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Task-Based Language Teaching and Reading Comprehension among Pakistani Secondary-Level EFL Learners: An Empirical Study

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Abstract
This study investigated the effectiveness of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in developing reading comprehension among secondary-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Pakistan. Specifically, it examined the effects of TBLT on three components of reading comprehension: vocabulary, literal and inferential comprehension. A quasi-experimental pre-test–post-test control-group design was employed, involving 56 students divided equally into experimental and control groups. Over a twelve-week instructional period, the experimental group received task-based reading instruction, whereas the control group was taught through traditional instructional methods. Data were collected through reading comprehension pre-tests and post-tests and analysed using paired-samples and independent-samples t-tests. The findings indicated statistically significant improvements in overall reading comprehension in both groups. However, the post-test results showed that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group across all three components. The strongest comparative improvement was observed in inferential comprehension, followed by literal comprehension and vocabulary comprehension. These findings suggest that integrating meaningful, goal-oriented tasks into reading instruction can support learners' development of both literal and higher-level comprehension skills. The study highlights the pedagogical value of TBLT for secondary-level EFL reading instruction and its potential application in similar educational contexts.
Keywords: *Task-Based Language Teaching, reading comprehension, vocabulary comprehension, literal comprehension, inferential comprehension, EFL learners.*

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Reading comprehension is a fundamental language skill that contributes significantly to learners' academic development. For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, comprehension involves more than recognizing words; it requires understanding explicitly stated information, interpreting implied meanings and using vocabulary knowledge to construct meaning from texts. However, reading instruction in many EFL classrooms continues to emphasize teacher explanation, translation and passive reading, offering limited opportunities for active engagement with texts (Shamim, 2008; 2011). Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) offers a learner-centred approach that organizes language instruction around meaningful tasks and purposeful language use (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004). Through activities such as information-gap tasks, problem-solving and collaborative reading, learners engage actively with texts and work towards specific outcomes. Such activities can provide opportunities to develop vocabulary knowledge, identify explicit information and interpret implicit meanings.

1.2 Statement of the Problem and Research Gap

Secondary-level EFL learners may experience difficulties in reading comprehension because of limited vocabulary knowledge, challenges in identifying explicitly stated information and difficulties in drawing inferences from texts. Traditional reading instruction, which often relies on translation and teacher-centred explanation, may provide insufficient opportunities for learners to engage actively with reading materials.

Although previous research studies has examined TBLT in relation to language learning and reading outcomes ((Akram et al., 2025; Duong & Truong, 2022; Joressa, Y et al., 2025; Ismail et al., 2023; Wongchalee & Tutwisoot, 2024; Wordofa et al., 2025); Duong & Truong, 2022; Ismail et al., 2023; Khyzer et al., 2025; Wongchalee & Tutwisoot, 2024; Wordofa et al., 2025) further investigation is needed into its effects on distinct components of reading comprehension. In particular, examining vocabulary, literal and inferential comprehension together can provide a clearer understanding of the contribution of task-based instruction to different aspects of reading development. The present study addresses this area by investigating these three components among secondary-level EFL learners in Pakistan.

1.3 Research Objectives

The study aimed to:

1. Examine the effect of TBLT on the overall reading comprehension of EFL learners.
2. Investigate the impact of TBLT on learners' vocabulary comprehension.
3. Examine the effect of TBLT on learners' literal comprehension.
4. Explore the effect of TBLT on learners' inferential comprehension.

1.4 Research Question

The study was guided by the following research question:

1. *Does Task-Based Language Teaching improve EFL learners' reading comprehension in terms of vocabulary, literal and inferential comprehension?*

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study contributes empirical evidence to research on TBLT by examining its effectiveness across three specific components of reading comprehension. Its findings may help EFL teachers understand how task-based reading activities can support vocabulary development, the identification of explicit information and inference-making. The findings may also inform curriculum designers and teacher educators about the potential value of integrating task-based activities into reading instruction and teacher training. Furthermore, the study may provide a useful reference for future researchers investigating task-based approaches to reading comprehension in similar EFL contexts.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Task-Based Language Teaching

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is a learner-centred approach that organizes language instruction around meaningful tasks rather than isolated language forms. Ellis (2003) explains that tasks require learners to use language meaningfully to achieve specific outcomes. Similarly, Nunan (2004) emphasizes the role of communicative activities in promoting purposeful language use. Through activities such as information-gap tasks, problem-solving, and collaborative reading, learners can engage actively with texts and construct meaning.

