

Teaching English For Specific Purposes (ESP) Through Task-Based Learning Approach And Observing Interactions Between Students

Dang Thi Tuyet Nhung

Faculty Of Foreign Languages, Dong Nai University, Bien Hoa City, Vietnam

Abstract

Task-based learning can be seen as a development within the communicative approach in English teaching and learning. The designed tasks in the task-based learning approach are conceived not only as effective links between inside-classroom pedagogy and outside-classroom reality but also as instructional tools in different learning styles of classrooms. Based on this definition, the article will clarify the importance and usefulness of applying a task-based learning approach in teaching English for Specific Purposes to improve student interaction. This article will explore the influence of Task-based Learning on student interaction and will conclude that implementing task-based learning should be taken into account by ESP teachers, student learning outcomes are shown clearly through pedagogic tasks in this article. Task-based Learning which is more motivating, more meaningful, and more innovative than other traditional approaches may breathe to satisfy the new generation of teaching and learning English for Specific Purposes.

Keywords: Task-based learning, ESP (English for Specific Purposes), EGP (English for General Purposes), TBL and Interaction

Date of Submission: 25-03-2024

Date of Acceptance: 05-04-2024

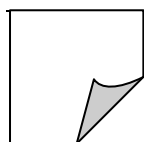
I. Introduction

notes communication and social interaction through tasks. This is supposed by Ellis (2003) "Task-based learning is mostly about the social interaction established by the learners as a source of input and means of acquisition and involves the negotiation of meaning, communicative strategies, and communicative effectiveness." According to Nunan (1989), task-based learning helps to increase student talk, makes the classroom relaxed and reinforces student's comprehensive input. In task-based learning, learners perform communicative tasks instead of doing grammar-based exercises. Learners are supported to express their ideas in speaking or writing and content of teaching and learning are based on communicative purposes which learners will need outside the classroom.

In TBL, there are many definitions of tasks. Prabhu (1987) defined "task" as: "an activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process" (p 24). In line with Prabhu, Willis (1996) explained "tasks are always activities where the target language is used by learners for a communicative goal (purpose) in order to achieve an outcome" (p 23). In other words task as "a goal-oriented activity in which learners use language to achieve a real outcome" (Willis, p 53). Willis holds that "the aim of tasks is to create a real purpose for language use and to provide a natural context for language study". These definitions emphasize that task based learning requires learners to use language through communicative activities to achieve the learning outcome. Moreover, Willis (1996) suggests that students may need a variety of interaction patterns which focus on themselves more than on teacher. Willis claims that TBL is a suitable approach fulfilling students' needs and selected tasks encourage students in interacting with group members. These characteristic about TBL promote the belief that TBL may be suitable for enhancing student interaction. Moreover, TBL may be very effective within ESP course in which a main goal is to train students to perform in a specific real tasks. There are three main phases in TBL framework.

Pre-task: introducing the class to the topic and the task, activating topic-related words and phrases.

Task cycle: students complete the task in group or role-play, depending on the type of task, and use their language resources. Students improve their language under the teacher guidance. The methodology is mainly student-centered. Students prepare a written or spoken report in group before presenting to the class. Teacher's feedback comes when learners need.



Language Focus: Teacher reviews what happened in the task, highlights specific language features from the tasks, selects the language areas which satisfy the students' needs to practice. In this stage students are free to use the language resources. Willis (1996, p 26-28) listed six types of tasks in TBL which are suitable for ESP course

1. Listing and/or brainstorming and fact-finding
2. Ordering and sorting- sequencing, ranking, categorizing or classifying items,
3. Comparing- finding differences or similarities in information,
4. Problem-solving - finding the solutions or explaining how to install components.
5. Sharing personal experiences- sharing opinions and attitudes and occurrences
6. Creative tasks-projects

TBL and interaction

"In interaction at least two individuals participate in an oral or written exchange in which production and except in alternate and may intersect overlap in oral communication..... the listener is generally already forecasting the remainder of the speakers' message and repairing the response. Learning to interact thus involves more than learning to receive and to produce utterance". (Council of Europe ,2004. p 14). Interaction has an important role in TBL- a student-centered approach because according to Ellis (2003)" development is not so much a matter of talking in possessing of knowledge but rather of taking part in social activity" (p 176). Grass (1997) points out that task can provide comprehensive input and communicative interaction among learners. This is supposed by Willis (1996, p. 101)" within the TBL framework, tasks and texts combine to give students a rich exposure to language and also opportunities to use it themselves". Interaction is an effective way to obtain data for language learning and interactive tasks can promote learners' negotiation and facilitate the development of language. Thus it can be believed that Task-based learning will enhance student interaction in ESP class.

