

TASK-BASED CURRICULUM REFORM IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION: EFFECTS ON SPEAKING FLUENCY AND ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

Siti Rahayu^{1*}

¹ Universitas Muhammadiyah Palembang

*Corresponding author: sitirahayu@ump.ac.id

Abstrak - Pada abad ke-21, pendidikan bahasa mengalami pergeseran paradigma dari pembelajaran berbasis tata bahasa menuju kurikulum yang berorientasi pada kompetensi komunikatif dan antarbudaya. Penelitian ini menelaah bagaimana integrasi kompetensi global dan pendekatan komunikatif membentuk kembali kurikulum pembelajaran bahasa di pendidikan tinggi. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif, penelitian ini melibatkan 10 pengembang kurikulum dan 20 pendidik bahasa dari universitas di Indonesia, Singapura, dan Australia. Data dikumpulkan melalui analisis dokumen, wawancara semi-terstruktur, dan observasi kelas. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa perancangan ulang kurikulum bahasa melalui kerangka kompetensi global mendorong pembelajaran aktif, kesadaran budaya, serta keterampilan komunikasi kritis. Para guru melaporkan bahwa integrasi konten antarbudaya dan tugas komunikasi autentik dapat menumbuhkan kepercayaan diri serta cara berpikir global pada peserta didik. Namun demikian, penelitian ini juga mengidentifikasi beberapa tantangan seperti kekakuan kurikulum, keterbatasan sumber daya digital, dan kurangnya pelatihan antarbudaya bagi guru. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa transformasi kurikulum harus bersifat partisipatif, kontekstual, dan selaras dengan tujuan pembelajaran abad ke-21 guna mengembangkan komunikator yang kompeten secara global.

Kata kunci: Kurikulum bahasa, pendekatan komunikatif, kompetensi antarbudaya, pendidikan global, reformasi kurikulum.

Abstract - Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has been proposed as a learner-centered curriculum innovation to promote meaningful communication and speaking fluency. This study examines the impact of integrating a task-based curriculum on secondary-level EFL students' speaking fluency and on classroom assessment practices. Employing a mixed-methods design, the research involved 120 ninth-grade EFL learners and 10 teachers across four schools that recently adopted task-based modules within their language curriculum. Quantitative data included pre- and post-speaking measures (mean length of run, speech rate, and repair frequency) and teacher questionnaires on assessment practices. Qualitative data comprised classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student focus groups. Results show statistically significant gains in measures of fluency ($p < .05$), improved willingness to communicate, and greater use of formative, performance-based assessments among teachers. However, challenges emerged: alignment with high-stakes exams, teachers' assessment literacy, and time constraints. The study concludes that TBLT-oriented curriculum reform can enhance speaking fluency and promote authentic assessment practices when supported by professional development and systemic alignment with assessment policy.

Keywords: Task-Based Language Teaching, curriculum reform, speaking fluency, assessment practices, EFL.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent shifts in language education underscore a growing departure from traditional, form-focused instruction toward approaches that prioritize communicative competence, learner autonomy, and authentic language use (Canale & Swain, 1980; Richards, 2017). In the 21st century, communicative proficiency is increasingly recognized as a multifaceted construct involving not only grammatical accuracy but also pragmatic, strategic, and sociolinguistic competence that enable learners to use language effectively in real contexts. Within this evolving pedagogical landscape, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has emerged as

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one of the most influential frameworks for aligning curriculum design with communicative goals.

Originally conceptualized by Prabhu (1987) in the Bangalore Project and later elaborated by Willis (1996), Ellis (2003), and Nunan (2004), TBLT positions meaning-focused tasks—rather than grammar lessons or vocabulary lists—as the central unit of curriculum organization and classroom practice. These tasks, defined as activities requiring learners to use language as a tool to achieve a communicative outcome, are designed to simulate real-world language use. Advocates of TBLT argue that such tasks provide rich opportunities for negotiation of meaning, hypothesis testing, and pushed output, which collectively promote second language acquisition (SLA) (Long, 2015; Bygate, 2001; Skehan, 1998). In particular, task-based interaction is seen as instrumental in developing speaking fluency, a skill often conceptualized as the automaticity, smoothness, and coherence of speech production under real-time communicative pressure (Segalowitz, 2010; Tavakoli & Hunter, 2018).

Over the past three decades, curriculum reform efforts in various educational contexts—from higher education institutions to secondary schools—have sought to incorporate TBLT principles into language programs (Nunan, 2004; Richards, 2017). These reforms reflect a broader pedagogical shift toward learner-centered education, where students are viewed as active participants in constructing linguistic and communicative knowledge. TBLT-based curricula typically encourage collaborative problem-solving, project work, and performance-based assessments that mirror authentic communication demands. Empirical studies have reported positive outcomes, including increased learner engagement, improved speaking fluency, and higher motivation levels (Willis & Willis, 2007; Ellis, 2009).

