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DEVELOPING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN EFL THROUGH TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING: CHALLENGES AND PEDAGOGICAL REFLECTIONS.

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Annotation. *This paper examines communicative language teaching methodologies, focusing primarily on Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), which remains a central topic in contemporary EFL instruction. In contrast to traditional approaches, TBLT provides educators with a distinct alternative by fostering an authentic, learner-centered environment rooted in students' personal experiences and interests. Prioritizing the learning process over the final outcome, this methodology enables students to acquire language skills through meaningful, goal-oriented communication. The tasks utilized within this framework generally fall into two categories: authentic real-world scenarios and targeted pedagogical exercises designed specifically for classroom instruction.*

Key words: *competence, TBLT (Task-Based language teaching), interaction, authentic, communicative, strategic, pragmatic, linguistic skills, sociolinguistic, teaching philosophy*

It is clear that modern English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction increasingly favors a communicative orientation. Whereas traditional methods emphasized structural accuracy over meaning, current practice prioritizes functional communicative ability. A natural progression of Communicative Language Teaching is Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), an instructional model centered on meaningful tasks as the primary unit of lesson design and delivery.

As noted earlier, contemporary EFL methodologies highlight communication at their core.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) likewise identifies communicative competence as one of four key competencies learners must build. Because TBLT treats communication as a central vehicle for learning, it serves as a leading framework for cultivating communicative competence. Rather than focusing solely on linguistic output, TBLT prioritizes the learning process itself: students acquire language by communicating purposefully while completing tasks. Accordingly, examining how TBLT functions in EFL classrooms—and evaluating outcomes from practical implementation—remains highly relevant for ongoing instructional practice.

Successful interaction requires more than avoiding communication breakdowns. Mastering formal linguistic elements—such as grammar, lexis, pronunciation, and orthography—does not guarantee effective communication on its own. Sociolinguistic competence enables speakers to tailor their message to a specific context and address interlocutors appropriately. In any exchange, speakers must account for their interlocutor's social and cultural background, status, age, occupation, and personality, alongside when and where the interaction takes place.

Without awareness of these situational and cultural cues, communication can easily falter.

Effective speech therefore balances linguistic accuracy with sociolinguistic appropriateness. For instance, a teacher interacts with students within institutional roles during class, whereas encountering those same individuals in town on a weekend involves a very different social dynamic.

I bring twenty years of university teaching experience across a wide range of courses, including Independent Study Skills (ISS), Integrated Skills (IS), Listening and Speaking, Developing Intercultural Competence, as well as lectures in Lexicology and English Literature. In my own teaching, I favor TBLT because it draws on authentic language and engages learners in purposeful real-world tasks—such as consulting a doctor, running an interview, or contacting customer support.

Engaging in task-based work builds transferable competencies in its own right. Learners practice posing questions, negotiating meaning, and collaborating in teams. Through group work, they see alternative ways to solve problems and observe how peers reason and make decisions—capabilities valuable in real-life settings regardless of the language spoken. At the same time, TBLT equips learners with practical language tools needed for everyday scenarios, including introducing themselves and talking about their background, family, interests, preferences, and needs within culturally appropriate norms.

One particularly successful ISS session I taught involved first-year B2-level students working on "Improving Memory." I introduced several mnemonic strategies—including acronyms, associative links, the method of loci, and chunking—supported by short instructional videos. After each technique was demonstrated, students completed hands-on tasks such as creating their own acronyms or building associative narratives. A standout favorite was voicing over a silent video clip, which proved lively, humorous, and naturally interactive. With Uzbek students, who generally operate at a B1–B2 level, grammatical or lexical accuracy rarely poses a major obstacle.

By contrast, working with Turkmen students presents distinct challenges. As international students admitted without entrance exams, many enter with only foundational English skills. Some struggle to structure ideas in speech and lean heavily on their first language (L1), which also carries over into their writing. Because I do not speak their L1, feelings of isolation and self-consciousness can arise, and individual personality traits sometimes compound reticence. In my second-year English Literature lectures and seminars, practical sessions offer the main window into assessing spoken communicative competence. However, fear of making errors in front of Uzbek peers often leads Turkmen students to remain quiet. Grouping Turkmen students together has also struggled due to low motivation and the complexity of literary coursework, while encouraging Russian (where my priority is content comprehension rather than spoken fluency) has not resolved the gap because many do not speak Russian either.

Linguistic—or grammatical—competence remains essential alongside communication. I view linguistic competence as the ability to accurately apply grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, punctuation, and spelling—spanning morphology, phonetics, semantics, syntax, and phonology.

Learners need this foundation to form well-structured sentences. Although serious grammatical errors are uncommon among my first-year students, occasional difficulties do emerge—such as distinguishing run-on sentences, sentence fragments, and compound or complex clauses, or misusing vocabulary—pointing to gaps in linguistic competence.

Adapting a TBLT lesson to place explicit focus on linguistic competence is demanding. In methodology literature, TBLT is often described as giving students material to engage with actively so they can express ideas freely and use their own words without constant anxiety over grammar, vocabulary, or mechanics (Abraham, 2015). Similarly, Nunan (2004) characterizes a task as classroom work in which learners comprehend, produce, or interact in the target language while focusing primarily on meaning rather than form. Because TBLT is not primarily designed to teach grammatical form directly, some learners feel they are not "really" being taught if no explicit grammar rule is introduced during a task.

