



Research Article

TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING FOR PRIMARY STUDENTS IN VIETNAM: POTENTIAL AND POSSIBILITIES

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the potential of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) for young learners in Vietnam by synthesizing key theoretical and pedagogical insights from existing research. Using a systematic review of literature from major academic databases (e.g., Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar), this study identifies input-based tasks and task repetition as essential strategies for optimizing TBLT implementation at the primary level. Input-based tasks provide essential scaffolding, allowing learners to engage in communication without the pressure of immediate production, while task repetition reinforces comprehension and fluency over time. By bridging theory and practice, this research contributes to the development of a more effective and accessible approach to English language education for young learners in Vietnam.

Keywords: input-based tasks; primary English education; Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT); task repetition

1. Introduction

English education has become a necessary part of the curriculum in many non-English speaking countries, including Vietnam. In Asia, governments and educators are increasingly prioritizing English proficiency to prepare their populations for global communication. Vietnam has followed this regional trend, progressively expanding English education at younger ages. Traditionally, foreign languages were taught only at the secondary level. However, recognizing the importance of early exposure, the government extended English education to primary schools in 2002, with students in Grade 3 (aged 8) beginning English as an optional subject (Hoang, 2010).

Despite these efforts, English proficiency among Vietnamese learners remains limited. Nhan (2013) found that after seven years of compulsory English education, 98% of students were unable to use English for basic communication. Critics argue that previous curricula

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were overly theoretical and grammar-focused, hindering students' ability to apply English in real-life situations (To, 2010).

To address these shortcomings, the Vietnamese government launched the National Foreign Language Project 2020 (NFLP 2020), promoting a shift toward communicative-based instruction. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was introduced as the primary approach, aligning with broader regional trends (Le et al., 2019). However, its implementation in Vietnamese primary schools has faced challenges, particularly for young learners with limited English exposure (Newton & Bui, 2020). One major issue with CLT is that it emphasizes productive language use (especially speaking), which can be difficult for young learners who have had limited exposure to English input (Newton & Bui, 2020). As a result, they may struggle to participate in communicative activities, leading to frustration and disengagement.

Given these challenges, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has emerged as a promising alternative. Studies in EFL contexts (e.g., Newton & Bui, 2018; Shintani, 2012, 2016) show that TBLT provides young learners with structured, meaningful tasks that support language acquisition before requiring active production. Unlike CLT, which often assumes a level of communicative competence from the start, TBLT offers a more scaffolded approach, helping students build confidence and fluency in a supportive environment.

This study explores the potential of TBLT in English language education for young Vietnamese learners. It reviews key literature on the successes and challenges of TBLT for young learners and proposes strategies for optimizing its implementation in Vietnam's EFL primary schools. By doing so, this paper aims to contribute to more effective teaching methods and improved language proficiency among primary school students.

2. Literature

2.1. What is TBLT?

TBLT is an approach to language instruction that prioritizes meaningful communication over explicit grammar instruction. It is based on the premise that language acquisition occurs naturally when learners engage in tasks that require real-world communication (Ellis, 2010). Unlike traditional grammar-based approaches, which emphasize the explicit teaching of linguistic structures, TBLT promotes incidental learning as a byproduct of authentic language use (Ellis, 2003). This "ecological rationale" (Lynch & Maclean, 2000) aligns with theories of holistic language learning, where learners develop linguistic competence through active engagement in real-life tasks (Samuda & Bygate, 2008).

TBLT emerged as an evolution of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), addressing some of its shortcomings while maintaining its core principles. CLT emphasizes meaningful communication and real-world interaction as essential aspects of language learning, prioritizing fluency over accuracy and encouraging learners to use language authentically rather than memorizing isolated grammar rules. However, CLT has been

critiqued for its lack of clear structure in some implementations, difficulties in applying communicative methods in EFL contexts where exposure to the target language is limited, and its failure to define the role of the first language (L1) in supporting learners.

Since TBLT originated from CLT, both approaches share fundamental principles, such as prioritizing meaning, fostering authentic communication, and encouraging real-life interactions in the classroom. However, scholars view TBLT as a more structured and task-driven extension of CLT. Hu (2005) describes task-based teaching as the latest methodological evolution of communicative pedagogy, while Nunan (2004) argues that CLT serves as a broad educational philosophy, with TBLT providing a structured implementation. Similarly, Littlewood (2004) and Kumaravadivelu (2006) consider TBLT as a progression of CLT, where communicative tasks form the central methodology and organizational structure for course design. While both approaches prioritize interaction, TBLT distinguishes itself by structuring learning around tasks rather than general communication activities. Tasks in TBLT require learners to use language to accomplish a non-linguistic goal while also presenting a linguistic challenge, thereby facilitating learning through both the process and the outcome (Samuda & Bygate, 2008).

