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COMPARATIVE EFFECTS OF TBLT ON EFL LEARNERS' SPEAKING FLUENCY, ACCURACY, AND COMPLEXITY

Juraeva Iroda Akhmedovna
PhD, Associate Professor of National University of Uzbekistan
Named after Mirzo Ulugbek
irodajuraeva@gmail.com

Xayrullayeva Sugdiyona
2nd-Year Student at National University of Uzbekistan
named after Mirzo Ulugbek
xsn18012007@gmail.com

Abstract
This study investigates the comparative effectiveness of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and traditional grammar-focused instruction in measuring EFL speaking performance. A controlled experiment was conducted on 150 university students, who were divided into TBLT experimental (n = 75) and traditional control (n = 75) groups over a 12-week period. Fluency (speech rate, hesitation patterns), accuracy (grammatical errors, self-corrections), and complexity (syntactic structures, lexical variety) were measured in the speech assessment. TBLT participants showed significant improvements: fluency increased by 38% compared to 14% in the control group, accuracy increased by 31% compared to 16%, and complexity increased by 42% compared to 19%. Statistical analysis revealed large effect sizes (d = 1.15-1.84) supporting the implementation of TBLT. The results indicate the high effectiveness of TBLT in developing balanced speech across all performance measures. The findings support the use of TBLT to enhance broad communicative competence in EFL learning contexts that require authentic speaking skills.

Keywords: Task-based language teaching, English speaking ability, fluency, grammatical accuracy, syntactic complexity, communicative competence

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Introduction

Task-based language teaching represents a fundamental pedagogical shift from traditional form-oriented instruction to meaning-based communicative approaches that prioritize language use in purposeful contexts [1]. This methodological shift reflects decades of research on second language acquisition, which suggests that learners develop skills most effectively through meaningful communicative tasks rather than isolated linguistic exercises [2].

The theoretical underpinnings of TBLT stem from psycholinguistic research that emphasizes the crucial role of meaningful interaction in promoting language acquisition and automation [3]. Unlike traditional audiolingual methods that prioritize accuracy through grammatical translation or repeated practice, TBLT engages learners in complex communicative problems that simultaneously develop fluency, accuracy, and complexity through integrated skill applications [4].

English proficiency in foreign language contexts presents unique challenges due to limited real-world communication opportunities and the emphasis on written accuracy rather than oral fluency [5]. EFL learners often struggle with the demands of real-time language production, which requires simultaneous attention to grammatical accuracy, lexical coherence, and coherence of speech, while maintaining the natural flow of communication [6].

Modern systems of speech assessment recognize three interrelated measures: fluency (timing and hesitancy features), accuracy (grammatical and lexical accuracy), and complexity (language complexity and structural variety) [7]. These measures interact dynamically, with different teaching approaches potentially creating trade-offs between competing aspects of performance or promoting balanced development across all domains [8].

Studies investigating the effectiveness of TBLT have yielded mixed results, with some studies showing task-specific benefits, while others report limited benefits or context-specific limitations [9]. Variability in task design principles, implementation procedures, and assessment methodologies contributes to ongoing debate and inconsistent results regarding optimal pedagogical practices for developing IFL speaking [10].

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This study addresses important empirical gaps by systematically comparing the effects of TBLT and traditional instruction on all three speaking dimensions using comprehensive assessment protocols. The study aims to provide clear evidence regarding the comparative effectiveness of TBLT in promoting the development of balanced speaking proficiency among EFL learners.

Literature review. The evolution of task-based language teaching methodology has been extensively documented through theoretical foundations and empirical validation studies spanning three decades of research. Ellis and Skehan's seminal contribution was the development of cognitive processing models that explain how meaningful tasks facilitate language acquisition by focusing on form in a communicative context [11]. Their research demonstrated that learners who engage in purposeful communication naturally acquire linguistic features when communication breaks occur, which helps them develop integrated accuracy and fluency.

A comprehensive meta-analysis by Norris [12] synthesized the results of 49 studies examining the effectiveness of TBLT in various skill areas. The analysis revealed medium to large effect sizes for task-based interventions in speech development, with fluency measures being particularly strongly affected compared with accuracy measures. The meta-analysis found significant variation in effect sizes depending on task complexity, duration of implementation, and participant proficiency level.

