COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING IN TECHNICAL COLLEGES: ENHANCING EFL LEARNERS' SPEAKING PROFICIENCY THROUGH TASK-BASED INSTRUCTION

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Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) combined with Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in improving the speaking proficiency of EFL learners at technical colleges in Uzbekistan. A quasi-experimental design was employed involving 84 first-year students divided into control (n=42) and experimental (n=42) groups over a 16-week instructional period. The experimental group received task-based communicative instruction, while the control group followed a traditional grammar-translation approach. Pre-test and post-test scores were analyzed using paired-samples t-tests and ANCOVA. Results indicated statistically significant improvements in fluency, accuracy, and interactional competence among experimental group participants ($p < 0.001$, $d = 0.87$). Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews revealed heightened learner motivation and reduced foreign language anxiety. These findings suggest that integrating CLT and TBLT into technical college curricula produces measurable gains in oral language production and can serve as a pedagogically sound alternative to conventional instructional methods.

Keywords: *Communicative Language Teaching, Task-Based Language Teaching, EFL, speaking proficiency, technical education, Uzbekistan*

1. Introduction

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction in technical and vocational institutions presents unique pedagogical challenges. Unlike general university settings, technical colleges prioritize discipline-specific competencies, often relegating English to a peripheral role within the curriculum (Dudley-Evans & St

John, 1998). However, growing demands of the globalized labor market have underscored the necessity of equipping technical graduates with functional communicative skills in English (Hyland, 2006).

In Uzbekistan, English language education has undergone significant reforms since 2012, with government decrees mandating enhanced foreign language instruction across all levels of education (Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2012). Despite these policy initiatives, empirical research on pedagogically effective approaches at the technical college level remains scarce. Most existing studies focus on university or secondary school contexts, leaving a notable gap in the literature regarding vocational and technical education environments (Coxhead, 2000; Nation, 2001).

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), developed from the sociolinguistic theories of Hymes (1972) and further elaborated by Canale and Swain (1980), emphasizes the development of communicative competence rather than mere grammatical accuracy. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), a prominent methodological strand within the CLT framework, organizes instruction around meaningful communicative tasks that mirror real-world language use (Ellis, 2003; Long, 1985; Nunan, 2004). Several meta-analyses have demonstrated the efficacy of TBLT in improving speaking performance across diverse learner populations (Keck et al., 2006; Mackey & Goo, 2007), yet its application in technical college contexts in Central Asia remains largely unexplored.

The present study addresses this gap by examining whether a systematically implemented CLT-TBLT instructional program produces greater gains in EFL speaking proficiency compared to traditional grammar-translation methods in a technical college setting in Uzbekistan. The research is guided by the following questions:

1. Do students receiving CLT-TBLT instruction demonstrate significantly greater improvement in speaking proficiency than those receiving traditional instruction?

2. What aspects of speaking performance (fluency, accuracy, interactional competence) show the most substantial gains?
3. How do learners perceive the communicative task-based approach in terms of motivation and anxiety?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of CLT and TBLT

Communicative competence, as conceptualized by Canale and Swain (1980) and later expanded by Bachman (1990), encompasses grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies. CLT operationalizes this theoretical construct by shifting pedagogical focus from form-focused drilling to meaning-focused interaction (Savignon, 2002). TBLT, as articulated by Long (1985) and Ellis (2003), further refines CLT by using tasks — defined as goal-oriented activities requiring the use of language — as the primary organizational unit of instruction.

The interaction hypothesis (Long, 1996) provides a cognitive-interactional rationale for TBLT, proposing that negotiation of meaning during communicative interaction facilitates second language acquisition by directing learner attention to linguistic form within meaningful contexts. Output hypothesis theory (Swain, 1985) complements this view, arguing that producing language — particularly in speaking — pushes learners to notice gaps in their interlanguage and promotes deeper processing of linguistic structures.

