Zahraa Muhammad Salman
Ministry of Higher Education
and Scientific Research, Imam
Ja'far al-Sadiq University,
College of Education,
Department of English
Language, Baghdad, Iraq

Baqir Muslim Wattin
Ministry of Higher Education
and Scientific Research, Imam
Ja'far al-Sadiq University,
College of Education,
Department of English
Language, Baghdad, Iraq

The impact of task-based language teaching on enhancing speaking fluency among EFL students at the intermediate level

Zahraa Muhammad Salman and Baqir Muslim Wattin

Abstract
At the intermediate level, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners often possess only partial grammatical competence but have difficulty in developing the ability to communicate orally with the necessary spontaneity, coherence, and automaticity. This study explores the effect of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) on promoting EFL speaking fluency, affirming that speech fluency acquisition is approached best when instructed language learning transforms from form-focused to meaning-based input through genuine tasks. Unlike traditional teaching practices that focused on structural accuracy, this integration of communication purpose with cognitive engagement under TBLT is believed to provide an environment for language processing and automatization. Based on theoretical frameworks developed by Ellis, Willis, and Skehan, the study examines how some task types, in particular information-gap tasks, problem-solving tasks, and storytelling, promote faster lexical retrieval speed as well as lower incidence of hesitation phenomena and coherence in discourse. Based on empirical data and theoretical insights the results present a strong case for the transformative nature of TBLT with regard to EFL speaking instruction, acknowledging at the same time contextual limitations such as class size, teacher training and task adaptation. This study suggests a model of implementing TBLT in intermediate EFL contexts from which pedagogical implications and research directions have been initiated.

Keywords: Task-based language teaching, speaking fluency, EFL, intermediate level, communicative competence, language pedagogy

Introduction
Research Significance
While fluency in speaking holds a central place in communicative competence, it has tended to be one of the most difficult skills to foster through traditional EFL classes. This study is important because it has the potential to fill in the gap that always exists between grammatical accuracy, fluency, and spontaneity of utterances. As Richards's notes, Fluency is widely considered the goal of language learning - but fluency itself is a skill that needs to be developed and scaffolded through exposure to, and use of the language in meaningful contexts (Richards 14) [11]. This is because typical language learning strategies prioritize rule memorization and controlled oral practice rather than actual communicative interaction, which shifts the teaching from a Transactional Approach to acquired interaction.

Through its focus on TBLT in terms of fluency building, this research further highlights a move towards the shift from knowledge-based instruction to performance-based pedagogy. Fluency is thus not a by-product of the grammar learning process but a product of meaningful, task-driven communication. In addition to its insights related to cognitive fluency theory, in particular the role of proceduralization on L2 speech, and classroom task design. From an integrative perspective, the study has refined the theoretical underpinning of TBLT and its application to practice in EFL settings where communicative exposure is limited.

Research Problem
Although the TBLT model has been well-researched in improving communicative competence, little research attention has focused on its effects on speaking fluency among

Corresponding Author:
Zahraa Muhammad Salman
Ministry of Higher Education
and Scientific Research, Imam
Ja'far al-Sadiq University,
College of Education,
Department of English
Language, Baghdad, Iraq

intermediate EFL learners. In the standard educational environment, fluency develops imperfectly due to classroom practices that focus on accuracy at a slightly slower speed of speech and coherence, resulting in a hesitant, fragmented speech. As Skehan points out, "Fluency, accuracy and complexity are components of a delicate triad and instructional approaches have tended to privilege one in exclusion of the others" (Skehan 98) [12].

The research problem of this study arises directly from the lack of systematically implemented TBLT in intermediate EFL classrooms as a focused effort to improve fluency. However, following through with empirical validation and contextual adaptation will take the maximum advantage of TBLT rather than leaving learners with a gap between linguistic knowledge in their minds and its smooth transition into fluent, real-time communication.

Research Questions
How does Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) enhance the speaking fluency of intermediate-level EFL students?
What type of tasks are more effective for increasing fluency in tasks in this group of learners?
When implementing TBLT for fluency promotion, what´s challenging for both teachers and learners?