2.2 Reading Comprehension and Its Components

Reading comprehension is a complex process involving the understanding and interpretation of written information. Vocabulary knowledge plays an important role because learners need to recognize word meanings to construct meaning from texts

(Nation, 2001). In addition, Barrett's (1968) Taxonomy of Reading Comprehension provides a useful basis for distinguishing between literal and inferential comprehension. Literal comprehension involves identifying explicitly stated information, whereas inferential comprehension requires readers to interpret implied meanings and draw conclusions beyond the text.

2.3 TBLT and Reading Comprehension

Task-based reading activities provide learners with opportunities to interact with texts through purposeful activities, including identifying key information, matching vocabulary with contextual meanings, predicting outcomes, and drawing conclusions. Such activities can encourage active engagement and deeper processing of textual information. Research by Shirvan and Talebinezhad (2014) examined the relationship between task-based instruction and reading comprehension among Iranian EFL learners, providing relevant empirical support for investigating TBLT in reading instruction.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

The present study draws primarily on Ellis's (2003) framework of Task-Based Language Teaching, which provides the pedagogical foundation for organizing instruction around meaningful tasks. Nation's (2001) framework of vocabulary knowledge supports the vocabulary component of reading comprehension, while Barrett's (1968) Taxonomy provides the basis for distinguishing literal and inferential comprehension. Together, these perspectives connect task-based instruction with the three reading comprehension components examined in this study.

3.1 Research Design

The study employed a quasi-experimental pre-test–post-test control-group design. Two intact groups participated: an experimental group receiving Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and a control group receiving traditional teacher-centred instruction.

3.2 Participants

The sample consisted of 56 secondary-level EFL learners, divided equally into an experimental group (n = 28) and a control group (n = 28). Both groups studied at the same educational level.

3.3 Research Instrument

Data were collected through a researcher-developed reading comprehension test administered before and after the intervention. The test assessed three components: vocabulary comprehension, literal comprehension, and inferential comprehension. Its content validity was examined through expert review, while its reliability was assessed through pilot testing.

3.4 Instructional Treatment

The intervention lasted twelve weeks. Both groups studied the same reading content and texts. The experimental group received task-based instruction through three stages: pre-task activities, task completion, and post-task discussion and feedback. The control group received traditional instruction involving reading, vocabulary explanation, translation where necessary, and individual comprehension questions.

3.5 Data Collection and Analysis

Pre-tests were administered before the intervention, followed by post-tests after its completion. The collected data were analysed using SPSS. Paired-samples t-tests examined improvements within each group, while independent-samples t-tests compared the post-test performance of the two groups.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Permission was obtained from the relevant authorities, and participants were informed about the study. Confidentiality was maintained by using numerical codes instead of students' names.

4. Results

The data were analysed to compare the reading-comprehension performance of the experimental group (EG), which received Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), and the control group (CG), which received traditional instruction. Independent-samples t-tests were used to examine the differences between the two groups. The results are presented in five tables.

4.1 Pre-test Comparison of the Experimental and Control Groups

Table 1. Pre-test Comparison of Overall Reading-Comprehension Scores

Group	N	Mean	SD	Mean Difference	t	p
EG	28	29.45	4.82	0.35	0.31	.758
CG	28	29.10	5.01			

Table 1 shows that the experimental group obtained a mean score of 29.45, while the control group obtained 29.10 in the pre-test. The difference between the groups was not statistically significant ($t = 0.31$, $p = .758$). This indicates that both groups had comparable levels of reading comprehension before the intervention.

4.2 Post-test Comparison of Vocabulary Comprehension

Table 2. Post-test Comparison of Vocabulary Comprehension

Group	N	Mean	SD	Mean Difference	t	p
EG	28	4.8	0.7	0.6	2.56	.012
CG	28	4.2	0.8			

Table 2 indicates that both groups demonstrated vocabulary development; however, the experimental group achieved a higher mean score (4.8) than the control group (4.2). The difference was statistically significant ($t = 2.56$, $p = .012$), suggesting that TBLT was more effective in improving vocabulary comprehension than traditional instruction.

