ENGLISH-MAJORED STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF LEARNING GRAMMAR WITH TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING (TBLT)

Phan Thị Lam

Nguyen Hong Ngoc

Nguyen Thi Dieu Huyen

Faculty of Foreign Languages, Dong Nai Technology University, Bien Hoa City,
Dong Nai Province, Viet Nam

*Corresponding Author: Phan Thi Lam – Email: phanthilam@dntu.edu.vn

ABSTRACT

Vietnamese students' English competency assessment is increasingly focusing on communicative competence. Textbooks and curriculums are specifically created to enhance students' speaking skills. Most English classrooms typically adhere to the classic Grammar-translation methodology, which exclusively focuses on translation between languages without providing opportunities for speaking practice. Many university students, including those who majored in English, struggle to engage in basic conversations despite having a strong grasp of numerous grammar rules. This study intends to investigate the task-based language teaching (TBLT), known for its effectiveness in English Language Teaching (ELT) to improve students' communicative English skills. The study also aims to get insights into students' perspectives on learning grammar through Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). We examined the principles, benefits, and practical use of communicative tasks in grammar lessons, highlighting how this methodology can engage DNTU's English majored freshmen in the learning of English grammar. The participants completed a closed-ended questionnaire. The findings indicated that the majority of the communicative tasks in the study are suitable in terms of proficiency and engagement. The participants demonstrated a clear interest in studying grammar within the framework of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) thanks to the communicative opportunities it provided. Nonetheless, within the scope of this research, all of the participants were freshmen; the designed statements in the questionnaire are still limited. Accordingly, the results might not represent all English-majored students at DNTU. Thus, further studies have been expected to explore practical application of TBLT in grammar lessons with sophomores or juniors.

Keywords: Grammar, communicative tasks, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), English-majored students

1. Introduction

1.2. Background

Grammar has always held significance in the realm of acquiring the English language. Vietnamese students, from elementary to higher education, have been encouraged to focus on grammatical structures, reading exercises, and grammar practice tasks (Hoang, 2013; Le, 2014) for the fact that the Vietnamese educational system has still favored grammar-based

written tests to assess students' English proficiency. Consequently, high school students tend to focus on memorizing grammar rules to pass exams, rather than emphasizing meaningful language use. This has undoubtedly led to students' incapacity to communicate effectively in English. However, the assessment of students' English skills upon entering university has been transitioning towards communicative competence which a majority of high school graduates lack, while having a strong grasp of numerous grammar rules and vocabulary.

Enhancing students' ability to communicate effectively is a key objective in English language education, so there is a need for suitable teaching methods to convey language information and help students apply it authentically. Although changes in curriculum and textbooks aim to enhance students' communicative ability, teaching methods like Grammar Translation and Presentation - Practice - Production which are often viewed as exam-oriented rather than focusing on skill development (Barnard & Nguyen, 2010; Hoang, 2013) are still popular. The approaches are ineffective since there are limited opportunities to utilize the target language for communication and negotiation, contradicting the goals of the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) as stated by Phuong (2016).

English grammar is a mandatory course at Dong Nai Technology University for students majoring in English. The course is designed to improve students' understanding of grammar and raise their language awareness to a B2 level according to the CEFR. Despite efforts by the faculty of foreign languages to reduce the use of teacher-centered methods and increase student participation in speaking drills, students appeared disengaged in lessons and occasionally struggled with questions beyond the textbook. This prompted the researchers to develop a novel teaching approach that would involve students in grammar learning and enhance their conversational skills. In other words, grammar should be instructed in ways that also help build students' communicative competence.

However, acquiring communicative competence might be challenging. Malihah (2010) discovers that students face difficulties in speaking due to a lack of courage and preparation prior to speaking. Alexsandrzak (2011) reveals that the challenges in speaking arise from insufficient practice outside the classroom. These learners' issue is not only connected to their psychological aspects but also to the teachers' ability to establish classroom environments that facilitate speaking practice.

Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT), a subtype of Communicative Language Teaching, views communication in a target language as the primary objective of language learning and an effective way to offer speaking opportunities for students. It provides students with opportunities to engage in speaking practice with partners, leading to increased confidence and less fear in speaking (Anjum et al., 2019). It also enhances students' ability to communicate

effectively and fluently by not directly correcting their grammar, which encourages them to participate more actively in speaking assignments based on real-world scenarios (Albino, 2017). Students speak English in discussions and negotiations with peers in order to complete communicative tasks. Thus, students can enhance their proficiency in the target language by engaging in task-based activities (Zhou, 2016).

1.2. Research objectives

The current study aims to explore the principles, benefits, and practical application of TBLT in grammar lessons, shedding light on how this innovative methodology can involve students in grammar learning through communicative tasks and how students view learning grammar within the framework of TBLT.

Research Question: How do the students respond to grammar acquisition using TBLT?

2. Literature review

2.1. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)

Task-based language education emerged in the 1980s and was predominantly utilized for teaching English in Asian countries such as Korea, Japan, China, Malaysia, Thailand, Bangladesh, and Vietnam. Several studies have been undertaken to investigate TBLT. Although each study may have its unique perspective on TBLT, they often achieve similar results. TBLT was created with the idea that modern teaching methods should focus on learners and prioritize a practical application of knowledge (Ellis, 2018). Put simply, teachers will

not act as input providers who depend solely on course texts for their teaching. Furthermore, students must be viewed as individuals who explore and discover on their own while acquiring knowledge. TBLT is a derivative communicative teaching method. It encourages student-centered classrooms, communication in daily settings, and minimal focus on grammar structures. According to Jackson (2022), TBLT classes inspire learners to participate in meaningful conversations and interactions in the target language to achieve specific language objectives. Skills such as problem-solving, information-sharing, and decision-making are essential for students to accomplish these objectives. TBLT posits that teaching language through real conversation is more effective than teaching grammatical rules and vocabulary lists. TBLT aims to enhance students' fluency in communication rather than emphasizing rote memorization of vocabulary and grammar rules. This approach is centered on the concept that students can enhance their linguistic and social abilities by engaging in authentic language interactions. More importantly, TBLT not only enhances students' fluency but also increases their linguistic awareness by encouraging them to identify linguistic patterns and rules while doing tasks and afterwards (Mishan, 2011). In a TBLT lesson, there are typically three sequential phases: pre-task, main-task, and post-task. During the pre-task stage, teacher and learners identify and discuss the vocabulary related to the primary

activity's theme in preparation for the task. The task-cycle comprises task execution, planning, and reporting. Students collaborate with their team mates to complete assignments and subsequently prepare to present their findings. Post-task entails students first analyzing a particular language form that was challenging and then practicing the grammatical structure that was previously examined.

2.2. How grammar is taught with TBLT

Task-based language teaching, if applied correctly to instruct grammar, will balance communicative competence and linguistic forms. Within the framework of TBLT, grammar is taught by having student's complete communicative tasks that allow them to understand English grammar starting with its meaning and progressing to its form. Students are initially presented with the meanings and functions of a certain grammar point; after that they independently investigate the form. Grammar teaching and learning in the light of TBLT focuses on communicative tasks meant to enhance learners' both communication skills and grammar competence (Rama & Agullo, 2012). Thompson & Millington (2012) also emphasizes the importance of an effective task which must include significant oral contact and emphasize linguistic form. It means that grammar lessons should be designed in a way that incorporate a communicative task or activity to allow students to practice the specific grammatical point. Traditionally, communicative grammar

practice has emphasized speaking activities, but writing activities are also a valuable method for practicing grammar in a communicative way. A communicative task, whether in writing or speaking, should allow learners to use language for communication.