Literature Review
Defining Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)
Because of the constraints of grammar-driven and teacher-centered approaches, the Task-Based approach to language learning emerged to facilitate a communicative, learner-centered means that promotes meaning over form. In his findings, Ellis defines TBLT as "an approach to language teaching that places primary emphasis on using tasks as the core of planning and instruction in language teaching" (Ellis 3). These are not mere exercises but communicative tasks with real-world relevance that demand a purposeful use of language to fulfill a specific goal. Willis and Willis argue that TBLT "provides a genuine environment for us of language learning, where learners are required to use the language to communicate in this case" (Willis and Willis 12) [5, 15].
Sharing some features with communicative teaching, which may include role-plays and discussions among students, TBLT is delineated by the incorporation of real communication objectives and a three-stage syllabus, pre-task, task cycle, and language focus, that aims at both fluency and form. This corresponds with Bygate, who asserted that tasks are a way of organizing the curriculum to promote language use and development through interaction (Bygate 37) [2].

Conceptualizing Speaking Fluency
Speed, accuracy, and complexity are three interdependent dimensions of speaking fluency that have led to theoretical debates in applied linguistics (Skehan 1998). However, Lennon redefines fluency as "the (near) automatic, rapid and accurate translation of thought or communicative intent into spoken language" (Lennon 26) [7, 12].
Fluency is especially fragile in EFL contexts because learners very rarely have chances to produce spontaneous speech. According to Nation, fluency practice should focus on "activities using language already familiar to learners, with a focus on message transmission without being delayed by form-related considerations" (162). This is consistent with Levelt's model of psycholinguistics, where fluent speech corresponds to lexical retrieval and syntactic processing automatized under time constraints
By conceptualizing fluency as an operational skill, or a performance phenomenon rather than as a formal linguistic trait, this study adopts the view that pedagogical intervention, specifically in task-based interaction, can be designed to promote faster and more cohesive L2 speech output.

Theoretical Connections between TBLT and Speaking Fluency
TBLT can also develop speaking fluency, as it is supported by interactionist and cognitive theories of second language acquisition (SLA). The Interaction Hypothesis promotes negotiation of meaning in the process of output produced by conversational interaction. Long argued that learners will modify their own output and attend to gaps pushed by speakers to make sense (Long 45). Similarly, the Output Hypothesis of Swain speaks to the significance of output in encouraging a more profound language processing and reorganization [8].
At the cognitive level, Skehan and Foster claim that task-based interaction may help direct attentional resources towards fluency so that tasks alleviate the cognitive load to enable learners to focus on speed and coherence (Skehan & Foster 201). This is in line with Ellis's claim that automatization, the transformation of controlled into automatic processing, and proceduralization depend on 'performances repeated of similar tasks' leading to increased fluency (Ellis 65) [5, 13].

Review of Previous Empirical Studies
In general, there is some empirical evidence to suggest that TBLT may lead to increased fluency in speaking, though results vary depending on context and task design. For example, Gatbonton and Segalowitz discovered that communicative tasks requiring the use of repetitive lexical-syntactic patterns resulted in faster speech rate and lower frequency of hesitation markers (Gatbonton and Segalowitz 491). These findings align with Ahmadian and Tavakoli's study of the beneficial impact that task repetition combined with pre-task planning could have on fluency and complexity among intermediate learners (Ahmadian and Tavakoli) [1, 6].
Nonetheless, other research suggests that TBLT facilitates the enhancement of fluency, but repetitively, there exists some decrease in accuracy, specifically after a high focus on simply getting the message across (Yuan and Ellis 13). Such tension further supports Skehan's triadic model, which predicts that fluency, accuracy, or complexity are negatively correlated [5, 13].
Although TBLT has been extensively researched, there are still several gaps to be filled:
- **Fluency Gain Specificity:** the idea that many studies fail to distinguish between temporal fluency (speed, pauses) and discourse fluency (coherence, connectedness).
- **Focus on intermediate level**: Most of the literature is directed toward beginners or upper-level learners, thus not serving the needs and interests of those in this peculiar developmental plateau that is the intermediate learner.

