Using Task-Based Learning with Students of Academic English

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Abstract
The purposes of this study were to study the effects of using task-based learning (TBL) to teach English for Academic Purposes (EAP) students and to explore their opinions towards TBL at Thammasat University.Forty students were chosen via purposely selected sampling. The research instruments included a reading and writing pretest-posttest, a speaking pretest-posttest, and a questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into three parts: the students' demographic information, the students' opinions about Pre-Task, During Task or Task Cycle, and Post-Task, as well as their additional opinions and suggestions of TBL. The data was statistically analyzed by mean, standard deviation, and *t*-test for dependent samples. The results of this study indicated that the reading-writing and speaking abilities of EAP students through TBL after the experiment were significantly higher at the .05 level. Similarly, they were highly satisfied to study with TBL.

Keywords: English language teaching, language teaching approach, task-based learning, teaching English as a foreign language

Introduction
A Chapter in the Educational Reform Act states that Thai learners should have global literacy (Prapphal, 2003). In addition, university graduates should be able to exchange knowledge, have interactive networking, and collaborate in international research projects. In fact, the stakeholders expect university graduates to have communication skills in English and Thai. Therefore, learning and teaching English is important for both educational and career purposes.

However, there are many problems caused by the quantity and quality of English language teachers in both public and private institutions in Thailand. Biyaem (1997) has reported that not only the teachers but also the learners faced many problems, which is still true even today. The students have difficulties in using English because of a lack of opportunity to use English in their daily lives, unchallenging English lessons, being passive learners, and a lack of responsibility for their own learning.

In addition, Noom-ura (2013, citing Wiriyachitra, 2002) has stated that problems involving students who wished to speak English fluently are challenging interference from Thai language, lack of opportunity to speak English with classmates, being poorly-motivated and lack of responsibility for their own learning.

Moreover, Prapphal (2003) has suggested that teachers should choose appropriate tasks for students to enhance their students' general proficiency as well as achieve the desired goals and objectives. Tasks and activities must be designed to expose the students to the target language and increase their motivation to learn the language in class and acquire the language outside of class. Furthermore, Wongsothorn, Hiranburana, and Chinnawongs (2002) have predicted that English language classrooms of the future would be less teacher-fronted. Greater emphasis would be on cooperative learning, productive skills, and English communicative skills.

In order to increase the student's general proficiency and achieve the desired goals and objectives of English language learning, task-based language learning or teaching should be utilized since it has strengthened the following six principles and practices: 1) a needs-based approach to content selection, 2) an emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language, 3) the introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation, 4) the provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language, but also on the learning process itself, 5) an enhancement of the learners' own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning, and 6) the linking of classroom language learning with language use outside the classroom (Nunan, 2006).

Literature Reviews
Task-Based Language Teaching
One of the most important things about the task-based language teaching is that it promotes learners' confidence by providing them with plenty of opportunities to use English in the classroom without being constantly afraid of making mistakes (Willis & Willis, 2011). TBL can also be used not only to teach reading and to provide valuable writing practice but also to teach the spoken language through working in pairs or groups which give learners more opportunities to use the language themselves.

Various TBL designs have been proposed (e.g. Estaire & Zanon, 1994; Lee 2000; Prabhu, 1987; Skehan, 1996; Willis, 1996 as cited in Ellis, 2006). However, they all have three principal phases in common: Pre-task, During task or Task cycle, and Post-task. The first phase, 'Pre-Task', concerns the different activities that teachers and students can tackle before they start the task, such as the purposes and the expected outcomes of the task, with or without time restriction. The second phase, the 'During Task', focuses on when and how the task must be completed, involves timing and grouping, and provides different instructional choices as necessary. The final phase, 'Post-Task' involves language analysis and reflection on the task performance.

In addition, the TBL teacher has different roles: leader and organizer of discussion, manager of group/pair work, facilitator, motivator, language "knower" and advisor, and language teacher.

Similarly, TBL learners have various roles: the writer/secretary/reporter for a pair or group, language consultant, leader/chairperson to make sure that everyone in the group has a chance to talk, spokesperson, and an observer.

Willis and Willis (2011) suggest seven types of tasks, confirming this concept by gathering ideas from teachers in Malaysia, working at different levels in schools and colleges: 1) listing: brainstorming and/or fact finding, 2) ordering and sorting: sequencing, ranking, classifying, 3) matching, 4) comparing: finding similarities or differences, 5) problem-solving: logic puzzles, real-life problems, case studies, incomplete text, 6) projects and creative tasks, and 7) sharing personal experiences; storytelling, anecdotes, reminiscences, opinions, and reactions.

