that the implementation of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) had a substantial positive impact on the development of students' communicative competence. The analysis of classroom observations, recordings, interviews, and student outputs showed consistent improvement across four major components of communicative competence: grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. Although the extent of improvement varied among individuals, the majority of learners demonstrated higher confidence and fluency during classroom communication after participating in a series of task-based activities.

The first finding concerns grammatical competence, which showed gradual improvement during task performance. At the beginning of the study, students frequently paused while constructing sentences and tended to rely heavily on simple structures. However, as tasks encouraged them to express ideas more spontaneously, students began producing more varied sentence forms and showed fewer grammatical breakdowns. In particular, tasks such as information-gap and opinion-sharing provided natural opportunities for students to practice functional grammar, such as expressing agreement, giving reasons, or asking for clarification. Although errors remained present, students became more accurate in using basic tenses, modal verbs, and connectors, especially when these were required to complete the communicative goals of the task.

The second finding relates to discourse competence. Analysis of group discussions and recorded dialogues showed notable improvement in students' ability to organize ideas coherently. At the beginning of the project, their contributions tended to be short, fragmented, and disconnected. However, by the third and fourth weeks, students began to use more cohesive devices—such as “first,” “because,” “however,” and “in my opinion”—to link ideas more smoothly. Tasks that required completing joint problem-solving activities or producing short spoken reports strengthened their ability to build extended turns and maintain topic continuity. The improvement in discourse competence appeared to be one of the strongest outcomes of the TBLT implementation.

The third significant finding is the enhancement of sociolinguistic competence. Prior to the intervention, most students used informal expressions regardless of context and often failed to adjust language based on the communicative situation. Through role-play tasks and simulation activities, students gradually learned to choose more appropriate expressions for requesting, suggesting, agreeing politely, and expressing hesitation. The data showed that they became more aware of formality levels and culturally appropriate expressions when interacting with peers and the teacher. Students mentioned in interviews that these tasks made them realize “how to speak politely” and “how to respond in different situations,” showing increased pragmatic awareness.

The fourth finding concerns strategic competence, which improved prominently across the intervention. At the early stage, students frequently became silent when they lacked vocabulary, often waiting for help or shifting to Indonesian. During later tasks, however, students began to use various communication strategies, such as paraphrasing, using gestures, seeking confirmation, and asking follow-up questions. These strategies allowed them to maintain communication flow even when linguistic resources were limited. Recordings from the final sessions showed that students rarely gave up during communication breakdowns and instead used strategies to keep conversations going.

The final finding relates to students' perceptions, which were overwhelmingly positive. Interview results indicated that most students felt more motivated and less anxious during speaking activities because tasks were meaningful, enjoyable, and collaborative. Many reported that working in groups "made speaking easier," and that task instructions gave them a clear purpose for communication. Some students initially felt nervous during performance tasks, but their confidence increased as they became familiar with the task cycle. However, a few challenges remained, such as uneven participation in groups and occasional vocabulary limitations. Despite these challenges, students consistently expressed that TBLT helped them speak more naturally and confidently in English.

Overall, the results suggest that TBLT not only improved students' communicative competence across multiple dimensions but also enhanced their motivation, participation, and willingness to communicate. The holistic gains observed in the classroom indicate that TBLT provides an effective and learner-centered approach for developing communicative competence in EFL contexts.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) plays a substantial role in enhancing students' communicative competence across multiple dimensions. These outcomes reinforce the theoretical premise that communication develops most effectively when learners engage in meaningful tasks requiring them to use language for real purposes. The improvement observed in grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence indicates that TBLT offers a holistic framework for language development, rather than focusing solely on isolated linguistic forms.

The improvement in grammatical competence aligns with Ellis' (2017) assertion that tasks naturally elicit functional grammar, enabling learners to focus on meaning while still developing accuracy. In this study, grammar did not improve through direct instruction but through repeated exposure to communicative situations where specific linguistic forms became necessary. Students' increased control over tenses, modal verbs, and connectors supports the idea that grammar acquisition is more durable when linked to communicative goals. This finding counters the assumption that tasks may neglect accuracy; instead, it shows that TBLT can balance meaning and form when tasks are well designed.