Tasks are the central focus of TBLT course and lesson development, as suggested by the name. In language learning, a task is a linguistic exercise that demands students to focus on meaning and the practical application of language. Tasks are defined as students' practical applications of the target language in real-world situations beyond the classroom, serving academic, professional, or social survival goals. On the other hand, a task, from a pedagogical viewpoint, is a classroom activity where students utilize their grammatical knowledge to convey meaning in the target language and comprehend each other, essentially through communication in the target language. Practical tasks are expected to bridge the gap between classroom discussions and real communication situations, as proposed by Hismanoglu & Hismanoglu (2011). Bryfonski (2020) studied how authentic tasks impact the speaking skills of adult ESL students. The students participated in a sequence of role-plays where they acted out various realistic scenarios, such as booking a restaurant table or attending a job interview. Students significantly enhanced their communication abilities after engaging in the realistic role-plays. Furthermore, students expressed being more motivated and engaged in the

speaking activities due to the clear relevance to their daily lives.

Teachers use a three-stage lesson structure in TBLT, consisting of pre-task, task-cycle, and post-task (Willis's Task-based learning framework, 1996, as quoted in Thompson et al, 2012). Thompson conducted an experimental study where students actively engaged in tasks related to TBLT. Through observation, he confirmed the effectiveness of using this teaching method to improve students' use of English grammar in communication. Similarly, Ahmadian (2016) investigated how real-world problem-solving activities impact students' oral communication skills in a Korean language classroom. The students collaborated in pairs to finish genuine language-focused tasks. Based on the findings, students engaged in practical problem-solving tasks had greater fluency and accuracy in their speech compared to those who focused on traditional grammar-based speaking drills. The authentic activities enhanced students' confidence and enjoyment in their public speaking skills. Van den Branden et al. (2021) examined the impact of real-world information-gap situations on the linguistic development of young Dutch speakers. Students collaborated in pairs, each possessing unique information and sharing a mutual objective. Students who engaged in authentic information-gap projects showed a notable enhancement in their communicative competence compared to those who had traditional instruction. The students' proficiency in the target language improved as a result

of the assignments focusing on meaningful negotiation and collaborative work.

Teachers generally used TBLT to teach grammatical structures in a more engaging way, allowing students to gain from both language forms and language use. TBLT alters the way in which teachers and students participate in classroom activities. Students are now actively involved in grammar learning by utilizing it, rather than passively receiving knowledge or learning it for future use.

Among prior studies related to current theme, there has not been works were carried out on the topics of effectiveness and importance of communicative tasks in teaching grammar. Thus, by the aim to explore the principles and benefits of TBLT, the present research considerately fulfills the gap adhere with students' perceptions and practice application in grammar lessons titled "English-majored students' perceptions of studying grammar with task-based language teaching".

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The study targeted 136 English freshmen enrolled in the obligatory course Grammar 2 at the faculty of foreign languages, Dong Nai Technology University. To achieve our research objective, we utilized an online survey questionnaire and obtained 136 comprehensive replies via Google Form. Prior to conducting the research, it is essential that every student has a thorough understanding of the study's objectives, participant selection and

procedure, potential risks and benefits, participant rights and responsibilities. The consent forms were delivered to the participants. The results of the research would benefit all by improving their learning and teaching.

3.2. Research design

The experimental methodology will utilize communicative tasks, and questionnaires to acquire a comprehensive knowledge of participants' responses to TBLT.

3.2.1. Communicative tasks

The researcher opted to utilize communicative tasks to assess students' reactions to grammar learning in a TBLT classroom. In TBLT, a good communicative task should primarily focus on achieving learning outcomes and engaging students in activities that connect to the real world. Students are specifically observed and evaluated based on their interactions with the teacher and classmates, as well as their performance on tasks.

To determine if TBLT leads to improved grammar learning experience through the study and application of grammar in meaningful communication, various factors including TBLT lesson plans, classroom activities, and students' responses and performances must be considered. A typical lesson plan with TBLT should include:

Students engage in communicative activities by collaborating with their peers in small groups. To complete their tasks, students must address information gaps through exchanging information, negotiating meaning, and sharing experiences.

Not all grammar sessions from the 10-week course will be implemented using TBLT. This is the description for some of the experimental lessons.

