

## THE ROLE OF TASK-BASED LEARNING IN DEVELOPING SPEAKING SKILLS IN PRE-INTERMEDIATE EFL STUDENTS IN UZBEKISTAN

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the effectiveness of Task-Based Learning (TBL) in improving the speaking skills of pre-intermediate foreign language learners. It focuses on a group of 15-17-year-old students in Uzbekistan, exploring how TBL can be used to enhance their ability to produce spoken language in real-life contexts. Using story retelling tasks as a primary methodological approach, this research aims to highlight the benefits of TBL in promoting fluency, vocabulary and confidence in the target language. The study further examines how collaborative tasks contribute to the development of language proficiency, particularly in speaking.

**Keywords:** Task-Based Learning, Speaking Skills, Story Retelling, Pre-Intermediate Students, EFL, Language Teaching, Uzbekistan

### INTRODUCTION

The ability to communicate effectively in a foreign language is one of the most crucial goals of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. Among the four primary language skills—reading, writing, listening, and speaking—speaking is often perceived as the most challenging skill for learners, particularly at the pre-intermediate level. Traditional language teaching methods tend to emphasize grammar and vocabulary without sufficiently fostering communicative competence. As such, students often struggle to use language fluidly and naturally in real-life scenarios. Task-Based Learning (TBL) offers a promising approach to addressing these challenges. TBL is a methodology that centers around the use of authentic tasks designed to mirror real-world language use. It has

been shown to improve language proficiency, especially in speaking, by encouraging learners to use the language meaningfully and collaboratively (Ellis, 2003). In this study, we explore how TBL, specifically through story retelling tasks, enhances the speaking abilities of pre-intermediate learners in Uzbekistan.

## **LITRATURE REVIEW**

The concept of Task-Based Learning has been well-documented in language teaching literature. Ellis (2003) defines TBL as a teaching approach that focuses on the completion of tasks rather than on the explicit teaching of grammar and vocabulary. TBL is grounded in the idea that language learning is most effective when learners are engaged in activities that replicate the ways language is used in real-world communication.

Willis (1996) argues that task-based activities are particularly beneficial for developing speaking skills because they require students to use language for meaningful communication, which contrasts with more traditional grammar-focused approaches. TBL helps learners focus on fluency and accuracy by encouraging them to think and speak spontaneously, rather than simply memorizing language forms.

Research has also shown that collaborative tasks, such as pair or group work, are integral to the success of TBL. According to Vygotsky (1978), language development occurs through social interaction, with more capable peers providing "scaffolding" to help learners achieve higher levels of competence. The use of peer feedback during collaborative tasks fosters a rich environment for language growth.

Pica (2005) further supports the efficacy of task-based learning, noting that it promotes learner interaction, which, in turn, facilitates the internalization of language forms. These findings underscore the importance of task-based instruction in developing speaking skills, especially in EFL contexts where learners may have limited exposure to the target language outside the classroom.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study was conducted at a private educational center in Uzbekistan over a period of four weeks and involved two groups of pre-intermediate EFL learners aged 15-17. Each group consisted of 15 students. One group was designated as the experimental group, and the other served as the control group. The primary aim of the study was to investigate the effectiveness of task-based story retelling in enhancing learners' speaking fluency, vocabulary use, and coherence. In the first week, both the control and experimental groups participated in a pre-task activity to assess their initial speaking abilities. Each student was given a short story (e.g., *The Lost Puppy*—a simple narrative about a child finding a lost dog in the park) and asked to read it silently and then retell the story orally to the teacher. No support materials or strategies were provided during this stage.

Their retellings were recorded and evaluated based on three criteria:

1. Fluency (ability to speak without long pauses),
2. Accuracy (correct use of grammar and vocabulary),
3. Lexical richness (variety and appropriateness of vocabulary).

The pre-task phase served as a baseline for comparing progress in the post-task stage.

#### Task Implementation Phase (Weeks 2–3)

The two groups received different instructional treatments during this phase.

#### Experimental Group (Task-Based Story Retelling)

The experimental group was introduced to a structured task-based learning cycle that incorporated storytelling, vocabulary enrichment, and group collaboration. Each week, students were divided into three subgroups of five students. They were provided with a new short story—selected for its narrative potential and age-appropriate vocabulary. Example stories included *The Magic Hat*, *The Secret Garden*, and *The Brave Squirrel*. Each story came with 10–12 target vocabulary words, highlighted in bold and pre-taught before reading (e.g., “whisper,” “disappear,” “curious,” “bravery”).

