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Beyond Memorization: Exploring Students' Perceptions of the Task-Based Approach to English Vocabulary Learning

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Abstract

This study examines the learners' perceptions regarding the impact of Task Based approach to English vocabulary learning. The study was conducted at a university in Saudi Arabia. The participants were seventy EFL learners who study English as a core subject. A mixed-methods approach was employed, using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to investigate learners' perceptions. The study findings showed generally positive perceptions of TBA, particularly in making vocabulary learning more engaging and meaningful and providing opportunities to use new words in communicative contexts. On the other hand, they illustrated some challenges in regards to vocabulary use, participation, and the need for teacher guidance.

1. Introduction

Learning English remains a common pathway and a requirement for students from non-English speaking backgrounds wishing to pursue education in most English language dominated countries. Teaching English has been necessitated by the fact that, in English dominated classrooms, being proficient in English plays an important role as far as reading and communication is concerned. For quite some time, task-based approach (TBA) has been adopted widely for teaching English vocabulary for academic purposes (Cubillo & Brenes, 2009). The success of TBA has been attributed to the fact that it encourages student involvement and reflection in the English language learning process. Nevertheless, this study investigates learners' perceptions regarding TBL in English vocabulary learning within the paradigm of English lessons offered for EFL learners.

Most of the textbooks now are designed based on the communicative approach where language skills are required to be taught in an integrated manner, including vocabulary. This study sheds the light on the learners' perceptions regarding the use of TBA in teaching and learning vocabulary as most textbooks designed. In addition, this is an important area of study because, in the past couple of decades, there has been mass exodus of students from non-English speaking backgrounds to study English as the dominant language for classroom instruction. Most of students seek admission to medium post-secondary classrooms and

institutions of higher learning in the destination countries. In addition, many students learn English to enter the job market. Often, English proficiency is taken as a mandatory requirement for gaining entry into higher education institutions and securing professional employment opportunities. As such, the non-English background students are usually enrolled in one-year English classrooms before joining the mainstream classes (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). This study is also significant because, currently, there are limited studies that explore learners' perceptions of task-based approaches in teaching vocabulary in English in the context of higher education. Examining learners' perceptions is important because their experiences, attitudes, and perceived challenges greatly impact the success of TBA application in EFL contexts. Therefore, this study addresses this gap and will be a pace setter for future studies in the area. By adopting the task-based approach, educators will allow students to gain English language skills that they will use in their academic lives: reading, listening, speaking, and writing.

2. Literature Review

The Task-Based Approach in Second Language Acquisition

According to Nunan (2004), vocabulary is an important component of language proficiency because it allows students to express themselves in different aspects of their academic lives: reading, speaking, listening and writing. In the effort to enhance vocabulary learning, teachers have found that task-based learning (TBL) is an effective tool. The approach enables English language learners to direct their effort in learning to communicate in a language that is foreign to them. Nito (2004) contends that TBL is a meaning-focused approach that enables English language learners to reflect the real-world language use for the purposes of academic communication. The approach utilizes tasks as the foundation for lesson planning and instruction dissemination to the foreign English language learners. In this case, TBL believes that tasks are important elements of syllabus design, classroom instruction, and learner's assessment. As noted by Zare (2010), tasks assume a central place in second language acquisition. This way, they are viewed as activities that involve usage of a target language by learners as means of communication in order to achieve the desired academic outcomes. When it comes to theory of learning, language is considered a primary means of meaning making (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Multiple models of language learning directly or indirectly inform task-based learning, mostly drawing on its interactional, functional and structural nature. Lexical units, which are central elements of language learning and use, remain the focus and keystone of second language acquisition. Based on the theory of learning, the use of tasks provides the inputs and the outputs that are necessary for second language acquisition. Characteristically, task activities are motivational, and as such, provide an important avenue through which students can successfully acquire a new language. Moreover, in a study done by Al Sultan et al. (2025) the researchers identified positive attitudes towards TBA in terms of enjoyment, engagement, collaboration, and self-confidence.