Table 1: *Summary of lesson plans*

Week	Language forms	Topics	Communicative tasks
1	English tenses Simple Present	Daily routines	Exchanging experiences: The most hectic day - Students collaborate in groups of five to discuss their most hectic day and determine whose day is the most hectic. - It is advisable to employ simple present tenses throughout lessons. Students must employ negotiating skills to accomplish the objective.
2	English tenses (cont) Simple past	Story telling	Telling stories: The lost kitten -Students are given storytelling exercise. They are given minutes to independently brainstorm the conclusion before pairing up. - Once the groups are established, they will be able to hear their peers' suggestions and reach a final decision on an ending through debate. Past tenses should be used during the lesson.
3	English tenses	Plan a	Stimulating discussion: Arranging a trip

Week	Language forms	Topics	Communicative tasks
	(cont) Future tense	trip	- Students work in groups to discuss about traveling, followed by a brainstorming session to arrange the trip. They are inquired to talk about the duration of the trip, the budget, and the recommended activities. - Students are given real items such as a map, allowing them to choose a real or fictional destination to build a travel itinerary. Future tenses should be used during the lesson.
4	English modal verbs Should/shouldn't	Giving advice	Analyzing and evaluating solutions: Balancing schoolwork and part-time job - Students collaborate in group of five to discuss the assigned problem. - Students each provide their own answer and then collectively determine which recommendation is the most effective. Modal verbs should be used during the lesson. Students must apply their life experience and negotiation abilities to accomplish the assignment.

Although the tasks varied in design, all of them necessitated students to fill in information gaps. Completion of the tasks was dependent on students exchanging information, negotiating meaning, and sharing experiences with their classmates.

The teachers must adhere to a three-stage lesson plan consisting of pre-task, task cycle, and post-task. During the pre-task stage, the teacher assists participants in generating vocabulary associated with the main task's theme to ensure students comprehend the task requirements and are ready for the main task. The task cycle comprises task execution, planning, and reporting. Students collaborate in pairs or small groups to complete the job, then they prepare to present their findings either in written or spoken format (with a preference for oral presentations), and ultimately, they deliver their report to the entire class. Post-task entails participants analyzing the target grammar point and other problematic grammar points from the lecture, and then practicing those structures.

3.2.2. Questionnaire

The survey is divided into three sections, with the first section focusing on questions regarding the participants' replies to the pre-task. Sections 2 and 3 inquiries about participants' views towards task-cycle and post-task practices, respectively. The items belonging to 3 sections are evaluated using five-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree).

4. Results

Approximately 70% of the students agreed and strongly agreed that grammar lessons were made easier by the guidance and input of the teacher. Accordingly, more than three quarters of the participants (77, 3%) concurred that learning grammar with TBLT allows for a deeper comprehension of grammatical concepts. However, only 14% of the answers agreed that they can improve retention of grammatical concepts with TBLT, due to the fact that communicative tasks took time to complete. As a result, about half of the participants (53%) strongly disagreed and disagreed with the allocated amount of time for practicing the grammar points and stated that TBLT lessons should be incorporated with a more traditional approach (agreed by 56%). Students attempt to complete the assigned assignments in an interactive setting throughout the task cycle stage. Accordingly, almost 90% of the participants recognized the enhanced cooperative learning environment in which they worked collaboratively with their classmates. That being said, around three-quarters of the participants (76.4%) agreed and strongly agreed that they were given the opportunities to utilize English during the task cycle stage in order to do the assignment. Instead of concentrating on the precise application of the language components, students should simply be asked to focus on fluency in a stress-free learning environment, agreed by 58.7%. Around 80% of participants agreed and strongly agreed that learning grammar through TBLT is more fascinating, suggesting that students may participate more in English grammar lectures by performing communicative tasks. Their motivation was subsequently increased, as indicated by the fact that 72.8% of the participants reported feeling more driven to study grammar.

