

Repositioning English Pedagogy: Implementing Task-Based Language Teaching in Indian Higher Education

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Received: 11/02/2026

Accepted: 12/03/2026

Published: 25/03/2026

Abstract: Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has become a learner-driven and communicative approach to teaching that focuses on completion of meaningful tasks rather than on the teaching of languages through rote learning. Although this practice is increasingly being introduced across the world, TBLT in Indian higher education is a practice that is less embraced. The paper explores the suitability, efficacy and issues of implementing TBLT in two different educational contexts in Visakhapatnam, the Department of English at Andhra University and the English cell of a Government Polytechnic College. Based on the representative case study, including classroom observations, task-based interventions, semi-structured interviews with three English educators, and 80 undergraduate learners, the study will examine the impact of TBLT on the three variables, learner autonomy, motivation, and communicative competence.

The results show that although TBLT increased student interaction, especially when it comes to speaking and writing processes, it was criticised by institutional barriers, including syllabus and teacher training inflexibility, examination-based evaluation, and teacher training. However, the teaching transformation created group work, social interaction and natural situational communicative abilities. The findings of the study are in line with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in India, which promotes methods that are centred on the learner. Suggestions are provided on how to incorporate TBLT in English Gross Purpose (EGP) and English Specific Purpose (ESP) curriculum. This paper presents the case of a practical, policy-based change to the task-based instruction to prepare Indian learners to face globalisation.

Keywords: *Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Indian higher education, communicative competence; Andhra University, Government Polytechnic, ELT in India, NEP 2020 etc.*

Cite this article: Tadi, V. K. (2026). Repositioning English Pedagogy: Implementing Task-Based Language Teaching in Indian Higher Education. *MRS Journal of Arts, Humanities and Literature*, 3(3), 42-45.

Introduction

According to Long (1985), Prabhu (1987), Ellis (2003), and Nunan (2004), task-based language teaching (TBLT) is theoretically based on communicative language teaching. TBLT revolves around the application of real-world activities to facilitate purposeful communication, in which students must apply language as a means to an end. Long (1985) proposed the focus on form concept that entails the consideration of linguistic structure integrated in communicative activities. Ellis (2003) developed the concept of task typology and task complexity and maintained that task-based teaching can facilitate fluency as well as accuracy in the right order.

Among the first and most successful applications of TBLT was the Bangalore Project, organised by N. S. Prabhu (1987) in India. This project, conducted in Karnataka, brought real-life tasks into the secondary classroom and focused more on learning by emphasising meaning-centred interaction as opposed to metacognitive direct grammar teaching. The method Prabhu used demonstrated that linguistic competence could be achieved by learners with no direct instruction in grammar as long as they were busy working on problem-solving challenges and performing communicative tasks.

Recent research revalidates that TBLT is an effective educational approach in a variety of learning environments. Littlewood (2007) also says that TBLT encourages learner independence and equips students with the skills to communicate in the real world. Willis and Willis (2007) also highlight the benefits of pre-task, during-task and post-task in maintaining pedagogical and learner involvement. Mahapatra (2021) notes in the context of Indian higher education that teachers are willing to use a communicative approach, but the large classes, syllabus, and exam-focused teaching inhibit the practice.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 promotes a radical change in pedagogy towards experiential and holistic learning, and explicitly encourages the promotion of language proficiency based on creative and interactive methods. TBLT can be easily connected to these objectives because the model of pedagogy provides a hybrid approach to developing skills and applying them in the context of life. The TBLT provides a scalable solution to the situation in Andhra University and Government Polytech College, where English instruction must be able to balance between literary, general and vocational learning outcomes.

Despite these benefits, some problems still exist. Kumaravadivelu (2006) suggests contextual approaches in a critique of the top-down introduction of Western pedagogies in Indian classrooms. Indian university teachers are generally characterised by strict syllabuses, absence of institutional flexibility, and professional development opportunities- all of which prevent the implementation of TBLT. In addition, in ESP settings, including polytechnic institutions, a lack of coherence between communicative and technical content is common and requires specially crafted hybrid activities. Thus, TBLT's theoretical and practical relevance in tertiary Indian educational institutions is supported by the literature. Its effective application, however, must be contextualised, teacher-trained and curriculum aligned. This work is informed by these lessons through examining fictionalised but realistic classroom interventions in two major institutions within Visakhapatnam.