As the name suggests, tasks serve as the fundamental unit for structuring both a TBLT language program and individual lesson plans. A task in TBLT is distinguished from conventional language exercises by four key criteria (Ellis, 2012):

- (1)**Meaning is primary** – The primary focus is on meaning rather than explicit language forms.
- (2)**There is a gap** – Learners must bridge an information, opinion, or reasoning gap through communication.
- (3)**Learners use their own resources** – Learners must rely on their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources to complete the activity. Rather than being explicitly taught the language needed, learners may draw from the input provided to assist them in performing the task.
- (4)**There is an outcome** – The task has a clearly defined outcome beyond language use—language is a means to an end, not the goal itself.

These criteria ensure that the tasks encourage language use in a way that prioritizes communication and meaning. Learners engage with language as a tool to achieve a communicative goal, rather than as an object for study, analysis, or display. Unlike grammar-based exercise that simply requires learners to produce sentences using prescribed structures, a task that involves an information gap, for example, recalling and verifying picture details with a partner, encourages independent language use, and has a defined communicative outcome - features that align TBLT with real-world language use.

A task-based lesson typically follows a three-phase structure (Ellis, 2003). In the pre-task phase, the teacher introduces the topic, provides input, and prepares learners for the

task. The main task phase, which is the core of the lesson, requires learners to engage in a communicative task, using language meaningfully to achieve a goal. Finally, the post-task phase allows learners to reflect on their performance, discuss strategies, and focus on form if needed. The main task phase is obligatory, while the other phases can be adjusted based on learners' needs, making TBLT a flexible approach that can be adapted to different classroom settings.

2.2. Suitability of TBLT for Young Learners

TBLT holds significant potential for young learners due to its emphasis on meaningful communication and learning through interaction (Ellis, 2003). As Arnold and Rixon (2008) highlight, "The search, for all learners of a language, is for ways of promoting meaningful communication, but for children, this is not just a desirable facilitating and motivating factor but at the heart of what children need in order to learn" (p. 54). Shintani (2015) further argues that TBLT is more feasible for implementation in primary schools compared to junior or senior high schools.

Given that younger learners acquire language more incidentally than through explicit instruction, TBLT serves as an effective approach (Shintani, 2015). It supports holistic language development by integrating multiple skills rather than isolating grammar and vocabulary (Samuda & Bygate, 2008). Furthermore, young learners benefit from hands-on, experiential learning, making task-based activities more engaging and effective than traditional grammar-based instruction (Shintani, 2016). TBLT has also been shown to enhance language skills and promote positive attitudes toward language learning among young learners in both ESL and EFL settings (Oliver et al., 2017; Garcia Mayo & Agirre, 2016).

A key study on TBLT for young learners is Shintani (2012), which explored the use of input-based tasks with beginner English learners aged six. The research focused on both learning outcomes and learner interactions through listen-and-do activities. Results showed significant gains in the learners' receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge, as well as in their understanding of plural -s over time. The findings suggest that listen-and-do tasks provide opportunities for incidental learning of both vocabulary and grammar, making them an effective approach for introducing task-based instruction to young beginner learners.

Notably, although the tasks did not require language production, children remained highly engaged and naturally interacted while completing them. They frequently engaged in "private speech" and "language play," which facilitated self-regulation and active processing of language. These findings underscore the motivational benefits of TBLT, as engagement is crucial for young learners' language development. Additionally, learners' social speech demonstrated meaning negotiation and focus on form—both key to second language acquisition (Lantolf, 2003; Ohta, 2001).

Further supporting these findings, Shintani and Ellis (2010) compared how listen-and-do tasks and production-based activities influenced incidental vocabulary and grammar

acquisition in Japanese children aged six to eight. Their study demonstrated that listen-and-do tasks were equally, if not more effective in promoting language acquisition, particularly for receptive grammar learning such as plural -s. In a related study, Shintani (2011) examined the process features of listen-and-do tasks in comparison to the Present-Practice-Produce (PPP) approach. The results indicated that listen-and-do tasks encouraged more natural, authentic interactions.

