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Enhancing Sociolinguistic Competence through Task-Based Language Teaching in EFL Classrooms: A Study in the Uzbek Context

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Abstract: This research article delves into the use of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) as a way to improve sociolinguistic competence among university students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Uzbekistan. Sociolinguistic competence is essential for effective communication, enabling learners to interact appropriately across various social and cultural situations. Despite efforts to adopt more communicative teaching methods, many EFL classrooms in Uzbekistan still focus heavily on grammar, often neglecting the pragmatic skills students need. To address this gap, a quasi-experimental study was conducted with 36 undergraduate students, using classroom tasks designed to enhance their understanding of language in context. By employing a mixed-methods approach, the study analyzed pre- and post-tests, recordings of student interactions, and interviews. The results revealed a notable improvement in how students used politeness strategies, controlled language registers, and employed pragmatic routines. The article ultimately calls for significant changes in the curriculum, better teacher training, and the integration of TBLT to help align Uzbekistan's language education with global communication standards, fostering a more effective and context-aware learning experience for students.

Key words: Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Sociolinguistic competence, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Communicative competence, Pragmatic skills, Educational reforms, Quasi-experimental design, Mixed-methods approach, Classroom interaction, Language acquisition, Pragmatics instruction, Uzbek EFL learners, Communication strategies, Contextual language use, Language education reform

1. Introduction and Background

Since the late 20th century, the landscape of language education has shifted dramatically. We've moved away from traditional methods like grammar-translation and audio lingual approaches towards frameworks that emphasize communicative

competence. A pivotal contribution to this evolution was made by Canale and Swain in 1980, who highlighted sociolinguistic competence as a crucial aspect of effective language use. This concept involves understanding how language varies based on social context, cultural norms, and the expectations of interactions.

In Uzbekistan, English has become increasingly important as an international language vital for academic opportunities, diplomacy, and global trade. National educational reforms, particularly the Presidential Decree on Foreign Language Learning in 2012, underline the importance of developing communicative English skills. However, studies, such as those by Abdullaeva in 2020, indicate that classroom practices still largely focus on grammar and vocabulary, often at the expense of pragmatic skills. Consequently, students may become proficient in grammar yet struggle to communicate appropriately in social contexts.

Sociolinguistic competence involves a deep understanding of various speech acts—like making requests or offering apologies—as well as the use of politeness strategies, honorifics, and appropriate variations in language register. Without mastering these elements, learners risk miscommunication or appearing rude, which can hinder their interactions in diverse settings. Scholars such as Taguchi (2011) and Ishihara & Cohen (2010) argue that explicit instruction in pragmatics, integrated into communicative tasks, is essential for preparing students for real-life intercultural exchanges.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) emerges as a promising framework for weaving sociolinguistic development into language curricula. According to Willis and Willis (2007), TBLT involves tasks that mimic authentic communication scenarios, requiring learners to use language in purposeful and interactive ways. Despite its potential, there is a notable lack of empirical studies examining how TBLT influences sociolinguistic competence, particularly in under-explored contexts like Uzbekistan. This study aims to fill that gap by evaluating how a TBLT intervention can enhance students' pragmatic and sociocultural language skills.

By focusing on these aspects, the research not only seeks to improve educational practices but also aspires to empower students, equipping them with the tools necessary for effective communication in a globalized world. This approach acknowledges the rich tapestry of cultural interactions and aims to foster a more nuanced understanding of language use that transcends mere grammatical accuracy.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Communicative Competence and Sociolinguistics

Hymes' groundbreaking work in 1972 on communicative competence shifted the conversation in language education away from a narrow focus on grammatical knowledge. He argued for the importance of sociocultural appropriateness, emphasizing that effective communication goes beyond mere grammar. This idea was further refined by Canale and Swain in 1980, who outlined four critical components of communicative competence: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence.

Sociolinguistic competence specifically involves understanding how language varies based on social factors such as status, age, gender, and cultural expectations. This means that effective communicators can choose their words and expressions based on the context and the people they are interacting with. Scholars like Bachman (1990) and Celce-Murcia (2007) built on this foundation, highlighting the importance of pragmatic routines—such as greetings and closings—as well as the norms of politeness and the patterns of how speech acts are realized.

2.2 Pragmatics Instruction and EFL Classrooms

Research by Ishihara and Cohen (2010), Taguchi (2011), and Bardovi-Harlig (2013) has shown that explicitly teaching pragmatics, paired with opportunities for interactive practice, significantly enhances learners' sociopragmatic competence. However, developing pragmatic skills can be particularly challenging for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, who often have limited exposure to real-world intercultural communication.

In post-Soviet contexts like Uzbekistan, explicit instruction in pragmatics is unfortunately rare. For instance, Juraeva (2021) found that Uzbek EFL textbooks typically lack pragmatic content, leaving students unprepared to navigate social situations that require appropriate language use—such as making requests, offering apologies, or expressing disagreement. This gap in their education can lead to misunderstandings and awkward interactions, which can hinder their ability to communicate effectively in diverse environments.

2.3 Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) offers a promising approach to address these challenges. Rooted in Long's Interaction Hypothesis from 1985, TBLT focuses on meaning-oriented tasks where language serves as a tool for

achieving communicative goals. According to Ellis (2003), these tasks engage learners both cognitively and socially, promoting language acquisition through the negotiation of meaning and interactive exchanges.

