

# Task-based language teaching

*Đỗ Thu Thủy*

*East Asia University of Technology*

*Received: 8/05/2024; Accepted: 16/05/2024; Published: 28/5/2024*

**Abstract:** *Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has been widely applied in foreign language classrooms in Vietnam as an effective teaching tool. This article will discuss the benefits and limitations of this method. Specifically, task-based learning plays an important role in enhancing motivation, engagement, and language exposure whereas it is criticized for being unsuitable for low-level learners and lacking the focus on form. I hold my belief that task-based learning is an effective tool for language acquisition given the aforementioned advantages. Despite some criticism, its potential should not be overlooked and more can be done to make task-based learning more effective and widely adopted in the future.*

**Keywords:** *Task-based language teaching, TBLT, ELT, Communicative language teaching.*

## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, English has become an international communication language widely used around the world. Therefore, teaching and learning this language has attracted the attention of people of all ages and levels. A series of teaching and learning methods have been developed as a supportive tool to assist learners in using English fluently. Some traditional teaching methods include Grammar translation method and Audio-lingual method. Other modern methods can be named as Total Physical Response (TPR), Silent Way and Neuro-linguistic Programming. Given the trend of communication-oriented language teaching and learning, the Task-based Language Teaching Approach (TBLT) method is being widely applied in educational institutions around the world in order to help learners communicate fluently. By being learner-centered, focusing on using the language to complete a task, this method shows effectiveness in improving learners' language ability and facilitating the language acquisition process. This method, therefore, should be applied more widely in teaching and learning languages in general and English in particular.

## 2. Research content

### 2.1. Overview of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)

#### 2.1.1. Historical background

In the 1970s, the Communicative Language Teaching Approach became increasingly popular with research scholars and foreign language teachers. In the 1980s, the term "task" gradually replaced "communicative activity" and as a result, task-based language learning became an updated teaching method widely used in foreign language classrooms.

#### 2.1.2. Define

There are many different definitions of "task". Bygate, Skehan and Swain (2001) defined a *task* as "an activity that requires learners to use language with an emphasis on meaning to achieve a goal". As stated by Shehadeh's (2005) a *task* is a goal-directed activity that focuses on content; has practical outcomes and reflects language use and language needs in real life. Ganta (2015) pointed out that tasks aim at "using expressive meaning-centered language" with the goal of giving the person participating in the task the opportunity to become a "language user." rather than a "language learner". According to Nunan (2004), a task is "a part of classroom activities intended to help learners understand, use or interact in the target language while their attention is focused on using learned grammatical knowledge to convey meaning." Therefore, the focus of TBLT is on "communicating and conveying messages" (Ganta, 2015). In other words, learners can use language quickly and confidently even though grammatical accuracy is sometimes sacrificed (Willis & Willis, 2009).

In short, tasks allow learners to communicate in their own way in the second language to achieve some goals in real life.

### 2.2. Benefits of TBLT method

#### 2.2.1. TBLT increases learning motivation

A conclusion was drawn from Granta's (2015) study that TBLT "is useful in promoting learning. TBLT creates practice opportunities to increase target language acquisition in lessons through performing various tasks." Richard and Rodger (2014) also argued in another study that TBLT reduces classroom stress, while learners' motivation increases when

they participate in simulations, role-plays, and other activities. Indeed, there are three reasons why TBLT reduces classroom stress. First, TBLT brings learners to the real world. Granta (2015) demonstrated that individuals tend to engage in a task that is authentic, personally meaningful, and relevant to their work. When applying TBLT, in each lesson, students are assigned a communicative task close to real life, and the purpose of the task is to “experiment naturally with a foreign language”, so the task will give learners “new personal experiences” with the second language. TBLT also evokes memories or past experiences for learners (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Additionally, Willis & Willis (2009) stated that “Learners can engage in a simple task because the topic is engaging”. Second, TBLT gives learners the opportunity to improve their learning performance. According to Shehadeh and Coombe, (2010), from a cognitive perspective, TBLT gives learners the opportunity to improve three aspects of performance including fluency - “the ability to communicate in a limited time”, accuracy - “the ability to use the target language under its standards” and complexity - “the ability to use complex structures” (Shehadeh & Coombe, 2010). This helps improve learners’ English skills and makes them feel more motivated to learn the language. Third, students have the opportunity to demonstrate “cooperation and collaboration” with their classmates (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Studies have shown that group work encourages learners to be active in their studies and, moreover, improves their decision-making, critical thinking, and communication skills. More specifically, Ganta (2015) pointed out that with TBLT students have the opportunity to work, collaborate, and establish relationships with other students in the group. This encourages students to actively participate in learning because they are actually working with their peers (Shehadeh & Coombe, 2010). Therefore, TBLT contributes to improving learners’ motivation and responsibility.

#### *2.2.2. TBLT enhances natural interactions*

When TBLT is used in the classroom, students have the opportunity to use the vocabulary and grammar learnt. For example, students are asked to play the role of a receptionist in a 5-star hotel talking to a guest who lost their luggage. Students must interact with each other to handle real-life situations. Therefore, students have the opportunity to both use the language learnt as well as learn the language from

their friends, helping them gradually gain confidence and eventually interact naturally. From a sociocultural perspective, when learners perform tasks, interactions will awaken cognitive processes, including the development of self-thinking and language; Besides, collaborating in such tasks is important for language learning (Shehadeh & Coombe, 2010). Through interaction, learners have the opportunity to receive feedback appropriate to their level of understanding, which leads to “negotiated conversational adjustment,” which is an important element of second language acquisition (Shehadeh & Coombe, 2010).

