



Effectiveness of Using TBLT to Teach Grammar in the Indian Context: A Literature Review

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Abstract:

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) fosters language acquisition through meaningful, real-world tasks in a communicative and interactive environment. Over the decades, many studies have been conducted to test the effectiveness of TBLT across ESL and EFL classrooms. The present study investigates the impact of TBLT in enhancing grammatical accuracy and learner motivation among Indian students based on the outcomes from the earlier studies conducted by Indian researchers. The research methodology involves a comprehensive review of TBLT and a thorough examination of selected studies that experimented with the efficacy of TBLT in grammar instruction. The findings suggest that TBLT can significantly enhance grammar learning outcomes and communicative competence.

Keywords: Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Real-world tasks, ELT Pedagogy, Grammar instruction, Classroom motivation.

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Introduction

English Language Teaching has gained prominence over the past few decades, ever since English has emerged as a prominent language of communication across countries at various levels. In turn, this has made teaching and learning English a major concern for EFL/ESL learners. Over time, many approaches and methods have been introduced and experimented with, based on the needs of the time. While the early approaches focused on teaching English through form and structure, later methods focused on communicative effectiveness. TBLT emerged as a response to perceived limitations of traditional language teaching methods. Practitioners sought an approach that would prioritise communication and real-world language use. As Richards & Rodgers define, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is a language teaching method that uses tasks as the core unit for planning and compiling instructional materials in language teaching. The TBLT approach is a learning material plan designed for implementation in the teaching and learning process. As a result, students gain a learning experience more focused on intellect and their own ideas. The historical development of TBLT can be traced from its origins in the 1980s, influenced by Prabhu's work and further shaped by contributions from scholars like Michael Long, Willis and Willis, Peter Skehan, and others. The ongoing evolution of TBLT reflects a commitment to enhancing language education through meaningful and communicative tasks.

Objective of the Study

The primary objective of this research paper is to investigate the effectiveness of TBLT in teaching grammar and learner motivation among ESL learners in India, based on the available empirical studies conducted in recent years.

Principles of TBLT

Task-based language Teaching is grounded in the belief that language learning is most effective when learners engage in authentic and meaningful tasks. The framework emphasises the integration of language skills and the development of communicative competence. 'Task' has been defined by different scholars at different times. "A task is an activity in which a person engages in order to attain an objective, and which necessitates the use of language." (Van den Branden). In Nunan's view,

"a pedagogical task is a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilising their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, middle, and an end." (Nunan 4)

TBLT places a strong emphasis on communication, considering it the main purpose of language use. In a TBLT classroom, Tasks are designed to simulate real-life situations, encouraging learners to use language for genuine communication rather than an academic exercise.

The TBLT process typically involves a task cycle including pre-task, task cycle, and language focus stages. The pre-task stage introduces the topic and activates relevant vocabulary. The task cycle involves learners in pairs or groups, completing the assigned tasks using language as a tool to achieve the expected outcome. The language focus stage allows the learners to reflect on language use, as the teacher/facilitator addresses the challenges or errors that occurred during the task phase.

Role of TBLT in Grammar Instruction

The questions of whether to teach grammar or not, how to teach grammar, and whether through an implicit or explicit manner have been debated among the teachers of English Second Language Acquisition for decades. In the words of Harmer, "Grammar is an important component in learning English in order to gain competency in using English" (12). The early methods of English Language Teaching (ELT) focused on teaching grammar explicitly. However, a lack of communicative competence and an inability to apply classroom knowledge in real-life situations paved the way for later approaches. These approaches focused on the communicative aspects, giving preference to meaning over accuracy.