II. Innovation And Its Rational

Innovation

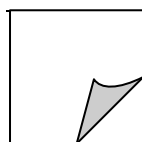
Nicholls (1983, cited in Study Guide & Reader, 2010) defines innovation as "an idea, object or practice perceived as new by an individual or individuals, which is intended to bring about improvement in relation to desired objectives, which is fundamental in nature and which is planned and deliberate". Nicholls points out some difficulties associated with innovation. First, innovation will involve changes in teachers' attitudes and practices. Second, innovation will increase teachers' workloads. Third, innovation may require extra preparation time, the costs not only for teacher extra time but also for materials and equipment. However, Markee (1997) confirms that " innovation in education should be a conscious intervention". Innovation can be successful or unsuccessful depending on many factors but if the innovation is not successful, the implementer will gain more experience in teaching. If the innovation is not successful, the implementer should notice and try to find out other suitable approaches to change the current situations to get a better results.

Models of innovation and Types of social change

According to Rogers (1983) "Social change is caused by both invention (the process by which a new idea is discovered or created) and diffusion (which usually occurs sequentially)" (cited in Study Guide & Reader, p 54). There are four types of changes process and five models of innovation. The model of this innovation is considered as bottom-up process. The change is considered as immanent or self-motivated change. This type of change allows teachers to act as internal change agents and promotes ownership. The models of innovation are problem solving and social interaction.

Problem solving model

"Problem solving model can be seen as an expression of progressivism and the approach to curriculum development. A problem-solving model coupled with a Normative-Re-educative strategy of change is theoretically the most popular approach to promoting change in education." (Markee, 1997). In this project, the researcher act as an inside change agent with the help of two colleagues and two students as outside change agent and the participation of 24 students as clients. The research used action research to articulate the problem. "After identifying the solutions, a process of adaptation, trial, and evaluation follows during with user assessed whether the solutions they had devised really solved their problem". If users judge that the solution is unsatisfactory, the process begin again until they find solution that work "(cited in Study Guide &Reader, p 102)



Social interaction model

Havelock (1971) emphasizes that "social interaction is not merely a matter of passively receiving from others; it is also a matter of give-take of mutual influence and two-way communication" (Study Guide & Reader, p 66). In this project, Task based learning is applied for the innovation in ESP classroom because TBL is popular both in EGP classroom and ESP classroom. If the innovation brings a better result it may be spread to other teachers in my school and gets the approval of The Culture Department in DNIT high school. Cooper (1989) clarified that "languages spread through the establishment of communication network." (Cooper 1989, quoted in Markee 1997, p.62)

Background on learning and teaching English in DNIT High School

Dong Nai Industrial and Technical (DNIT) High School is a Vocational School located in Vu Hong Pho Street, Dong Nai Province, It is one of the vocational schools in Vietnam under the administration of the Minister of the Ministry of Labor, War Invalids and Social Welfare. DNIT High School is for secondary school leavers and the enrollment is offered for people who are at the age of fifteen or more. The philosophy of DNIT High School is to train qualified and skilled personnel to satisfy the local and foreign labour force. All first-year students in DNIT are required to study an EGP course with 60 periods (each 45 minutes). Second-year students received 60 periods of an ESP course with 8 or 9 units. In DNIT, students have an English class (lasting 180 minutes in the morning or afternoon) and a non-English class (lasting 225 minutes in the morning or afternoon) a week. It is different from public or private high schools in Vietnam. This is an advantage for teachers in applying new teaching methods or starting new research as they have more teaching time for them. In DNIT, there are two departments: the Culture Department and the Vocational Department. English is one of the subjects of the Culture Department. The Chairman of the Culture Department is responsible for designing timetables which are used during the school year not for designing or choosing textbooks or materials. The textbooks or materials for ESP class are selected, and collected from many sources of documents by teachers who are responsible for that major. Teachers in DNIT have to teach both EGP and ESP in a semester so group meetings are often held every month with the participation of all teachers in the Culture Department. Suggestions, changes, objections, and problems in teaching are discussed to find the best solutions.