Also, TBL is of particular relevance as language is used for a genuine purpose, meaning that real communication should take place. Furthermore, learners are forced to consider language forms in general rather than to focus on a single structure. Another way in which TBL is more relevant to learners is that the aim of TBL is to integrate all four skills and move from fluency to accuracy plus fluency.

In Thammasat University, EAP students are generally low-proficient in all skills since most of them received a C or D grade in their foundation courses. In addition, they have low motivation to learn English and their participation in class is quite low. After considering the problems and reviewing the literature to find ways to enhance teaching and learning English as well as the students' motivation to learn English, the researcher found that the task-based approach is a promising approach in enhancing English skills of EAP students at Thammasat University. A three-step teaching process of TBL, Pre-task activities, During-task, and Post-task activities, including seven types of tasks, were chosen to investigate whether the problems of EAP students in the four skills of English could be solved with TBL or whether TBL could enhance their motivation to learn English and increase their cooperative learning in class.

Previous Studies on Task-based Language Teaching
Numerous studies have found that task-based language teaching has a positive influence on language development and learners' attitude toward language learning. For example, a large number of studies on task-based learning have been conducted from different English skills such as English language communicative ability (Rattanawong, 2004; Sittichai, Thummapon, & Churngchow, 2005), Vadhamara, 1996), listening and speaking ability (Ruenyoot, 2011; Sae-Ong,

2010; Wichitpaisan, 2005), reading ability (Thaneepakorn, 2003), and writing ability (Ruengrat, 2006).

Research Objectives

The objectives of the study are to study the effects of using task-based learning to teach EAP students at Thammasat University and to explore the students' opinions about tasked-based learning.

Methodology

Participants

The participants were 40 students from two classes that were taught by the researcher. These undergraduate students enrolled in EAP as an elective course at the Language Institute, Thammasat University. The course aimed to equip students with four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing used for advanced studies and future careers. All students passed the prerequisite foundation course before taking this course. The majority of them were second-year students from the Faculty of Science and Technology, majoring in material sciences and physics electronics.

Research Design and Instruments

This research is an experimental study with one group pretest and posttest. The instruments used included a reading and writing pretest-posttest, a speaking pretest-posttest, an opinion questionnaire, and the lesson plans for 12 weeks. The validity was ensured by 1) the lessons were planned along with the course textbook- *Tech Talk Intermediate* (Hollett & Sydes, 2013) and 2) all research tools were checked for the content validity by a native speaker and ELT experts through appropriate Item Objective Congruence (IOC) indices.

Data Collection Procedure

Before the study started, all research instruments were developed, validated, piloted, and revised and ethical concerns were considered throughout the procedure. Following this, the reading and writing pretest and the speaking pretest were administered. In Week one, the researcher introduced TBL to the students to raise their awareness of using ONLY English in all communicative tasks and its benefits and helped them understand the different roles of students when conducting task-based activities. During the study, the researcher incorporated three different stages of performing tasks: Pre-Task, During Task, and Post-Task, as well as seven types of tasks and then checked and evaluated by observing the students while performing tasks and then asked the students to give opinions towards task-based learning at the end of each task-related lesson. In the last week, the researcher administered the reading and writing and speaking posttests and the questionnaire. Having gathered all research instruments, the researcher analyzed and interpreted data from the pretests, posttests, and questionnaire responses.

Data Analysis

The mean, standard deviation, and t-test for dependent samples were used to analyze the reading and writing tests and the speaking tests, while the questionnaire was analyzed by mean

and standard deviation. Finally, content-analysis and frequency-count were used to analyze the student open-ended opinions, suggestions, problems, and solutions to TBL English learning.

Results

Table 1   *Students' average reading and writing pretest and posttest (Total score: 30)*

		Mean	**N**	**Std .Deviation**	**Std .Error Mean**
Pair 1	Pretest	10.71	40	4.642	.734
	Posttest	23.19	40	3.502	.554

Table 1 shows the average scores of the reading and writing pretest and posttest of the students who studied the EAP course with TBL. A significant differencewas found from the average score of 10.71 in the pretest to 23.19 in the posttest. The paired sample t-test in Table 2 confirms the significant level.

