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TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: FRAMEWORKS, ESP INTEGRATION, AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

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Abstract

This article examines the theoretical foundations and practical application of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) for university students, specifically focusing on English for Specific Purposes (ESP) within non-philological higher education settings such as agricultural universities. While traditional grammar-translation and lecture-based methods often fail to equip students with functional professional communication skills, TBLT provides a dynamic, student-centered alternative. By focusing on meaningful, goal-oriented tasks that mirror real-world academic and professional scenarios, TBLT bridges the gap between passive language knowledge and active communicative competence. This paper outlines the key challenges of implementing TBLT in higher education, proposes a concrete agricultural ESP task model based on Jane Willis's three-stage framework, and discusses integrated assessment strategies. Ultimately, the paper argues that TBLT is essential for preparing modern university graduates to successfully operate in globalized scientific and professional spheres.

Keywords

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Higher Education, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Communicative Competence, Task Cycle, Tashkent State Agrarian University, Active Learning, Pedagogy, Curriculum Design.

Introduction

In the modern academic landscape, higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly tasked with cultivating professional English proficiency. For students specializing in disciplines like agriculture, environmental science, and agro-economics, English is not merely an academic subject but a vital tool for global scientific collaboration, reading peer-reviewed research, and participating in international commerce. However, traditional English language teaching (ELT) methodologies in non-philological universities often remain confined to structuralist approaches, focusing heavily on rote vocabulary memorization and reading comprehension of dry, isolated texts.

To address this disconnect, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has emerged as a major development within the broader framework of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Pioneered and refined by applied linguists such as N. S. Prabhu, Jane Willis, and Rod Ellis, TBLT shifts the classroom focus from "learning language as a system of rules" to "using language to achieve a communicative outcome." In a TBLT classroom, the "task" is the core unit of instruction. A task is defined as a structured activity that requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning rather than form, to reach a clear, non-linguistic objective. For university students, this paradigm shift is transformative: instead of studying passive grammar, they use English as a medium to solve authentic, field-specific problems.

Statement of the Problem

Despite its recognized benefits, the widespread adoption of TBLT in Uzbek higher education, particularly in professional-technical and agrarian institutions, faces critical structural and pedagogical hurdles:

1. **The Abstract-Pragmatic Gap in Curriculum Design:** Standard university English textbooks often focus on "General English" themes (e.g., travel, shopping, or hobbies) that lack professional relevance. For agrarian and technical students, this creates a motivational deficit. They struggle to see how these general tasks relate to reading biotechnology research papers, presenting at international conferences, or understanding sustainable farming manuals.
2. **Pedagogical Rigidities and Teacher Roles:** Transitioning to TBLT requires university instructors to shift from the traditional role of "absolute lecturer" to that of "facilitator and counselor." Many educators, having been trained under structuralist regimes, find it difficult to manage the decentralized, louder, and highly collaborative environment that TBLT demands.
3. **High Cognitive and Affective Loads:** When presented with complex, open-ended professional tasks in a foreign language, students often experience high cognitive load and anxiety. Without scaffolded stages, they may retreat into silence or revert entirely to their native language (Uzbek or Russian) to complete the assigned work, defeating the communicative purpose of the task.
4. **Outmoded Assessment Frameworks:** Traditional assessments in higher education rely predominantly on discrete-point grammar tests and written translation exercises. If students are trained to perform communicative tasks in class but are graded on their ability to conjugate irregular verbs in multiple-choice exams, the "negative washback" destroys the incentive to engage in oral task performance.

Methodology and Solutions

This study adopts a qualitative, classroom-action-research methodology, applying Jane Willis's classic TBLT framework to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses at Tashkent State Agrarian University. The methodology synthesizes current theories of second language acquisition (SLA) with practical instructional design to construct real-world agricultural English tasks. The proposed solutions are evaluated on their capacity to balance fluency, accuracy, and professional relevance.

Solutions

A. Constructing Contextualized ESP Tasks (The Agrarian Task Model)

To overcome the motivational gap, tasks must be designed to reflect real activities in the students' future careers. Rather than generic roleplays, tasks should involve analyzing agricultural data, proposing eco-friendly solutions, or researching crop diseases.

- **Sample Task Design:** "Designing an Eco-Friendly Drip Irrigation Proposal for Arid Regions."
- **Target Student Body:** Tashkent State Agrarian University (Agro-engineering & Water Resource Management tracks).
- **Core Objective:** Students must collaborate in small groups to select an appropriate irrigation system for a specific dry region in Uzbekistan, calculate estimated water savings, and present their proposal to a mock "investor panel."

B. Implementing the Three-Stage TBLT Cycle

To lower the cognitive load and ensure linguistic growth, the task must follow Jane Willis's scaffolded TBLT framework:

1. **The Pre-Task Stage:** The instructor activates prior schema. For our agrarian drip irrigation task, the teacher displays a diagram of a drip irrigation system versus standard flood irrigation. Key technical vocabulary (e.g., *evaporation*, *salinization*, *soil moisture*, *yield efficiency*) is introduced using real photos and short video clips.
2. **The Task Cycle (Task, Planning, and Report):**
    - **Task:** Working in groups of four, students receive data sheets detailing soil conditions and water limits. They discuss and draft their proposal. The teacher circulates, offering non-intrusive support and ensuring students negotiate meaning in English.
    - **Planning:** Groups prepare to present their decisions to the class. They organize their arguments, focus on logical transitions, and write down brief notes. At this stage, accuracy is emphasized as they prepare for a public report.
    - **Report:** Each group presents their proposal. The rest of the class acts as the "investor panel," asking critical questions about the feasibility and cost of the irrigation project.
3. **The Language Focus (Analysis & Practice):** After the communicative task is completed, the teacher draws attention to linguistic forms that caused difficulties during the cycle. For instance, the instructor might highlight conditional structures used for expressing predictions (e.g., "If we install drip systems, water consumption will decrease by 40%") or passive voice for scientific processes (e.g., "Water is distributed directly to the root zone"). Students then practice these specific forms.

C. Task-Based Assessment and Evaluation

To align assessments with TBLT, students are graded on their performance during the "Report" stage of the task. The evaluation uses a multi-dimensional rubric that calculates a comprehensive performance score based on specific, weighted parameters.

Instead of general or subjective grading, the evaluation framework distributes importance to prioritize communicative success while still valuing technical correctness. Task Completion (the degree to which the team solved the agricultural problem) holds the highest weight at 35% of the total grade. Interactive Fluency (how smoothly students interact and negotiate meaning) accounts for 25%. Professional Vocabulary (the correct use of agricultural ESP terms) makes up another 25%. Finally, Grammatical Control (the accurate use of structural syntax) holds a weight of 15%.

By allocating 60% of the evaluation weight directly to Task Completion and Interactive Fluency, students are encouraged to focus on clear, functional delivery and problem-solving. The remaining 40% ensures that professional vocabulary and grammatical accuracy are maintained to meet professional academic standards.

Conclusion

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) represents a powerful, highly adaptive framework for university classrooms, particularly within professional institutions like Tashkent State Agrarian University. By restructuring classroom activities into meaningful, field-specific tasks such as developing agricultural proposals, evaluating scientific data, and presenting research TBLT turns the English language classroom into an active laboratory for professional preparation. Although systemic barriers like rigid curriculum guidelines, lack of specialized training, and traditional test structures remain, they can be mitigated through scaffolded instructional cycles, dedicated ESP materials, and functional task-based rubrics. Embracing TBLT ultimately equips Uzbek university graduates with the communicative confidence and professional skills needed to thrive in a competitive, globalized scientific ecosystem.

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