The relationship between task characteristics and speech performance has been extensively studied within the framework of Robinson's cognitive hypothesis [13]. This study found that cognitively complex tasks facilitate greater syntactic complexity and lexical variety, but may temporarily reduce fluency due to increased processing demands. The findings highlight the importance of carefully sequencing tasks to optimize learning outcomes across a range of performance measures.

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Research Methodology

This study used a quasi-experimental test-posttest control group design to examine the comparative effects of TBLT and traditional grammar-focused instruction on EFL speaking performance. The methodology included rigorous experimental controls and extensive assessment protocols to ensure accurate measurement of speaking development on measures of fluency, accuracy, and complexity.

Participants. The study included 150 intermediate EFL learners (78 females, 72 males) aged 19–23 years who were enrolled in English communication courses at two urban universities. Participants were randomly assigned to experimental (TBLT, n = 75) and control (traditional instruction, n = 75) groups using stratified randomization to ensure demographic and proficiency equivalence. Inclusion criteria included an intermediate proficiency certificate (equivalent to IELTS 5.0-6.0), at least three years of formal English language study, and voluntary consent to participate.

Instructional Treatments. The experimental group received TBLT instruction, including information gap activities, problem-solving scenarios, decision-making discussions, brainstorming tasks, and collaborative project work. The tasks were designed according to established principles of complexity, with a gradual progression from simple to complex cognitive demands over the treatment period. The control group received traditional grammar-oriented instruction, which included structured patterns, vocabulary development exercises, supervised practice activities, and specific error-correction procedures. Both treatments included the same contact hours (3 hours per week for 12 weeks), similar thematic content, and equivalent teacher qualifications to reduce confounding variables.

Assessment procedures. Speech proficiency was assessed using standardized tasks adapted from international proficiency tests. Fluency measures included speech rate (words per minute), articulation rate (syllables per second excluding pauses), average length of runs (syllables between unforced pauses), and pause frequency.

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Accuracy assessments included a comprehensive error analysis across grammatical, lexical, and phonological categories, with weighted scores based on error severity and communicative impact. Self-correction rates and error-correction strategies, as well as metalinguistic awareness, were documented.

Complexity measures included syntactic measures (T-unit sentences, subordination ratio, coordinate structures) and lexical measures (type-token ratio, use of low-frequency vocabulary, academic word processing). All speaking samples were digitally recorded and transcribed using established conventions for detailed linguistic analysis.

Analysis and Results

The comprehensive statistical analysis reveals substantial differences between TBLT and traditional instruction effects on EFL speaking performance across all measured dimensions. The findings demonstrate consistent task-based advantages, with particularly pronounced benefits for fluency and complexity development.

Fluency Development Analysis

TBLT participants demonstrated remarkable fluency improvements across all temporal measures. Speech rate increased by 38% (33.2 words per minute) compared to 14% (12.3 words per minute) in the control group, indicating substantial automatization gains. Articulation rate improvements of 34% versus 14% suggest enhanced processing efficiency and reduced cognitive load during speech production.

Qualitative analysis reveals that TBLT learners developed more natural discourse patterns with extended fluent segments and strategic pause placement for meaning organization rather than linguistic planning. These participants exhibited increased confidence in sustained speech production and demonstrated reduced hesitation phenomena during complex communicative exchanges.

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Table 1. Effect Size Analysis for Performance Improvements

Performance Domain	**TBLT Group**		**Control Group**		**Between-Group**
	Cohen's d	Magnitude	Cohen's d	Magnitude	Cohen's d
Overall Fluency	1.84	Very Large	0.72	Medium	1.45
Words per Minute	2.41	Very Large	1.04	Large	1.67
Articulation Rate	2.18	Very Large	0.89	Large	1.52
Pause Reduction	2.35	Very Large	0.91	Large	1.58
Overall Accuracy	1.48	Large	0.63	Medium	1.15
Error Reduction	1.56	Large	0.74	Medium	1.23
Self-Correction	1.73	Very Large	0.69	Medium	1.34
Overall Complexity	1.92	Very Large	0.85	Large	1.48
Syntactic Complexity	2.07	Very Large	0.93	Large	1.56
Lexical Sophistication	1.89	Very Large	0.79	Medium	1.41

While both groups showed accuracy improvements, TBLT participants achieved superior error reduction and enhanced self-monitoring capabilities. Error rates decreased by 31% in the experimental group versus 16% in the control condition. More notably, self-correction abilities nearly doubled among task-based learners, indicating improved metalinguistic awareness and real-time monitoring skills.