Table 2   *Paired sample t-test reading and writing pretest and posttest*

		Paired Difference							
		Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig)2 tailed(
Pair 1	Pretest-Posttest	-12.48	4.359	.689	-13.87	-11.08	-18.10	39	.000*

 (p<0. 05)*

A similar result was found with the speaking pretest and posttest as shown in Table 3 and Table 4. The speaking test results show a significant level at 0.05 from the paired sample t-test.

Table 3   *Student' average speaking pretest and posttest (Total score: 132)*

		Mean	**N**	**Std .Deviation**	**Std .Error Mean**
Pair 1	Pretest	81.40	40	21.861	3.456
	Posttest	98.38	40	19.278	3.048

Table 4   *Paired sample t-test speaking pretest and posttest*

		Paired Difference							
		Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig)2 tailed(
Pair 1	Pretest-Posttest	-16.98	22.646	3.581	-24.22	-9.73	-4.741	39	.000*

(p<0. 05)*

For the questionnaire results, the students' opinions about Pre-task, During-Task and Post-Task are shown as follows:

Regarding student's opinions about Pre-task, the students' average mean score of 4.20 shows a high level of agreement with the approach. Before performing a task, they thought that the teacher should inform the purposes of a task (mean score = 4.53), should demonstrate how to do a task (mean = 4.42), and should arrange groups (mean = 3.47). In addition, they believed that they should share a task equally (mean = 4.45) and they liked to find their group members (mean = 4.13).

Concerning the students' opinions about During Task or Task Cycle, the students' average mean score of 3.88 shows that they agreed with the approach at a high level. They agreed that while performing a task, better students helped weaker students (mean = 4.26), students collaborated more (mean = 4.18), they were thinking of how to communicate rather than thinking of accuracy (mean = 4.13), they had more fun studying (mean = 4.11) and they were determined to complete the task (mean = 4.08). However, the students moderately agreed that they needed more time to complete the task (mean= 3.66), they used more Thai to complete the task (mean = 3.53), and they were worried that they didn't study the same way as their peers in other different classes (mean = 3.47). The lowest rank with the moderate agreement was that they could complete the task without the teacher's demonstration (mean = 2.84).

With respect to the students' opinions about Post-Task, the average mean score of the students' opinions regarding the Post task was also at a high level of agreement (mean = 3.93) . The highest ranking item (mean = 4.32) shows that the students were proud to complete the task, followed by more learning of difficult vocabulary and listening skill improvement (mean = 4.29). Besides, they thought that tasks were various and suited the text (mean = 4.26), they had various roles doing a task e.g. a speaker, secretary, language counselor, etc. (mean = 4.18), and they could use their English background knowledge (mean = 4.16). However, the students moderately agreed that they liked doing tasks (mean = 3.45), the tasks were difficult (mean = 3.18), and the teacher gave too many tasks (mean = 3.05). The lowest ranking shows that they didn't like to work alone (mean = 2.92).

When the average scores of the three stages were calculated to see the overall picture, it was found that the students' opinion averaged at 4.00, a high level of agreement with TBL approach (see Table 5).

Table 5   *Overall average score from three stages of TBL*

TBL stages	Mean	S.D.	Level of agreement
Pre-task	4.20	0.67	high
During task	3.88	0.73	high
Post-task	3.93	0.71	high
Overall average score	4.00	0.70	high

Discussion

According to the findings, TBL, implemented during the 12-week elective ESP course, positively affected students' English skills and attitudes with increases in motivation, confidence in using English, and willingness to use English. The results of TBL in this study agreed with several research studies that found TBL could improve English language communicative ability (Rattanawong, 2004; Sittichai, Thummapon, &Churngchow, 2005), Vadhamara, 1996), listening

and speaking ability (Ruenyoot, 2011; Sae-Ong, 2010; Wichitpaisan, 2005), reading ability (Thaneepakorn, 2003), and writing ability (Ruengrat, 2006). Positive attitudes regarding motivation, confidence in using English, and willingness to use English were shown in the students' open-ended opinions about the advantages of TBL:

> *"I used English more. I had more courage to use English, and my fright to use English and my dislike of English have been reduced." (Student #31)*

> *"I did tasks and presentations more. This made students think and speak more. I developed my teamwork skill when I exchanged ideas and experiences." (Student #5)*

> *"I thought more through integrated teaching and tasks .I learned how to work with others. This was more interesting and I did not feel bored.") Student #16(*

> *"I was eager to use English more and I developed my listening and speaking Skills." (Student #28)*

Regarding the students' increased proficiency in English, it was found in this study that the students who studied with TBL performed better in the reading and writing posttest. This is because the students said they had learned many things during the three phases of TBL. For example, before doing a task, the teacher had informed purposes of a task and demonstrated how to perform a task, and the students shared a task equally among their group members.