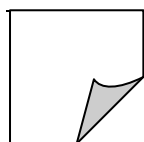
A series of policies were published by Minister of the Ministry of Labor, War Invalids and Social Welfare decided to introduce CLT with teaching and learning both EGP and ESP in Vocational schools. These policies required that teaching and learning especially ESP should be focused on improving students' four skills and enhancing interaction through communicative strategies. CLT was not implemented absolutely.

Classroom culture

According to Le Van Canh (1999), "Vietnamese society is typically characterized as a collectivist society where students study and play together..... Influenced by Confucianism, students feel rude if they interrupt, question or argue with teachers. Language activities such as role plays, problem-solving tasks, or information gaps are strange to the culture of learning. When they fail to understand something they are reluctant to ask for clarification in public because they may "lose face". They are not pro-active enough to initiate interaction, either" (cited in Pham Tan, 2008, p 315). This learning culture is also applicable to the DNIT classroom. In DNIT, expository teaching methods and teacher-led teaching are popular in ESP/EGP classes. Students are usually passive listeners with no chance to become active participants in the learning process, and little chance to interact with others. Students take notes and practice until memorizing during the class in ESP where vocabulary and language focus are concentrated on. Traditional teaching is usual methods which emphasize grammar-translation are usual in all English classes even though this may not help ESP students to develop their communicative competence. The primary focus of the ESP textbooks in DNIT is on reading comprehension and translation. There are long reading passages with long comprehension exercises and mechanical drills for one simple grammar point and a lack of activities for working in groups. Most texts in textbooks contain specific contents which are intended for individual study. Writing and listening skills are neglected and Speaking is only through oral questions. This created an ESP classroom with passive students and an inactive atmosphere.

The ESP course is applied to second-year students after they pass the EGP course in the first year. This course aims to develop students' language skills through texts and comprehension exercises, prepare students for reading specific texts, and enhance technical vocabulary to help them perform better in their workplace. One difference is that concentrating on student interaction through working in groups is emphasized at the beginning of the course with the hope of increasing students' participation and students' talk, reducing students' reticence and teachers' talk in ESP classrooms.

Because of this, an innovation in the teaching method focusing on student interaction plus effective tasks was declined to be implemented, as TBL seems to be a suitable next step to group work. If the innovation is successful, there should be an active ESP class with active students in DNIT High School.



III. Methodology

The participants

The target population consisted of 24 year-second students 16 female and class "079 Electronics". Their age ranged from 15 to 20. They were mostly pre-intermediate level and some students were beginners. This class is an example of a mixed-ability class, a different learning style class. This project was carried out over 5 weeks. It had the participation of two teachers and two fourth-year students as observers. This project focused on influence of TBL on student interaction in ESP classroom. The material was "English for Electronics" which is an internal material.

Instruments

To achieve the objective of the project two research tools were us questionnaire and classroom observation.

1. Questionnaire:

a. Pre-questionnaire was delivered to students before the research in order the ESP students' opinions about the present class, their contributions t classroom, the leaming period, the types of interaction.(Appendix A)

b. Semi-questionnaire (Appendix B): This questionnaire included 2 Yes/No questions. It aimed at double checking the results of the classroom observation.

c. Post -questionnaire: This nine item questionnaire was delivered to students after the experiment. This questionnaire aimed at finding out the influences of TBL on students' *interaction*.(Appendix C)

2. Observation

Pawar (2004) indicated observation method helps to overcome some of the limitation discussion. This method helped collect rich and insightful data in natural setting with relatively less cost and less inconvenience to do research (p, 18). Observation was done with the participation of 2 teachers and 2 fourth-year students. Two observation forms of other data collecting methods such as interview, questionnaire and focus on group were used in this project

a. Real-time observation (Appendix D)