Among the latter methods, TBLT focuses not only on communicative competence but also gives equal importance to grammatical accuracy. It has been emphasised by proponents like Skehan, Long & Norris, Dougley & Williams, and Ellis that in TBLT, meaning and form constitute one of the paramount features. To achieve the expected outcome, task designers are expected to manipulate tasks in a way that will increase the probability of language learners paying attention to the specific aspects of the language. As Long and Norris observe:

Task-based language teaching...is an attempt to harness the benefits of a focus on meaning via the adoption of an analytic syllabus, while simultaneously, through the use of focus on form (not forms), to deal with its known shortcomings, particularly rate of development and incompleteness where grammatical correctness is concerned. (599)

Loschky and Bley-Vroman observed that in TBLT, Grammar is treated as a tool for effective communication within the context of meaningful tasks. Tasks are designed in a way that helps teachers give clear feedback on mistakes or deficiencies that can lead to a more natural and intuitive understanding of grammar rules (126)

This approach contrasts with traditional methods that isolate grammar from communicative use. TBLT often relies on implicit learning, where learners acquire grammar rules through exposure and use in meaningful contexts. Grammar learned in context makes it more relevant and easier for learners to understand and apply in real-life situations, connecting language form with meaning.

Ellis sustains that formal instruction is central in second language learning only if it is given as part of meaning-based activities. He distinguishes two kinds of knowledge: explicit and implicit. Explicit grammar instruction refers to those instructional strategies used to raise learners' conscious awareness of the form or structure of the target language. Through explicit instruction, learners can notice features in the input data. Implicit knowledge, on the other hand, is a non-conscious and automatic abstraction of the structural nature of the material arrived at from experience of instances.

Critiques for and against TBLT

Task-Based Language Teaching has garnered support as well as faced challenges ever since Prabhu used it in his Bangalore project. Critics and theorists supporting TBLT emphasised its benefits as a teaching pedagogy. Prabhu supports TBLT's implicit mechanism that helps learners acquire language, while Willis focuses on exposing learners to an abundance of linguistic content and meaningful language outcomes through the three-phase approach. As Luo and Gong point out, tasks provide a more conducive environment for language learning than conventional pedagogies. "Students who are exposed to efficient team activities during language learning tend to excel more in their target language performance. Moreover, real-world scenarios in the classroom inspire

students to foster an interest in language learning" (Lee). Through motivation, Richards states, TBLT emphasises developing learners' communicative capacity.

Despite TBLT being introduced as an effective pedagogy among many ESL/EFL learners, some critics remain sceptical about its effectiveness in practice. Some of their arguments are: the definition of Task is not clear enough to distinguish it from the exercises used in traditional teaching methods (Widdowson and Seedhouse); students may not achieve communicative competence for minimal language (L2) use maybe enough to complete a task (Seedhouse and Widdowson); it may not be efficient to the learners at beginner level (Littlewood) and learners with the limited exposure to SLA besides their classroom (Swan); it has no grammar and grammar syllabus (Sheen:2003; Swan:2005); and TBLT is promoted based on theory only (Sheen; Swan).

Rod Ellis denies these claims against TBLT, asserting its effectiveness through substantial evidence from the findings of Skehan, Ellis, Shintani, Loschky & Bley-Vroman, Swain & Lapkin, Prabhu, and others.

Empirical Studies on the Effectiveness of TBLT in Teaching Grammar in India

In recent years, numerous studies have been conducted in response to the claims against TBLT and to prove its effectiveness in comparison to traditional teaching methods among ESL learners. The findings of this research demonstrate that tasks facilitate learners' achievement of communicative competence through interaction, while real-time situations enhance their confidence and motivation. Furthermore, the subconscious learning aspect of the method nurtures their communicative abilities and cognitive development, ultimately leading to fluency.

Based on the number of studies conducted on the effectiveness of Task-Based language teaching in teaching and learning among ESL learners in the South Asian context, the researcher selected two studies conducted in India. Even though English has been in use among Indians and as a part

of the curriculum for a very long time, the communicative competence of the learners is not at a commendable level. The inhibition of making mistakes and a lack of knowledge in applying it are the main problems among the rapidly growing ESL community. At this juncture, recent awareness of TBLT is put to the test, and the evidence is impressive.