4.3 Post-test Comparison of Literal Comprehension

Table 3. Post-test Comparison of Literal Comprehension

Group	N	Mean	SD	Mean Difference	t	p
EG	28	4.9	0.8	0.7	2.75	.007
CG	28	4.2	0.7			

As shown in Table 3, the experimental group achieved a higher mean score (4.9) than the control group (4.2) in literal comprehension. The difference was statistically significant ($t = 2.75$, $p = .007$). These findings indicate stronger performance among students who received TBLT-based instruction.

4.4 Post-test Comparison of Inferential Comprehension

Table 4. Post-test Comparison of Inferential Comprehension

Group	N	Mean	SD	Mean Difference	t	p
EG	28	4.9	0.8	0.7	3.38	.001
CG	28	4.2	0.7			

Table 4 shows that the experimental group obtained a higher mean score (4.9) than the control group (4.2) in inferential comprehension. The difference was statistically significant ($t = 3.38$, $p = .001$), indicating that students taught through TBLT performed better in interpreting information and drawing inferences from texts.

4.5 Post-test Comparison of Overall Reading Comprehension

Table 5. Post-test Comparison of Overall Reading-Comprehension Scores

Group	N	Mean	SD	Mean Difference	t	p
EG	28	31.5	4.8	4.1	3.87	.001
CG	28	27.4	4.1			

Table 5 demonstrates that the experimental group achieved a higher overall post-test mean score (31.5) than the control group (27.4). The difference was statistically significant ($t = 3.87$, $p = .001$). This finding suggests that TBLT was more effective than traditional instruction in improving students' overall reading comprehension.

Table.6. Summary of Post-test Comparison Results Between Experimental EG and Control CG Groups Across Reading Comprehension Sub-components

S.NO	Aspects	Accepted	Significance by *paired* t-test
1	Vocabulary Comprehension	Yes	Sig p> .012
2	Literal Comprehension	Yes	Sig p> .007
3	Inferential Comprehension	Yes	Sig p> .001

In nut shell, the findings presented above indicate that statistically significant differences were found between the post-test reading comprehension scores of participants in the experimental EG group, who received TBLT instruction, and the control CG group, who received traditional instruction, across all three sub-components of reading comprehension. However, the magnitude of improvement varied among the sub-components. Vocabulary comprehension ($p < .012$) and Literal comprehension ($p < .007$) showed notable gains, while inferential comprehension ($p < .001$) showed the largest improvement. These results confirm that participants in the experimental group outperformed the control group in all areas, with the greatest gains observed in inferential comprehension. Therefore, it can be concluded that TBLT significantly enhanced learners' reading comprehension, particularly in inferential and literal comprehension, while vocabulary comprehension also improved, though to a slightly lesser extent.

5. Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations

5.2 Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to compare the effectiveness of TBLT and traditional instruction in developing students' reading comprehension. The findings revealed that both approaches contributed to students' learning; however, the experimental group taught through TBLT achieved stronger results than the control group.

5.2.1 Improvement in the Experimental Group

The experimental group demonstrated statistically significant improvement in overall reading comprehension following TBLT-based instruction. Improvement was also observed across vocabulary, literal and inferential comprehension. These findings suggest that meaningful, task-based activities can provide learners with opportunities to engage actively with texts, exchange ideas and construct meaning.

The results are consistent with the principles of TBLT, which emphasize meaningful language use and purposeful tasks rather than the isolated teaching of linguistic forms (Ellis, 2003; Willis, 2021). Tasks involving text discussion, information exchange and problem-solving may encourage learners to use vocabulary in context and develop their ability to interpret textual information. These findings also correspond with the cognitive perspective on task-based instruction discussed by Skehan (1998).

5.2.2 Improvement in the Control Group

The control group, which received traditional instruction, also demonstrated statistically significant improvement in reading comprehension. Its performance improved across vocabulary, literal and inferential comprehension. This indicates that conventional teaching practices, including explanation, translation and teacher-led reading activities, can also support the development of reading skills.