Detailed error analysis indicates that TBLT participants showed particular improvement in discourse-level accuracy and pragmatic appropriateness, with fewer register violations and better coherence maintenance. Traditional instruction produced stronger gains in morphosyntactic accuracy but limited improvement in communicative effectiveness measures.

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Table 2. Complexity Development by Linguistic Features

Complexity Feature	**TBLT Group**		**Control Group**		**Statistical**
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Comparison
Syntactic Features					
Dependent Clauses/T	0.52±0.18	0.89±0.24	0.51±0.19	0.67±0.21	F(1,148)=47.83***
Complex Nominals	1.14±0.31	1.78±0.42	1.12±0.33	1.36±0.38	F(1,148)=35.67***
Verb Phrase Complexity	1.08±0.23	1.54±0.31	1.06±0.25	1.22±0.28	F(1,148)=28.92***
Lexical Features					
Low-Frequency Words (%)	11.3±2.8	18.7±3.9	11.1±3.0	14.2±3.4	F(1,148)=33.24***
Polysyllabic Ratio	0.29±0.06	0.42±0.09	0.28±0.07	0.35±0.08	F(1,148)=24.56***
Lexical Bundles (/100w)	2.4±0.8	4.1±1.1	2.3±0.9	2.9±1.0	F(1,148)=19.47***

***p<.001

Complexity Advancement Patterns

TBLT instruction generated substantial complexity improvements across syntactic and lexical dimensions. Subordination ratios increased by 68% versus 26% in the control group, demonstrating enhanced ability to produce sophisticated grammatical structures in spontaneous speech. Lexical sophistication measures showed similar trends, with TBLT participants achieving 42% improvement in type-token ratios compared to 19% in traditional instruction.

Qualitative examination reveals that TBLT learners developed more advanced discourse organization abilities, employing sophisticated cohesive devices and rhetorical structures. These participants demonstrated increased willingness to attempt complex linguistic constructions and showed greater functional variety in their communicative repertoires.

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Table 3. Dimensional Relationship Analysis

Instructional Group	Fluency-Accuracy	Fluency-Complexity	Accuracy-Complexity
TBLT Group			
Pre-treatment	-.18	.23*	.12
Post-treatment	.51***	.68***	.62***
Control Group			
Pre-treatment	-.27*	.19	.08
Post-treatment	.31*	.43**	.38**

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Integration and Trade-off Examination

Correlation analysis reveals fundamental differences in dimensional relationships between instructional approaches. TBLT participants developed highly integrated performance profiles with strong positive correlations among fluency, accuracy, and complexity measures by treatment conclusion. Control group participants maintained weaker interdimensional relationships, suggesting continued resource competition between performance aspects.

These findings indicate that TBLT promotes more holistic language development, enabling simultaneous advancement across multiple performance dimensions rather than the traditional trade-offs typically observed in form-focused instruction approaches.

Conclusion

This comprehensive investigation provides robust empirical evidence supporting TBLT's superior effectiveness in developing EFL speaking proficiency across fluency, accuracy, and complexity dimensions. TBLT participants achieved substantially greater improvements than traditionally instructed peers: 38% fluency enhancement versus 14%, 31% accuracy gains versus 16%, and 42% complexity development versus 19%. Effect size analysis confirms large to very large practical significance for task-based interventions (d=1.15-1.84). Correlation analysis demonstrates that TBLT promotes integrated performance development, eliminating traditional accuracy-fluency trade-offs. These findings

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indicate that meaningful communicative tasks facilitate simultaneous development across all speaking dimensions through authentic language use contexts. Results strongly support TBLT adoption in EFL curricula, with significant implications for teacher training programs, curriculum development initiatives, and assessment practices emphasizing communicative competence over isolated linguistic skill development.

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