

## TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING IN ESP CLASSROOMS AT TECHNICAL COLLEGES: DEVELOPING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE FOR PROFESSIONAL CONTEXTS

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**Abstract:** This article investigates the application of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) methodology within English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction at technical colleges in Uzbekistan. The study examines how professionally oriented communicative tasks simultaneously advance language competence and vocational readiness among second-year technical students. Drawing on empirical evidence gathered over one full academic semester, the paper demonstrates that carefully designed tasks grounded in students' anticipated occupational activities produce measurable gains in productive language skills and communicative performance while meaningfully heightening learner motivation.

**Keywords:** *task-based language teaching, English for Specific Purposes, technical education, communicative competence, professional communication, needs analysis, Uzbekistan*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The capacity for effective communication in English has become an indispensable professional competency for graduates of technical and vocational institutions across the globe. Engineers, technicians, information technology specialists, and other professionals trained at technical colleges increasingly operate within international or internationally connected environments where the demands of occupational discourse require both linguistic accuracy and fluency in domain-specific terminology. The English language teacher at a technical college therefore faces a dual pedagogical imperative: to cultivate students' general communicative ability while simultaneously equipping them with the specialized lexical, functional, and discursive resources that their respective professions demand.

Uzbekistan's educational reforms, formally accelerated by Presidential Decree PF-5117 (Mirziyoev, 2017), placed the enhancement of English language instruction at the center of the national education agenda, calling for qualitatively improved language outcomes across all levels of the education system and specifically emphasizing professionally oriented competencies in vocational and technical institutions. In this policy environment, English language teachers at technical colleges

are expected not only to deliver linguistically sound instruction but to ensure that their graduates possess the communicative tools required by a globalizing labor market.

Against this backdrop, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has emerged as the dominant paradigm for organizing language instruction in professional and vocational educational contexts. Unlike general English programs, ESP grounds curriculum development in an analysis of the target communicative situations that learners will encounter in their professional lives, thereby aligning course content with demonstrable occupational utility. Within the ESP paradigm, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has attracted sustained scholarly attention as a methodology that places authentic, goal-directed activity at the center of language learning, creating conditions in which language is used as a functional instrument rather than merely studied as a formal object.

The present article examines the implementation of TBLT within an ESP context at a technical college in Uzbekistan, drawing on both the international theoretical literature and the contributions of Uzbek researchers who have investigated professionally oriented language education in the Central Asian context. The discussion moves from a review of theoretical foundations through an account of research design and implementation to an analysis of outcomes and their pedagogical implications, concluding with recommendations for English language teachers working in comparable institutional settings.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Task-Based Language Teaching: Theoretical Foundations**

Task-Based Language Teaching, theorized comprehensively by Nunan (2004), Ellis (2003), and Willis and Willis (2007), rests on the premise that language acquisition proceeds most effectively when learners engage in purposeful activities requiring meaning-focused communication. Within this framework, a task is understood as a pedagogical activity possessing a non-linguistic outcome, communicative demands that necessitate authentic language use, and a primary focus on meaning rather than on linguistic form. This conception stands in deliberate contrast to presentation-practice-production models in which language structures are isolated, explained, and subsequently consolidated through controlled formal exercises.

The theoretical underpinning of TBLT draws substantially from second language acquisition research, particularly Long's (1996) interaction hypothesis, which proposes that the negotiation of meaning during communicative interaction provides a potent mechanism for language development. When learners encounter a communicative challenge that their existing linguistic resources cannot immediately resolve, they are impelled to attend to new forms, seek clarification, reformulate their output, and restructure their interlanguage. The task thus functions simultaneously as

a motivating communicative context and as an acquisitional trigger, embedding form-focused attention within a framework of genuine meaning-making.

Subsequent theoretical elaborations have refined the understanding of how tasks generate language development. Swain's (1985) output hypothesis identified pushed output — production at the edge of learners' current competence — as an independent source of acquisitional benefit complementary to input-based processes, and argued that tasks creating communicative pressure to produce precise, coherent language accelerate acquisition. Schmidt's (1990) noticing hypothesis further enriched the picture by demonstrating that explicit awareness of a linguistic form, which communicative difficulty within a task can facilitate, is a prerequisite for its acquisition.