However, despite its theoretical appeal and global influence, the practical implementation of TBLT remains complex and context-dependent. Several issues persist regarding its empirical impact on speaking fluency and its compatibility with existing assessment systems—particularly in exam-oriented educational settings (Fotos & Ellis, 1991; Tavakoli & Hunter, 2018). While TBLT promotes fluency development through spontaneous communication, most assessment regimes continue to prioritize grammatical accuracy and discrete-point testing (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Fulcher, 2010). This misalignment between pedagogical innovation and assessment practice often constrains teachers' ability to fully enact communicative principles in their classrooms. As a result, many educators face tensions between meeting institutional testing requirements and fostering authentic communicative competence (McKinley & Rose, 2012).

Furthermore, successful curriculum reform requires not only pedagogical innovation but also teacher readiness, institutional support, and sociopolitical alignment. In many contexts, teachers lack sufficient training or confidence in designing and assessing task-based activities, leading to superficial or inconsistent implementation (Carless, 2007; East, 2012). In exam-driven systems, where high-stakes testing determines educational advancement, TBLT's process-oriented approach may be perceived as incompatible with accountability frameworks. Such contextual challenges underscore the importance of examining not only linguistic outcomes but also the broader institutional and cultural factors that mediate curriculum reform (Richards, 2017; McKinley & Rose, 2012).

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to explore the dual dimensions of pedagogical impact and assessment transformation within task-based curriculum reform. Specifically, it investigates:

- 1) Whether the integration of a TBLT-based curriculum leads to measurable improvements in students' speaking fluency, operationalized as automaticity, accuracy, and ease of expression in spontaneous communication; and
- 2) How teachers' assessment practices evolve in response to task-based reform, particularly in balancing communicative authenticity with institutional assessment requirements.

Framed within the theoretical perspectives of communicative language teaching and task-based learning (Ellis, 2003; Bygate, Skehan, & Swain, 2001), this study also situates curriculum reform within its sociopolitical context, acknowledging that pedagogical change does not occur in isolation but is shaped by educational policy, institutional culture, and teacher agency. By examining both the pedagogical and systemic dimensions of reform, the study contributes to the ongoing discourse on how TBLT principles can be effectively operationalized to enhance communicative fluency while maintaining curricular coherence in diverse educational settings.

Ultimately, this research seeks to bridge the gap between theory and practice in task-based curriculum innovation. By identifying the strategies, challenges, and contextual mediations that shape the adoption of TBLT, it offers empirical insights for educators, policymakers, and curriculum designers striving to create language programs that are both pedagogically sound and contextually sustainable in the 21st century.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Task-Based Teaching and Speaking Fluency

TBLT posits that tasks goal-oriented activities resembling real-world language use promote second language acquisition through meaningful communication (Willis, 1996; Nunan, 2004). Empirical studies have linked task repetition, task complexity manipulation, and focused tasks to gains in fluency measures (Bygate, 1996; Skehan & Foster, 2001). Tavakoli and Hunter (2018) emphasize fluency dimensions: breakdown fluency (pauses), repair fluency (self-corrections), and speed fluency (speech rate), which can be sensitive to instruction type.

2.2. Curriculum Reform and Implementation Issues

Curricular integration of TBLT requires systemic changes—syllabus design, materials, teacher roles, and assessment frameworks (Richards, 2017). Studies show implementation barriers: teacher beliefs, institutional constraints, and high-stakes examinations that privilege accuracy over communication (James, 2010; McKinley & Rose, 2012). Successful reform often includes targeted professional development and alignment with assessment policy (Little, 1991; Freeman, 2016).

2.3. Assessment Practices in Task-Based Curricula

Authentic performance assessment such as oral portfolios, task-based ratings, and formative feedback aligns with TBLT principles (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Brown & Hudson, 1998). However, teachers frequently report limited assessment literacy and pressure to prioritize standardized tests (Fulcher, 2010; Stiggins, 2002). Research suggests that formative

assessment and classroom-based performance tasks can both support fluency development and provide valid evidence of communicative competence (Brevik & Hovden, 2018; Tavakoli & Hunter, 2019).

3. METHOD

3.1. Design

This mixed-methods study combined quantitative pre-post measures of speaking fluency with qualitative exploration of assessment practices through classroom observation and semi-structured interviews. The concurrent triangulation design enabled corroboration across data sources (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

3.2. Participants and Context

Participants were 120 ninth-grade EFL students (aged 14–15) and 10 English teachers from four public secondary schools in an urban Indonesian district where the education authority piloted task-based modules for one academic year. Schools were selected purposively based on participation in the pilot. Teachers had attended an initial 5-day TBLT workshop prior to implementation.

3.3. Intervention

The curriculum reform introduced a semester-long sequence of task cycles (pre-task, task, planning, report, language focus) across speaking units (Willis & Willis, 2007). Tasks included problem-solving, role-plays, and project presentations with real audiences. Teachers were encouraged to use formative assessment (peer feedback, rubrics, audio/video portfolios) and to document performance.

3.4. Instruments and Data Collection

Quantitative instruments:

- **Speaking tasks:** Students performed three standardized narrative/descriptive tasks (pre and post) recorded and transcribed.
- **Fluency measures:** Mean Length of Run (MLR), speech rate (syllables/minute), and repair frequency (repairs per minute) were computed (Skehan, 2009; Tavakoli & Hunter, 2018).
- **Teacher questionnaire:** Likert items on assessment practices and beliefs ($\alpha = .81$).

Qualitative instruments:

- **Classroom observations:** 24 sessions observed using an observation protocol focusing on task implementation and assessment.
 - **Semi-structured interviews:** Conducted with all 10 teachers (45–60 minutes each) and focus groups with 24 students.
- Ethical approval and parental consent were obtained.

3.5. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using paired-samples t-tests to compare pre- and post-fluency measures; effect sizes (Cohen's d) were reported. Teacher questionnaire data were analyzed descriptively. Qualitative data were coded thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and triangulated with quantitative outcomes.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Result

4.1.1 Quantitative Findings: Speaking Fluency

Table 1. summarizes key fluency metrics (pre vs. post).

Measure	Pre Mean (SD)	Post Mean (SD)	t	p	Cohen's d
Mean Length of Run (words)	6.2 (1.8)	7.9 (2.0)	9.12	< .001	0.83
Speech Rate (syllables/min)	95.4 (12.5)	104.7 (13.1)	7.45	< .001	0.68
Repair Frequency (repairs/min)	2.8 (0.9)	1.9 (0.7)	8.20	< .001	0.75

All three measures showed statistically significant improvement with moderate to large effect sizes, indicating increased automaticity (higher MLR and speech rate) and reduced self-repair behaviors.

4.1.2 Teacher Assessment Practices (Questionnaire)

Post-implementation, 8/10 teachers reported increased use of formative assessment (peer feedback, rubrics, performance recordings). Mean agreement on the statement "I use performance-based assessments to evaluate speaking" was 4.2/5 (SD = 0.6). However, 7/10 teachers indicated challenges aligning classroom tasks with district summative exams.

4.1.3 Qualitative Findings

Three major themes emerged:

- Enhanced Communicative Engagement:** Observations and student interviews revealed higher willingness to communicate; students reported tasks felt "meaningful" and "fun," increasing practice opportunities.
- Shifts in Teacher Role and Assessment:** Teachers described shifts from lecturing to facilitating and reported adopting formative tools (audio portfolios, peer rubrics). Several teachers noted improved insight into students' speaking progress through recorded artifacts.
- Structural and Policy Constraints:** Teachers expressed tensions between task-based instruction and preparation for high-stakes grammar-oriented exams. Time constraints and large class sizes impeded richer feedback cycles.

4.2 Discussion

4.2.1 TBLT and Improved Fluency

Quantitative improvements in MLR, speech rate, and reduced repairs align with theoretical expectations: repeated meaningful output and task practice foster automatization and fluency (Bygate, 2001; Skehan, 1998). The moderate to large effect sizes corroborate prior experimental studies demonstrating TBLT's efficacy for oral fluency when tasks are sequenced and include opportunities for rehearsal and feedback (Ellis, 2003; Willis & Willis, 2007).

4.2.2 Assessment Practices: Movement Toward Authenticity

Teacher reports and observations indicate a notable shift toward performance-based assessment—consistent with recommendations by Bachman and Palmer (1996) and Brown & Hudson (1998). Use of audio/video portfolios provided longitudinal evidence of speaking development, supporting more valid assessment of communicative competence (Fulcher, 2010). Nonetheless, teachers' partial adoption suggests that assessment literacy and practical constraints limit full implementation (Stiggins, 2002).

4.2.3 Systemic Barriers and Policy Alignment

Despite pedagogical gains, systemic barriers persisted especially the need to prepare students for standardized tests emphasizing discrete accuracy. This tension mirrors findings in contexts where high-stakes assessments shape classroom priorities (James, 2010; McKinley & Rose, 2012). For sustainable reform, policy makers should consider aligning assessment frameworks with communicative curriculum aims, providing teacher training, and adjusting accountability measures.

4.2.4 Implications for Teacher Development

Teachers benefited from initial professional development but requested ongoing coaching focused on assessment design, rubric construction, and actionable feedback strategies. Professional development that models task cycles, scoring rubrics, and efficient feedback can bridge the gap between curriculum ideals and classroom realities (Richards, 2017; Freeman, 2016).

Limitations include the quasi-experimental design (no randomized control group), relatively short intervention period (one semester), and context specificity (urban Indonesian pilot). Future longitudinal and cross-contextual studies could examine retention effects and scalability.

5. CONCLUSION

This study provides empirical support for task-based curriculum reform as a means to enhance EFL students' speaking fluency and to encourage more authentic assessment practices. Gains in fluency measures, combined with qualitative evidence of increased engagement and formative assessment use, suggest TBLT's potential to meet communicative objectives. Effective and sustainable reform, however, requires systemic support: alignment of high-stakes assessment policies, continued teacher professional development, and infrastructural provisions for performance assessment. Policymakers and curriculum designers should thus pursue integrated strategies that reconcile pedagogical innovation with assessment accountability.

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