Implementing Task-Based Activities in English Language Classrooms

Currently, there are procedures that have been set forth to guide the practice of task-based instruction. These procedures, sometimes referred to as phases, include pre-task, during task, and post-task (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). In the pre-task stage, the overall objective of the instruction is to provide the learners with preparedness to complete various English learning tasks. The two core functions of the pre-task phase are to create student's interest in completing the tasks of a given topic and to invoke topic-related vocabularies and phrases. Special attention is given to words, phrases, and sentences that would be applicable as far as completion of the tasks in the real-world communication is concerned. A third function of the pre-task phase, which is optional, involves inclusion of tasks that would enable the students to communicate effectively or smoothly during the task life cycle. In the second phase 'during the task', English language learners work in small groups of two or three depending on the nature of activity to be undertaken (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). In this case, the students utilize all the linguistic

resources at their disposal to achieve the predetermined objectives of the tasks given to them. In the final phase: post-task, the English language learners have an opportunity to produce a focused work (Cubillo & Brenes, 2009). Having completed the tasks given to them, the students at this phase prepare an oral or a written report that would be presented before the class. At this phase, specific features of vocabulary and language that have been integrated during the task performance get identified and scrutinized.

Benefits and Challenges of the Task-Based Approach (TBA)

The benefits and drawbacks of task-based learning and teaching have been explored widely in literature. Task-based learning facilitates interactive communication while encouraging learners to engage in meaningful tasks. Again, TBL is an approach to English language learning that finds relevance to the students' interests and needs (Liu et al., 2021).This is primarily because the approach stimulates development of language skills that are necessary for successful completion of tasks that students encounter both inside and outside the classroom (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Thirdly, task-based learning is an approach that enables students to use self-reflection during performance of language learning-related tasks. Since no specific tasks are imposed, students are free to use the language skills that they have rather than complying with pre-specified language items. On the other hand, TBL has received widespread criticism for its general tendency to minimize the volume of language that students use by requiring them to concentrate solely on accomplishment on the necessary tasks. Secondly, TBL tends to focus on developing fluency while ignoring the importance of accuracy in language use (Chooma, 2013). In a study done by Alwahibee and Al-Mutairi (2024), the researchers found that there are a number of challenges associated with TBA implementation in EFL classrooms such as classroom management, lesson preparation, and the allocated time to complete activities.

Theoretical Foundations of TBA

This study is grounded on the communicative language teaching approach. This approach views language is best learned through social interaction and negotiation of meaning. In addition, it encourages learners-centered learning to enhance communicative competence through different activities that entail learners to use the language in meaningful communication. In terms of vocabulary learning, this approach encourages real-life language use that help learners acquire and use new vocabulary through different activities. In TBA approach, learning is best acquired through encounter and practice new vocabulary while completing meaningful tasks.

3. Research Question

1. How do students perceive the use of the Task-Based Approach in learning English vocabulary?
2. What challenges do students experience when applying task-based activities?

4. Research Design and Methodology

Seventy students aged between 18 and 25 and taking courses at University in Saudi Arabia were recruited. An open-ended questionnaire was sent to the experimental group to examine the participants' perceptions regarding the Task-based approach. This study used a mixed method approach to investigate the students' perception regarding the impact of task-based approach to learn vocabulary. In this study I used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design by using a questionnaire and an interview. I used a 5-point Likert scale divided into different sections such as: Demographic information, Students' perceptions of TBA, Perceived benefits, Motivation and engagement, and Challenges. I used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to analyze the data collected from the questionnaire.

Then a semi-structured interview was followed to provide in-depth investigation of the students' perception regarding TBA. The interview consisted of 8 questions**,** with approximately 20–30 minutes per interview. The interviews were structured in a manner that

they input the aspects of study with ease. It was accommodating various sections of questions relevant to the study. The interview employed both the approaches of the open-ended questions and the closed-ended questions. The interviews were held at my office.

The focus group interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis to deeply explore the perceptions of the participants regarding the impact of task-based approach in learning English vocabulary. The interview was coded to highlight the themes that emerged from analyzing the transcripts. The identified theme will be supported by anonymized quotations from the participants.

5. Data Analysis

Table 1. ***Descriptive Statistics for the Three Questionnaire Dimensions***

Questionnaire dimension	No. of items	Mean (M)	SD	Interpretation
Effectiveness of TBA	10	3.82	0.46	Positive perceptions
Engagement, motivation, and confidence	10	3.88	0.46	Positive perceptions
Challenges and difficulties	10	2.96	0.25	Moderate challenges
Overall positive-perception items	20	3.85	—	Positive perceptions

The above data show a positive attitude toward the TBA in general. The participants show agreement toward the Effectiveness of TBA (3.82) in terms of learning English vocabulary. In addition, they express that TBA enhances their motivation, engagement and confidence (3.88) through collaborative tasks and different activities. However, the participants show that they to some extent (2.96) encounter some difficulties when using TBA in learning vocabulary.