2.2 TBLT in EFL Contexts

Numerous studies have investigated the effectiveness of TBLT in EFL settings. Keck et al. (2006) conducted a meta-analysis of 14 TBLT studies and found a large overall effect size (d = 0.73) for interaction tasks on second language development. More recently, Bryfonski and McKay (2017) synthesized 67 studies and reported consistent positive outcomes for TBLT across diverse linguistic targets and proficiency levels. In Asian EFL contexts specifically, Li (2013) demonstrated

that TBLT implementation improved Chinese university students' spoken fluency significantly more than form-focused instruction.

However, challenges in implementing CLT and TBLT in post-Soviet educational contexts have been documented. Incecay and Dollar (2011) noted resistance from both teachers and learners accustomed to explicit grammar instruction. Karimov (2019) reported similar findings in Uzbekistan, identifying institutional constraints, large class sizes, and teacher training deficits as primary barriers to CLT adoption.

2.3 Speaking Proficiency Assessment

Speaking proficiency is a multidimensional construct encompassing fluency, accuracy, complexity, and interactional competence (Housen & Kuiken, 2009; Young, 2011). Fluency is commonly operationalized through measures of speech rate, mean length of run, and pause frequency (Skehan, 2009). Accuracy refers to the degree of conformity to target language norms, typically measured through error-free clause ratio. Interactional competence encompasses turn-taking, repair strategies, and discourse management (Walsh, 2011).

2.4 Foreign Language Anxiety and Motivation

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), as conceptualized by Horwitz et al. (1986), negatively correlates with speaking performance. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) demonstrated that anxiety in the speaking context specifically undermines oral production. Conversely, self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) suggests that task-based instruction, by providing meaningful and autonomous learning experiences, can enhance intrinsic motivation, thereby indirectly improving performance outcomes.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test control group design was adopted. Random assignment of participants to groups was not feasible due to institutional scheduling constraints; however, pre-test equivalence of groups was confirmed through statistical comparison.

3.2 Participants

Eighty-four first-year students (age M = 17.6, SD = 0.8; 61 male, 23 female) enrolled in an engineering program at a technical college in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, participated in the study. All participants had studied English for a minimum of five years in secondary school and were classified as pre-intermediate learners (A2-B1) based on Oxford Placement Test scores. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and institutional permission was secured prior to data collection.

3.3 Instructional Treatment

Experimental group (n = 42): Received 16 weeks of CLT-TBLT instruction (3 hours per week, 48 instructional hours total). Each lesson followed a pre-task, during-task, and post-task framework (Ellis, 2003). Tasks were designed around engineering and workplace communication scenarios relevant to participants' vocational context (e.g., describing technical processes, participating in problem-solving discussions, conducting mock job interviews). Task complexity was systematically increased following Robinson's (2001) Cognition Hypothesis.

Control group (n = 42): Received instruction using the standard textbook-based grammar-translation method prescribed by the national curriculum, covering equivalent content hours.

3.4 Instruments

Speaking proficiency: Assessed using an adapted version of the IELTS Speaking Band Descriptors, scored by two trained raters (inter-rater reliability: ICC

= 0.91). Participants completed an individual speaking task and a paired interaction task at pre-test and post-test.

Foreign Language Anxiety Scale (FLAS): The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS; Horwitz et al., 1986), adapted and validated for the Uzbek technical college context (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$).

Motivation questionnaire: A 20-item Likert-scale instrument based on self-determination theory constructs (Deci & Ryan, 1985), validated through exploratory factor analysis ($\alpha = 0.84$).