## **2.2. English for Specific Purposes: Needs Analysis and Curriculum Design**

English for Specific Purposes, as conceptualized by Hutchinson and Waters (1987) and elaborated by Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998), grounds language curriculum development in a systematic investigation of the target communicative situations that define a learner group's professional or academic context. The needs analysis procedure central to ESP methodology examines the text types, discourse conventions, interactional formats, register requirements, and specialized lexical domains that constitute the target communicative repertoire. For technical college students, this target repertoire encompasses reading technical documentation and safety regulations, producing maintenance reports and operational logs, participating in team briefings and client consultations, and communicating in professional networks that may involve international interlocutors.

The convergence of TBLT with ESP curriculum design yields what researchers have characterized as professionally task-based instruction, in which pedagogical tasks are modeled directly on real-world professional tasks. This alignment serves functions that are simultaneously acquisitional, motivational, and evaluative. Acquisitionally, it ensures that learners practice the precise communicative moves they will be required to deploy professionally. Motivationally, it renders the instrumental value of language study transparent and immediate, a factor that Dörnyei (2001) identifies as a robust predictor of sustained engagement and effort. Evaluatively, it enables assessment that measures communicative readiness for genuine occupational demands rather than performance on decontextualized linguistic exercises.

## **2.3. Uzbek and Central Asian Research Perspectives**

The international literature on TBLT and ESP finds significant resonance and important qualification in the contributions of Uzbek and Central Asian researchers who have examined professionally oriented language education within the specific institutional, linguistic, and sociocultural context of the region. These scholars have

both confirmed the effectiveness of task-based approaches and identified contextual factors that shape their implementation and outcomes.

Yo'ldoshev (2019) investigated the introduction of ESP programs into Uzbekistan's technical higher education institutions, identifying the absence of substantive collaboration between language teachers and subject-matter specialists as the principal structural obstacle to effective ESP curriculum development. His research demonstrated that ESP courses implemented without a systematic needs analysis grounded in genuine occupational requirements tended to replicate general English instruction under a different label, failing to deliver the professionally oriented competencies that constituted their stated rationale. Yo'ldoshev's finding that integrative curriculum design — in which ESP and vocational subject courses share objectives, materials, and assessment criteria — produced significantly superior language outcomes provides direct support for the interdisciplinary task design methodology adopted in the present study.

Xoliqova (2020) examined the implementation of task-based approaches in Uzbekistan with particular attention to the linguo-cultural factors that mediate their effectiveness. Her monographic study found that the phonological and grammatical divergence between Uzbek and English creates predictable interference patterns in productive tasks, notably in prosody, word order, and the expression of tense and aspect, patterns that need to be anticipated in task design. Crucially, however, Xoliqova also found that tasks anchored in culturally and professionally familiar scenarios significantly mitigated these difficulties, as learners' investment in the communicative outcome reduced the attentional resources devoted to anxiety management and freed cognitive capacity for linguistic processing. This insight informs the task design principle, adopted in the present study, of embedding linguistically challenging forms within scenarios that are professionally and culturally recognizable to learners.

Nazarov (2021), working at a technical university in Tashkent, conducted an investigation into the barriers to professional integration in ESP instruction for technical students. His analysis identified three principal challenges: insufficient time allocated to English within technically dominated curricula, the limited ESP pedagogical training of language teachers, and the absence of institutional mechanisms for interdepartmental collaboration. Nazarov's study also documented a positive correlation between the authenticity of the professional scenarios used in language tasks and students' reported engagement, a finding that directly informs the present study's task selection criteria.

Karimova (2022) explored the combination of digital tools and task-based pedagogy in ESP classrooms in a master's thesis that provides a valuable account of technologically enhanced TBLT implementation in the Uzbek context. Her research found that tasks involving authentic digital professional communication — including

the analysis of English-language technical videos, participation in simulated international professional correspondence, and engagement with international online professional communities — produced marked increases in both language use motivation and measurable communicative performance. The enhanced contextual richness that digital media provided appeared to strengthen learners' perception of the professional relevance of English language competence and to model the kinds of authentic communicative tasks that graduates would encounter in internationally connected workplaces.

