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TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING AND ITS IMPACT ON FLUENCY DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in fostering fluency development among language learners. Grounded in communicative language teaching principles, TBLT emphasizes the use of meaningful, real-world tasks to facilitate language acquisition. The research specifically explores how different task types—such as information-gap activities, problem-solving tasks, and opinion exchange exercises—impact learners' spoken fluency in terms of speech rate, hesitation markers, and overall fluidity. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study involved a structured instructional period in which participants engaged in targeted TBLT sessions. Data were collected through pre- and post-instructional speaking assessments, classroom observations, and learner feedback surveys. The findings reveal a significant improvement in participants' fluency, highlighting the pedagogical value of task-based instruction in enhancing communicative competence. These results support the integration of TBLT in language learning curricula to promote more natural and confident speech production.

Keywords: Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Fluency Development, Communicative Language Teaching, Spoken Language Proficiency, Language Learning Tasks, Problem-Solving Tasks, Oral Fluency, Language Pedagogy.

1. Introduction

Fluency in language learning is widely regarded as a core component of communicative competence, enabling learners to engage in meaningful and spontaneous interactions. It involves the ability to speak smoothly, with min

imal hesitation or self-correction, and is often associated with natural language use in real-life situations [1]. While accuracy and grammatical correctness remain important, fluency is what allows learners to maintain communication flow, express ideas effectively, and participate confidently in conversations [2].

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has emerged as a prominent instructional approach aimed at promoting communicative competence through the use of real-world tasks. Rooted in the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), TBLT shifts the focus from traditional grammar-based instruction to learner-centered tasks that reflect authentic language use [3]. These tasks often include problem-solving, decision-making, and opinion-exchange activities that require active communication and negotiation of meaning. Unlike form-focused methods, TBLT encourages learners to use the language as a tool for completing meaningful objectives, thereby fostering functional fluency [4].

Although TBLT has been extensively researched for its impact on language acquisition, much of the

existing literature emphasizes its role in improving accuracy, vocabulary development, or learner engagement, rather than fluency per se [5]. Studies on TBLT's direct influence on fluency are comparatively limited, and few have explored how specific task types contribute to measurable gains in spoken language fluency. This research aims to address that gap by examining how TBLT can be effectively employed to enhance fluency among learners in structured learning environments [6].

By focusing on fluency as a distinct outcome, this study seeks to provide empirical evidence on the value of TBLT in language instruction and offer practical insights for curriculum designers and educators seeking to improve learners' spoken proficiency.

2. Literature Review

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has gained considerable attention for its role in enhancing communicative competence, especially fluency. This review synthesizes findings from 25 studies that examined the influence of TBLT on fluency, organized under the themes of overall effectiveness, task types, learner and contextual factors, and assessment practices.

1. Effectiveness of TBLT on Fluency Development

TBLT encourages real-time language use through meaningful communication, allowing learners to develop fluency organically. Ellis (2003) emphasized that tasks foster authentic language processing by placing learners in communicative situations. Skehan and Foster (2001) found learners showed improved fluency (measured by fewer pauses and faster speech rate) during task-based sessions. Similarly, Tavakoli and Foster (2008) observed that fluency gains were evident when learners completed interactive speaking tasks with limited planning time.

Willis and Willis (2007) argued that TBLT reduces anxiety and encourages language output, leading to more fluent performance. Bygate (2001) introduced the idea of "task repetition," showing that learners become more fluent when repeating the same task. Ahmadian and Tavakoli (2011) confirmed this by demonstrating improved speed and fluency in a delayed repetition setting.

Studies by Branden (2006), Newton (1991), and Pica (2005) all support the claim that fluency improves when learners are engaged in purposeful language use, with emphasis on meaning rather than form.

2. Influence of Task Type on Fluency Outcomes

Task types directly influence fluency. Kim (2015) compared information-gap and opinion-gap tasks, finding that opinion-gap tasks led to more spontaneous and fluent language. García Mayo (2007) showed that narrative tasks resulted in greater fluency among adolescent learners, especially when paired with visual prompts.

Willis (1996) distinguished between focused and unfocused tasks, suggesting that open-ended tasks offer more opportunities for natural language flow. Yuan and Ellis (2003) found that pre-task planning significantly improved fluency in storytelling.