Table 2: *Students' perceptions of learning grammar through TBLT*

Statements	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Unsure (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
Learning grammar with TBLT is facilitated thank to teacher's input and guidance	3	18.4	8.8	33	36.8
TBLT enables deeper understanding of grammar points	5.9	7.3	9.5	58.9	18.4
TBLT enables better memorization of grammar points	23.5	29.5	33	14	0
TBLT gives students a chance to speak in English	3	11	9.6	51.4	25

Statements	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Unsure (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
TBLT is more interesting than the traditional way	3.7	8.8	8.1	54.4	25
TBLT improves communicative fluency while regarding accuracy	2.3	14.7	24.3	36.7	22
TBLT provides enough time to practice the grammar points during class	23.5	29.5	33	14	0
TBLT should be incorporated with a more traditional approach	0	36	8.1	47.1	8.8
Learning grammar through TBLT enhances cooperative learning	0	3	8.8	44.1	44.1
Learning grammar through TBLT motivates students' learning spirit	0	15.4	11.8	47.8	25

5. Discussion

We examined the English-majored freshmen's perceptions of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) at Dong Nai Technology University for this study. 136 students completed a study questionnaire. Many participants gave favourable feedback

on learning grammar through a communicative approach known as TBLT and expressed a readiness to adopt this method due to its prominent advantages. The findings are in line with previous studies 'results including Bryfonski (2020) and Jackson (2022). They stated that TBLT lessons encourage students to engage in meaningful interactions and

conversations in the target language and students were more interested and motivated in the speaking exercises because of the activities' obvious application to their everyday lives.

However, that students encountered some challenges including difficulty in remembering language form and lack of time for practice during its implementation should be taken into consideration. The study's participants were asked if TBLT should be combined with conventional techniques. Many students concurred on that point. However, should this phenomenon be combined with or completely avoided? The researchers claim that learning grammar has always suffered from the

use of traditional teaching methods. The exclusive concentration on form in traditional grammar instruction creates unrealistic models of language use. Simplifying texts and conversations has a detrimental effect on second language acquisition rather than assisting students in reaching appropriate language forms. This mindset is found in line with Goodarzi & Tale (2015), teachers are expected to incorporate a variety of projects and activities into their grammar lessons in order to avoid utilising old approaches. Because they are teacher-centered, these old methods of teaching grammar have produced poor outcomes, are perceived as uninteresting by students, and do not aid in improving their communicative skills.

There are two primary categories of challenges associated with implementing TBLT: external and internal issues. The two largest obstacles in terms of external ones are determined to be restricted teaching hours for task-based instruction and interference from exam-oriented instruction. Regarding students, it has been shown that most teachers encounter difficulties when attempting to implement TBLT due to students' unfamiliarity with the method and their lack of prior knowledge or vocabulary. It is believed that teachers' inconsistent use of the target language will negatively affect how well they apply TBLT.

Teachers should consider solutions to familiarize students, for the fact that when students are familiarized with TBLT, they become more motivated

and it can yield them more substantial benefits. Anthony (2012) conducted research in Japan to assess the efficacy of TBLT in enhancing students' communicative skills. Initially, students expressed reluctance to participate in communicative tasks. They indicated in the questionnaire that they were accustomed to traditional teaching methods like Present-Practice-Produce since high school. They also mentioned that teachers were their primary source of knowledge and that most of their learning came from assigned course books. Conventional teaching methods and ideas resulted in college students having good grammatical and lexical understanding but struggling to effectively use these resources to speak at length. As teachers motivated students and assignments piqued their attention, students became more receptive to the new technique. This led to an improvement in their ability to create longer sentences and produce more fluent discourses with increased syntactic complexity and accuracy.