Taken collectively, the contributions of Uzbek researchers complement and enrich the international literature in three significant ways. First, they confirm that the fundamental relationships between task authenticity, professional relevance, and communicative learning outcomes identified in the international literature hold in the Uzbek context. Second, they identify specific contextual factors — linguo-cultural interference, structural barriers to interdisciplinary collaboration, and the motivational significance of culturally familiar professional scenarios — that must be addressed in any implementation of TBLT-informed ESP instruction in Central Asian technical education. Third, they point toward institutional and pedagogical solutions — integrative curriculum design, digital task enhancement, and targeted teacher development — that are feasible within the resource and scheduling constraints of Uzbek technical colleges.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted over one full academic semester at a technical college in Shahrizabz, Uzbekistan. Participants comprised two intact groups of second-year students enrolled in technical programs, totaling 47 students: 23 in the experimental group and 24 in the comparison group. Both groups were taught by the same instructor, received equivalent total instructional hours, and were matched for initial proficiency level on the basis of a standardized pre-intervention assessment. Students in both groups were preparing for occupational roles in technical fields, providing a coherent and meaningful professional context for needs analysis and task design.

#### 3.2. Instructional Design

Instruction for the experimental group was organized according to TBLT principles with tasks anchored in professionally relevant scenarios identified through a structured needs analysis. The needs analysis procedure involved questionnaire administration to students, semi-structured interviews with vocational subject teachers, and review of occupational competency frameworks applicable to the target professions. From this analysis, a target task inventory was compiled comprising the communicative activities that students would be expected to perform in their future work environments: reading and interpreting technical specifications, producing

maintenance reports, conducting equipment briefings, negotiating solutions to operational problems, and communicating in professionally appropriate written registers.

Pedagogical tasks were then designed to approximate the communicative demands of these target tasks while remaining accessible to learners at their current proficiency level. Task sequencing followed Willis's (1996) task cycle framework, comprising a pre-task phase in which the topic and task were introduced and relevant lexical and background resources were activated; a task cycle in which learners completed the task, planned a report of their outcomes, and reported to the class; and a language focus phase in which specific linguistic forms that had appeared in the task were identified, analyzed, and practiced. The comparison group followed a conventional grammar-translation approach supplemented by ESP vocabulary instruction delivered through explicit presentation and controlled practice exercises.

### **3.3. Data Collection and Analysis**

A mixed-methods approach was employed to assess outcomes. Quantitative data were gathered through parallel pre- and post-intervention proficiency assessments measuring productive and receptive competencies across speaking, writing, reading, and listening dimensions. A professionally oriented communicative performance assessment, in which students completed a simulated workplace task under structured observation, provided additional quantitative evidence specifically oriented toward occupational communicative readiness. Qualitative data were collected through structured learner reflection instruments administered at mid-semester and at intervention completion, and through systematic classroom observation notes recorded by the instructor across both groups. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics; qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis.

## **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.1. Language Proficiency Outcomes**

Post-intervention proficiency assessments revealed statistically significant differences between the experimental and comparison groups across multiple competency dimensions. Experimental group students demonstrated substantially stronger performance on productive skills measures, with mean post-test scores in speaking and writing tasks exceeding those of the comparison group by margins that achieved significance at the  $p < .05$  level. The most pronounced differences were observed in tasks requiring extended spoken interaction and coherent written production in a professional register, precisely the competencies that the task-based instructional design had prioritized. Receptive skills measures showed improvement in both groups, with smaller but still meaningful group differences, a pattern consistent with Ellis's (2003) characterization of TBLT effects as most pronounced in productive communicative ability.

The professionally oriented performance assessment produced the most marked group differentiation. Experimental group students completed the simulated workplace task with greater fluency, more contextually appropriate deployment of technical register, and demonstrably more effective use of communicative strategies — including circumlocution, clarification requests, and collaborative meaning negotiation — when encountering lexical or comprehension difficulties. These findings suggest that repeated engagement with professionally contextualized communicative tasks cultivates not merely an expanded vocabulary or more accurate grammar, but a more flexible and strategically sophisticated communicative competence of the kind described by Swales (1990) as genre knowledge: the ability to deploy linguistic resources in accordance with the communicative purposes and conventions of a specific professional context.

#### **4.2. Motivational Dimensions**

Thematic analysis of learner reflection data revealed a consistent pattern of enhanced perceived relevance in the experimental group that was largely absent from comparison group reflections. Experimental group students repeatedly referenced the connection between classroom tasks and their anticipated professional roles as a primary source of engagement, effort, and — in several cases — broader interest in the English language as a medium of professional identity. Tasks involving technical report writing, equipment troubleshooting dialogues, and safety briefing preparation were identified as particularly motivating precisely because learners could project themselves into the communicative scenarios and envision deploying the practiced competencies in their future work.

