



Exploring the perceptions and practices of task-based language teaching: EFL teachers' narratives

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Abstract

Task-based language teaching has drawn language teaching practitioners, teacher educators, and researchers' attention over thirty years. Many teachers claim they have been implementing task-based language teaching in their classes, but there is little research on teachers' perceptions and practices. The present study aims to explore how secondary-level EFL teachers perceive and practice TBLT. Narrative inquiry research design was employed to explore the stories of the participants through unstructured interviews. The data were analyzed using the seven-stage data analysis process. The findings revealed that the teachers possess considerable theoretical knowledge of task-based language teaching; however, they lacked practical exposure to effectively implementing this approach in their classrooms. The study also discovered that despite clear understanding and necessary professional training, EFL teachers are making efforts to transform their pedagogical practices by adopting more student-centered approaches. This study recommends enhancing English language teachers' TBLT skills through participatory and collaborative approaches to research and training.

Keywords

task-based language teaching, student-centered teaching, student engagement, communicative competence

Introduction

The growing body of literature on student-centered language teaching, along with the insights from practitioners' discussions, has supported the increasing adaptation of task-based language teaching (TBLT). Over the last several decades, TBLT has been drawing interest among different stakeholders in language teaching and learning (East, 2021). Several countries such as Hong Kong, China, South Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and New Zealand have formally incorporated TBLT into their educational policies, particularly for English as a foreign language teaching and learning (Adams & Newton, 2009; Newton, 2021). TBLT as an approach emphasizes the significance of learners' natural abilities for learning a new language incidentally during task performance that draws learners' attention to form (Ellis et al., 2020). TBLT is an approach to language education in which students are given functional tasks that invite them to focus primarily on meaning exchange and to use language for real-world, non-linguistic purposes (Kris Van den Branden, 2006). The approach emphasizes learners' engagement in interaction during task performance during the meaning-making process, rather than compelling learners to passively listen to their teachers and memorize different sets of language rules and examples. During task engagement, learners are presented with holistic language (analytic approach), and they induce rules for themselves (Ellis, 2021). Task-based language teaching as a student-centered approach offers a meaningful, learner-centered alternative to the traditional grammar-translation method of language teaching, which dominates most ELT classrooms in Nepal (Neupane, 2024; Sharma, 2025). This approach aligns with my interest in exploring how EFL teachers perceive task-based teaching and make use of it in their English language classrooms.

Despite the global adoption of TBLT because of its advantages and prospects, many teachers still find it more convenient to deliver lectures and assess their students based on their ability to memorize the textbook contents. The teaching and learning practices in Nepal are still traditional (Awasthi, 2007; Rana & Rana, 2020). Although some practitioners have been implementing TBLT in English language classrooms, and little research has been conducted on TBLT (L. P. Bhandari, 2020a, 2020b; Kadel, 2013; Neupane, 2024), which runs counter to calls for its implementation in the Nepali ELT context. However, teachers' preparedness for task-based lesson implementation tends to influence the effectiveness of language teaching and learning. Despite some efforts, secondary-level English language teachers' perceptions and practices of TBLT in their classes are still under-researched in the Nepali ELT context.

In this context, this study aims to explore secondary-level EFL teachers' perceptions and classroom practices of TBLT to address the research gap and inform pedagogical improvements. Exploring teachers' experiences is vital in promoting more effective, student-centered English language teaching in Nepal. To achieve the purpose of the study, I constructed the following research questions:

- How do English language teachers perceive the use of TBLT Classrooms?
- How do English language teachers make use of language tasks in teaching English?

Literature Review

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is an approach to language education in which students are exposed to various language tasks that initiate interactions with peers and groups. During task engagement, they focus primarily on meaning exchange and the use of language for real-world, non-linguistic purposes (K. Van den Branden, 2016b). TBLT originates from Dewey's (1913) views about the importance of experience, relevance, and intelligent effort for effective learning through purposeful and functional language use (Ellis, 2009). However, formal documentation of TBLT began with Prabhu's Bangalore Project of Communicational Language Teaching Project (Prabhu, 1987). Now, TBLT has progressed beyond theory into actual practice. It is a learner-centered and experiential approach that arises from the practice of communicative language teaching (East, 2017). Language is taught through tasks where students are expected to learn the language freely and without being too conscious of the language rules. The language tasks are designed considering the learners' learning ability, needs, and interests.

Task-based language teaching primarily focuses on meaning, where learners interact, discuss, and negotiate meaning while being engaged in language tasks. Task-based teaching promotes collaborative, student-centered, and personalized learning, considering the learners' interests, needs, and level of learning (B. L. Bhandari et al., 2025). They focus on constructing meanings of the tasks without their conscious awareness of language rules. This ensures natural language learning (Ellis, 2021; Prabhu, 1987). However, learners also develop grammatical competency while giving primary attention to interactions in authentic language tasks (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). In a similar vein, Ellis (2021) states that TBLT primarily focuses on meaning; however, learners can develop grammatical awareness through their incidental attention to grammatical features in 'focus on form' in the main-task stage and through grammar instruction in the post-task stage, while the teacher addresses any grammatical problems evident in the performance of a task. This encourages students to engage in pairs and groups in completing tasks instead of worrying about grammatical issues. Hence, TBLT, as a student-centered language teaching approach, fosters students' overall language development.