This research has also identified a number of ways to minimise the difficulties. In addition to delivering teachers workshops or in-service training, they are also supplying models and merging TBLT with conventional approaches. Hopefully, the challenges and suggestions discussed above will help teachers who are thinking about using TBLT to help their students improve their communication competence.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated the potential applications of task-based language

training in grammar instruction. Students' viewpoints were considered while also considering the theoretical framework in this study. The results of the study indicate that there are several reasons why the Task-Based model of grammar learning is better than the traditional approach to grammar training. To begin with, TBLT is a teacher-facilitated, student-centered teaching methodology. In TBLT classrooms, teachers start to assume the roles of facilitators, consultants, and source providers in place of being the authority. By completing the real-world tasks included in the course materials, students take on the roles of inventors and group members. By means of collaborative knowledge creation, TBLT facilitates language learning and

skill development chances. The fact that TBLT seeks to improve students' communicative competence is more significant. Finally, despite the Approach's lack of emphasis on grammar, the results showed how effective task-based language instruction is at enhancing students' grammatical knowledge. Because of this, TBLT should be used in grammar education and regarded as a suitable alternative. However, it is impossible to conclude that the findings apply to a wider environment because this study only involved freshmen. Additional research on the method and its application to grammar education is needed before TBLT can be categorically accepted or rejected in classroom settings.

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Nguyễn Thị Diệu Huyền
Khoa Ngoại ngữ, Trường Đại học Công nghệ Đồng Nai, Thành phố Biên Hòa,
Tỉnh Đồng Nai, Việt Nam
*Tác giả liên hệ: Phan Thị Lam – Email: phanthilam@dntu.edu.vn

TÓM TẮT

Việc đánh giá năng lực tiếng Anh của sinh viên Việt Nam ngày càng chú trọng vào khả năng giao tiếp. Giáo trình và chương trình học được tạo ra nhằm nâng cao kỹ năng nói của sinh viên. Đa số lớp học tiếng Anh thường tuân thủ phương pháp dịch - ngữ pháp cổ điển, chỉ tập trung vào dịch giữa các ngôn ngữ mà không cung cấp cơ hội để luyện nói. Nhiều sinh viên đại học, kể cả sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh, gặp khó khăn khi tham gia vào các cuộc trò chuyện cơ bản mặc dù đã nắm rõ nhiều quy tắc ngữ pháp. Nghiên cứu này nhằm mục đích điều tra phương pháp giảng dạy ngôn ngữ dựa trên nhiệm vụ, được biết đến là hiệu quả trong giảng dạy tiếng Anh để cải thiện kỹ năng giao tiếp của sinh viên. Nghiên cứu cũng nhằm mục đích nhận thức được quan điểm của sinh viên về việc học ngữ pháp thông qua phương pháp giảng dạy ngôn ngữ dựa trên nhiệm vụ. Chúng tôi đã nghiên cứu các nguyên tắc, lợi ích và ứng dụng thực tế của các nhiệm vụ giao tiếp trong bài học ngữ pháp, nhấn mạnh phương pháp này có thể nâng cao việc học ngữ pháp tiếng Anh cho sinh viên năm thứ nhất tại Trường Đại học Công nghệ Đồng Nai (DNTU). Các đối tượng nghiên cứu đã hoàn thành một bảng câu hỏi đóng. Kết quả chỉ ra rằng đa số các nhiệm vụ giao tiếp trong nghiên cứu này phù hợp với năng lực và sự tham gia của sinh viên. Họ đã thể hiện sự quan tâm rõ ràng trong việc học ngữ pháp với mô hình giảng dạy ngôn ngữ dựa trên nhiệm vụ vì nó mang lại nhiều cơ hội giao tiếp cho họ. Tuy nhiên, trong phạm vi của nghiên cứu này, đối tượng tham gia hoàn toàn là sinh viên năm nhất; số lượng các câu thiết kế trong bảng hỏi chưa nhiều. Theo đó, kết quả nghiên cứu có thể không đại diện cho tất cả sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh tại DNTU. Các nghiên cứu tiếp theo được kỳ vọng để khám phá ứng dụng thực tiễn của phương pháp giảng dạy ngôn ngữ dựa trên nhiệm vụ trong các lớp học ngữ pháp với sinh viên năm hai hoặc năm ba.

Từ khóa: Ngữ pháp, nhiệm vụ giao tiếp, giảng dạy theo nhiệm vụ, sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh