



The Effectiveness of Task-Based Grammar Activities in Improving English Grammar Proficiency among University Students in a University in Northern Viet Nam

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ABSTRACT: This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of task-based grammar activities in improving the English grammar proficiency of university students at a university in Viet Nam. Specifically, it compared the grammar performance of students taught through the Task-Based Approach with those taught through the Grammar-Translation Method. The study employed a quasi-experimental pre-test and post-test design involving 60 students, who were divided into an experimental group and a control group, with 30 students in each group. The experimental group was taught grammar through task-based activities, while the control group received instruction through the Grammar-Translation Method. Data were collected using grammar pre-tests and post-tests and were analyzed using mean scores, standard deviation, and t-test procedures. The findings showed that both groups improved after the intervention; however, the experimental group achieved a higher post-test mean score than the control group. The results indicate that task-based grammar activities were more effective in enhancing students' grammar proficiency, increasing their classroom participation, and promoting more meaningful use of grammatical structures in communication. The study concludes that the Task-Based Approach is a suitable and effective method for teaching English grammar at the university level, particularly in contexts where traditional grammar instruction remains dominant.

KEYWORDS: Task-Based Approach, grammar teaching, grammar proficiency, Grammar-Translation Method, English as a foreign language, university students.

1. INTRODUCTION

Grammar is an essential component of English language learning because it provides the structural foundation for clear and accurate communication. A good knowledge of grammar enables learners to organize words, phrases, and clauses meaningfully and to express ideas appropriately in both spoken and written English. Wood (1995) emphasizes that grammatical knowledge is necessary for mastering a foreign language and forms an important part of communicative competence. Similarly, Bradshaw (2013) argues that grammar supports effective communication because accurate grammar helps messages become clearer and easier to understand.

In Viet Nam, English grammar has traditionally been taught through form-focused instruction, especially the Grammar-Translation Method. This method emphasizes rule explanation, vocabulary memorization, sentence analysis, and translation between English and Vietnamese. Although it may help learners recognize grammatical forms, it often gives them limited opportunities to use English meaningfully in communication. Richards and Rodgers (1986) describe the Grammar-Translation Method as having limited theoretical grounding, while Littlewood (1981) argues that communicative language teaching should combine structural and functional aspects of language. Therefore, grammar instruction should not focus only on rules but should also help learners use grammatical structures for communicative purposes.

Task-Based Approach offers a useful alternative for teaching grammar because it connects language forms with meaningful language use. Nunan (1989) defines a task as classroom work in which learners comprehend, produce, or interact in the target language while mainly focusing on meaning rather than form. Willis (1996) also describes a task as a goal-oriented activity in which learners use language to achieve a real outcome. In task-based grammar teaching, students use grammatical structures while completing purposeful activities such as discussion, problem-solving, information exchange, and reporting. This approach can help learners develop both grammatical accuracy and communicative competence.



For first-year university students in northern Viet Nam, grammar proficiency remains important because they need English for academic study, communication, and future professional purposes. However, many students enter university after years of examination-oriented English learning, where grammar is often learned through memorization and controlled exercises. As a result, they may know grammatical rules but still have difficulty applying them accurately and flexibly in real communication. This situation creates a need for grammar teaching activities that are more interactive, meaningful, and learner-centered.

Although previous literature supports the importance of grammar teaching and the value of task-based language teaching, more classroom-based evidence is needed in Vietnamese higher education contexts. In particular, it is necessary to examine whether task-based grammar activities can improve university students' English grammar proficiency more effectively than traditional grammar instruction. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the effectiveness of task-based grammar activities in improving English grammar proficiency among first-year students at a university in northern Viet Nam.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. Is there a significant difference between the grammar performance of students taught through Task-Based Approach and those taught through the Grammar-Translation Method?
2. To what extent are task-based grammar activities effective in improving first-year university students' English grammar proficiency?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Grammar in English Language Teaching

Grammar is an essential component of English language learning because it provides the rules and structures that enable learners to form meaningful sentences. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2013) defines grammar as the study of rules governing word forms and sentence structures, while the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2015) describes it as the system by which words change their forms and combine into sentences. Grammar is therefore not only a set of rules but also a framework for communication. Batstone (1994) views grammar as multidimensional, and Brumfit (2000) suggests that vocabulary alone is insufficient without grammar because words need a structural system to create meaning.

Grammar instruction has remained important in second and foreign language teaching despite debates about whether it should be taught explicitly. Wood (1995) argues that grammatical knowledge is necessary for mastering a foreign language and is part of communicative competence. Hedge (2000) also emphasizes that grammar teaching should help learners notice accurate forms, understand high-frequency grammatical items, and recognize how structures are used in spoken and written communication. Similarly, Thornbury (2001) proposes that grammar should be taught in context and for use, while Ellis (2006) defines grammar teaching as instruction that draws learners' attention to forms so that they can understand, process, and internalize them.

2.2 Grammar-Translation Method

The Grammar-Translation Method has strongly influenced English grammar teaching in many EFL contexts, including Viet Nam. This method usually emphasizes rule explanation, vocabulary memorization, sentence analysis, and translation between the target language and the mother tongue. Richards and Rodgers (1986) note that the Grammar-Translation Method has limited theoretical grounding, although its techniques have remained common in language classrooms. In this approach, grammar is often taught deductively, with rules presented before students practice them through translation or written exercises.

Although the Grammar-Translation Method may help learners recognize grammatical forms, it often gives them limited opportunities to use English for meaningful communication. Students may know rules and complete written exercises but still struggle to express ideas fluently and accurately. This limitation has encouraged a shift toward communicative approaches. Littlewood (1981) explains that communicative language teaching pays attention to both functional and structural aspects of language, suggesting that grammar teaching should develop both accuracy and communicative ability.

2.3 Task-Based Approach

Task-Based Approach is a communicative and learner-centered approach that organizes language instruction around meaningful tasks. Nunan (1989) defines a task as classroom work in which learners comprehend, produce, or interact in the target



language while mainly focusing on meaning rather than form. Willis (1996) describes a task as a goal-oriented activity in which learners use language to achieve a real outcome. These definitions show that tasks differ from traditional exercises because they require learners to use language for a communicative purpose, not simply to practice isolated forms.

Task-based language teaching encourages learners to participate actively in communication, work with others, and use language to complete meaningful objectives. Nunan (1991) identifies key features of task-based language teaching, including interaction in the target language, the use of authentic texts, attention to both language and learning processes, and the connection between classroom learning and real-world language use. Brown (1994) also views task-based instruction as a series of tasks that serve teaching purposes beyond mechanical language practice.

2.4 Task-Based Grammar Teaching

Task-Based Approach can be applied to grammar teaching by placing grammatical structures within meaningful classroom activities. Instead of learning rules first and practicing them mechanically, students use target grammar while completing tasks such as discussions, information exchange, problem-solving, and reporting. Willis (1996) proposes a task-based framework with three stages: pre-task, task cycle, and language focus. This framework is useful for grammar teaching because learners first use language in context and then analyze and practice relevant grammatical forms.

Task-based grammar teaching can help learners develop both accuracy and fluency. It allows students to encounter grammar through meaningful use, interact with classmates, and become more aware of how grammatical forms function in communication. This approach is especially relevant for university students, who need English not only for examinations but also for academic study, classroom discussion, and future professional communication.

2.5 Research Gap

The reviewed literature shows that grammar instruction remains necessary in English language teaching and that Task-Based Approach offers a communicative way to teach grammar. However, traditional grammar teaching, particularly the Grammar-Translation Method, still strongly influences English classrooms in Viet Nam. While existing literature supports the theoretical value of task-based learning, more classroom-based evidence is needed to examine whether task-based grammar activities can improve students' grammar proficiency more effectively than traditional instruction. This study addresses that gap by investigating the effectiveness of task-based grammar activities in improving English grammar proficiency among first-year university students in a university in northern Viet Nam.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a quasi-experimental pre-test and post-test design to examine the effectiveness of task-based grammar activities in improving English grammar proficiency among first-year university students in a university in northern Viet Nam. The participants consisted of 60 first-year students who were divided into two groups: an experimental group and a control group, with 30 students in each group. The experimental group received grammar instruction through task-based grammar activities, while the control group was taught through the Grammar-Translation Method. Before the intervention, both groups completed a grammar pre-test to identify their initial level of grammar proficiency and to ensure that the two groups were relatively comparable before instruction. The grammar test included multiple-choice items designed to measure students' understanding of selected grammar points, particularly areas such as the simple present tense, subject-verb agreement, and plural forms of nouns. After the pre-test, the experimental teaching period was conducted, during which the experimental group participated in task-based activities involving pair work, group work, discussion, problem-solving, reporting, and language-focused practice, while the control group learned grammar mainly through rule explanation, translation, and controlled exercises. At the end of the intervention, both groups completed a post-test with a similar format to the pre-test in order to measure changes in grammar proficiency. The data collected from the pre-test and post-test were analyzed quantitatively using mean scores, standard deviation, and t-test procedures to determine whether there were significant differences between the two groups and between students' performance before and after the intervention. The comparison of pre-test and post-test results was used to evaluate the effectiveness of task-based grammar activities in improving students' English grammar proficiency. Ethical considerations were observed by informing students of the purpose of the study, ensuring that their participation was used only for research purposes, and keeping their personal information and test results confidential.

4. RESULTS

This section presents the results of the study based on the two research questions. The first research question examined whether there was a significant difference between the grammar performance of students taught through the Task-Based Approach and those taught through the Grammar-Translation Method. The second research question examined the extent to which task-based grammar activities were effective in improving first-year university students' English grammar proficiency. The results are presented through the post-test comparison between the experimental and control groups, followed by the comparison of pre-test and post-test mean scores. The experimental group was taught through task-based grammar activities, while the control group was taught through the Grammar-Translation Method.

4.1 Difference in Grammar Performance between the Task-Based Approach Group and the Grammar-Translation Method Group

The first research question asked: Is there a significant difference between the grammar performance of students taught through Task-Based Approach and those taught through the Grammar-Translation Method? To answer this question, the post-test scores of the experimental group and the control group were compared after the intervention.

Table 1. Post-test results of the experimental and control groups

Group	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Test Value
Experimental group	30	7.96	7.31	Z = 4.2
Control group	30	7.11	11.23	

As shown in Table 1, the experimental group obtained a post-test mean score of **7.96**, while the control group obtained a post-test mean score of **7.11**. The experimental group therefore achieved a higher grammar performance score than the control group after the intervention. The reported value was **Z = 4.2**, which is higher than the critical value of **1.96**. This indicates that there was a significant difference between the post-test grammar performance of students taught through the Task-Based Approach and those taught through the Grammar-Translation Method. Therefore, the first research question was answered: students taught through the Task-Based Approach performed significantly better in the post-test than students taught through the Grammar-Translation Method.

4.2 Effectiveness of Task-Based Grammar Activities in Improving Grammar Proficiency

The second research question asked: To what extent are task-based grammar activities effective in improving first-year university students' English grammar proficiency? To answer this question, the pre-test and post-test mean scores of the experimental group were compared. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Pre-test and post-test results of the experimental group

Test	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean Gain
Pre-test	30	6.41	0.71	
Post-test	30	7.96	7.31	1.55

As presented in Table 2, the experimental group's mean score increased from 6.41 in the pre-test to 7.96 in the post-test. The mean gain was 1.55 points. This indicates that students who received task-based grammar instruction improved their English grammar proficiency after the intervention. The increase in the mean score shows that task-based grammar activities had a positive effect on students' grammar performance.

To further show the extent of improvement, the mean gain of the experimental group was compared with that of the control group. The results are shown in Table 3.



Table 3. Mean gain comparison between the experimental and control groups

Group	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Mean Gain
Experimental group	6.41	7.96	1.55
Control group	6.74	7.11	0.37
Difference in mean gain			1.18

Table 3 shows that both groups improved after instruction, but the experimental group showed a larger increase. The experimental group gained 1.55 points, while the control group gained 0.37 points. The difference in mean gain between the two groups was 1.18 points. This result indicates that task-based grammar activities produced a greater improvement in grammar proficiency than the Grammar-Translation Method. Therefore, the second research question was answered: task-based grammar activities were effective in improving first-year university students' English grammar proficiency, as shown by the experimental group's higher mean gain and stronger post-test performance.

Overall, the results directly answered the two research questions. First, there was a significant difference between the grammar performance of students taught through the Task-Based Approach and those taught through the Grammar-Translation Method, with the experimental group obtaining the higher post-test mean score. Second, task-based grammar activities were effective in improving students' English grammar proficiency, as demonstrated by the experimental group's increase from **6.41** to **7.96** and its larger mean gain compared with the control group.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of the study show that students taught through the Task-Based Approach achieved better grammar performance than those taught through the Grammar-Translation Method. The post-test mean score of the experimental group was higher than that of the control group, and the reported test value indicated a significant difference between the two groups. This result suggests that task-based grammar activities provided more effective learning conditions for improving students' grammar proficiency than traditional grammar instruction. While the Grammar-Translation Method may help students understand rules and complete controlled exercises, task-based grammar instruction appears to create more opportunities for students to use grammatical structures meaningfully through communication, interaction, and task completion. This finding is consistent with Nunan's (1989) view that tasks require learners to comprehend, produce, or interact in the target language while focusing mainly on meaning rather than form. It also supports Willis's (1996) argument that tasks are goal-oriented activities in which learners use language to achieve real outcomes.

The higher performance of the experimental group may be explained by the communicative nature of task-based grammar activities. In task-based lessons, students were not limited to memorizing grammar rules or translating sentences. Instead, they used grammar while completing activities such as pair work, group discussion, information exchange, problem-solving, sentence completion, and reporting. These activities gave students opportunities to encounter grammar in meaningful contexts and to apply grammatical forms in communication. This supports Littlewood's (1981) view that communicative language teaching should combine functional and structural aspects of language. In this sense, the Task-Based Approach did not remove grammar instruction from the classroom; rather, it placed grammar within meaningful language use, helping students connect grammatical accuracy with communicative purpose.

The improvement of the experimental group from the pre-test to the post-test also indicates that task-based grammar activities had a positive effect on students' grammar proficiency. The experimental group's mean score increased from 6.41 to 7.96, with a mean gain of 1.55 points, while the control group increased from 6.74 to 7.11, with a mean gain of 0.37 points. This larger gain suggests that task-based grammar instruction helped students make greater progress than instruction through the Grammar-Translation Method. The result is consistent with Hedge's (2000) argument that grammar teaching should help learners notice accurate forms and understand how language structures are used in spoken and written communication. It also reflects Thornbury's (2001) principle that grammar should be taught in context and for use, rather than as an isolated body of rules.

Another possible explanation for the stronger improvement of the experimental group is that task-based activities encouraged more active student participation. Traditional grammar teaching often positions learners as passive receivers of rules, while task-based learning requires them to participate, cooperate, negotiate meaning, and produce language. During the task cycle, learners



are expected to work with peers, prepare outputs, and report their results. Such activities may increase students' engagement and make grammar learning less mechanical. This is in line with Nunan's (1991) characteristics of task-based language teaching, including interaction in the target language, the use of learners' personal experiences, and the connection between classroom learning and real language use.

The findings also suggest that grammar instruction should balance form, meaning, and use. The control group showed some improvement after being taught through the Grammar-Translation Method, which indicates that explicit rule explanation and controlled practice can still contribute to grammar learning. However, the smaller gain of the control group suggests that this method may be less effective when used as the dominant approach. Students may learn grammatical rules, but they may not have sufficient opportunities to apply those rules communicatively. In contrast, the Task-Based Approach allows learners to use language first and then focus on grammar during the language focus stage. This sequence corresponds to Willis's (1996) task-based framework of pre-task, task cycle, and language focus, in which learners complete meaningful tasks before analyzing and practicing relevant language forms.

The results are particularly relevant to first-year university students in the Vietnamese EFL context. Many students enter university after years of examination-oriented English learning, where grammar is often taught through memorization, translation, and written exercises. Although such learning may help students recognize grammatical structures, it may not sufficiently prepare them to use English in academic and communicative contexts. Task-based grammar activities can address this limitation by encouraging students to use grammar in purposeful interaction. This is important at the university level, where students need English not only for tests but also for classroom communication, academic study, presentations, and future professional purposes.

Overall, the findings confirm that task-based grammar activities can improve students' English grammar proficiency more effectively than the Grammar-Translation Method. The significant post-test difference between the two groups and the larger mean gain of the experimental group show that task-based grammar instruction had a clear positive effect on students' grammar performance. These results support the use of task-based grammar activities as a practical pedagogical approach for EFL grammar teaching in higher education. However, the findings should be interpreted within the scope of the study, as the participants were limited to first-year students at one university in northern Viet Nam, and the intervention focused on selected grammar areas. Future studies may expand the sample size, include students from different institutions, and examine the effects of task-based grammar instruction on other language skills.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined the effectiveness of task-based grammar activities in improving English grammar proficiency among first-year university students in a university in northern Viet Nam. The findings showed that students taught through the Task-Based Approach achieved a higher post-test mean score than those taught through the Grammar-Translation Method, indicating a significant difference in grammar performance between the two groups. The experimental group also demonstrated a greater mean gain from pre-test to post-test, showing that task-based grammar activities had a positive effect on students' grammar proficiency. These results suggest that task-based grammar instruction can help students learn grammar more effectively by connecting grammatical forms with meaningful communication, interaction, and classroom tasks. Therefore, the study contributes to English language teaching by supporting the use of task-based grammar activities as a practical alternative to traditional grammar instruction in Vietnamese higher education. The final implication is that university English teachers should consider integrating task-based activities into grammar lessons to improve students' grammatical accuracy, communicative use of English, and active participation in learning.

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