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### The Effect of Task-Based Language Instruction on Students' Writing Abilities

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#### Abstract

This article outlines an action research experiment aimed at investigating the impact of diverse writing styles and task-based language teaching on the writing skills of students in public schools. The research employed a three-stage action research methodology, including diagnosis, action, and assessment. The initial diagnosis identified a need to enhance participants' writing productivity to align with the Ministry of Education (MN) and Common European Framework (CEFR) standards. Workshops were subsequently developed, incorporating the pre-task, task, planning, report, and language emphasis framework for task-based learning. Various writing techniques, such as list-making, question-asking, reading aloud, brainstorming, and

word classification, were also employed. The assessment phase revealed significant improvements in learners' written work, including expanded vocabulary, reduced grammatical errors, improved language syntax, and heightened levels of autonomy and responsibility. Moreover, students exhibited increased confidence in their writing abilities. The study's findings indicated that the application of task-based language teaching positively influenced students' writing skills. Consequently, the article suggests integrating writing skills and task-based language teaching into future curriculum development as a means of supporting English language methodology for teachers, schools, and policymakers.

**Keywords:** Writing Process, Writing Skills, Writing Techniques, Task-Based Language Training

#### 1. Introduction

As English serves as a global language facilitating communication across borders, there is a growing need to support students in their language learning journey and stimulate educators' interest in crafting pedagogical language instructions that provide enhanced opportunities for language acquisition. However, conventional methodologies remain the primary focus in assessing language proficiency and competence. In Vietnam, proficiency in English is increasingly mandated in schools at all levels. Both public and private educational institutions prioritize teaching and learning processes to equip students with the necessary communicative skills for success in a dynamic market and an increasingly demanding society.

Recognizing the importance of aligning practices, strategies, and tactics with current interests, preferences, and technological advancements, experts have emphasized the need for English classrooms worldwide to embrace trends such as cross-curricular content, e-learning, and the integration of information and communication technologies (ICT). In response to these trends, Vietnam has adopted the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR) standards, aiming to prioritize instructional quality and facilitate the achievement of goals in various English courses. This includes the development of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, and examinations, ultimately enhancing competitiveness, fostering intercultural growth, and expanding employment and academic prospects.

This particular study took place in a public school in Hanoi, involving 40 ninth-grade students (15 boys and 25 girls), aged fourteen to sixteen. Various data collection tools were employed during the diagnostic stage to gauge the perspectives of administrators, teachers, and students regarding the English teaching and learning process. The analysis revealed a significant challenge: Poor writing, vocabulary, and grammatical skills, hindering students from becoming proficient writers.

To address this issue, the researchers opted for a multi-faceted approach, incorporating different writing styles and procedures. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) was employed to stimulate the development of writing skills, highlighting the importance of educators creating conducive conditions for effective language learning experiences and integrating meaningful assignments. The primary aim of the study was to enhance learners' writing skills in this English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. The research question posed was, "To what extent can task-based language teaching influence the development of ninth graders' writing skills in a public school in Hanoi?" following the analysis of learning needs.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 English-language writing's relevance

The request for students to engage in writing serves multiple purposes, as articulated by Smith. Firstly, writing is a means of communication, allowing individuals to convey their thoughts to others. Additionally, and perhaps more significantly, writing serves as a tool for self-reflection and intellectual exploration. According to Manyike and Lemmer (2010)<sup>[7]</sup>, writing facilitates the clarification and challenging of one's ideas.

Moreover, writing plays a crucial role in the learning process, aiding students in expressing themselves and grasping academic content. The act of writing not only helps students organize their thoughts but also contributes to a deeper understanding of material. The authors of this perspective also assert that writing assignments offer students opportunities to think critically, structure their ideas, explore new concepts, and enhance their communication skills. By engaging in writing exercises, students not only gain insight into the cognitive processes involved but also allow teachers to design diverse projects in the classroom that align with students' interests and needs.

### 2.2 The writing process stages

The development of writing skills for students involves various steps, and the intervention activity design in this study is based on the model proposed by Harmer (2011a)<sup>[5]</sup>. According to this model, the writing process comprises four key components: Planning, drafting, editing (which includes reflecting and revising), and creating the final version.