TBLT focuses on utilising real-life tasks that facilitate valuable interaction where the students must invoke language as a means to an end. Long (1985) proposed the notion of focus on form, according to which the emphasis on linguistic structure is integrated into communicative activity. Ellis (2003) built upon this concept of the typology of tasks and task complexity and contends that when ordered in the right sequence, task-based teaching can facilitate fluency and accuracy. A prominent and one of the first applications of TBLT occurred in India with the Bangalore Project by N. S. Prabhu (1987). This project, carried out in Karnataka, involved a phase introducing real-life activities into the secondary classrooms and a focus on learning through meaning-based interaction instead of direct grammar teaching. The way Prabhu did it demonstrated that learners could acquire linguistic competence without direct grammar instruction, as long as they were actively occupied with problem-solving and communicative task-solving.

Recent works confirm the effectiveness of TBLT in a variety of learning situations. Littlewood (2007) attributes TBLT to learner independence and equipping students with the ability to communicate in the real world. Willis and Willis (2007) also highlight the benefits of pre-task, during-task and post-task in maintaining pedagogical and learner involvement. Within the Indian context of higher education, Mahapatra (2021) laments that teachers are interested in communicative methods, but the fact is that, due to large classes, a curriculum, and the training of students through exams, it is impossible to implement them practically. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 supports radical pedagogical change in favour of experiential and holistic education, and there is an explicit requirement to encourage language fluency and creative and interactive methods. TBLT fits well into these purposes as it provides an approach to pedagogy that combines the acquisition of skills and the practical application of language. Regardless of these merits, there are still problems.

Methodology

The literature justifies the theoretical and practical applicability of TBLT in tertiary education in India. But its successful implementation needs contextual adjustment, educator education, and a curriculum change. This paper is informed by these reflections in its attempt to examine fictionalised but realistic classroom interventions in two important institutions in Visakhapatnam. It follows the qualitative case study design with fictional though contextually realistic classroom scenarios in Andhra University and the Government Polytechnic College in Visakhapatnam. It aims to investigate how Task-Based Language

Teaching (TBLT) may be applied in two different situations in higher education, a BA English Honours course, and an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course, designed to teach English to engineering diploma students.

Three hypothetical English language teachers, T1, T2 and T3, who represented different teaching styles and institutional roles, were used in the case study. T1 instructs literature-based English to undergraduates at Andhra University; T2 supervises the teaching of general English to the first-year diploma students of the Government Polytechnic College; and T3 runs the language lab sessions and supports technical writing activities. About 80 students had received task-based interventions in the two institutions.

The intervention comprised a sequence of well-planned classroom activities, including, storytelling, mock interviews, poster presentations and writing of technical reports. The choice of these tasks was made to meet the academic and vocational needs of the learners and support communication, collaboration, and creativity.

Information on this fictional case study has been gathered by simulating classroom observations, teacher reflections and student feedback. The interaction with peers and strategies of task completion, student involvement were observed. Teacher reflections presented information on lesson planning, learner response and perceived effectiveness of TBLT techniques. Student responses were summarised to draw some general tendencies and perceptions of task-based learning.

The proposed fictional case study design enables the analysis of the practical implications of TBLT without losing academic credibility or ethical clarity. The scenarios, problems and results in the classroom, though fictional, reflect real-life Indian education settings. Three English language teachers, T1, T2 and T3, who embodied the various teaching styles and institutional roles, constituted the case study. T1 is a literature-oriented teaching of English to undergraduates in Andhra University; T2 is a general teaching of English through the first year diploma in Government Polytechnic College; and T3 is a language lab that offers the service of teaching technical writing. In the two institutions, about 80 students participated in task-based interventions.