In short, TBLT facilitates learning by allowing learners to negotiate meaning and regulate language. Therefore, learners will likely increase their ability to interact excitedly.

#### *2.2.3. TBLT increases the amount of time exposed to the language*

With the TBLT method, learners are encouraged to communicate in English anytime, anywhere regardless of accuracy. As a result, the more tasks they do, the more they are exposed to the language and the more they “takes in” the language (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). That means exposure can lead to learners’ language proficiency. Lightbown and Spada (2006) also point out that when learners cooperate with each other to carry out a task, they are able to acquire and produce a large amount of language despite the fact that they can still make mistakes.

TBLT gives learners more opportunities to use the target language, thereby giving them more access to English and making it easier for them to acquire the language because “language is acquired through contact” (Tavaloki, 2009).

### **2.3. Some limitations of the TBLT method**

#### *2.3.1. TBLT is not suitable for low level learners*

To apply TBLT in classrooms successfully, teachers need to be aware of the difficulty and suitability of the task to the learner’s current level. Task difficulty includes vocabulary volume, vocabulary density, communication pressure including time limit, time pressure, speed, the number of participants; self-thinking requirements that contains familiarity of the topic, familiarity of the discourse genre, familiarity of the task itself, and completeness of the information provided. Besides, Tavakoli (2009) pointed out that both teachers and students complain that they have difficulty understanding the task as a story, and realizing what is going on in the story. Tavakoli (2009) also asserted that performing tasks becomes

difficult and challenging because TBLT requires the use of “certain vocabulary and structures that learners do not know”. Besides, information overload in a task also increases difficulty. Ganta (2015) supported the view by pointing out that low-level students who are not equipped with sufficient language knowledge will have difficulty participating in a task. They may not understand the requirements of the task and “find participation in the task confusing.”, leading to the loss of motivation or loss of confidence.

However, teachers can completely change the difficulty of the task by using appropriate methods and ensuring that learners have strategies to engage in the assigned task. If the task is too difficult for the learner, the teacher can reduce the difficulty of the task and vice versa.

Thus, it is the teacher who determines the difficulty level of the task when applying TBLT in teaching. After observing the class and understanding the learners’ language levels, knowledge, and skills teachers can design tasks suitable for their students, find supporting materials, and provide students with useful vocabulary and structures appropriate to the task. Therefore, the problem of difficulty of tasks seems to have been solved.

### 2.3.2. TBLT lacks focus on grammatical structure

With TBLT, learners spend most of their time communicating with each other to perform the task, and they can say what they want without being interrupted or immediately corrected. Many teachers and researchers raise concerns about the use of correct grammatical structures or accuracy in learners’ speaking skills in the long term. Granta (2015) suggested that if learners focus too much on expressive meaning while performing tasks without paying attention to grammar, their strategic solutions will be limited. Therefore, there is a need for solutions that help focus on grammatical structures without losing the value of the tasks as motivators of actual communication.

In fact, task-based learning “does not exclude a focus on grammar” but has a “combination of expression and grammar” (Willis & Willis, 2009). However, there need to be potential solutions to the above concerns. It is necessary to harmoniously combine expression and grammar in the task. Specifically, from the beginning teachers can provide students with some necessary and important vocabulary and structures for them to refer to when doing their task. After the task, the teacher will

monitor the use of key vocabulary and structures of the lesson. More interestingly, grammatical forms or structures can be learned or explored for their “role in meaningful communication” through attention-grabbing and awareness-raising activities (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). For example, students can learn the present perfect tense through the task of talking about life experiences (what they have or have never done).

### 3. Conclusion

TBLT as well as the benefits and limitations of this method are being researched and widely applied in teaching foreign languages in general and English in particular. In terms of benefits, TBLT plays an important role in increasing motivation, engagement and language exposure - but the method has also been criticized for being unsuitable for low-level learners and lacking the focus on grammatical accuracy. Although there is still much controversy among researchers, TBLT is an effective tool to help learners acquire language because of the advantages mentioned above. Although there are some criticisms, the potential of this method should not be overlooked. Lecturers can completely adjust and flexibly apply TBLT in teaching to bring optimal effectiveness to learners.

### References

- [1]. Ganta, T. G. (2015), *The strengths and weaknesses of task-based learning* (TBL). Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies, 5(16), 2760-2771.
- [2]. Lightbown, P. M., & Spada, N. (2006), *How languages are learned* (3rd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [3]. Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2014), *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [4]. Shehadeh, A., & Coombe, C. (2010), *Introduction: From Theory to Practice in Taskbased learning*. In A. Shehadeh, & C. Coombe, *Applications of Task-based learning in TESOL* (pp. 1-7). Virginia: Teaching English for speakers of other languages.
- [5]. Tavaloki, P. (2009), *Investigating task difficulty: learners’ and teachers’ perceptions*. International Journal of Applied Linguistics, 19(1), 1-25.
- [6]. Willis, D., & Willis, E. (2009), *Infinite possibilities: expanding limited opportunity in language education*, Paper presented at 8th Annual JALT Pan-SIG Conference. Chiba, Japan: Tokyo Gakuen University.