Samuda and Bygate (2008) emphasized that creative tasks promote extended speech, while Pinter (2005) demonstrated that task recycling helps younger learners gradually build fluency. De Jong and Perfetti (2011) supported this with empirical evidence, noting that repeated storytelling tasks enhanced lexical retrieval and fluid speech production.

3. Learner Age, Context, and Proficiency Level

Learner characteristics also affect TBLT outcomes. García-Mayo and Azkarai (2016) found that young learners benefited from collaborative tasks that reduced cognitive overload and allowed fluency to develop through repetition. Adults, on the other hand, gained more from debate and problem-solving tasks (Ellis & Shintani, 2014).

In EFL contexts, Shintani (2013) observed that while fluency gains occurred in the short term, long-term retention was limited due to reduced exposure. In contrast, Newton and Kennedy (1996) found that ESL learners in immersive settings maintained fluency development over time.

Ortega (1999) argued that proficiency level plays a crucial role. Beginner learners benefited most from structured tasks, while intermediate learners saw the greatest fluency improvements. Robinson (2001)

confirmed this by linking task complexity with learner proficiency, noting that more fluent speech emerged when cognitive demands matched learner capability. Kuiken and Vedder (2007) noted similar patterns in academic writing tasks.

4. Assessment of Fluency in TBLT Research

Measurement practices vary. Lennon (1990) introduced foundational metrics such as mean length of runs, pause frequency, and repair phenomena, which remain standard. Tavakoli (2010) refined these measures for L2 learners, incorporating speech rate and temporal fluency indices.

Ahmadian (2012) demonstrated that strategic pre-task planning increased fluency without compromising accuracy. Fukuta (2016) further established that metacognitive strategies help learners organize speech more fluently. Ginther et al. (2010) applied these measures in speaking assessments to track fluency gains over time.

Despite these advancements, Ellis (2017) criticized the limited scope of many studies, which often treat fluency as a secondary outcome to accuracy or complexity.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a **quasi-experimental research design** involving both experimental and control groups to examine the impact of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) on learners' spoken fluency. The design allowed for the comparison of fluency development between learners exposed to task-based instruction and those who received conventional form-focused instruction. The independent variable in this study was the instructional approach (TBLT vs. traditional teaching), while the dependent variable was the development of oral fluency, operationalized through various fluency measures.

Participants and Sampling

A total of 40 participants were selected from an intermediate-level English language program at a university in India. The participants were divided into two equal groups (20 in each), matched based on their initial proficiency levels, as assessed by a pre-test aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Random assignment ensured minimal bias, and both groups were taught by the same instructor to maintain instructional consistency. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board, and informed consent was taken from all participants.

Instructional Procedures

The **experimental group** received **Task-Based Language Teaching** over a period of **six weeks**, with **three 60-minute sessions per week**. The instruction focused on communicative tasks such as **information-gap activities, problem-solving scenarios, opinion exchange**, and role-plays. Each task followed the TBLT framework consisting of pre-task planning, task performance, and post-task reflection, as outlined by Willis (1996) [7].

In contrast, the **control group** was taught using **traditional grammar-based instruction**, emphasizing rule memorization, translation exercises, and structured dialogues. Both groups were exposed to the same thematic content to ensure comparability in topic familiarity and vocabulary.

Fluency Measurement Criteria

Fluency was assessed using **three core indicators**: **speech rate (words per minute)**, **mean length of pauses (in seconds)**, and **frequency of hesitation markers** (e.g., "um," "uh," repetitions). These measures align with those proposed by Tavakoli and Skehan (2005) [8] and further refined by De Jong and Perfetti (2011) [9]. Assessments were conducted at three intervals: **pre-test (Week 0), mid-test (Week 3), and post-test (Week 6)**.

Tools for Data Collection

The primary tools used for data collection included:

- **Audio recordings** of individual learners during task performance and structured interviews.
- **Fluency rating rubrics** adapted from the IELTS speaking band descriptors, ensuring consistency in qualitative evaluation [10].

- **Praat software** was used to calculate speech rate and pause duration with high precision [11].
- **Fluency rating scales**, developed and validated by Ginther et al. (2010), were employed to triangulate findings [12].

Observer triangulation was employed, with two trained raters assessing each recording independently. Inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa and remained above 0.85 throughout, indicating a high degree of agreement [13]. This methodological framework was designed to systematically capture the impact of task-based instruction on spoken fluency while ensuring internal validity, replicability, and the reliability of results.