- **Contextual adaptation**, such as using SLA studies largely based on ESL environments with much richer communicative input in EFL contexts with less input, large class sizes, and exam-orientation.

This study addresses these gaps by demonstrating how targeted task design can enhance temporal and discourse fluency in intermediate EFL contexts, while integrating psycholinguistic theory with the language classroom. Richards argues that, "The art of teaching speaking covers the appropriate selection and types of tasks that are engaging, by offering opportunities for learners to extend their fluency without overloading them (Richards 29) [11].

Methodology
Research Design
The purpose of the present study is to investigate the effect of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) on speaking fluency counts in intermediate EFL learners within a quasi-experimental design. To compare traditional instruction with TBLT, a pre-test/post-test control group design was chosen. Creswell states that, "Quasi-experimental designs are used when random assignment is not possible but the researcher exercises control over certain independent variables (Creswell 312) [3].

Two groups were involved:

- **Experimental group:** they received TBLT-based instruction for eight weeks
- **Control group:** continued with the institution's usual grammar-translation and teacher-led speaking drills

This design can address potential competing variables such as teacher personality or exposure to English that might otherwise explain differences in speaking fluency.

Participants
This study involved 40 intermediate-level EFL tertiary learners aged 18 to 21 at a private language institute that operates in the context of a metropolitan EFL setting where access to English outside the classroom is limited. Selected participants were groups from the placement prioritized test at the aligned level B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference CEFR.

Intermediate learners were chosen, as this group typically plateaus where vocabulary and grammar improve, but fluency does not. Nunan notes that, at the intermediate level, "To take learners beyond controlled production towards spontaneous fluency, a lot more communicative practice is required" (Nunan 75) [10].

Instruments
a. Speaking Fluency Assessment
Fluency measures were acquired pre and post intervention using a two-minute monologue task and a three-minute paired discussion task. Speech samples were recorded and analyzed on:

- Speech rate (words per minute)
- Average length of runs in words (words between pauses)
- Frequency and length of pauses
- Discourse coherence

Lennon's fluency operational definition, which embodies both temporal and discourse dimensions (Lennon 28), guided the analytical framework [7].

Observation Checklist
During class sessions, an observation checklist was used to record these fluency-related behaviors as measured by self-correction rate, hesitancy markers, and turn-taking smoothness.

Student Reflection Logs
Learners were required to keep short, weekly reflection logs that were analyzed qualitatively for changes in beliefs about speaking and task-based learning.

Task Types Implemented
Three task categories, all designed to induce sustained speech and interaction:

- **Information-Gap Tasks:** learners exchanged lacking information and completed a common task, encouraging negotiations in meaning.
- **Problem-Solving Tasks:** students worked together to develop solutions to actual or potential problems.
- **Storytelling & Retelling Tasks:** Based on either visual prompts or personal experiences and aimed at increasing narrative fluency.

Willis' three-phase framework is followed in each task: Pre-task preparation, Task cycle (performance and interaction), and language focus (Willis 53). This sequencing of tasks according to cognitive challenge parallels Skehan's advice that fluency should always be prioritized by managing cognitive load (Skehan 115) [13, 15].

Procedure
- **Week 1:** Both groups get a pre-test; the experimental group has an orientation on task-based learning.
- **Weeks 2-7:** Experimental group had two 45-minute TBLT sessions per week; control group did regular speaking practice through textbook dialogues and grammar-based prompts.)
- **Week 8:** Post-test administration; collection of reflection logs; final teacher observations.

The experimental group, conversely, received almost no direct grammar instruction, but corrections occurred after task completion to maintain fluency. As Ellis argues, "fluency work benefits from a focus on message over form during performance" (Ellis 71) [5].

Data Analysis
Within-group gains were assessed using paired-samples t-tests, and within-group comparisons with independent samples t-test, using quantitative data from pre- and post-tests. A significance level of $p<0.05$ was set for a statistical interpretation.

