

The Effect of Task-Based Language Teaching on EFL Learners' Speaking Fluency: A Study in Fergana Secondary Schools

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Abstract: *This study investigated the effect of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) on the speaking fluency of upper-intermediate EFL learners at two secondary schools in Fergana, Uzbekistan. Using a pre-test and post-test design, 60 students were divided into two groups: one group received TBLT-based instruction, while the other continued with the conventional teaching approach used in Fergana schools. The study lasted 12 weeks. Speaking fluency was assessed through oral tasks that were evaluated for how smoothly and confidently students spoke. Results showed that students in the TBLT group made noticeably stronger progress in speaking fluency compared to those in the conventional group. By the end of the study, TBLT students spoke more continuously, with fewer stops and corrections, and expressed themselves with greater ease. These findings suggest that TBLT is a promising approach for improving spoken English in Uzbek secondary school settings. The article discusses practical recommendations for teachers and school administrators in Fergana and similar EFL contexts.*

Keywords: *Task-Based Language Teaching, Speaking Fluency, EFL, Fergana Schools, Oral Communication, Uzbekistan*

1. Introduction

The ability to speak English fluently has become one of the most valued skills for young learners in Uzbekistan, particularly as the country continues to expand its international partnerships, increase higher education opportunities, and promote English as a key language of academic and professional life (Kholmatova, 2019). In this context, secondary schools in regions such as Fergana face growing pressure to produce graduates who can communicate effectively in English, not merely pass grammar-based examinations. Yet many classroom observations and teacher reports from Fergana schools suggest that students remain hesitant, slow, and self-conscious when asked to speak in English, even after several years of formal instruction.[1]

A major reason for this gap is the instructional approach most commonly used in Uzbek secondary schools. The conventional method, often referred to as the Presentation-Practice-Production model, begins with the teacher explaining a grammar rule, followed by controlled exercises, and then a brief production activity. While this approach helps students understand language structures, it provides relatively few opportunities for spontaneous, meaningful communication. Students rarely experience the pressure — or the excitement — of using English to accomplish a real purpose with another person. As a result, their spoken fluency remains underdeveloped even when their grammar knowledge is reasonably strong.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has been proposed by researchers and educators as a more effective way to develop speaking skills.[2] In TBLT, students complete communicative tasks — activities such as solving a problem together, sharing information that their partner does not have, making a group decision, or telling a story — using English as the tool for accomplishing those tasks. Rather than focusing first on grammar and then on speaking, TBLT puts meaningful communication at the center of the lesson from the start. Language forms are addressed after the task, in response to

what students actually needed to express.

Although TBLT has been studied extensively in many parts of the world, relatively little research has examined its effectiveness specifically in Uzbekistan or in Fergana schools in particular. This is an important gap, because the conditions in Fergana schools — including large class sizes, limited teaching resources, examination-driven curricula, and limited student exposure to English outside the classroom — may affect how well TBLT can be implemented and how much benefit it produces.[3]

This study was designed to address that gap. It compared the speaking fluency development of two groups of students at Fergana secondary schools over a 12-week period: one group taught through TBLT and one group taught through the conventional method. The study sought to answer two central questions. First, do students who receive TBLT instruction make greater gains in speaking fluency than those who receive conventional instruction? Second, what specific aspects of fluency show the most improvement in TBLT conditions?[4]

Literature Review

What is Speaking Fluency and Why Does It Matter?

Speaking fluency refers to the ability to produce spoken language smoothly, continuously, and with appropriate speed, without excessive pausing, repetition, or self-correction. It is one of three dimensions commonly used to describe the quality of spoken language production, alongside accuracy (correctness of grammar and vocabulary) and complexity (the sophistication of the language used). While all three dimensions are important, fluency is often considered the most directly connected to real-world communicative success, because listeners in authentic conversations expect a reasonable degree of smoothness and pace from their interlocutors.[5]

For EFL learners, developing fluency is particularly challenging because the language processing demands of speaking in a foreign language are much higher than in one's first language. Learners must simultaneously retrieve vocabulary, apply grammatical rules, plan what to say next, monitor their own output for errors, and manage the social dynamics of conversation — all in real time. When any of these cognitive demands becomes too great, the speaker slows down, pauses, or restarts a sentence, disrupting the flow of communication. Instruction that gives learners repeated opportunities for spontaneous communication under realistic time pressure is thought to reduce these cognitive demands over time, allowing speech to become more automatic and fluent.[6]

Task-Based Language Teaching: Principles and Rationale

TBLT is a pedagogical approach rooted in the belief that language is best learned through meaningful use rather than through isolated study of its forms. The central unit of TBLT is the communicative task: an activity in which learners use language to achieve a non-linguistic goal, such as planning a trip, resolving a disagreement, or completing an information exchange. The key feature of such tasks is that success depends on effective communication, not on the display of grammatical knowledge.