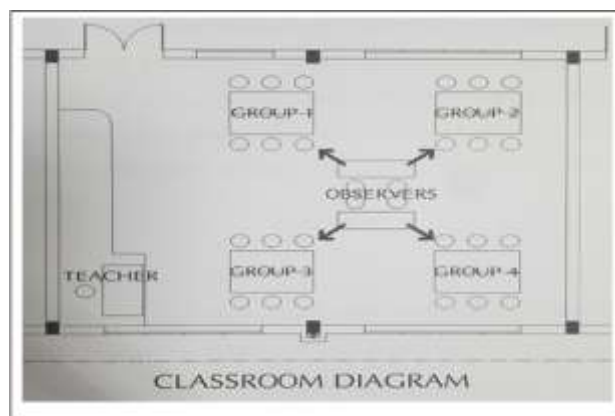
Observers had to fill in the "real-time observation form" which was used to record the distribution of participation in group-work activities before completing the "classroom observation form"

b. Classroom observation (Appendix E)

This observation form included three items. It was delivered to observers at the same time with real-time observation form.

Procedure

The questionnaires were written in English. The teacher read and explained the directions and statements carefully before asking students to answer. Students were informed that their answers would not relate to the grades of the test or the examination. In the first week, the students were asked to respond to seven questions in the pre-questionnaire (Appendix A). The teacher as a researcher collected the answer sheets and classified the results. The teacher had two weeks to prepare the materials, lesson plan, research instruments, etc. The experiment with the new method (TBL) was carried out with the participation of 24 students of class "079 Electronics " and the observers in the following weeks. There were 4 observers. The students were divided into 4 groups (Group 1, Group 2, Group 3, Group 4). There were 6 members in each group. The students and observers were arranged following the classroom diagram.



In DNIT High School students had 4 periods of ESP/EGP a week. The experiment happened in 2nd period of class. The material was the reading text "Electronics in the Home" (Appendix F). Two data-gathering forms were given to the observers of each group. The observers were asked to fill in the form with the names of the group and group members. In the real-time observation form (Appendix D), observers examined the times members in groups interacted with each other in the appropriate column and summarized. The results of this form were used to complete the first item of the classroom observation form (Appendix E). Three items of classroom observation form were based on quantitative, qualitative and the learning outcome of the experiment. Two data-gathering forms were handed in after the experiment. A semi-questionnaire (Appendix B) was delivered to students and students were asked to complete it within 5 minutes. The researcher used the findings of this semi-questionnaire to check the results of the classroom observation. The post-questionnaire (Appendix C) was delivered a week after that. Students were asked to think carefully when completing this questionnaire. Researchers collected, classified the results and analyzed the responses

IV. Results

1. From pre-questionnaire

Table 1: Students' contribution in class

Questionnaire item	Result			
	YES (n= 6) 25%	%	NO (n= 18) 75%	%
7. Do you interact with group members?	Teacher asks you to do	3 (50%)	The tasks are difficult. You have no answer	2 (11%)
	The tasks are very interesting	2 (33.3%)	You are afraid of losing face if you give wrong answer	4 (22.2%)
	Most tasks focus on interacting	1 (16.7%)	You prefer working with teacher	12 (66.7%)
	Other ideas		Other ideas	

Through this questionnaire in which the results were collected before the experiment we can see that 25% of students in ESP class in DNIT high school found that teacher's method was interesting. The type of classroom interaction was mainly teacher-whole class with 70.8 % of student.

The classroom atmosphere which played an important role in language learning only received 2 out of 24 students' opinion (8.4%) for an exciting classroom while 41.6 % of students informed the non-exciting atmosphere. Teacher dominance ESP class made up 75%. These figures of techniques and classroom atmosphere above led to a negative contribution of ESP students in class (shown in table 1). In table 1, the number of students who did not like the interacting in groups made up 75% and 25% of students likes interacting. There were 12 (66.7%) out of 18 students agreed that they preferred working with teacher to working with group members.

These results showed that there were negative attitude to interacting and different learning styles of these ESP students. ESP students did not have much time and opportunities to interact. The teacher-centered approach and individual learning style made students have a negative attitude toward interaction in group. These problems came from not only ESP students' learning styles but also ESP teacher's method. Task-based learning was in an attempt to increase students interaction.