Mr M. Chandrasena Rajeswaran, Associate Professor, Department of English, Dr M.G.R. Educational and Research Institute, conducted the first study taken for review. In his experimental study, following Bygate, he employed the idea of a "repeat task" to improve grammatical ability. The research was carried out among 60 Engineering students in the age group of 18-20 years. The researcher observed that the participants are of mixed ability, coming from different cultural backgrounds, and speak different first languages. Through the preliminary study, the researcher found that the learners have been learning English for more than 6 years. However, they lack confidence to speak due to various reasons, including shyness, fear of making mistakes, limited vocabulary, and difficulty producing grammatically accurate language. During the task performance, the students were divided into 12 groups of five members each. The activity involved a simple food ordering task, using the pamphlet provided to them. During the activity, students gave opinions, ordered food, gave instructions, and shared previous experiences. Subconsciously, they utilised grammatical components, including the present tense, past tense, present perfect, and past perfect, to form lexical phrases. The activity was conducted at two levels, one at the pre-test level without the pamphlet, and the second with the pamphlet. Compared with the pre-test stage, students were more aware of their actions during the test. Students' performance was analysed by the researcher using the criterion developed by O'Malley and Pierce. The pre-test and post-test scores also showed a statistically significant difference at 1%.

The second study reviewed is an unpublished thesis by Mehrnaz Jahanshahi, submitted to Aligarh Muslim University. She validates the effectiveness of the Task-Based Language Teaching method in teaching grammar, particularly with reference to Prepositions, through her study. The objectives of the study were to comprehend the practice, need, and prospect of the Task-Based Approach in high school classrooms at the university. The study was conducted among 90 students from the 9th class of AMU Girls' High School (45 female students) and ABK Boys' High School (45 male students). The research was carried out in three phases: pre-test, task cycle, and post-test. A questionnaire with 30 questions, focusing on the use of prepositions, was prepared and administered during the pre-test and post-test phases to assess learners' ability to use prepositions before and after learning the grammar through the TBLT method. A comparative review of the test results shows a significant improvement in the average score of all 90 students, from 16.08 (54% correct answers) in the pre-test to 20.22 (67% correct answers) in the post-test. This improved difference highlights the effectiveness of using the Task-Based Method in teaching grammar.

The third study, taken for review, is from Mr Anup Denzil Veigas and Dr David Wilson, which highlights the rapid development and progress among the students as a result of innovative teaching practices over traditional teaching. They emphasise the need for implementing Task-based language teaching methods through an experimental study conducted among selected male and female students from a college in Mangalore, Karnataka, India. Selected students (44 male and 31 female) were pursuing their undergraduate programme. They were a mixed group of learners from urban and rural backgrounds, influenced by their mother tongue and regional background. The pre-test was conducted using a questionnaire on selected grammar topics to assess the students' grammatical knowledge comprehensively. During the task phase, students

engaged in various activities focused on developing vocabulary, grammatical ability in tenses, prepositions, and linkers, as well as developing writing and speaking skills. At the end of the experimental phase, students were administered a post-test. By comparing the results, a comprehensive difference in marks and scoring could be seen between the pre-test and the post-test. While none scored in the range of 40-50 in the pre-test, 10 students scored in this range during the post-test. Similarly, the number of students scoring below 20 decreased from 29 to five in the post-test, clearly indicating the benefits of the TBL learning method and its outcomes.

Conclusion

The current study was motivated by the researchers' urge to investigate whether Task-Based Teaching could be effective in India, as it has been in South Asian and many other countries. Research has evaluated the effectiveness of TBLT in the Indian classroom, focusing on its impact on vocabulary, language skills, and other aspects. The selected works focus on the implications and effectiveness of TBLT in teaching grammar among Indian students. The selected studies cover learners of diverse age groups and mother tongues.

A thorough understanding and observation of the selected studies demonstrates that learners have the possibility of effective grammar acquisition through the task-based method. It is evident that learners apply their knowledge of grammatical structures in a natural environment, provided through tasks, and subconsciously produce grammatically correct content while solving the task. Visuals, dialogues, texts, songs, or videos can help reduce anxiety in the learning environment and make learning more enjoyable.

However, the researchers also faced some limitations while carrying out the experiments. Collectively, they emphasise that employing form-focused tasks and providing corrective

feedback when necessary could be effective. This helps learners compare their existing grammar knowledge with the input given inside the classroom. Also, these limitations expand the hope for further study in the field of teaching English through Task-based language teaching as an effective method.

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