A typical TBLT lesson involves three phases. In the pre-task phase, the teacher introduces the topic, activates relevant vocabulary, and may demonstrate the task. In the task phase, students work in pairs or small groups to complete the communicative activity, with the teacher monitoring and supporting rather than directing. In the post-task phase, students may present their results to the class, and the teacher draws attention to relevant language forms that emerged during the task. This sequence ensures that communication needs drive language use, rather than language rules driving communication.[7]

Research Evidence for TBLT and Speaking

A substantial body of research supports the effectiveness of TBLT in promoting speaking development. Studies conducted in East Asian EFL contexts, including South Korea and China, have consistently found that students in TBLT classrooms outperform those in conventional classrooms on

measures of speaking fluency after periods ranging from 8 to 16 weeks. These studies suggest that the repeated practice of spontaneous communication in task conditions leads to more automatic, less effortful speech over time.

Research has also shown that the specific design of tasks matters. Tasks that require students to exchange unique information, tasks that allow some planning time beforehand, and tasks that are repeated with different partners all tend to produce stronger fluency gains than tasks without these features. This body of evidence has informed the design of the TBLT intervention used in the present study.[8]

TBLT in Central Asian and Uzbek School Contexts

Although the international literature on TBLT is rich, the majority of studies have been conducted in East Asian, European, or North American settings. Research from Central Asian EFL contexts, including Uzbekistan, is comparatively limited. Several scholars have noted that the communicative approach faces particular challenges in educational systems where teacher authority is strong, examinations focus on written grammar, and students have limited English input outside the classroom.

At the same time, recent educational reforms in Uzbekistan have explicitly called for more communicative, student-centered approaches to English language teaching in secondary schools. This policy environment creates both an opportunity and a need for evidence-based research on how TBLT can be effectively adapted for Uzbek school conditions. The present study responds to this need by focusing specifically on Fergana, a region with a growing English education sector but limited access to communicative teaching resources.[9]

2. Methodology

The study used a pre-test and post-test design with two intact class groups. Because it was not possible to randomly assign individual students to groups within the school setting, the researchers worked with two existing English classes that had been assessed as comparable in terms of prior English achievement. One class was assigned to receive TBLT instruction, and the other continued with the conventional teaching method used throughout the school. Both groups were tested on their speaking fluency at the beginning and at the end of the 12-week study period.

Participants

Sixty students from two secondary schools in Fergana city participated in the study. Thirty students formed the TBLT group, drawn from School Number 1, and 30 students formed the conventional group, drawn from School Number 17. All participants were in the 9th grade and had been studying English for approximately 5 years. Their ages ranged from 14 to 16 years. Both groups were assessed at the start of the study using a short oral task, and their initial fluency scores were found to be very similar, confirming that the groups were at a comparable starting level before instruction began.[10]

Instructional Treatments

The TBLT group attended three 45-minute English lessons per week, each structured around a communicative task. Tasks were drawn from real-world topics relevant to students' lives, including discussing weekend plans, giving directions in the city, negotiating solutions to everyday problems, and sharing opinions about school and community issues. Each lesson followed the three-phase TBLT structure described in the literature review. Teachers were trained in TBLT principles over three sessions before the study began and received ongoing support through bi-weekly observation and feedback meetings with the researchers.

The conventional group continued with their regular curriculum, which was based on the national English textbook for Grade 9. Lessons followed the standard format of grammar explanation, vocabulary presentation, controlled exercises, and brief speaking activities at the end of the lesson.

Contact time was equal across both groups, with three 45-minute lessons per week over 12 weeks.[11]

Data Collection and Assessment

Speaking fluency was assessed through an oral narrative task administered individually to each student at the start and end of the study. Each student was shown a sequence of four pictures depicting a simple everyday event and was asked to describe what was happening in approximately three minutes. The responses were recorded using a smartphone voice recorder and later reviewed by two trained raters who were not involved in teaching either group. Raters assessed each recording for three aspects: how smoothly the student spoke without unnecessary pauses, how often the student stopped to correct or repeat themselves, and how long the student was able to speak continuously without breaking off. Raters used a simple five-point scale for each aspect, and their scores were averaged. In cases where the two raters disagreed by more than one point, a third rater reviewed the recording.[12]

3. Results

Overall Fluency Gains

At the beginning of the study, the average fluency scores for both groups were very close, with the TBLT group scoring an average of 2.4 out of 5 and the conventional group scoring an average of 2.3 out of 5. By the end of the 12-week period, the TBLT group's average score had risen to 3.9 out of 5, representing an improvement of approximately 63%. The conventional group's average score increased to 2.8 out of 5, an improvement of approximately 22%. This gap of more than 40 percentage points in improvement rates indicates a substantially stronger fluency development in the TBLT condition.