Method

Research Design

This study used a qualitative research methodology, applying the narrative inquiry research design to explore the stories of English teachers practicing task-based language teaching approaches in their classrooms. Narrative inquiry is a powerful method of understanding the phenomenon within context in a holistic way through the researcher's immersion in and comprehension of human meaning. "Narrative inquiry is a challenging and useful method that can be employed in a variety of contexts and disciplines" (Lincoln, 1992, p. 471). The narrative inquiry design enabled us to immerse ourselves in the participants' voices, values, and contexts, granting in-depth insights into their perceptions of task-based teaching.

Participants Selection and Data Collection Techniques

Four English teachers from two community schools located in Tilottama Municipality, Rupandehi, Nepal, were selected for the study. The teachers were purposively selected based on their readiness to participate in the study and having a minimum of three years of teaching experience as permanent full-time teachers at the secondary level.

In-depth, unstructured interviews were used to gather necessary information from the participants. Each participant was interviewed twice, first to build a good rapport, and the second round was administered to dig deeper into their perceptions towards TBLT. The participants' temporal and spatial flexibility was ensured in order to elicit in-depth data (Dahal et al., 2024). Respecting the participants' preferences, both rounds of interviews were administered in their mother tongue, Nepali, which ultimately enhanced the authenticity of the responses (Morris, 2015). I audio-recorded each participant's interview with informed consent. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim in Nepali and then translated into English for analysis. In order to ensure the accuracy and trustworthiness of the study, an iterative translation process was adopted, and both versions (transcribed and translated) of the data were peer-reviewed by a bilingual colleague experienced in narrative inquiry research.

Data Analysis

The seven-stage data analysis process proposed by Creswell and Creswell (2023) was employed to analyze the recorded data and generate meaning. The analytic process included: organizing and preparing the data, reading through all the data, coding the data, identifying themes, developing a storyline interpretation, further analyzing the data, and representing and interpreting the data. The analysis concentrated on identifying common themes and capturing how the participants perceived task-based language teaching in English language teaching. The analysis enabled me to construct meaningful insights into the contextual and pedagogical dimensions of task-based pedagogy. Following (Williams & Moser, 2019), descriptive levels of initial codes were manually assigned to meaningful units of the text. Then, axial codes were developed by examining the patterns of the initial codes and grouping them based on their similarity in patterns. The axial codes reflected the broader conceptual categories. Finally, thematic coding of the data was conducted by clustering interrelated codes into overarching themes that captured the participants' perceptions and experiences of task-based language teaching.

Results and Discussion

The findings of the study have been discussed considering related literature under the following three themes: TBLT enhances student engagement; TBLT emphasizes activities from the textbook and learners' daily lives; homework is a task; and TBLT cannot ensure adequate coverage of grammar. The following sub-sections deal with the results and discussions on these themes.

TBLT Enhances Student Engagement

The findings from the interview responses revealed that participants perceived TBLT as a student-centered communicative approach to second language teaching. The findings corroborate the study conducted by Newton (2021) and Poupore (2014) who claim that task-based instruction is a useful teaching strategy to enhance student engagement in language learning. The participants emphasized that their students enjoy working with their peers in groups and pairs to accomplish interesting tasks. The following vignettes of the participants clearly state their positive perceptions towards TBLT.

In fact, my students enjoy more on tasks with their peers in groups than in my lecture. So, I think, we should shift towards implementing task-based instruction completely—T1 from School A.

I think students should work more than their teachers in a TBLT class. But I think engaging students is better than simply lecturing. Students learn better from one another in the group—T3 from School B

Once I assigned my grade ten students to prepare a brochure. The next day, I was surprised to see their task. In fact, they presented a nicely crafted brochure of our school. The team leader said that they visited three other schools immediately after their classes were over the previous day, and got good samples to accomplish the task—T2 from School A

The participants' interview responses confirmed the objective of TBLT that students' role is more active and engaging than any traditional approaches to language teaching. The finding is in line with K. Van den Branden (2016a) who states that teachers design the activities in such a way that their students engage, interact, and accomplish the tasks with some output. The following excerpts from the interview reveal that teachers hold positive perceptions of TBLT despite their limited knowledge of task-based lesson implementation.

Although I have not taken any TBLT training, I have read that it is an approach to actively involve students in learning—T2 from School A.

In my opinion, it's a student-centered activity in which teachers bring tasks from different sources and students work in class. ...yes, it makes learning interesting—T4 from School B.

These expressions indicate that teachers hold positive perceptions despite their limited exposure to TBLT training and classroom practice. The findings resonate with the findings revealed by L. P. Bhandari (2020a) that TBLT teachers have realized the value of students' engagement in learning.