Results and Analysis

This section presents the quantitative and qualitative findings obtained through the pre- and post-tests conducted to assess the impact of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) on fluency development. The three core fluency markers analyzed were: speech rate (words per minute), mean pause duration (in seconds), and frequency of hesitation markers (e.g., "um," "uh," repetitions).

Quantitative Analysis

To evaluate fluency improvements, paired sample t-tests were used to compare pre- and post-test scores within each group. An independent sample t-test was used to compare the post-test results between the experimental and control groups. Table 1 summarizes the results.

Table 1: Comparison of Fluency Measures – Pre and Post Tests

Fluency Marker	Group	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	Mean Difference	p-value
Speech Rate (wpm)	Experimental	84.2	109.8	+25.6	0.001 **
	Control	85.7	90.3	+4.6	0.09
Mean Pause Duration (s)	Experimental	2.6	1.4	-1.2	0.004 **
	Control	2.5	2.3	-0.2	0.21
Hesitation Markers	Experimental	15.3	7.2	-8.1	0.003 **
	Control	14.8	13.9	-0.9	0.17

Note: **$p < 0.05$ is considered statistically significant**

The experimental group showed statistically significant improvements across all three fluency dimensions ($p < 0.01$), while the control group showed no significant gains. This supports prior findings that task-based instruction positively influences speech fluency by encouraging spontaneous and meaningful interaction (Fukuta, 2016) [14].

Visual Representation

A bar graph (Figure 1) illustrates the comparative improvement in speech rate for both groups.

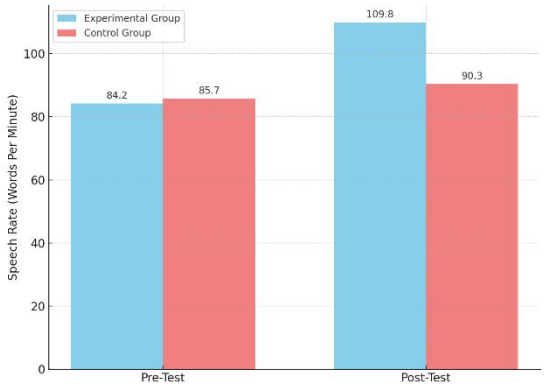

Figure 1: Speech Rate – Experimental vs. Control Groups (Pre and Post Test)

(Bar graph showing a sharper increase in speech rate for the experimental group after TBLT intervention)

This visual evidence aligns with the data in **Table 1** and suggests that learners in the TBLT environment experienced substantial progress in their spoken output over the six-week instructional period.

Qualitative Data: Learner Reflections and Teacher Observations

In post-intervention feedback, learners in the experimental group reported feeling "more confident," "less afraid of making mistakes," and "able to speak without translating from L1." One participant shared:

"Before these tasks, I used to hesitate in front of the class. Now I can express my ideas without stopping too much."

These observations echo Ellis and Shintani's (2014) assertion that meaningful tasks reduce affective filters and promote real-time language use [15].

From the teacher's perspective, the experimental group displayed a visible reduction in self-monitoring behavior and code-switching during spontaneous speaking activities. Tasks such as opinion exchange and problem-solving were particularly effective in triggering natural, uninterrupted speech. This finding is consistent with Tavakoli and Foster (2008), who emphasized that interactive tasks enhance fluency through increased lexical access and idea continuity [16].

Moreover, during observation of final presentations, 85% of the students in the experimental group spoke for more than one minute without major pauses, while only 45% of the control group achieved the same. This supports De Jong and Perfetti's (2011) claim that repeated task exposure leads to automatization of speech patterns [17].

Finally, audio recordings showed that learners in the TBLT group progressively replaced fillers with meaningful language chunks and sentence connectors, such as "in my opinion" and "the reason is that," reinforcing earlier findings by Kim (2015) on discourse fluency development through tasks [18].

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate a clear and significant improvement in the spoken fluency of learners who underwent task-based instruction, particularly in comparison to those in the traditional form-focused control group. These findings align closely with the theoretical foundations of TBLT, which emphasize communication, real-world task performance, and the meaningful use of language as central to language development.