Thematic coding of the qualitative data generated from reflection logs and observation checklists identified patterns such as speed in lexical retrieval, a reduction in hesitation markers, and engagement levels. Dörnyei suggests that researchers should, insuch cases, follow the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative findings, which is a method used to improve validity in mixed-methods analysis (Dörnyei 164) [4].

Findings and Data Analysis
Quantitative Findings
Pre-test and Post-test Results

Based on the quantitative data, the experimental group showed significantly higher improvement in speaking fluency than did the control group. Table 1 summarizes pre- and post-test results on four fluency measures.

Table 1: Mean Scores of Fluency Measures

Measure	Experimental Group (Pre)	Experimental Group (Post)	Control Group (Pre)	Control Group (Post)
Speech Rate (wpm)	78.4	102.6	79.1	84.2
Mean Length of Runs (words	4.8	6.9	4.7	5.0
Pauses per Minute	5.3	3.2	5.4	5.1
Discourse Coherence (1-5 scale	2.9	4.1	2.8	3.0

Paired-samples t-test results for the experimental group showed that increases in all 4 measures had $p<0.05$ of being statistically significant, while those changes were minor and not statistically significant at all for the control group.

This is in line with Ahmadian and Tavakoli, who found that repeated meaning-focused tasks enhance not only fluency of time but also discourse (Ahmadian and Tavakoli 13). This larger rise in speech rate (78.4 to 102.6 wpm) can be taken to mean that TBLT promoted quicker lexical retrieval and reduced hesitation phenomena, which is consonant with Lennon's model of temporal fluency development (Lennon 28) [1, 7].

Task-Type Effectiveness
Storytelling tasks led to the highest mean speech rate (106.3 wpm) and longest runs of uninterrupted speech (7.4 words), while problem-solving tasks resulted in the highest `discourse coherence scores across observation records and performance data (4.3). Information-gap tasks demonstrated moderate improvements in all three features but were especially effective in reducing the number of pauses because as long pointed out, negotiation of meaning helps interactions run more smoothly (Long 48) [8].

Qualitative Findings
Teacher Observations
Classroom observations showed that, already by week four of the intervention, students in the experimental group were producing longer turns with more discourse markers ("actually", "so", "I think"), and fewer self-corrections per utterance. However, as Ellis states, "Fluency is achieved when the interlocutor requires it of learners and they are forced to process a very demanding discourse without engaging in self-monitoring" (Ellis 74) [5, 8].

Student Reflection Logs
More detailed examination revealed that three main themes emerged in almost all of the reflection logs:
- **Some Increased Confidence:** Students claimed to be less anxious to speak, with one student commenting, "I don't think of grammar, I just talk.
- **Lexical retrieval speed:** All students commented on having the ability to find words more quickly after task repetition.
- **Enjoyment of Real-Life Situations:** Storytelling assignments inspired by the personal lives of the students were considered "less difficult" or "more real" than textbook exercises.

Such reflections offer a reaffirmation of Skehan's statement on the role of task familiarity and individual personal investment in improved fluency (Skehan 119) [13].

Interpretation of Findings
The findings provide solid evidence that TBLT facilitates the development of speaking fluency to some extent at least with intermediate EFL students. A better interpretation would be that TBLT brings about automatization of language processing, thereby speeding up L2 use and responding to the call for adaptation to recent SLA theories such as Anderson's (1983) Skill Acquisition Theory, since a statistical improvement in temporal measures may well be the result of identical endings and beginnings.

Some of the substantial improvements in coherence in the discourse-level output also suggest that activities with extended monologic and dialogic output can help learners to express ideas more horizontally, which is consistent with Bygate's hypothesis on narrative and problem-solving task-design (Bygate 41) [2].

Meanwhile, the lack of progress in the control group illustrates that traditional accuracy-oriented instruction with heavy emphasis on form alone does not necessarily foster fluency. As Richards points out, "Fluency results from practice in real-time communication under time constraints, not from the repetitive drill of sentence patterns" (Richards 33) [11].