### 2.3 What to consider when teaching writing

Teaching and learning the skill of writing pose significant challenges due to the multitude of factors involved, such as vocabulary, grammar, and writing mechanics, which collectively contribute to the creation of a coherent piece of writing. Additionally, students must develop time-management skills, a task that often requires substantial training and effort.

Furthermore, the process of conveying a message in writing necessitates students to think through and organize their thoughts. According to Sokolik, as cited in Nunan (2003, pp. 87-88)<sup>[11]</sup>, writing is both a process and a product. The product refers to the finished piece of writing, while the process involves the act of gathering ideas or the stages a writer goes through when producing a written work. In essence, writers must adhere to a set of guidelines during the creation of any form of writing until they arrive at the final product.

Thirdly, when teachers assign writing tasks to their students, it is crucial to consider additional writing-related factors. Harmer (2011b)<sup>[6]</sup> emphasizes a correlation between the type of writing children engage in, their approach to it, and the final outcome achieved by the teacher. The type of writing and its style should be tailored to students' interests, age, level, and learning preferences. It is advisable to start with simpler texts before progressing to more complex ones, prioritizing easy narratives initially to build students' confidence. Teachers should recognize that students who feel confident are more likely to put in effort, grasp new concepts, and effectively express their ideas.

### 2.4 Task-based language instruction methodology

According to Ellis (2003)<sup>[4]</sup>, task-based language teaching

(TBLT) is an instructional method that provides students with opportunities to engage with the target language in authentic, real-world contexts through assigned tasks. The task, viewed as the central component of TBLT, serves as the primary context and focus for learning, facilitating language use that mirrors real-life situations beyond the classroom. Ellis (2003)<sup>[4]</sup> notes that as students work towards completing the task, they naturally acquire new language and skills, encouraging the utilization of their linguistic resources.

An alternative definition of TBLT is presented by Richards and Rogers (2001)<sup>[10]</sup>, who describe it as an approach centered around tasks as the fundamental unit for planning and instruction in language teaching. Richards and Rogers (2001, p. 223)<sup>[10]</sup> assert that for effective language acquisition, three essential elements are required: 1) engagement in real-world communication activities; 2) participation in activities where language is employed to achieve learning-related objectives; and 3) exposure to language that holds meaning for the learner and aids in the learning process.

### 2.5 Research on writing

The studies discussed in this subsection have significantly contributed to the research project by providing practical insights into the teaching and learning processes of writing skills. "Teaching writing to second language learners: Insights from theory and research," conducted by Barkaoui in 2007, stands out among these studies. Barkaoui offers a comprehensive overview of key conclusions from second language (L2) writing theory and research, focusing on the types of skills students need to acquire for effective writing. He addresses the question, "What do students need to learn to become effective L2 writers?" Barkaoui emphasizes the importance of understanding various linguistic elements, including vocabulary, syntax, morphology, lexicon, discourse, and rhetorical conventions of L2. He also discusses process-oriented research, highlighting the development of macro-skills like organizing, writing, and editing, along with micro-skills such as simultaneous attention to form and content.

Barkaoui delves into affective, linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural aspects, providing guidance on which elements of writing to teach L2 learners and how to do it. The study also offers practical advice for teachers to enhance their teaching methods, suggesting the education of students on effective writing techniques, expectations for L2 readers, and L2 language and textual conventions. Additionally, Barkaoui recommends providing students with models, clear learning objectives, meaningful writing contexts, well-planned exercises, accessible resources, constructive feedback, encouragement, and maintaining high standards. His conclusion emphasizes the importance of fostering student autonomy both inside and outside the L2 writing classroom.

In another study, Mohite (2014)<sup>[8]</sup> investigated Polish English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in a secondary school in London. Employing a mixed-approaches strategy, Mohite combined qualitative and quantitative methods to explore students' opinions and beliefs about their English language writing skills. While the quantitative analysis did not yield statistically significant results regarding proficient language learners' use of writing techniques, the qualitative analysis generated two novel

hypotheses. The qualitative findings suggested that students faced challenges in seeing English writing as a communication tool and understanding the compositional aspect of the language. The study's implications underscore the importance of increasing students' awareness of compositional skills in English writing, emphasizing the communicative value of writing in English, and teaching them effective peer collaboration strategies to support their writing endeavors.