Semi-structured interviews: Conducted with 16 purposively selected experimental group participants at study conclusion to gather qualitative data on learner perceptions.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 27. Paired-samples t-tests assessed within-group pre-to-post gains. Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA), with pre-test scores as covariate, compared between-group post-test differences. Cohen's d was calculated to estimate effect sizes. Qualitative interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4. Results

4.1 Speaking Proficiency Gains

Pre-test speaking scores did not differ significantly between groups ($t(82) = 0.43$, $p = .67$), confirming initial equivalence. Post-test ANCOVA results revealed a significant main effect of instructional condition ($F(1, 81) = 47.32$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.37$), indicating that the experimental group ($M = 6.84$, $SD = 0.71$) significantly outperformed the control group ($M = 5.61$, $SD = 0.68$) after controlling for pre-test scores. Cohen's $d = 0.87$ represents a large practical effect.

Sub-scale analysis demonstrated significant experimental advantages across all dimensions: fluency ($d = 0.91$), accuracy ($d = 0.72$), and interactional competence

(d = 0.88). Fluency and interactional competence showed the largest gains, consistent with the communicative nature of the treatment.

4.2 Foreign Language Anxiety

Experimental group participants reported significantly reduced anxiety at post-test compared to controls ($F(1, 81) = 22.14$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.21$). Within the experimental group, FLCAS scores declined from M = 3.72 (SD = 0.54) to M = 2.89 (SD = 0.61), representing a medium-to-large reduction (d = 0.60).

4.3 Motivation

Experimental group motivation scores increased significantly from pre- to post-treatment ($t(41) = 8.34$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.74$), with notable increases in intrinsic motivation and identified regulation subscales, suggesting internalization of communicative learning goals.

4.4 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of interview data identified three primary themes: (1) Perceived relevance — participants consistently highlighted the vocational authenticity of tasks as enhancing engagement; (2) Reduced anxiety through peer interaction — pair and group task structures were reported to lower performance anxiety; (3) Self-perceived communicative growth — participants expressed heightened confidence in real-world English use. Representative quote: "When we talked about things from our specialty, I felt more confident. It was not just grammar exercises — it was real communication."

5. Discussion

The present findings corroborate and extend existing literature on CLT and TBLT effectiveness in EFL contexts (Bryfonski & McKay, 2017; Keck et al., 2006). The large effect size observed (d = 0.87) compares favorably with meta-analytic benchmarks and suggests that the systematic integration of communicative task-

based instruction yields educationally meaningful benefits for technical college EFL learners.

The particularly strong gains in fluency and interactional competence align with theoretical predictions derived from the interaction hypothesis (Long, 1996) and output hypothesis (Swain, 1985). Task-based interaction appeared to create opportunities for meaning negotiation and pushed output that traditional drilling exercises cannot replicate. Accuracy gains, while statistically significant, were comparatively smaller, consistent with documented trade-off effects between fluency and accuracy in task-based production (Skehan, 2009).

The reduction in foreign language anxiety observed parallels findings by Incecay and Dollar (2011) and supports the premise that collaborative, meaning-focused tasks reduce evaluative threat, a key driver of FLA (Horwitz et al., 1986). Increased motivation, particularly intrinsic motivation, may represent a mediating mechanism through which TBLT indirectly facilitates language development, aligning with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

The vocational contextualization of tasks appears particularly significant. Qualitative data indicate that participants attributed their engagement to the perceived relevance of tasks to their future professional contexts, supporting calls for ESP-informed TBLT design in technical education settings (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Hyland, 2006).

Limitations: The quasi-experimental design, single-institution sample, and relatively short intervention period limit generalizability. Future research should employ randomized controlled designs across multiple institutions and examine long-term retention of communicative gains.

6. Conclusion

This study provides empirical support for the integration of CLT-TBLT instruction in technical college EFL settings. Significant improvements in speaking proficiency, reduced foreign language anxiety, and enhanced motivation among experimental participants suggest that communicative task-based approaches

represent a pedagogically superior alternative to grammar-translation methods for this learner population. Curriculum designers and teacher educators in Uzbekistan and comparable post-Soviet contexts are encouraged to consider systematic CLT-TBLT implementation, supported by targeted teacher professional development to address documented barriers to adoption.

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