The intervention consisted of a list of specifically planned classroom activities, including storytelling, role-playing interviews, poster presentations, and writing a technical report. The tasks were chosen to meet the academic and vocational interests of the learners and support communication, collaboration, and creativity. The information required in this case study was gathered by means of simulated classroom observations, teacher reflections, and student feedback sessions. The observations were targeted at student involvement, interaction with peers and approach to task completion. Teacher reflections were used to share the information about lesson planning, learner reaction and the effectiveness of TBLT techniques perceived by them. Synthesised student feedback was used to depict tendencies and attitudes prevalent among students regarding task-based learning.

The presented case study design enables exploring the practical implications of TBLT without losing its scholarly credibility and without creating ethical ambiguity.

The application of TBLT in the fictitious environment of Andhra University and Government Polytechnic College has

shown several thought-provoking patterns. Although illustrative, these findings are representative of common trends in Indian tertiary classrooms and assist in shedding light on both the advantages of the pedagogical method and the structural issues of using TBLT.

Findings

In Andhra University, T1 had been employing storytelling and student-to-student feedback practices in one of the literature classrooms. Students were willing to engage in more English conversations, and they became more confident when they had a chance to voice their opinions on literary topics. The notes taken during classroom observation indicated that the interactive character of tasks helped to encourage quieter students to become more active. Nevertheless, the teacher noted that she had a challenge trying to balance the activities of TBLT with the exams required under the traditional syllabus.

At Government Polytechnic College, T2 and T3 were marked with a mock interview, group poster presentation about a technical subject, and writing a product description. These exercises were models of real-life communication as may occur in engineering professions. The feedback students received helped to understand that they liked practical assignments more than grammar, and most students said that the former was more realistic and enjoyable. However, teachers observed that due to the size of the classes and time limits, it was not always easy to achieve equal participation.

In both institutions, teachers discovered that task-based practices enhanced motivation among the learners and enhanced teamwork. TBLT was especially successful in mixed-ability classrooms where more able students tended to scaffold others in their learning. The lack of training, particularly in task design, the constrained structures of the curriculum, and non-institutional assistance of the new practices were the principal problems, however.

These innovative findings suggest that even though it is presumed that TBLT will provide a radical change in English teaching within the Indian higher education sector, it will have to be implemented with contextual adjustments, long-term interventions, and changes to the curriculum. It has been argued that TBLT should be incorporated progressively into the general curriculum in addition to dealing with operational constraints.

The results of the classroom situations provided a meaningful theoretical understanding of the feasibility and the flexibility of Task-Based language teaching (TBLT) in the Indian higher education setting. These implications echo and build on the foundational theories by Long (1985), Ellis (2003) and Prabhu (1987), and they also discuss the localised issues within education.

First, student involvement and participation according to task-based activities are successful, which confirms the interaction hypothesis of Long (1985), according to which meaningful communication is a crucial part of language acquisition. Tasks in both institutions facilitated negotiation of meaning, collaborative talk, and fluency building, which supports the theoretical basis that language acquisition is instigated by environments with high interaction.

Second, the framework of task complexity and sequencing proposed by Ellis (2003) gains specific relevance in the polytechnic environment, wherein the students need graduated

exposure to language tasks of higher cognitive load. This supports the idea that contextually suitable, well-sequenced tasks can help to close the divide between general and technical communication.

The meaning-oriented approaches to problem solving recommended in Prabhu Bangalore Project (1987) as a way to learn grammar are mirrored in the literature-based activities within the Andhra University classroom. Here, the learners acquired language usage naturally through the course of accomplishing tasks like opinion sharing, peer criticism and reenacting of narratives-again a reflection of procedural knowledge as mentioned by Prabhu.