While performing a task, better students helped weaker students, and they collaborated more. In addition, they were thinking of how to communicate rather than thinking of accuracy, and they were determined to complete the task.

After performing a task, they were, therefore, proud to complete the task, had learned more difficult vocabulary, and could use their English background knowledge.

In addition, when they had problems of TBL lessons and activities such as difficult vocabulary, especially technical terms and grammar, they searched the Internet or website, asked peers, or used a dictionary. Therefore, they learned more vocabulary by looking for more information from various sources.

Through the three stages of TBL lessons, the students improved in various areas: their language proficiency: what they knew and what needed to know, the learning process, how to work with others, and how to solve the problems. These findings accorded with Bygate, Skehan, and Swain, 2001 (as cited in Ellis, 2003, p. 5), 'a task requires learners to use the language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective.' The finding also agreed with Willis and Willis (2010, p. 5-6), 'One of the most important things about task-based teaching (TBT) is that it promotes learners' confidence by providing them plenty of opportunities to use the language in the classroom without being constantly afraid of making mistakes. The initial aim of TBT is to

encourage learners to engage in meaning with the language resources they already have. TBT can be used to teach reading and to provide valuable writing practice.'

Not only did the students perform better in reading and writing by studying with TBL, but it was found in this study that they also performed better in speaking. This could be the result of the improvements made in the three phases of task-based learning mentioned above.

In addition, the students said studying with TBL enabled them to use English more through tasks, to understand more since they learned from their mistakes, to collaborate in group work, to practice how to think, to take part in class more, to learn to exchange opinions, and to focus on performing the task using their English background and then learn the language later.

These findings agreed with Nunan (1989, cited in Ellis, 2003 p. 4), 'A communicative task involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form.'

The findings also accorded with Willis and Willis (2011, p. 2-3), 'Task-based teaching is effective if the teachers have confidence to trust the learners and give them every opportunity to use the language for themselves, so they are aware of what they need to learn. The teachers then give form-focused activities to help them develop the language and later do a repeat task which gives them the opportunity to incorporate some of the language they have learned from the earlier stage.'

The focus on learning results are not satisfactorily only in terms of academic achievement; affection and passion in learning should be factors to consider. Thus, the students' opinions regarding TBL should be focused upon. It was found in this study that the overall participant opinion towards TBL was at the high level (mean= 4.00). That means the students were satisfied with this approach. The participants also gave several reasons to recommend TBL, for example, they could practice using English more, they learned how to work with others, TBL made them more interested in class, and they had to use their English, so they understood better than they listened to the lecture.

For these reasons, TBL has been shown to be a suitable alternative approach in language teaching and learning due to its large amount of engagement and involvement on the part of the learners as the more learners become engaged, the more language acquisition they experience, and, in turn, their motivation should also increase. Also, their high-level agreement with the approach showed that students were taking more responsibility in their own learning and displayed no resistance to non-lecture approaches in teaching.

Conclusion

From this study, forty students showed significant improvement in all four skills and they agreed with all the three stages of the approach at a high level. From the open-ended question, the students stated that TBL was advantageous because they used more English, learned and understood by themselves outside the class when they did homework, had more practice, understood more, and learned how to work with others through TBL. In addition, they recommended TBL be used with other courses because of its many learning benefits.

Pedagogical Implications and Recommendations

From the dual roles as a teacher and the researcher in this study, the researcher would like to recommend that English teachers teaching similar courses write the TBL lesson plans together to gather materials, brainstorm and make decisions on task types and evaluation criteria. While many tasks could be achieved in class, encouragement for autonomous learning should be maximized. This means some tasks such as task-related vocabulary and grammar exercises, listening and reading exercises could be given as homework or learned outside class time.

For further study, a larger number of participants in foundation courses and other ESP courses that focus on business, politics, engineering, nursing, social sciences, and the law should be employed to generalize the findings. Interviews or classroom observation could possibly help gain moredetails of the students' real needs, collaboration, quantity and quality of English use, etc. to counteract or support TBL.

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