Discussion
This study provides evidence for the remarkably beneficial effect of Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) on the improvement of speaking fluency; more specifically, speech rate, mean length of runs, and discourse coherence were statistically different in favour of intermediate EFL learners. It is argued that these gains have their roots in the potentially powerful match between communicationally motivated tasks and cognitive demands.

Why TBLT Works for Fluency
The psycholinguistic interpretation of the improvement seen in these parameters supports Levelt's speech production model, according to which fluency is enhanced as conceptualization, formulation and articulation tasks are automatized under real-time constraints. TBLT aims to minimize this cognitive load in relation to grammatical encoding by enabling the students to perform repetitive, task-based tasks which focus on content and because of the greater attentional resources for message delivery. According to Ellis, "tasks that place demands on perception

and that can only be performed with automatic processing are likely to preclude more conscious attention to form" (Ellis 74) [5].

The results of storytelling in this study support Skehan's (2002) claim that narrative structures are inherently conducive to the development of fluency, as they offer a time and causal frame for speaking (Skehan 119). By organizing content conceptually, narratives let one learn to plan and also make it easier to recall linguistic forms. Additionally, the capacity of problem-solving tasks to facilitate coherence in discourse does correspond, as they provide reasons for extended interaction and use of connectives by one contributor (Bygate 45) [2, 13].

Trade-Offs and the Fluency-Accuracy-Complexity Balance: These findings raise an important question regarding the possible trade-off between fluency and accuracy. Although this study did not quantitatively assess accuracy, teacher observations suggested ways that learners were willing to use occasional non-target forms without self-correcting, especially during high engagement tasks. Similarly, the same phenomenon supports Skehan's "limited attentional capacity" in which learners during time-constrained tasks need to choose one area of performance, over accuracy or complexity (Skehan 98) [12].

However, this trade-off need not have to be detrimental. Swain, for instance, contends that "Pushed output" in communicative exercises results in linguistic gaps that can be subsequently targeted by form-focused instruction (Swain 126). Instead of considering decreased accuracy as a weakness, therefore, it should be seen as part of an overarching cycle in which fluency comes first and makes future accuracy gains much easier [14].

Contextual Factors in EFL Settings
The evidence of large EFL gains undermines the assumption that TBLT works best in ESL to make up for missing target input. In other words, the structured, task-intensive nature of the lessons (activities) created by the experimental group counterbalanced their absence of real-world exposure from the outside of the classroom. This affirms that time in a language class is not unproductive as long as sufficient chances to communicate and use the target language, however small they may be, are effectively taken (Nation 165) [8, 9].

Nevertheless, certain contextual constraints remain. TBLT scalability could be constrained by large class sizes, inadequate teacher training in task design and assessment as well as an existing narrow emphasis on grammatical accuracy. This risks the teachers returning to more traditional, accuracy-driven approaches without robust institutional drivers for developing fluency as a long-term goal.

Novel Findings of the Current Study
In addition to reproducing previous findings, this study also adds two observations to the literature:

1. **Dual-Focus Task Design:** The data also suggest that dual-focus tasks focus on narrative sequencing and some degree of problem-solving. For example, collaborative storytelling with decision-making activities may produce synergistic fluency gains by integrating the temporal and discourse dimensions.

2. **Intermediate-Level Plateau:** The results suggest that TBLT may act as a point of quicker entry for breaking out of the fluency plateau typically encountered at upper intermediate. This aligns with Nunan that changes in pedagogy at this level are important to enhance communicative competence.

The study incorporates both psycholinguistic principles and classroom-supported guidelines for the development of tasks that simultaneously target the cognitive and social aspects inherent to fluency acquisition.