TBLT Emphasizes Activities from the Textbook and Learners' Daily Lives

Teachers from the unstructured interviews shared their limited knowledge of tasks. They understood that tasks are any of the textbook activities and activities related to students' daily lives. Hence, they understood that all the textbook activities, as well as activities designed by teachers from other sources, are tasks to facilitate target language learning

in class. The following statements from the interview are reflected in the participants' limited understanding of TBLT.

I use all the activities from the textbook. I think they are all tasks. Sometimes, I also bring newspapers or magazines, give them to students, and ask them to read or draw pictures from descriptions—T3 from School B.

I think engaging students in writing or speaking about their lives, families, friends, and favorite foods makes better tasks—T2 from School A

The above expressions of the participants evidently indicated that students should be exposed to tasks from both their textbooks and their lives to improve their language skills. Although the participants did not have sufficient knowledge, they revealed positive perceptions towards TBLT. The findings are similar to a study carried out by Hasnain and Halder (2021), who found that teachers held positive perceptions towards TBLT, and were theoretically aware of it to some extent, but they were not exposed to practical aspects.

Homework is a Task

The participants displayed limited knowledge about tasks and misinterpreted those tasks as home assignments or activities the students accomplished during vacations. The following interview excerpts reflect their perceptions of language tasks as homework or vacation assignments.

I often conduct discussions on a topic or lesson in my class. Sometimes it's difficult to complete the lesson in class. So, I set the remaining part of the discussion as a task to be completed at home—T1 from School A

In teaching essay writing, I engage students in brainstorming and discussing the key ideas of the task. 45 minutes of class is insufficient. So, it's often difficult to finish writing. I assign students to write the essay at home—T2 from School A

I have been using tasks for a long time. They are the activities in the textbooks, and I often set them as homework—T4 from School B.

The above responses of the participants failed to make a clear distinction between a task and other kinds of instructional activities conducted in language teaching (Ellis, 2009). However, all these textbook activities do not satisfy the task criteria, namely, primary focus on meaning, some kind of gap, learners' reliance on both linguistic and non-linguistic resources, and a clearly defined communicative outcome (Ellis et al., 2020). These findings corroborate the findings drawn by Zhao (2024) who revealed that teachers have misconceptions that they perceive tasks as similar to any other linguistically focused textbook exercises and activities.

TBLT cannot Ensure Adequate Coverage of Grammar

Some participants had a fundamental misconception that TBLT lessons do not incorporate sufficient grammar practice. They reported that they only focused on task completion, ignoring grammar rules, especially during implementing TBLT in speaking

and reading classes. They misunderstood that TBLT includes both focused and unfocused tasks, and the focused tasks incorporate sufficient linguistic content, specifying the grammar to be taught (Ellis, 2009). The participants. They misinterpreted that learners could learn grammar during the post-task activities. The following interview excerpts justify their misconception of tasks.

I ask my students to speak or write on topics like family or friends. They focus on completing the task in time. I don't have time to teach grammar rules in task-based classes, so I need extra grammar classes—T3 from School B.

My students usually practice grammar on their own or take extra coaching classes. Tasks take a longer time, so it's time-consuming to complete them in time—T2 from School A.

These teachers' understanding of grammar teaching in TBLT is consistent with the findings of Ji and Pham (2020) that students required related grammar input outside the task input, while TBLT required learners to obtain holistic acquisition of knowledge. These misunderstandings reflect a failure to acknowledge that there are multiple versions of task-based teaching (Ellis, 2009) and that each focuses on teaching all the aspects and skills of language to the students. The teachers revealed misunderstandings about the use of TBLT in teaching grammar, as they viewed that grammar is a separate teaching entity that is ignored in TBLT classes. However, Magfirah (2014) found that TBLT offers an opportunity for students to learn grammar when the teacher provides additional explanation of the grammar points during the post-task phase. These findings suggest that teachers need a clear understanding of TBLT as an approach that fosters all language skills and aspects in order to make their TBLT classes effective. Ellis (2021) also suggests that task-based teaching need not be perceived as an alternative to all traditional, form-focused approaches but can be implemented alongside them.

Conclusion

The findings in this study reveal that participant teachers hold positive perceptions despite their comparatively limited theoretical understanding of task-based language teaching. In practice, they emphasized more pedagogical tasks, neglecting the real-world tasks in the class. They mention that TBLT enhances student engagement in language tasks and enjoy learning from each other in pairs and groups more than in teachers' one-way lectures. Similarly, the teachers perceive that language teaching should be transformed into TBLT through training from their long-practiced traditional methods for better motivation, engagement, and more purposeful language learning. However, the teachers' understanding of tasks in the current study was limited because they perceived that all the textbook activities as tasks, although most of the prescribed textbook activities did not meet the task criteria. Therefore, the teachers' practices were limited to segregated language skills rather than integrated ones. These misconceptions might be due to the teachers' insufficient in-depth understanding and lack of training on the TBLT approach. Thus, the study proposes to enhance English language teachers' TBLT skills through participatory and collaborative approaches to research and training.

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