### 3. Methodology

The research methodology employed in this study is Action Research, as defined by McNiff and Whitehead (2005) <sup>[1]</sup> as "a common-sense approach to personal and professional development that enables practitioners everywhere to investigate and evaluate their work, and to create their own theories of practices."

The study involved significant decisions about English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and learning procedures based on early research findings. The insights of participants, instructors, and administrators played a pivotal role in guiding adjustments to be made in classroom areas requiring improvement. The study encompassed planning, observation, action, and analysis of data from a large group of seventh-grade students.

Forty ninth-graders, comprising fifteen boys and twenty-five girls aged fifteen to sixteen, participated in the study. Instruments such as questionnaires from students, teachers, administrators, teachers' journals, and students' post-tests were utilized.

The study unfolded in stages, starting with a preliminary diagnosis that utilized four tools to obtain a comprehensive understanding of participants, teaching methods, the learning environment, and concerns related to the process of teaching and learning English. The action stage comprised the creation of six workshops employing the Task-Based Language teaching methodology, with the primary aim of engaging learners in meaningful tasks. These workshops tailored tasks to the students' needs, motivation, and environment, progressively capturing their interest. The activities followed the Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) strategy, incorporating the four language skills but centering the students' writing process on planning, drafting, editing, and producing a final version.

The teaching cycle proposed by Willis and Willis (2007) <sup>[2]</sup>, consisting of pre-task, main task, planning, report, and language focus components, was integrated into the workshops. This approach encouraged participants to apply newly acquired vocabulary during pre-task exercises. Workshop goals aligned with the Ministry of Education's guidelines on foreign language competency levels. Various tasks included composing paragraphs, describing families, creating poems, expressing problems, and providing guidance. After each workshop, progress assessments were conducted using rubrics and questionnaires.

Data analysis commenced with an examination of administrators' comments and student questionnaires. The researchers coded the data into preliminary categories by reviewing teacher questionnaires and journal entries. Throughout the action and evaluation phase, the data underwent further analysis, including grouping and coding, to identify converging patterns.

### 4. Results and discussion

The overarching educational objective of this research was to enhance students' writing skills through the implementation of Task-Based Language Teaching. The specific pedagogical goals aimed to: 1) enhance students' accuracy and coherence in second language (L2) writing; 2) foster the development of students' writing skills by employing various strategies; and 3) bolster students' confidence in the writing process as a means of expressing their unique communicative needs. The analysis of the findings indicated significant improvements in students' overall writing proficiency, as well as notable advancements in their vocabulary, syntax, and grammar. The subsequent section provides a detailed description of the analysis's outcomes.

#### ***TBLT boosted students' self-assurance when producing written work.***

The implementation of the workshops, tailored to the students' needs and interests, contributed to a sense of security among the students. They expressed that the lessons were designed with their preferences in mind. Additionally, the students acknowledged gaining valuable information and recognized the importance of learning English for academic improvement and enhanced employment prospects. The collaborative nature of the workshops, where students worked together in groups to complete assignments, was particularly well-received. This collaborative approach fostered a positive environment where students enjoyed working with their classmates, spending quality time together, and giving their best effort to the assignments. The students demonstrated enthusiasm and willingly shared insights and knowledge about each assignment in the sessions. An examination of the data gathering tools indicated that the students successfully met the learning objectives outlined in each workshop, showing consistent improvement in their performance over time.

#### ***Students' progress in their writing abilities***

Initially, writing presented a significant challenge for the children, proving to be one of the more formidable obstacles. However, with the passage of time and the opportunity to organize, draft, and revise their writing, the students experienced a growing confidence in the writing process. The structured approach allowed them time for thoughtful consideration and revisions before their work was finalized and assessed. Consequently, the pupils were able to construct sentences that were logically and clearly organized.