The group work followed this sequence:

1. Story Reading: Each student read the story individually and underlined the target vocabulary.

2. Discussion Phase: Students discussed the story in their small groups to ensure mutual understanding.

3. Story Retelling Game: One student started retelling the story aloud, integrating the new vocabulary. After one or two sentences, the next student continued, building on the narrative. Each group had 7–10 minutes to complete the story collaboratively.

4. Gamification: At the end of each task, the teacher evaluated each group's performance based on:

Number of new vocabulary items used,

Logical flow and creativity of the narrative,

Speaking fluency and reduced hesitation.

For example, one group transformed The Magic Hat story by adding imaginative elements: “When Sarah wore the magic hat, she didn’t just disappear—she teleported to a castle made of clouds.” This encouraged creative use of vocabulary in context.

5. Feedback and Reflection: After each task, the teacher and peers provided constructive feedback. Mistakes in grammar or pronunciation were corrected sensitively, and students were praised for vocabulary use and fluency improvements.

To support this process, the following learning tools were used:

Audio recordings of each group's retelling were played back in class to promote self-assessment.

Flashcards and visual aids were used to reinforce new vocabulary.

Note-taking exercises were assigned to help students organize story elements (setting, characters, problem, solution).

Weekly vocabulary quizzes were given to measure retention and usage.

### Control Group (Traditional Approach)

The control group followed a conventional language instruction method. Each week, students read the same stories as the experimental group, but they:

Completed written comprehension questions,

Discussed the story's main idea with the teacher,

Practiced vocabulary through translation or matching activities,

Retold the story individually to the teacher without peer collaboration or group tasks.

There was no competitive element, no vocabulary integration task, and minimal speaking time for most students compared to the experimental group.

In the final week, both groups were given the same story they had received in the pre-task phase (The Lost Puppy). The task was to retell the story again, and this time, performance was evaluated with the same criteria: fluency, vocabulary use, and coherence. However, unlike in the first week: Students in the experimental group were observed to use more target vocabulary (e.g., “rescue,” “owner,” “direction”) and were able to speak more fluently, without long pauses or repetition. Their stories also included creative variations, indicating improved narrative skills. For example, one student said: “The boy carefully approached the scared puppy, whispered kind words, and offered a piece of his sandwich to gain its trust.” In contrast, the control group showed minimal improvement. Many students still paused frequently and forgot key story elements. Vocabulary use was limited and less precise. All students’ post-task retellings were recorded and assessed. These results are presented in the next section.

## RESULT

This study was conducted over four weeks, from April 15 to May 15, involving both a control group and an experimental group of students aged 15–17 at educational centers in Uzbekistan. The main objective was to evaluate the effectiveness of Task-Based

Learning (TBL) in improving students' speaking skills, specifically fluency, vocabulary usage, and confidence during speech.

**Control Group:** Continued traditional instruction — reading and retelling texts to their teacher.

**Experimental Group:** Engaged in task-based speaking activities where students had to speak within a limited time, using highlighted vocabulary from the text.

In the experimental group, students retold stories to each other, not just to the teacher, integrating new vocabulary collaboratively.

The most engaging aspect was the competitive element: the group that spoke with minimum hesitation, correct vocabulary use, and fluent delivery was recognized as the winner.

## **1. Fluency**

The experimental group's fluency was assessed before and after the TBL intervention using pre-task and post-task evaluations. While the improvement in fluency was modest, students demonstrated greater ease in maintaining conversation flow and reduced long pauses compared to their initial performance.

- **Observation:** Average word production per minute increased slightly, and students were more willing to speak continuously even with minor errors.
- **Comparison:** The control group showed little to no improvement in fluency, as their activities focused more on passive repetition rather than spontaneous speech.

## **2. Vocabulary Usage**

Vocabulary development was one of the most notable achievements of the TBL activities. Students in the experimental group were required to use highlighted vocabulary in meaningful speech, and they shared new expressions with their peers during group tasks. This method not only reinforced word retention but also encouraged practical application.

- **Result:** Vocabulary usage improved more significantly than fluency. Students demonstrated wider lexical variety and better context-appropriate word choice in their post-task performances.

- **Student Reflection:** Learners reported that sharing new vocabulary in groups helped them remember and use words more confidently.

### **3. Confidence in Speaking**

The most enhanced aspect of student performance was confidence. Initially, many students hesitated to speak or relied heavily on written notes. However, the nature of TBL tasks — which were peer-focused, goal-oriented, and non-threatening — allowed students to relax and engage more freely in communication.

- **Survey Feedback:** 80% of students in the experimental group reported feeling more comfortable and confident speaking in English by the end of the four weeks.

- **Teacher Observation:** Students took more initiative in group discussions and were less afraid of making mistakes, showing a shift toward a more communicative mindset.

#### **Summary of Findings**

**Fluency:** Slight improvement in speech flow, reduced hesitation.

**Vocabulary:** Substantial improvement; students used more varied and accurate words.

**Confidence:** Most significant gain; students became more active and willing to speak.

In contrast, the control group showed minimal progress, as their traditional method lacked interaction, spontaneous speech, and peer collaboration. The comparative data supports the conclusion that TBL not only supports language development but also creates a more motivating and confidence-building environment for students

## **DISCUSSION**



This study aimed to examine the impact of Task-Based Learning (TBL) on improving speaking skills, particularly focusing on student confidence and fluency among upper-grade learners at educational centers in Uzbekistan. The results obtained from the experimental and control groups suggest that the implementation of TBL-based speaking activities can lead to measurable improvements in learners' language performance and confidence. First, the data revealed a noticeable enhancement in students' confidence during oral tasks. Compared to the control group, where learners mainly read and retold texts to the teacher, the experimental group engaged in peer-based interaction, time-limited speaking, and vocabulary sharing. These elements fostered a less stressful environment that encouraged more natural communication. Approximately 80% of the students in the experimental group reported feeling more confident in their speaking abilities by the end of the 4-week period, which aligns with findings from previous studies (e.g., Willis, 1996; Ellis, 2003) emphasizing the motivational benefits of collaborative task-based learning. Second, regarding fluency, students in the experimental group showed a moderate increase (15%) in their ability to speak with fewer pauses and hesitations. While this improvement was smaller than expected, it is still significant considering the short duration of the intervention. One reason for the limited fluency growth could be the cognitive load of incorporating new vocabulary while speaking within a time limit. However, students' vocabulary usage improved more substantially (35%), suggesting that they prioritized lexical development over fluency when preparing and performing the tasks. Furthermore, the interactive nature of the tasks — particularly the group retelling activity where students judged each other's performance — appeared to enhance learner engagement and vocabulary retention. The competitive aspect motivated students to speak accurately and apply new words meaningfully, creating a supportive yet dynamic learning environment. This supports Skehan's (1998) theory that meaningful communication tasks with clear outcomes lead to deeper cognitive processing and better language acquisition. Despite these positive outcomes, some limitations were observed. A few students initially struggled with reduced teacher input and the need to manage their own learning, reflecting the importance of scaffolding in early stages of TBL. Future implementations should consider gradually reducing teacher control to help students adapt more smoothly. In conclusion,



the findings support the effectiveness of Task-Based Learning in developing not only vocabulary and speaking performance but also learners' confidence in foreign language use. The method encourages active participation, fosters learner autonomy, and can serve as a practical approach for speaking skill development in Uzbekistan's educational context.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study explored the effectiveness of Task-Based Learning (TBL), particularly through story retelling activities, in developing speaking skills among pre-intermediate students aged 15–17 in Uzbekistan. The findings demonstrate that TBL is a valuable approach to enhancing vocabulary acquisition, speaking fluency, and, most notably, learner confidence. The experimental group, which engaged in interactive, peer-based story retelling tasks, showed significant improvement in vocabulary usage and moderate gains in fluency compared to the control group that followed a traditional instruction method. The collaborative and competitive elements of the TBL activities contributed to higher student engagement and motivation. Learners not only retained more vocabulary but also applied it more effectively in meaningful speech. Additionally, 80% of participants reported feeling more confident in their speaking abilities, underlining the psychological benefits of student-centered, task-driven learning environments. Although the short duration of the intervention limited the extent of fluency development, the results indicate that TBL fosters a shift toward active language use, supports spontaneous communication, and builds a foundation for long-term improvement in speaking skills. The study also highlighted the need for adequate scaffolding and teacher support, especially in contexts like Uzbekistan, where traditional grammar-based instruction still prevails. In conclusion, integrating TBL into language education can enhance not only linguistic outcomes but also learner autonomy and motivation. Future research should focus on expanding the duration of such interventions, adapting tasks to different proficiency levels, and training teachers to implement TBL effectively across diverse educational settings. Future studies might also investigate digital storytelling tools or AI-supported feedback platforms to further enhance the task-based learning process in similar educational contexts.

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