The enhancement of discourse competence further supports Nunan's (2019) argument that tasks provide opportunities for extended turns and coherent expression. As students engaged in problem-solving and opinion-sharing tasks, they learned to sustain talk, organize explanations, and link ideas using cohesive devices. This ability to manage discourse is essential for real communication but is often underdeveloped in traditional classrooms that emphasize sentence-level practice. The observed improvements suggest that TBLT encourages learners to think in larger communicative units, promoting more natural and structured speech.

Improvements in sociolinguistic competence indicate that TBLT can also foster pragmatic awareness, a crucial dimension of communicative competence often overlooked in EFL contexts. Role-plays and simulations helped students understand how language choices vary depending on context, interlocutor, and communicative intention. This supports Kim and Park's (2022) findings that meaningful tasks increase learners' sensitivity to appropriateness and cultural norms. In this study, students became more skilled at using polite expressions, making requests, and adjusting formality levels—skills essential for participating in diverse communicative situations.

The development of strategic competence highlights the role of TBLT in encouraging learner autonomy and resilience during communication. In line with Carless (2018), the study shows that tasks promote active participation and push students to negotiate meaning. Rather than relying on the teacher or switching to their first language, students increasingly used paraphrasing, gestures, confirmation checks, and repair strategies. These behaviors show that learners became more confident in managing communication problems independently, which is a key indicator of communicative competence.

Students' positive perceptions of TBLT reflect the motivational benefits documented by previous research. Many learners reported feeling more engaged and less anxious because tasks provided clear goals and collaborative structures. This aligns with Rahmawati and Hapsari's (2021) findings that authentic tasks increase learners' speaking confidence, particularly in Indonesian EFL contexts. The enjoyable and meaningful nature of tasks helped reduce affective barriers, enabling students to participate more actively in communication. However, some challenges—such as uneven group participation and limited vocabulary—suggest the need for careful scaffolding and balanced grouping strategies during implementation.

Taken together, these findings indicate that TBLT enhances communicative competence not merely through language practice, but through the creation of meaningful communicative experiences. The integration of tasks that require interaction, negotiation, and problem-solving allows learners to activate multiple components of competence simultaneously. This holistic development contrasts with traditional methods that isolate linguistic skills and limit opportunities for authentic communication. The results therefore reinforce the argument that TBLT is highly suitable for EFL settings where communicative opportunities are limited and learners need structured support to practice using English meaningfully.

Overall, this study contributes to existing literature by showing how TBLT operates within real classroom conditions, rather than controlled experimental settings. It provides evidence that communicative competence can develop naturally when learners are engaged in purposeful tasks and when teachers adopt a facilitative rather than directive role. The findings also highlight the need for teachers to design tasks that balance meaning and form, promote active participation, and scaffold learners' strategic and sociolinguistic development. In doing so, TBLT can serve as a powerful pedagogical approach for preparing learners to communicate effectively in both academic and everyday contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is an effective and holistic approach for developing communicative competence among EFL learners. Through the implementation of meaningful, interaction-driven tasks, students demonstrated notable improvement in grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence. These gains indicate that communicative competence does not emerge from isolated practice of linguistic forms but grows out of opportunities to use language purposefully in authentic and collaborative contexts. The findings affirm that TBLT creates a learning environment where students negotiate meaning, construct coherent discourse, apply culturally appropriate expressions, and develop strategies to overcome communication breakdowns—all of which are essential for successful communication.

The study also highlights that TBLT fosters positive learner attitudes toward English learning. Students reported higher motivation, reduced anxiety, and greater confidence in speaking, suggesting that tasks help learners overcome affective barriers commonly found in EFL classrooms. While some challenges such as uneven group participation and limited vocabulary were observed, these did not hinder the overall effectiveness of the approach. Instead, they point to the need for continuous scaffolding, careful task selection, and balanced grouping strategies to maximize student engagement.

Importantly, this research contributes to the existing literature by providing insights into how TBLT functions in real classroom settings rather than controlled experimental environments. The findings emphasize that communicative competence can be cultivated when teachers adopt a facilitative role and create task sequences that integrate meaning and form. Given the generally positive outcomes, TBLT holds strong potential to address the persistent issue of limited communicative ability among EFL learners, particularly in contexts where exposure to authentic English use is minimal. Future research may explore longer-term implementation, variations of task types, or the integration of digital tools to further enhance communicative learning in diverse educational settings.

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