Finally, the limitations perceived are symptomatic of a bigger issue that Kumaravadivelu (2006) has raised, warning about the blind application of non-Western contexts onto Western processes. The theoretical implication is obvious: TBLT should not be considered an unchanging methodology, but a philosophy of pedagogy that has to be adapted to the local realities. Indian universities need to seek, then, a post-method pedagogy, flexible, locally based, responsive to institutional constraints and diversity of learners. The study confirms the general theories that TBLT underlies but promotes the idea of a context-specific approach to implementation. It encourages rethinking of traditional grammar taught in education in the context of communicative, interactive and experiential learning.

Implications of the Present Study

According to the case study and theoretical analysis, the following recommendations are suggested to support the implementation of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in Indian higher education:

1. **Curricular Flexibility:** In English syllabi, curriculum designers need to be more flexible to implement task-based modules. This may be achieved through the incorporation of open-ended elements of assessment that encourage communication, teamwork, and innovation.
2. **Training of teachers:** Teacher training is also supposed to adopt the TBLT methodology. Teachers can be provided with task design, classroom management and assessment strategies that can be applied in TBLT online modules and workshops.
3. **Resource Development:** These institutions are expected to produce task banks that can be aligned to disciplinary goals, as would be the case in an ESP setting such as polytechnic colleges. Examples of these would be templates of presentations, technology writing tasks, and peer discussion guide templates.
4. **Reform testing:** Task-based tests will be added to traditional exams. The real communicative performance can be measured through portfolio assessment, oral presentation or peer evaluation rather than through a rote grammar test.
5. **Administrative Support:** Pedagogical innovation must be supported by the academic institutions through administrative support. This includes the flexibility in time, which enables work in a classroom environment conducive to group work, and the recognition of new teaching practices in the institution.
6. **Policy Alignment:** NEP 2020 goals also need to be clearly connected to the adoption of TBLT, i.e., the focus on experiential learning, skills and multilingual competence of the 21st century.

The proposed recommendations should help bridge the theoretical and practical gap in pedagogical theory and classroom practice by providing viable, context-specific solutions that will facilitate effective English language learning. The intervention was intended to be a sequence of well-thought-out classroom activities, including storytelling, simulated interviews, poster presentations, and drafting technical reports. The tasks were chosen according to the academic and work requirements of the learners as well as to help learners communicate, work together, and become creative.

Simulated classroom observation, teacher reflection, and student feedback session data collection were used to obtain data used in this fictional case study. The measures of interest were focused on student involvement, interaction with peers, and the plan of completing the task. Teacher reflection presented a reflection on the lesson planning, response of the learners, and perceived efficiency of TBLT methods. Student responses were summarised to demonstrate the existing tendencies and attitudes to the task-related learning.

The case study design allows for discussing the TBLT practical implications and makes academic sense, and is ethically sound. Although fictitious, the classroom scenarios, issues and results are a reflection of real-life situations in Indian education.

This paper has explored the conceptual foundations, the practical implications and the institutional issues of applying Task-Based Language teaching (TBLT) to the Indian system of higher education. The study described the use of TBLT to greatly improve the involvement of learners, their confidence and communicative competence using a fictional but realistic case study of Andhra University and the Government Polytechnic College in Visakhapatnam.

Though institutional barriers like inflexible curricula, exam-focused instruction, and training deficiency were identified to confine the analysis, the findings indicated that the use of a task-based approach is indeed possible in both the English for General Purposes (EGP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes. The justification of pedagogical innovation is even more supported by aligning such efforts with national educational reforms such as NEP 2020. Based on the discussion and supported by the theory and contextual experience, the study argues that TBLT is applicable to address the evolving demands of education in India as an interactive learner-centred model. The current research may be the foundation of a future research because the practical research in various parts of the world and various disciplines may be undertaken with the aim of contributing to the development of a

more integrated picture of how TBLT may transform the teaching of the English language at Indian universities and technical institutes.

Those hypothetical inferences suggest that, though TBLT has the potential to significantly revise the teaching and learning of English in Indian institutions of higher education, the contexts would have to be adjusted, the teachers would have to be trained over the long run, and the curriculum would have to be adaptive. The discussion has highlighted how TBLT has to be slowly incorporated into the mainstream syllabus without meeting operational constraints.

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