While I agree that grammatical competence deserves attention, weaving it into TBLT requires deliberate planning, time, and creativity. In my ISS lesson on memory improvement, for example, handouts containing proper nouns provide a natural opportunity to focus on capitalization and proper names, while story-based visualization tasks can highlight grammatical categories such as tense usage (for instance, the Past Simple when recounting events). Ultimately, strong linguistic competence helps learners produce higher-quality task outcomes.

Because intended meaning can shift substantially across cultures, identical expressions may be interpreted in very different ways (Murray, 2010). Cross-cultural effectiveness therefore depends not only on linguistic knowledge but also on pragmatic competence—the ability to convey communicative intent appropriately and interpret others' intent in context. Cultural norms, linguistic backgrounds, speaker relationships, setting, and timing all shape interpretation and can easily cause pragmatic misunderstandings. Consider *"Can you lift this box?"*: depending on context, it may function as a polite request for help or as a literal question about physical strength.

During the silent-video voicing activity in my ISS memory class, three characters appeared in an office scene. Dividing the class into two groups produced two distinct polylogues: one centered on recruiting a new employee, and the other depicting an office manager, a secretary, and the secretary's husband resolving a personal matter. Those divergent interpretations stemmed directly from pragmatics, and forming three or four groups would likely have generated even more varied scenarios.

Strategic competence is equally vital. Even learners with solid grammar and broad vocabulary can freeze when they lack ready-made phrasing to express what they mean. Strategic competence is the capacity to navigate unexpected communicative hurdles and use compensatory strategies when linguistic resources fall short. It is critical in foreign language learning and can explain why seemingly strong students sometimes falter on oral assessments when trying to convey ideas beyond their immediate linguistic repertoire.

Sociolinguistic competence is another pillar of effective EFL instruction. It concerns how contextual factors—such as cultural norms, setting, timing, and participants—govern whether an utterance is socially appropriate rather than merely grammatical.

Even advice that is grammatically well-formed can miss the mark if it does not fit the situation. Learners demonstrate sociolinguistic competence when they adjust their speech to suit the context. When strong linguistic competence is paired with weak sociolinguistic competence, learners often fall back on the social rules of their native language, producing grammatically correct utterances that sound unnatural, confusing, or off-putting to listeners from another culture.

Building students' sociolinguistic competence is not straightforward. Teaching culture and sociolinguistic rules explicitly is complex because culture itself is multifaceted and difficult to unpack for learners whose proficiency is still developing—which is why explicit cultural instruction is often reserved for higher proficiency levels. In diverse classrooms with varied backgrounds, navigating cultural topics requires particular care.

My own teaching philosophy has taken shape over two decades of experience at Bukhara State University and a year teaching at Specialized Public School No. 16 in Bukhara. Teaching diverse learner groups led me to experiment with numerous methods and techniques, while teaching Tajik to learners from the United States and Russian to Japanese and Korean business professionals further broadened my perspective on effective instruction.

For me, three core pillars anchor effective teaching:

1. **A welcoming, supportive classroom atmosphere**
2. **Prioritizing meaningful content over form or style ("what to say" rather than "how to say it")**
3. **Thoughtful integration of technology** (such as ICT, multimedia, and virtual tours)

Classroom Atmosphere

Learners thrive in an environment where they feel safe, respected, and valued. Building that climate requires intentional effort from the teacher—setting the tone with a warm greeting, keeping materials and classroom organization clear to reduce friction, structuring activities so every learner can experience success, and encouraging peer interaction alongside critical and analytical thinking. In my own classes, I make a point of thanking and encouraging students even when their answers are hesitant or off-target. Occasionally, that surprises learners who expect praise only for completely right answers, so clarity around feedback remains an ongoing balance.

Content Over Manner ("What to Say, Not How to Say It")

When learners engage with compelling content through purposeful tasks, language is absorbed more naturally within authentic discourse rather than treated as isolated bits. During a first-year debate club last year, I noticed a telling pattern: many students prepared elaborate speeches packed with adjectives, smooth phrasing, and polished delivery while paying little attention to substance. When I shared brief notes summarizing the actual arguments made, they were surprised to see how few distinct ideas had been conveyed. Integrating content and language—an approach widely recognized in European educational frameworks—supports both deeper subject engagement and stronger functional language growth over time.

Technology Integration

Digital tools can enrich input quality, expand access to authentic materials, and support more relevant feedback.

As scholars such as Bill Robertson and Min Pun have observed, multimedia and internet resources can increase learner engagement and bring real-world communication closer to the classroom, even as some educators feel hesitant or cautious about adopting unfamiliar technologies. Effective integration depends on pairing tools purposefully with pedagogical goals rather than adding technology for its own sake.

In conclusion, my teaching philosophy rests on combining a supportive classroom climate, content-rich instruction, and purposeful technology use—supported by clear structure and expectations so open discussion and collaboration can flourish. Having dreamed since age three of becoming an English teacher and working in the main building of the University, I continue to find deep fulfillment in the profession.

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