The improvement in the control group should not be overlooked. It demonstrates that traditional instruction can contribute positively to language learning. However, the post-test comparison showed that the experimental group achieved higher scores across all three components. Therefore, although both approaches were beneficial, TBLT produced stronger outcomes in the present study.

5.2.3 Comparison of the Experimental and Control Groups

The post-test comparison revealed statistically significant differences between the experimental and control groups in vocabulary, literal and inferential comprehension, as well as overall reading comprehension. In each comparison, the experimental group obtained higher mean scores than the control group.

The difference in vocabulary comprehension suggests that task-based activities may help learners understand and engage with lexical items in meaningful contexts, an important consideration in second-language reading (Nation, 2001). Similarly, the higher scores in literal and inferential comprehension indicate that task-based reading activities can support both the identification of explicitly stated information and the interpretation of implied meanings (Barrett, 1968).

These findings are consistent with the broader theoretical position that meaningful tasks can promote active engagement with language and facilitate comprehension (Nunan, 2004). They also correspond with research examining the relationship between task-based instruction and EFL reading comprehension (Shirvan & Talebinezhad, 2014).

Overall, the findings suggest that TBLT was more effective than traditional instruction in improving students' reading comprehension. Nevertheless, the improvement observed in both groups indicates that effective reading instruction can benefit from different pedagogical approaches.

5.3 Contribution of the Study

This study contributes empirical evidence from the Pakistani EFL context concerning the effectiveness of TBLT in teaching reading comprehension at the secondary level. Its contribution lies in examining reading comprehension through three distinct components: vocabulary, literal and inferential comprehension.

By comparing task-based instruction with traditional teaching, the study provides insight into the relative effectiveness of these approaches. The findings demonstrate that although both approaches supported improvement, TBLT produced stronger post-test performance across the measured components. The study therefore highlights the potential value of incorporating meaningful, task-based reading activities into secondary-level English classrooms.

5.4 Conclusions

Based on the findings, the following conclusions are drawn:

1. Students in the experimental group demonstrated statistically significant improvement in overall reading comprehension after receiving TBLT-based instruction.
2. Improvement was observed across vocabulary, literal and inferential comprehension in the experimental group.
3. Students in the control group also demonstrated improvement across the reading-comprehension components following traditional instruction.
4. The post-test comparison showed that the experimental group performed significantly better than the control group in all three components and overall reading comprehension.

5. Although both instructional approaches contributed to students' learning, TBLT produced stronger results in the present study.

In conclusion, TBLT proved to be a more effective approach than traditional instruction for developing reading comprehension among the learners participating in this study. The findings support the use of meaningful, goal-oriented tasks as an important part of secondary-level EFL reading instruction.

5.5 Implications and Limitations for Future Research

The findings have practical implications for English language teaching. Teachers may incorporate task-based activities into reading lessons to encourage active participation, vocabulary development and deeper engagement with texts. Such activities can complement existing instructional practices rather than requiring the complete abandonment of traditional teaching methods.

The study was limited to a particular educational setting and a relatively small sample. Therefore, its findings should be interpreted within the context of the participating learners. Future research may extend this investigation by:

- Including female students and learners from different educational settings and geographical areas.
- Conducting studies with larger samples and longer intervention periods.
- Employing mixed-methods designs to examine learners' experiences and perceptions of task-based reading instruction.
- Investigating the effects of TBLT on additional reading skills, including critical reading and reading fluency.

5.6 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. English language teachers should incorporate TBLT activities into reading lessons to promote meaningful engagement with texts.
2. Reading instruction should include activities that develop vocabulary knowledge, literal understanding and inferential thinking.
3. Traditional instructional practices may be complemented with task-based activities to provide learners with opportunities for both explanation and practical language use.
4. Curriculum designers should consider incorporating task-based reading activities into secondary-level English textbooks and syllabi.
5. Teacher-training programmes should provide professional development opportunities focusing on the design and implementation of TBLT activities.
6. Students should be encouraged to participate in collaborative reading tasks, discussions and problem-solving activities to strengthen their comprehension skills.

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