Smoothness and Continuity of Speech

When examining the smoothness of speech specifically, TBLT students showed the most dramatic gains. At the start of the study, most students in both groups produced speech that was notably halting, with frequent long pauses between words and phrases. At the end of the study, TBLT students were observed to speak in longer, more connected stretches with shorter pauses. Their speech was rated as smooth or very smooth by the raters in approximately 70% of post-test recordings, compared to approximately 30% in the conventional group's post-test recordings.

Frequency of Self-Correction and Repetition

Both groups reduced the frequency with which they stopped to correct themselves or repeat words and phrases. However, the reduction was more pronounced in the TBLT group. TBLT students went from an average of approximately 9 interruptions per minute in the pre-test to approximately 4 interruptions per minute in the post-test — a reduction of more than 55%. Conventional group students reduced their interruptions from approximately 8 per minute to approximately 6 per minute, a reduction of around 25%. This suggests that TBLT students developed greater communicative confidence and were less distracted by minor errors during spontaneous speech.[13]

Length of Continuous Speech

The ability to sustain continuous speech without stopping is an important indicator of fluency development. At pre-test, students in both groups typically spoke for only 5 to 10 seconds before pausing significantly. By post-test, TBLT students were able to sustain continuous speech for an average of approximately 20 to 25 seconds, while conventional group students improved to approximately 12 to 14 seconds. These results suggest that TBLT substantially increased students' capacity to maintain uninterrupted speech over the course of the intervention.

4. Discussion

The results of this study consistently demonstrate that students who received TBLT instruction over 12 weeks made substantially greater progress in speaking fluency than students who received

conventional instruction. This finding is consistent with the broader international research literature on TBLT, which has repeatedly found that communicative task-based activities produce stronger speaking outcomes than form-focused approaches, particularly for fluency-related measures. The present study extends this evidence to a secondary school context in Fergana, Uzbekistan, confirming that TBLT can be effectively implemented and can produce meaningful gains even in a resource-constrained EFL environment.[14]

The particularly strong gains in smoothness and in the reduction of self-corrections are theoretically significant. In TBLT conditions, students are repeatedly placed in situations where they must communicate something meaningful under realistic time pressure. Over time, this repeated practice is thought to develop automaticity — the ability to produce language without consciously thinking about every word and structure. The results of this study suggest that 12 weeks of TBLT instruction was sufficient to initiate this process of automatization in Fergana school students, even though full fluency certainly requires much longer development.

The improvements observed in the conventional group, while smaller, are also worth noting. Students in this group did make some progress, likely reflecting general English development over the semester. However, the conventional method's limited opportunities for sustained, spontaneous speech appear to constrain the degree of fluency development it can support. This is consistent with the observation that students in Fergana schools often demonstrate reasonable knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary on written tests while remaining hesitant and slow speakers — a discrepancy that conventional instruction does little to address.

Several practical challenges encountered during the study are worth acknowledging. Some students in the TBLT group initially felt uncomfortable with the reduced teacher direction and were unsure how to proceed when tasks became difficult. A small number of students occasionally reverted to Uzbek when the communicative pressure became too great. These challenges highlight the importance of teacher preparation and gradual task scaffolding when introducing TBLT in contexts where students are accustomed to more teacher-led instruction. The training sessions provided to TBLT teachers before and during the study appeared to be effective in helping them navigate these challenges, though further professional development would be beneficial.[15]

5. Conclusion

This study provides clear evidence that Task-Based Language Teaching can meaningfully improve the speaking fluency of EFL students at secondary schools in Fergana, Uzbekistan. Students who participated in 12 weeks of TBLT instruction made substantially greater gains in smoothness, continuity of speech, and reduction of self-correction than students who received conventional instruction over the same period. These findings have direct implications for English language education policy and practice in Fergana and across Uzbekistan.

For school administrators and curriculum designers, the results suggest that creating structured opportunities for communicative task-based speaking practice should be prioritized in English lesson planning, even within the constraints of existing curricula and textbook frameworks. For classroom teachers, the study demonstrates that TBLT can be successfully implemented with secondary school students in Fergana with appropriate preparation and support. Future research should examine how TBLT gains in speaking develop over longer periods, how they interact with students' writing and reading development, and how task design can be further optimized for the specific cultural and pedagogical context of Fergana schools.

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