There were three phases of TBL: Pre-task. Task-cycle and Language focus. Each phase was observed and the findings were presented in table 2. The result of item 1 table 2 were drawn from classroom observation form (Appendix D) compared with figures from real-time observation form (Appendix E)

Table 2: Observing students' interaction

Items	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
The extent of distribution of participation in group-work activity	Average	Very much	Average	rather
Group members' attitude toward working in groups	ok	Interesting	ok	Interesting
Result (after teacher's feedback)	Untrue answer	True answer	True answer	True answer

As shown in table 2, Group I and group 3 had 4 members provided ideas, the total time they gave ideas in group was 10 for group 3 and 8 for group 1. Their extent of distribution of participation in group was average. Most of members in group 1 and 3 had a positive attitude toward working in groups. The extent of participation of members in Group 2 was high. There were 6 members who gave ideas and the total time was 16. They were interested in working in group. Group 4 with 5 members participating had the total time for giving ideas was 12. Most of members had positive attitudes towards interaction. The findings from classroom observation shown that there were some increases in student interaction inside ESP classroom when implementing TBL. The belief in TBL was affirmed through the findings of semi-questionnaire, as follows

Semi-questionnaire

Table 3: Students' opinions about the effects of TBL inside ESP classroom

Items	Yes	No	other
Do you like tasks in the lesson?	31	1	4
Do you provide ideas when doing tasks?	19	2	1
Do you feel relaxed when doing task?	22	1	3
Do you reach the task outcome?	7	3	2
TOTAL	79 82.3%	7 7.3%	10 10.4%

As can be seen in table 3, a large number of students (82.3%) agreed with the effects of TBL in ESP classroom, 7.3% of students disagreed with TBL and 10.4% of students had other ideas. In brief, implementing TBL learning inside ESP classroom brought positive effects to students. Students liked to do tasks and provided ideas in group, they were relaxed when working with group members. Results from table 4 once more time illustrated the influence of TBL on ESP students, increased positive attitude, investigated related factors and further research.

Table 4: The influence of TBL on ESP students' performance

Aspect	Items	Yes	No	Other
Aim	1. TBL help students enjoy learning ESP	19 79.2%	2 6.3%	3 12.5%
	2. TBL helps students enjoying doing tasks	18 75%	1 4.2%	5 28.8%
	3. TBL helps students reach the learning outcome	18 75%	3 12.5%	3 12.5%
Interaction	4. TBL enhances students interaction	22 91.6%	0 0%	2 8.3%
	5. TBL encourages students to ask and answer the question	23 95.8%	0 0%	1 4.2%
Task performance	6. Students are more confident	19 79.2%	3 12.5%	2 8.3%
	7. Students lack of vocabulary	20 83.3%	0 0%	4 16.7%
	8. Students have problems with expressing their ideas (speaking skill)	19 79.2%	1 4.2%	4 16.7%
	9. Students have problems with using ESP vocabulary in real-life tasks	21 87.5%	0 0%	3 12.5%
Future development	10.Students agree with using TBL in ESP classroom	20 83.3%	2 8.3%	2 8.3%
	11.Students like to do different kinds of tasks in different kinds of topics	21 87.5%	0 0%	3 12.5%
	12. Students like to focus on + Speaking + Reading + Writing + Listening	10 – 41.7% 9 – 37.5% 3 – 12.5% 2 – 8.3%		

These results show that TBL satisfied the aim of the research to change students' attitude to interest and participate in the ESP course. Most of students enjoyed learning ESP through tasks (9%). The interaction between students was enhanced with the agreement of 91.6% of students. A large percentage of students (95.8 %) interacted with group members by asking and answering. During task-cycle, ESP students were more confident (79.2%) however they recognized that they had problems with lacking vocabulary (83.3%), expressing ideas in group (79.2%). They found it hard to use ESP vocabulary in tasks (87.5%). With the figures from table 4, it can be sure that the ESP students' attitude toward TBL was positive and TBL influenced their performances. However, there existed some problems with vocabulary and language skills which needed to be further investigated for ways to alleviate these lacks.This was proved through the answer in future development. A total of 87.5% of students liked to do different kinds of tasks and 83.3% of students responded positively to using TBL in ESP classroom. Reading skill (91.6%) and speaking skill (83.3%) should be focused and improved in the future.