Willis and Willis (2007) argue that well-designed tasks naturally encourage the use of pragmatic functions. As students engage in these tasks, they must adapt their language to fit the context and the roles of their conversation partners. While existing research on TBLT shows positive outcomes for fluency, accuracy, and learner motivation, there is still a significant gap in studies exploring its effectiveness in fostering sociolinguistic competence (Yuan & Ellis, 2003; Kasper & Rose, 2002).

This research aims to bridge that gap, investigating how TBLT can enhance the pragmatic and sociocultural language skills of students in Uzbekistan. By focusing on authentic communication and the nuances of social interaction, we hope to empower learners to navigate diverse contexts with confidence and appropriateness, ultimately enriching their educational experience and preparing them for global engagement.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a quasi-experimental, mixed-methods design to investigate the impact of TBLT on the development of sociolinguistic competence among EFL learners. A pretest-posttest control group design was used to quantitatively measure competence gains, while qualitative data provided insight into learners' perceptions and classroom interaction dynamics.

3.2 Participants

The participants consisted of 36 second-year undergraduate students (aged 19–21) enrolled in the English Philology program at Uzbekistan State World Languages University. All participants had a B1–B2 level of English proficiency based on institutional placement tests and were native Uzbek or Russian speakers.

Participants were randomly assigned to:

– Experimental Group (n = 18): Received TBLT-based instruction

– Control Group (n = 18): Received conventional instruction (PPP – Presentation, Practice, Production)

3.3 Instructional Materials and Task Design

The experimental group engaged in a 10-week intervention, comprising 20 instructional hours. The tasks were designed following Willis and Willis (2007)'s task cycle model and emphasized sociolinguistic functions, such as:

Task type	Sociolinguistic focus	Example task
Role-play	Politeness strategies, formality levels	Requesting a favor from a professor
Information gap	Speech acts (requests, refusals)	Negotiating a room booking at a hotel
Simulation	Cross-cultural awareness	Hosting a foreign guest in Uzbekistan
Problem-solving	Turn-taking, disagreement strategies	Planning a university event with classmates

Tasks included input enhancement, explicit instruction of pragmatic markers, and post-task reflection prompts to promote metapragmatic awareness.

The control group followed a traditional syllabus from a nationally prescribed textbook, focusing on grammar exercises, vocabulary drills, and textbook dialogues with minimal sociolinguistic focus.

3.4 Data Collection Instruments

Instrument	Purpose
Discourse completion task (DCT)	Measure sociolinguistic competence (pre/post)
Audio recordings	Analyze pragmatic features in task interactions
Reflective journals	Elicit learner perceptions of sociolinguistic learning

Semi-structured interviews	Gather qualitative feedback from students and instructors

The DCT, adapted from Taguchi (2011), contained 12 situational prompts eliciting common speech acts (requests, apologies, refusals, compliments). Responses were scored on appropriateness, politeness, and contextual fit (5-point scale).

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative DCT data were analyzed using paired-sample t-tests (within groups) and independent-sample t-tests (between groups). Qualitative data from audio recordings, journals, and interviews were thematically analyzed (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify patterns in sociolinguistic development and learner attitudes.

4. Results

4.1 Quantitative Findings

Group	Pre-test mean (%)	Post-test mean (%)	Mean gain (%)
Experimental (TBLT)	54.3	79.1	+24.8
Control (PPP)	55.6	63.5	+7.9

Independent-samples t-test results revealed a statistically significant difference between the groups ($p < 0.01$). The experimental group outperformed the control group, particularly in tasks involving:

– Indirect requests (e.g., "Would you mind…?")
– Formal greetings and closings
– Polite refusals and apologies

4.2 Qualitative Findings

4.2.1 Audio Recordings

Discourse analysis indicated increased use of:

– Politeness markers (e.g., "I'd appreciate it if…")

– Mitigation strategies (e.g., "I'm afraid I can't…")

– Discourse management features (e.g., "Excuse me, may I add something?")

4.2.2 Reflective Journals

Students reported growing awareness of context-sensitive language use:

"I realized that saying 'Give me the book' to a teacher sounds rude. Now, I say 'Could I borrow the book, please?'" (Student 7)

4.2.3 Interviews

Both students and instructors emphasized that task-based interaction increased confidence and sociopragmatic flexibility:

"I enjoyed practicing real situations like making requests. It made me think about how I speak to teachers and friends differently." (Student 14)

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Interpretation of Findings

The study corroborates earlier research (Taguchi, 2011; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010) that explicit pragmatics instruction embedded in communicative tasks significantly enhances sociolinguistic competence. TBLT facilitated noticing, practice, and internalization of pragmatic norms in a supportive, interactive environment.

The experimental group's substantial gains suggest that task complexity, combined with targeted sociolinguistic focus, is a powerful tool for bridging linguistic and pragmatic gaps in Uzbek EFL contexts.

5.2 Pedagogical Implications

Curriculum Reform: EFL syllabi should integrate explicit sociolinguistic objectives and task-based modules.

Teacher Training: Professional development should equip teachers with strategies to design and implement pragmatics-rich tasks.

Material Development: Locally relevant, culturally grounded TBLT materials should be created to reflect Uzbek and intercultural settings.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study's limitations include a small sample size and short intervention period. Future longitudinal studies could explore:

– Long-term retention of sociolinguistic competence
– Effects of digital TBLT tasks (e.g., online role-plays, video tasks)
– Application in secondary schools and diverse Uzbek regions

5.4 Conclusion

The findings affirm that TBLT is an effective, context-appropriate approach for fostering sociolinguistic competence among Uzbek EFL learners. Embedding pragmatic awareness in interactive tasks can transform classroom practices and prepare students for authentic intercultural communication.

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