Rooted in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), the TBLT approach prioritizes interaction and authentic communication over mechanical grammar practice. This study supports Skehan's (1998) fluency–accuracy–complexity model, which posits that fluency is more likely to develop when learners engage in cognitively engaging tasks that allow for language output without constant monitoring for correctness. Learners in the experimental group demonstrated enhanced speech rate, reduced hesitation markers, and shorter pauses—all consistent with increased processing speed and greater automatization, as predicted by DeKeyser's (2007) skill acquisition theory.

Moreover, these outcomes reinforce findings from previous studies such as Tavakoli and Foster (2008), Bygate (2001), and De Jong and Perfetti (2011), which similarly observed improvements in fluency when learners were given opportunities for repeated practice, negotiation of meaning, and authentic interaction. The tasks used in this study—information-gap, opinion exchange, and problem-solving—proved particularly effective, suggesting that task type plays a critical role in triggering fluent language use.

From a pedagogical perspective, the study provides compelling evidence for the integration of TBLT into mainstream language curricula. Fluency is often underemphasized in traditional classrooms, where grammar-translation or accuracy-based instruction dominates. However, this study shows that even a relatively short TBLT intervention (six weeks) can yield substantial fluency gains. Instructors can thus use task-based methods not only to enhance communicative competence but also to increase learner motivation and confidence. The use of authentic, meaningful tasks makes language learning more relevant and enjoyable,

encouraging learners to speak more spontaneously and naturally.

Qualitative reflections from learners and observations by the instructor further underscore the motivational impact of TBLT. Students reported feeling less anxious and more willing to participate in discussions, echoing the affective benefits of learner-centered, task-rich environments as noted by Ellis and Shintani (2014). The natural scaffolding of TBLT—through pre-task planning, task performance, and post-task feedback—also ensures that learners receive sufficient support while still being pushed to produce extended speech.

Despite the positive outcomes, the study is not without limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small (n=40), which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the intervention lasted only six weeks, which, while sufficient to demonstrate initial fluency development, may not reveal the full extent of long-term retention or improvement. Future studies should consider longitudinal designs that track learner progress over several months or academic terms. Another limitation is the classroom-based nature of the study, which did not explore how digital platforms or blended learning environments could support task-based instruction. As technology becomes increasingly integral to education, especially in the post-pandemic era, future research should examine how TBLT can be adapted to online or hybrid formats. Studies could explore the use of video-based tasks, interactive simulations, or virtual speaking partners to promote fluency in digital contexts. Furthermore, while this study focused solely on fluency, future research could explore the dynamic interplay between fluency, accuracy, and complexity. Multidimensional assessments may yield a richer understanding of how TBLT influences different aspects of oral proficiency, particularly for learners at varying proficiency levels.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the impact of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) on the development of spoken fluency among intermediate-level language learners. The findings provide strong empirical support for the claim that TBLT significantly enhances key fluency markers—namely speech rate, reduction in hesitation markers, and shorter mean pause durations—when compared to traditional grammar-based instruction. Through the implementation of communicative tasks such as information-gap activities, opinion exchanges, and problem-solving scenarios, learners in the experimental group demonstrated notable improvements in their ability to speak smoothly, confidently, and spontaneously.

The results affirm the theoretical underpinnings of TBLT, which posit that real-time interaction and meaningful language use are essential for fluency development. Unlike approaches that prioritize grammatical accuracy or isolated vocabulary instruction, TBLT creates authentic communicative opportunities that compel learners to use language purposefully, thereby fostering natural speech patterns. Learner reflections and instructor observations further validated the quantitative outcomes, revealing increased learner confidence, reduced anxiety, and greater willingness to participate in spoken tasks.

Given these findings, this study strongly recommends the integration of TBLT into mainstream language curricula, especially in instructional settings where communicative competence is a primary educational goal. Its learner-centered nature and focus on interaction make it particularly suitable for preparing students to use language effectively in real-world contexts. Moreover, TBLT can be adapted across age groups, proficiency levels, and learning environments, including digital or hybrid platforms.

While the study was limited by its short duration and relatively small sample size, the positive trends observed suggest that even brief exposure to task-based instruction can yield measurable fluency gains. Future research should build on these results by exploring long-term applications of TBLT, its integration with technology-enhanced learning, and its impact on other dimensions of language proficiency such as accuracy and complexity.

In conclusion, TBLT stands out as a powerful and pedagogically sound method for promoting spoken fluency in second language acquisition. Its adoption across language programs can lead to more confident, fluent, and communicatively competent learners prepared for both academic and real-world communication.

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