V. Strength

This innovation is considered to be successful because it posed the following attributes:

Firstly, this innovation was supported by all teachers and students in DNIT High School. The implementer found reasons preventing student interaction in the ESP classroom and made a decision to apply an innovation in her class. The students as potential users in the experiment realized that this project helped them in improving interaction. They were offered opportunities to use ESP vocabulary in the workplace and were provided materials with specific readings which were necessary for their future jobs. "If potential users perceived an innovation to be relatively advantageous to them they are more likely to adopt it than one they judge to be financially, professionally, or personally disadvantageous to them." Markee (1997).

Secondly, compatibility which is important in innovation is one of the attributes leading to success. This project was not very different from students' current practices and values. Task-based Learning aimed at enhancing the student interaction inside the ESP classroom which was used for individual learning styles, limited time interacting and working in groups.

Thirdly, this innovation is easy to observe and it is feasible. The technique to observe student interaction used in this innovation was simple but it had a considerable effect. The observers were able to examine the extent students interacted with each other in groups and total the results. The resources used in the innovation were suitable for students' knowledge. Moreover, impatiently, students could observe its results for themselves.

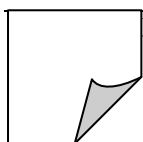
One more factor that led to the success of this innovation was the interconnectedness of the social system and between teachers in the Cultural Department at DNIT High school. They were willing to help, and support the innovation because regular meetings and discussions between implementers, observers and teachers in the Cultural Department are aimed at improving teaching and professional development.

VI. Limitation

There were several limitations to the study which should be highlighted to avoid any overgeneralization of the results. Firstly, the project was based on the findings of students in the "079 Electronics Class" who might not be representative of students in DNIT high school. The project should be replicated in other classes with other populations. Secondly, the new method with many interesting tasks which were new to students ESP classroom encouraged them to learn and interact. Students however may have the same attitude toward other new methods and these would need to be researched. Thirdly, students are used to working in the same group, they are more confident when being face to face with the old group members. So, they may be not confident when working with others. Fourthly, teachers and students in the class may have tension when being observed thus it may lead to less reliable results. One more limitation that may affect the project is the real-time observation which recorded the distribution of participation but not the nature of the interaction.

VII. Conclusion

This project examined the influence of TBL on student interaction in ESP classrooms. The research instruments such as questionnaires and classroom observation led to the results that most ESP students in the "079 Electronics class" had positive attitudes toward TBL. They were highly satisfied with the TBL approach in terms of enhancing their interaction and learning ESP. They became confident when doing interactive tasks. They were active in asking and answering questions and giving ideas in groups. A majority of students reached the learning outcome through Task-based Learning. Ellis (1999) and Tsui (1995) support the belief that the quality of observable interactive patterns of student participation in the classroom correlates with learning outcomes. From the post questionnaire, most of the students in DNIT enjoyed learning ESP with TBL. They had opportunities to share ideas, to give opinions. However, some problems arising from this method need to be addressed for further research. One of these problems was vocabulary both EGP and ESP. A majority of students liked the classroom atmosphere with TBL they were encouraged to interact with each other but lacking vocabulary was their obstacle. Some people found it difficult to express ideas. Improving vocabulary in ESP classrooms is necessary for further research. This approach was challenging for language teachers, especially with teachers in DNIT high school who had to teach both ESP and EGP. ESP and EGP are different from each other in terms of learning purposes. ESP concentrates on language in context while EGP concentrates on language structures and grammar in informal settings. Thus, there are some recommendations ESP teachers should take into account in implementing TBL. ESP teachers should identify and select pedagogic tasks which were suitable for students' future jobs and satisfy the specific objectives of ESP courses. Teachers should take into account students' background knowledge before choosing the topic and encourage students to do the tasks at their own pace. The roles of ESP teachers are not only guides but also motivators and facilitators of the learning process. All recommendations above aim at leading to a new generation of teaching and learning ESP. The new generation with a student-centred approach and learning-centered approach should be focused on.



Hutchinson and Waters (1992) emphasized that "Our concern in ESP is not language use although this will help to define the course objectives. Our concern is with language learning. We cannot simply assume that describing and exemplifying what people do with language will enable someone to learn it... A truly valid approach to ESP must be based on an understanding of the processes of language learning." Task-based Learning which is more motivating, more meaningful, and more innovative than other traditional approaches may breathe to satisfy the new generation of teaching and learning English for Specific Purposes.

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