Item-Level Results

A. Effectiveness of TBA for Vocabulary Learning

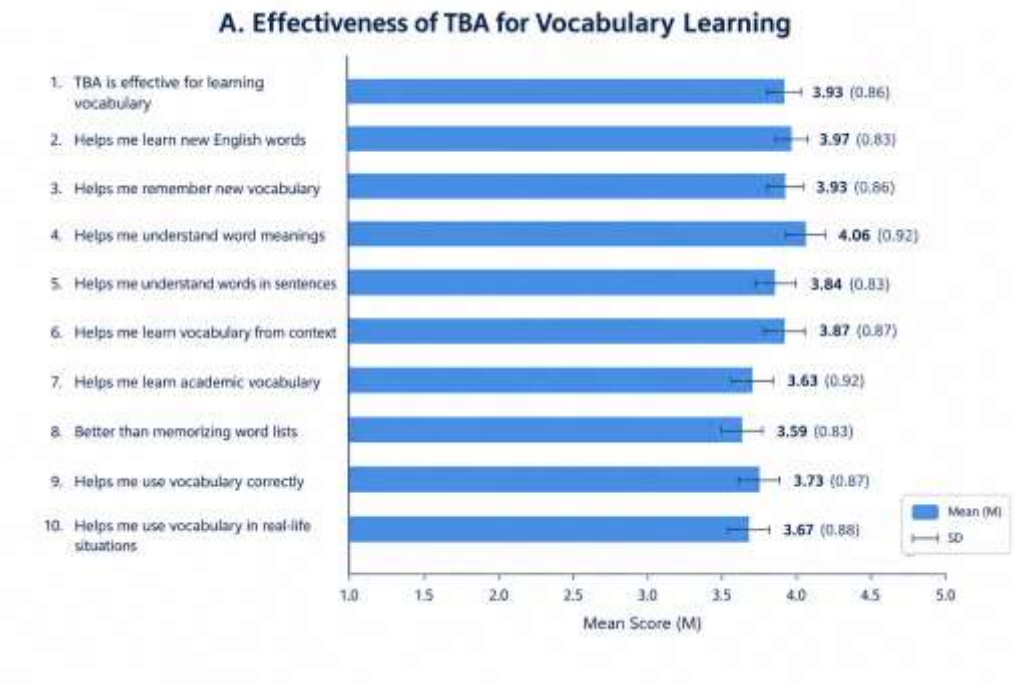

Figure 1. ***Item-Level Means and Standard Deviations for the Effectiveness of TBA (Items 1–10)***

The data above indicates a favorable perception regarding the effectiveness of TBA to learn vocabulary. Most participants strongly agree that TBA is effective for learning vocabulary with a high mean (3.93) and SD (0.86). Most of the participants agree that TBA is effective for learning vocabulary. Nearly all the participants agree that TBA plays a significant role in

helping them to understand word meaning with a very high mean (4.06) and SD (0.92). This statement is followed by indicating that TBA is helpful to remember the new vocabulary with a high mean (3.93) and SD (0.86).

In addition, the participants express that TBA is one of the best ways to learn English vocabulary in context (M = 3.87, SD = 0.87) and understanding words in sentences rather than isolated words. As shown in the table above, the participants found that TBA to slightly improve their socialization in English and make them use vocabulary in real life situations (M= 3.67, SD= 0.88). This finding aligns with Liu et al., (2021) as they posit that task-based learning facilitates interactive communication.

These findings show that the participants believe that TBA is very effective in learning the new vocabulary and it helps them to use the new learned vocabulary in context. In addition, the participants perceived the TBA is more effective than memorizing vocabulary and word lists (M = 3.59, SD = 0.83). Additionally, the lower rating of the statements that TBA help participants to use the vocabulary in real life situations indicate that they identified potential areas for further development, particularly academic vocabulary and the practical application of newly learned vocabulary.

The participants perceived TBA as effective in learning vocabulary through different activities they were required to accomplish throughout the course. The activities were based on real situations where they were asked to write business reports and emails and communicate verbally in meaningful contexts. Participant A indicate that "I used to learn new vocabulary and forget them but with TBA I use the new learned vocabulary in writing business emails, and it helps me to not forget the words." However, participant B has an opponent opinion regarding TBA as she indicates that "I like to learn vocabulary in lists rather than learning them through different activities such as reading and summarizing texts." On the other hand, participant C explained that planning a university project helped them learn words such as "deadline," "allocate," and "resources," which reflects that the participants perceived TBA as very effective.