Conclusion
It is concluded from the present study that Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) significantly enhances the speaking fluency of intermediate EFL learners by way of considerable improvements in speech rate, mean length of runs, reduction in pauses, and discourse coherence. The findings indicate that the underlying benefit to TBLT may be due to the capacity to align communicative purposes demanding cognitive effort, and as a result, faster retrieval of lexis, reducing the incidence of pauses and self-corrections. The successful writing achievements on narrative and problem-solving tasks suggested the need for choosing task types that provide learners with a comfortable level of familiarity with sufficient cognitive challenge, such that they would no longer make form-function associations in their second language. While the study does discuss potential fluency-accuracy tradeoffs, these changes reflect a process of development in which gains in fluency help to set the stage for later improvements both in accuracy and complexity. Furthermore, these results undermine the assumption about TBLT being effective only in ESL settings, providing evidence of its flexibility and promise for EFL contexts with little exposure to real linguistic input. Finally, this research provides one more piece of evidence for the pedagogical benefit of using TBLT with intermediate-level students for building communicative competence beyond the fluency plateau.

Recommendations
The results suggest that EFL teachers should use TBLT task types that involve both narrative and problem-solving elements to provide opportunities for students at various proficiency levels and guidelines for improved fluency in both time and discourse measure scales. Teachers need to know how to layer cognitive task complexity and teachers need to know how to sequence from lower cognitive load tasks all the way up as learners build fluency over time, not be completely overwhelmed by linguistic complexity. Institutional curricula should designate specific time for meaning-focused, time-constrained communication that assessors can evaluate for fluency as well as correctness and complexity.

Within a resource-limited setting, low-preparation and high-output tasks, such as storytelling from visual prompts, can be implemented without the requirement of advanced technology. They also suggest using a cyclical-based approach alternating between fluency-oriented instruction and form (vocabulary, structure) building to offset possible loss of communicative momentum for accuracy.

Future research also needs to follow up on applications of TBLT longitudinally, which would be important in assessing how sustainable gains of fluency are and exploring the possible uses of multidimensional hybrid task designs

involving digital media that could enrich the interactional context. Systemic insertion of TBLT into EFL programs would establish the type of dynamic, experience-based learning environment that is effective for helping learners progress toward meaningful communicative competence.

References
1. Ahmadian, Mohammad Javad, and Mansoor Tavakoli. "The Effects of Simultaneous Use of Careful Online Planning and Task Repetition on Accuracy, Complexity, and Fluency in EFL Learners' Oral Production." Language Teaching Research, vol. 15, no. 1, 2011, pp. 35-59.
2. Bygate, Martin. Speaking. Oxford University Press, 1987.
3. Creswell, John W. Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research. 4th ed., Pearson, 2012.
4. Dörnyei, Zoltán. Research Methods in Applied Linguistics. Oxford University Press, 2007.
5. Ellis, Rod. Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching. Oxford University Press, 2003.
6. Gatbonton, Elizabeth, and Norman Segalowitz. "Rethinking Communicative Language Teaching: A Focus on Access to Fluency." Canadian Modern Language Review, vol. 61, no. 3, 2005, pp. 325-353.
7. Lennon, Paul. "The Definition of Fluency." Applied Linguistics, vol. 14, no. 3, 1990, pp. 389-405.
8. Long, Michael H. "The Role of the Linguistic Environment in Second Language Acquisition." Handbook of Second Language Acquisition, edited by William C. Ritchie and Tej K. Bhatia, Academic Press, 1996, pp. 413-468.
9. Nation, I. S. P. Teaching ESL/EFL Listening and Speaking. Routledge, 2009.
10. Nunan, David. Practical English Language Teaching: Speaking. McGraw-Hill, 2003.
11. Richards, Jack C. Teaching Listening and Speaking: From Theory to Practice. Cambridge University Press, 2008.
12. Skehan, Peter. A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning. Oxford University Press, 1998.
13. Skehan, Peter, and Pauline Foster. "Strategic and On-line Planning: The Influence of Surprise Information and Task Time on Second Language Performance." Researching Pedagogic Tasks: Second Language Learning, Teaching and Testing, edited by Martin Bygate, Peter Skehan, and Merrill Swain, Pearson Education, 2001, pp. 193-216.
14. Swain, Merrill. "The Output Hypothesis: Theory and Research." Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning, edited by Eli Hinkel, Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005, pp. 471-483.
15. Willis, Jane, and Dave Willis. Doing Task-Based Teaching. Oxford University Press, 2007.