#### ***The enhancement of students' writing, vocabulary, spelling, editing, and critical thinking abilities***

At the outset of this study, students often made mistakes in their written work. However, the tasks provided in the workshops proved instrumental in helping students address certain grammatical issues. The writing process itself played a key role in teaching students to plan, carefully think through, and edit their drafts, while also fostering the organization of their thoughts. Notably, students exhibited enhanced proficiency in using connectors and content-related expressions, demonstrating improvement in English grammar. Furthermore, the students' improved spelling and expanded vocabulary indicated significant lexical progress.

### ***The development of students' text building and collaborative writing skills***

As the students progressed through the Action Stage and completed assignments, they found writing to be more manageable, and their skills as writers improved. Key steps in the writing process, such as planning, drafting, reflecting, revising, and spending time reviewing their drafts, were crucial. These steps helped students identify necessary changes and become aware of their own errors, ultimately enabling them to create a polished final version. Additionally, the collaborative nature of group work allowed students to share knowledge and insights. Engaging with various classmates while reading drafts, correcting errors, and producing a coherent document not only facilitated communication of thoughts to peers but also provided an opportunity for mutual learning among students.

### ***Intriguing and inspiring assignments***

Each activity in the workshops had a clear objective, and the students successfully met these objectives, showcasing their creativity in producing well-designed and illustrated written pieces. The engaging nature of the activities motivated the students, leading them to approach their work with enthusiasm and joy. Consequently, there was a significant improvement in the students' performance. In summary, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) proved instrumental in helping students attain the specified objectives within the tasks.

### ***Portfolios to track development and evaluate written work***

Students found portfolios to be a valuable tool for self-assessing their writing skills and recognizing both their strengths and weaknesses. It was deemed essential for them to maintain a portfolio to organize and compile their writing endeavors. Upon completing tasks or writing assignments, students engaged in experimentation with varying degrees of improvement, fostered creativity, and regularly reflected on their progress. The ability to observe their written productions positively impacted the students' confidence, serving as a motivating factor. The portfolio allowed students to track their personal development and included important criteria for evaluating writing proficiency in the grading rubrics.

Furthermore, the results indicated that portfolios not only facilitated the assessment of writing proficiency but also contributed to evaluating the learning process. Portfolios were shown to promote critical thinking and the development of learning autonomy in students. In conclusion, when task-based language instruction is employed to enhance students' writing skills, there is a simultaneous increase in their confidence levels, improvement in spelling, vocabulary, and writing mechanics. Additionally, language usage becomes more precise both in written compositions and conversational situations.

### **5. Conclusion**

Mastering writing as a linguistic skill requires effort and commitment. While writing is challenging, there are crucial aspects of instruction that contribute to students becoming proficient writers, especially when implementing the Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) approach. Key elements in the creation of writing assignments following TBLT implementation include involving students in selecting topics to ensure their engagement, designing assignments

that enhance auxiliary skills required for writing, guiding students through various writing stages, and providing clear assessment criteria for tracking their development.

The TBLT approach positively impacts students' English proficiency and writing skills. It promotes activities that benefit the learning process and encourages group projects, creating environments where ideas flow and captivating ways to present work are developed. This approach not only enhances the structure and execution of assignments but also improves language usage and idea expression. Real-world situations engaged in through TBLT offer greater opportunities for language acquisition and the development of writing abilities. Moreover, students working in pairs or teams experience increased comprehension, encouragement, and exchange of ideas and materials, fostering productivity and communication skills.

The study's objective is to evaluate the impact of writing strategies in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom using the TBLT approach. The pedagogical implications suggest that TBLT is effective for planning, implementing activities, assessing, and achieving language learning goals. As students are at the center of the learning process, TBLT motivates them to study, supports real-life communication situations, and fosters autonomy. TBLT enhances students' writing production compared to standard instructional methods and encourages dynamic roles and communication within group projects.

Teaching writing skills is challenging but essential due to the increasing necessity for written communication in English. The world's changing dynamics require effective written communication and multilingual capabilities. This study aims to contribute to finding efficient methods to improve writing skills, with TBLT being recommended as a teaching strategy. The researchers believe that TBLT can assist in developing communicative competence and elevating language use, emphasizing the need for assignments to meet specific communication needs.

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