B. Engagement, Motivation, and Confidence

Table 2. ***Descriptive Statistics for Engagement, Motivation, and Confidence (Items 11–20)***

Item	Statement (shortened)	M	SD
11	I enjoy learning vocabulary through TBA	3.96	0.84
12	Makes learning more interesting	3.83	0.74
13	Motivates me to learn more vocabulary	3.97	0.80
14	Increases my confidence	3.87	0.78
15	Encourages communication with classmates	3.90	0.78
16	Group work helps me learn vocabulary	3.86	0.87
17	Encourages active participation	3.83	0.80
18	Encourages vocabulary use outside class	3.51	0.97
19	I want more TBA activities in class	4.14	0.79
20	Increases interest in learning new words	3.93	1.01

The descriptive statistics for Items 11–20 show a positive perception regarding the use of TBA to promote engagement, motivation, and confidence. All ten items received mean scores above 3.50, which indicate a general agreement regarding the positive impact of TBA. The statement that *"I want more TBA activities in class"* (M = 4.14, SD = 0.79) with a high mean shows an overall agreement among participants to pursue the use of TBA in their classrooms. Moreover, the two statements regarding motivation to learn more vocabulary (M = 3.97, SD = 0.80) and enjoyment of vocabulary learning through TBA (M= 3.96, SD = 0.84) suggested that the participants enjoy their vocabulary learning journey using TBA and highly motivated to learn new vocabulary though different activities and situations. This finding is in alignment

with Al Sultan et al. (2025) where he found that learners hold positive attitudes towards TBA to enjoyment, engagement, collaboration, and self-confidence.

In addition, the participants are encouraged to communicate with their peers when they do communicative tasks in classroom (M = 3.90, SD = 0.78) which in result boost their confidence (M = 3.87, SD = 0.78). However, the participants still find it challenging to use the vocabulary learned using TBA in a daily basis (M = 3.51, SD = 0.97) outside the classroom context.

Another subtheme is the impact of collaboration to enhance motivation and confidence through different tasks. P (A) illustrates that "when I work with my classmates to do a presentation, I gain more confidence because I learn new vocabulary through discussion and I practice using them through explain ideas and justify answers." These perceptions indicate that TBA provides chances for the participants to improve their communication. However, such perceptions do not independently demonstrate measurable improvements in speaking proficiency. One of the participants P (D) illustrates that "sometimes I focus more on accomplishing the tasks that I was required to submit on time which sometimes make me to not focus on the new vocabulary." This statement is aligned with Richards & Rodgers (2001) finding that TBL has received widespread criticism for its general tendency to minimize the volume of language that students use instead of the amount of vocabulary learned.

P (A) indicate that when they were asked if they used vocabulary learned through task-based activities outside the classroom "I understand most of the vocabulary we use when doing tasks however, sometimes I cannot use them outside the classroom because I forget them." On the other hand, P (E) indicates that "TBA when used in the classroom with a clear instruction from the teacher make me able to participate with my peers to do tasks and they help me when I don't understand new vocabulary." We can infer that TBA is effective to enhance students' engagement, motivation, and confidence specifically inside the classroom. Although unclear instructions and unequal contributions within groups could limit the learning opportunities available to some students. This suggests that assigning clear roles and monitoring participation may help make collaborative tasks more inclusive.

C. Challenges and Difficulties of TBA

Table 3. ***Descriptive Statistics for Challenges and Difficulties (Items 21–30)***

Item	Statement (shortened)	M	SD
21	I feel nervous using new vocabulary	2.67	1.02
22	Some activities are too difficult	2.71	0.80
23	Difficulty understanding new vocabulary	2.94	0.92
24	I forget vocabulary after a task	2.96	0.84
25	Some students participate more than others	3.24	0.94
26	I need more teacher guidance	3.56	0.90
27	Difficulty using vocabulary correctly	2.56	0.97
28	Activities take too much class time	3.16	0.85
29	Difficulty remembering all new vocabulary	2.99	0.91
30	I prefer traditional vocabulary learning	2.84	0.88

The participants' responses show a moderate agreement regarding the level of difficulties and challenges they encounter when learning vocabulary through the Task-Based Approach.