2.3. *TBLT in Vietnamese Primary Education*

Despite its advantages, research on TBLT with young learners remains limited (Shintani, 2014), particularly in contexts like Vietnam, where its implementation is still evolving and faces challenges related to teacher training and classroom constraints. Many primary teachers are more familiar with traditional grammar-focused instruction and may lack the confidence or training to fully implement TBLT (Nguyen et al., 2015). Additionally, large class sizes and limited instructional time create practical barriers to incorporating interactive, student-centered tasks (Newton & Bui, 2020).

Nonetheless, Bui and Newton (2020) provide evidence that TBLT can be integrated into Vietnamese primary schools. Their study examined how Grade 3–4 teachers used newly introduced textbooks under the NFLP, finding that the textbooks already contained task-based components. Textbooks designed in several Asian countries, including Vietnam (Newton & Bui, 2018; Tran, 2015), have progressively incorporated task-based teaching components. This suggests that rather than developing tasks from scratch, teachers can adapt existing materials to better align with task-based principles.

However, Bui and Newton's (2020) findings from phase one revealed that teachers primarily followed a task-supported approach, adhering to a Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) sequence with occasional communicative activities rather than fully embracing a task-based methodology. In the second phase, teachers implemented a stronger TBLT approach by redesigning lessons, which led to increased student engagement and richer peer-to-peer interactions characterized by negotiation of meaning and collaborative scaffolding.

The redesigned task-based lessons were well received by both teachers and students, leading to more meaningful language learning opportunities. The encouraging results from Vietnam stand in contrast to the generally more skeptical perspective found in TBLT research across Asia, where teachers have been noted to resist, circumvent, or adapt task-based mandates introduced through top-down policy reforms (e.g., Carless, 2004; Zhang, 2015). This underscores the crucial role of teacher agency in adapting TBLT and implementing innovative pedagogical approaches (Nguyen et al., 2015). The Vietnamese case suggests that with appropriate support and flexibility in implementation, TBLT can be a viable and effective approach in primary education.

3. Discussion

This section explores how TBLT can be optimized for young Vietnamese learners by incorporating input-based tasks and task repetition. By addressing concerns about learners' language proficiency and highlighting practical strategies, this discussion provides insights into how teachers can effectively implement TBLT in primary education settings.

3.1. *Incorporating More Input-Based Tasks*

A common concern among teachers, as highlighted in the literature review, is that young learners may not have the necessary language proficiency to effectively participate in task-based lessons. This concern often arises from the misconception that TBLT primarily involves production-based tasks (Swan, 2005). However, research has shown that TBLT can also be input-based (Ellis, 2009), allowing learners to develop their language skills through listening or reading without immediate pressure to produce language. Ellis (2003), drawing on Prabhu's (1987) work, suggested that a TBLT course for beginners should primarily incorporate input-based tasks, as these learners lack the linguistic resources to engage in meaning-focused language use. Input-based tasks have been proven particularly effective for elementary students with low language proficiency (Shintani, 2012, 2016).

Input-based tasks can be categorized into different types. An enriched input task provides learners with exposure to input containing multiple instances of specific lexical or grammatical items without requiring them to demonstrate comprehension. Research on enriched input, particularly in reading-based L2 acquisition (Krashen, 1985; Paribakht, 2005), highlighted its positive impact on language development.

There is also the comprehension-based input task, where learners are not only exposed to input but also required to respond in a way that demonstrates successful processing. One widely used comprehension-based task is the listen-and-do task, a one-way information gap task in which learners follow commands or descriptions and perform corresponding actions (e.g., pointing to a picture or carrying out a physical action).

Ellis (2003) emphasized that "simple listening tasks can be devised that can be performed with zero competence in the L2" (p. 37). Research on listen-and-do tasks (e.g., Ellis et al., 1999; Loschky, 1994) shows that they support language acquisition. Shintani (2012) observed that such tasks foster natural conversations, high learner engagement, and vocabulary growth. Bui and Newton (2020) further highlighted input-based tasks in the pre-task phase as essential for making TBLT more accessible to beginners. These findings challenge the idea that learners must master linguistic forms before engaging in communication (Newton & Bui, 2018; Zhang, 2015).

By incorporating more input-based tasks, Vietnamese primary school teachers can create a low-pressure, meaning-focused learning environment where young learners gradually build their confidence and linguistic competence through rich exposure to the target language. To support implementation, Willis and Willis (2007) provide guidelines on

integrating input-based tasks into lesson plans, equipping teachers with the necessary strategies to implement TBLT effectively and ensuring that students receive the structured support needed for successful language learning.