These motivational patterns are consonant with the instrumental orientation that Dörnyei (2001) identifies as a robust motivational substrate in professional language learning contexts, but they also suggest that instrumental motivation and integrative interest need not be mutually exclusive. Several students reported that initial engagement with professionally relevant tasks had stimulated a broader interest in English language use that extended beyond the instrumental calculus of occupational necessity. This finding echoes Karimova's (2022) observation that authentic professional tasks can function as a gateway to more expansive language engagement, and suggests that the pedagogical value of task authenticity may exceed its direct acquisitional contribution.

Classroom observation data corroborated the self-report evidence. The experimental group displayed consistently higher rates of voluntary participation, greater readiness to attempt extended production without prompting, and more sustained peer interaction in pair and group task phases. The comparison group exhibited diligent engagement with assigned formal exercises but showed markedly less spontaneous communicative initiative and more frequent recourse to Uzbek during

collaborative activities, a behavioral indicator of lower investment in the English-medium communicative process. These observational findings align with Nazarov's (2021) finding of a positive relationship between task authenticity and student engagement in Uzbek technical education contexts.

### **4.3. Pedagogical Implications**

The evidence gathered in this study has several practical implications for English language teachers in technical educational institutions. The first is the value of investing in a substantive needs analysis as the foundational step of ESP course design. While the needs analysis procedure demands time and requires active engagement with vocational subject teachers and occupational competency documentation, the resulting task inventory ensures that instructional effort is oriented toward competencies with genuine professional utility and that learners encounter a transparently relevant communicative curriculum. Yo'ldoshev's (2019) identification of the absence of needs analysis as the principal weakness of Uzbek technical ESP programs makes this recommendation particularly salient for the domestic context.

The second implication concerns the structure of the task cycle as a vehicle for integrating form-focused instruction with communicative practice. The language focus phase following task completion provides a principled mechanism for drawing learners' attention to grammatical and lexical forms that have appeared in a meaningful communicative context, capitalizing on the heightened receptivity to formal features that communicative engagement has generated. This integration addresses the concern sometimes raised by teachers working under conventional syllabus constraints that TBLT's emphasis on meaning may come at the expense of systematic grammar instruction.

Third, the experience of the present study underscores the value of interdisciplinary collaboration between language teachers and vocational subject instructors in designing professionally authentic tasks. Such collaboration produces tasks that are simultaneously linguistically sound — in the sense of targeting forms appropriate to the learners' developmental stage — and professionally credible, in the sense of accurately representing the communicative demands of genuine workplace scenarios. The logistical challenges of establishing such collaboration within the scheduling and administrative structures of Uzbek technical colleges, documented by Nazarov (2021), are real but surmountable, and the pedagogical returns justify the institutional effort required.

Finally, assessment practices in technical ESP courses benefit from incorporating professionally oriented performance tasks alongside conventional form-focused measures. Such assessments communicate to learners that language competence is valued instrumentally as a professional tool, provide richer diagnostic information about communicative readiness for occupational environments, and create

incentive structures that reward the development of flexible, contextually appropriate communicative ability rather than merely accurate performance on decontextualized linguistic exercises.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study has provided theoretical justification and empirical support for the integration of Task-Based Language Teaching within ESP instruction at technical colleges, situating its findings within both the international TBLT and ESP literature and the contributions of Uzbek researchers who have examined professionally oriented language education in the Central Asian context. The evidence demonstrates that professionally contextualized task design produces measurable improvements in communicative competence, with the most pronounced effects in productive skills and professionally oriented performance; enhances learner motivation through the transparent relevance of occupational task scenarios; and generates the kind of strategically flexible communicative competence that technical graduates require for effective participation in professional discourse communities.

The present study's single-site design and relatively brief observation period represent acknowledged limitations that recommend longitudinal, multi-site replications capable of supporting more robust generalizations. Future research might productively investigate the differential effects of varying task types on specific competency dimensions; the role of digital task platforms in extending professionally oriented language practice beyond the classroom; the long-term retention of task-developed communicative competencies in graduates' professional practice; and the institutional conditions — particularly collaborative curriculum structures and teacher development provisions — that most effectively support TBLT-informed ESP instruction in Uzbekistan's technical colleges. Notwithstanding these limitations, the present findings provide substantive grounds for recommending TBLT-informed ESP instruction as a principled, practically feasible, and demonstrably effective response to the communicative preparation needs of students in technical vocational education.

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