The main challenge they indicate that affect their performance when learning vocabulary through TBA is the need of more teacher guidance (M = 3.56, SD = 0.90). Among the reported challenges, the unequal amount of the participants' engagement and participation stands as one of the issues that need to be considered (M = 3.24, SD = 0.94). Moreover, the participants find that applying TBA is a time consuming as the activities need long amount of classroom time to be completed (M = 3.16, SD = 0.85). The participants faced another challenge when it comes

to vocabulary retention as they face difficulty remembering all new vocabulary (M = 2.99, SD = 0.91) and forgetting vocabulary later (M = 2.96, SD = 0.84).

On the other hand, the statement that received the lowest mean scores among the items that measure challenges are the difficulty using new vocabulary appropriately (M = 2.56, SD = 0.97), followed by feeling nervous when using new vocabulary (M = 2.67, SD = 1.02).

The questionnaire was followed by more in-depth interview questions to explore more about the participants perceptions regarding the challenges and difficulties they encounter when learning vocabulary through TBA. One of the participants indicate that she feels nervous when participate in groups especially when more confident students dominated group discussions, which forced her to participate less actively. This finding contradicts with Liu et al.,(2021), as they posit that TBA facilitates interactive communication while encouraging learners to engage in meaningful tasks. However, participant (E) found that learning vocabulary in groups through different TB activities helped her to learn vocabulary pronunciation accurately as they discuss with other peers in the groups.

One of the challenges that all the participants emphasized is the need of clear teacher guidance through different TB activities as participant (F) illustrates “when we are required to do activities, sometimes I feel lost. I think if the teachers provide more examples, clear instructions, and immediate feedback that would help me more and make me learn vocabulary instead of losing time in understanding what are we required to do!.” We can infer that there is a strong need for scaffolding during activities to ensure effective learning experience. This statement is aligned with (Richards & Rodgers, 2001) study as he indicates that there are procedures that have been set forth to guide the practice of task-based in pre and post task stages to ensure its success. In addition, this finding regarding the challenges of TBA is aligned with Alwahibee and Al-Mutairi (2024) as they indicate that lesson preparation, task selection, and the time required to complete activities impact the success of TBA implementation in classroom.

Moreover, the participants indicated that repetition, contextual practice, and vocabulary revision help them to retain the new learned vocabulary. These findings shed the light on the significance of providing learners with more opportunities to reuse newly learned vocabulary beyond the completion of individual tasks to ensure long-term retention.

6. Conclusion and Implications

The findings of this study revealed that learners hold a positive perception regarding the use of TBA in learning vocabulary. They believed learning vocabulary through different interactive tasks and through collaboration is more beneficial than learning vocabulary using traditional methods such as memorization. The findings suggest that this approach of teaching vocabulary makes learners more confident to communicate in the target language. However, learners believe that teachers’ guidance and constant feedback are important to ensure optimal success of vocabulary learning through TBA. Although TBA aims at promoting learners’ autonomy and encourage learners’ active engagement, teachers’ scaffolding maximizes the benefits of task-based instruction. Moreover, the finding suggests that time management is an important factor to ensure the success of TBA in learning vocabulary. Therefore, attention should be given to differences in learners’ language proficiency, unequal participation, and time needed. Addressing these issues is essential to ensuring that TBA provides meaningful learning opportunities.

By the virtue of being action-oriented, this study acts as a guide for policy makers in the education sector about the most effective models of teaching vocabulary. The study is a breakthrough into an area that has long been neglected by educators, researchers, and policy makers. Most previous studies in this area have focused on the teachers’ perception regarding the task-based approach in teaching mastery of English language for knowledge purposes, and as such, the impact of TBL in teaching vocabulary through learners’ lenses have remained widely un-researched. In respect to the second research question, educators and policy makers

have assumed that mastery of English vocabulary is achieved the same way as mastery of other English language skills: proficiency and fluency. Therefore, the study empirical evidence can be used as the basis for advocating for use of task-based approach in teaching vocabulary to second language learners. It is likely that meaning-making and cooperative nature of TBL ensures that students receive feedback from their teachers during the life cycle of the task performance, and hence, better performance.

7. Limitations

There are some limitations in this study such as the limited number of participants which may influence the generality of the findings. In addition, this study investigates the learners' perceptions at one educational context. These limitations can be addressed through including more participants from different educational settings to examine the actual impact of TBA on vocabulary acquisition.

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