3.2. Repeating Tasks

Research has shown that task repetition benefits young learners in multiple ways. Ortega (2012) suggested that repeating tasks helps learners focus on linguistic forms, while Pinter (2005) found that task repetition increased talkativeness, reduced first-language (L1) use, and enhanced grammatical accuracy among 10-year-old Hungarian EFL learners. Similarly, Shintani (2012) incorporated repeated listen-and-do tasks over nine sessions, leading to improved task performance, comprehension, and social speech. Initially, students produced little or no social speech, but as the tasks were repeated, their use of L2 in social interactions gradually increased, and their reliance on L1 decreased—even though the task did not require spoken production. Notably, their motivation remained high, and their interest did not wane despite the repetition.

Both Pinter (2005) and Shintani (2012) attribute these improvements to increased confidence gained through task repetition. This aligns with Bygate's (2001, 2018) work, which draws on Levelt's (1989) speech production model to explain how task repetition reduces the cognitive load during L2 speech production. Skehan (2009) similarly suggests that task repetition reduces cognitive pressure on both the conceptualizer and the formulator. Since learners no longer need to decide what to say during a repeated task, cognitive resources previously devoted to conceptualization can be redirected toward refining formulation (structuring speech) and articulation (producing speech more fluently and accurately) (Sample & Michel, 2014). Studies with young L2 learners have demonstrated this effect, showing that task repetition leads to reduced L1 use, increased peer collaboration, and greater attention to self- and peer-correction (García Mayo & Agirre, 2016; Pinter, 2007).

By incorporating more input-based tasks and strategically using task repetition, Vietnamese primary school teachers can scaffold young learners' language acquisition in a meaningful and engaging way. These approaches not only support comprehension and linguistic development but also help learners gain confidence in using English communicatively, even at an early stage of proficiency.

4. Conclusion

This paper has explored the potential of TBLT to enhance English language education for young learners in Vietnamese primary schools. By examining existing literature and considering the specific context of EFL education in Vietnam, it has highlighted the theoretical advantages of TBLT over traditional grammar-focused approaches and the limitations of CLT in this setting.

While this paper presents a compelling case for the adoption of TBLT, it is important to acknowledge that it is primarily a review and advocacy piece. Further empirical research is necessary to validate the effectiveness of TBLT in Vietnamese primary schools and to address the practical challenges of implementation. Studies that employ rigorous methodologies and collect data on student outcomes and teacher experiences would provide valuable insights and inform evidence-based practices.

Despite the absence of empirical data in this paper, the practical suggestions provided, such as incorporating input-based tasks and task repetition, offer valuable starting points for teachers seeking to implement TBLT. It is recommended that future research focus on pilot programs and classroom-based studies to explore the feasibility and impact of these suggestions.

Ultimately, the successful integration of TBLT into Vietnamese primary schools hinges on a collaborative effort involving teachers, administrators, and policymakers. By fostering a culture of innovation and providing adequate support and resources, Vietnam can pave the way for a more effective and engaging English language learning experience for its young learners.

❖ **Conflict of Interest:** Author have no conflict of interest to declare.

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TIỀM NĂNG ỨNG DỤNG PHƯƠNG PHÁP DẠY HỌC TIẾNG ANH THEO NHIỆM VỤ CHO HỌC SINH TIỂU HỌC TẠI VIỆT NAM

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TÓM TẮT

Nghiên cứu này xem xét tiềm năng ứng dụng Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) trong giảng dạy tiếng Anh cho học sinh tiểu học tại Việt Nam bằng cách tổng hợp những cơ sở lý thuyết và chiến lược sư phạm quan trọng từ các nghiên cứu trước đây. Thông qua việc hệ thống hóa tài liệu từ các nguồn học thuật lớn (Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar), nghiên cứu xác định nhiệm vụ dựa trên đầu vào (input-based tasks) và việc lặp lại nhiệm vụ (task repetition) là hai chiến lược then chốt giúp tối ưu hóa hiệu quả của TBLT ở bậc tiểu học. Các nhiệm vụ dựa trên đầu vào cung cấp sự hỗ trợ cần thiết, cho phép học sinh tham gia vào hoạt động giao tiếp mà không phải chịu áp lực phải biểu đạt ngôn ngữ ngay lập tức, trong khi việc lặp lại nhiệm vụ giúp củng cố khả năng hiểu và nâng cao độ lưu loát trong giao tiếp. Bằng cách kết nối lý thuyết với thực tiễn, nghiên cứu này góp phần cao chất lượng dạy học ngoại ngữ cho trẻ tại Việt Nam.

Từ khóa: nhiệm vụ dựa trên đầu vào; giảng dạy tiếng Anh ở bậc tiểu học; dạy học theo nhiệm vụ; lặp lại nhiệm vụ