



Task-Based Learning in Academic Writing for EFL Students at Sabratah University

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Abstract:

This qualitative study explores the use of Task-Based Learning (TBL) in teaching academic writing to EFL students at Sabratah University. Based on classroom observations, student feedback, and literature review, the research found that authentic, communicative writing tasks increased learner autonomy, engagement, and confidence. Collaborative projects, such as research proposals and reports, improved fluency, organization, and vocabulary through peer feedback. Students viewed TBL positively, citing deeper understanding of writing processes and less fear of errors. Despite challenges like preparation time and initial resistance to group work, TBL effectively promoted independent learning and practical language use in Libyan EFL classrooms.

المخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة النوعية تطبيق التعلم القائم على المهام (TBL) في تدريس الكتابة الأكاديمية لطلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة صبراتة. استنادًا إلى الملاحظات الصفية وآراء الطلاب ومراجعة الأدبيات، توصلت الدراسة إلى أن المهام الكتابية الأصيلة والتواصلية زادت من استقلالية الطلبة ومشاركتهم وتقنهم بأنفسهم. كما ساهمت المشاريع التعاونية، مثل كتابة المقترحات البحثية والتقارير، في تحسين الطلاقة والتنظيم والمفردات من خلال التغذية الراجعة المتبادلة بين الأقران. أبدى الطلاب مواقف إيجابية تجاه هذا النهج، مشيرين إلى فهم أعمق لعمليات الكتابة وانخفاض الخوف من ارتكاب الأخطاء. وعلى الرغم من التحديات المتمثلة في زيادة وقت التحضير ومقاومة بعض الطلاب للعمل الجماعي في البداية، أثبت التعلم القائم على المهام فعاليته في تعزيز التعلم المستقل واستخدام اللغة الإنجليزية في سياقات واقعية داخل فصول اللغة في ليبيا.

Introduction

Effective academic writing is a critical skill for university students, yet EFL learners often struggle to meet its demands. In many Arab and North African EFL contexts, including Libya, students receive limited writing practice and encounter difficulties such as limited vocabulary, grammar errors, and underdeveloped organization. Research at Libyan universities has documented that inadequate instructional time and resources, along with traditional teaching methods, contribute to students' writing challenges. For example, Aldabbus and Almansouri (2022) report that Libyan undergraduates frequently face spelling and grammar problems as well as coherence issues in their essays. In this environment of limited input and practice, motivating learners and building autonomy are especially important. Elsayed (2020) emphasizes that learner autonomy, relatedness to the task, and a sense of competence significantly influence EFL student motivation in Arab contexts.

Task-Based Learning (TBL) offers an alternative to traditional, form-focused instruction by centering lessons on meaningful writing tasks. TBL originates in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and frames language as a tool for accomplishing real-world goals. Ellis (2003) notes that, in task-based approaches, classroom activities are organized around completing purposeful tasks, which broadens the curriculum focus toward fluency (communication) rather than strict accuracy. Tasks are defined as goal-oriented activities with clear outcomes (e.g. creating a report, solving a problem). They typically involve pre-task preparation, task performance (often collaborative), and post-task reflection (Willis, 1996; Ellis, 2003). By prioritizing authentic communication and learner initiative, TBL has been shown to increase student-centeredness and engagement in language classes.

In the writing classroom, TBL means having students produce genuine texts (reports, essays, proposals) rather than isolated drills. For instance, Thirakunkovit and Boonyaparakob (2022) describe tasks where student groups drafted components of academic research (a proposal, literature review, report, and discussion of findings) and

iteratively revised their work. These authentic assignments required students to research, plan, write, and peer-review, mirroring real academic writing processes. Using such tasks, researchers have reported significant improvements in EFL learners' writing skills. In several contexts (Pakistan, Iran, Malaysia, China), task-based approaches led to gains in coherence, creativity, and overall writing performance. Likewise, collaborative, task-based writing tends to enhance content development, organization, and vocabulary use, as well as encourage student motivation and confidence.

Despite its potential, implementing TBL can pose challenges. Preparing rich, authentic tasks demands extra instructor effort, and some students initially resist unfamiliar group processes. Nevertheless, by engaging learners in meaningful work, TBL is believed to foster higher-order skills like critical thinking and promote learner autonomy. Marashi and Dadari (2012) found that EFL students working on task-based writing activities improved their creative thinking and critical reasoning during the writing process. In our Libyan university setting, little research has examined TBL in writing. This study seeks to fill that gap by investigating how implementing task-based activities affects student autonomy, fluency, accuracy, and critical thinking in academic writing classes at Sabratah University.

Methodology

A qualitative case-study design was employed to explore the impact of TBL on academic writing instruction in Sabratah University's English Department. The context was an intermediate-level EFL writing course for English majors during one semester. Two intact classes (approximately 20 students each) participated. The instructor (the author) redesigned several units around task-based activities aligned with academic writing objectives. Example tasks included: collaboratively drafting a research proposal on a chosen topic, writing a literature review in small groups, preparing a formal report based on survey findings, and discussing their projects' results. These tasks were relevant to students' fields of study and required authentic information gathering, planning, and writing.

Data sources included classroom observations, student work samples (drafts and final versions of tasks), and student perspectives. The researcher kept a reflective teaching journal and took field notes during task activities (monitoring group discussions, scaffolding language when needed). After each major task, focus-group interviews were conducted with volunteer students to elicit their experiences and attitudes towards the tasks. Students also completed open-ended questionnaires on how these tasks influenced their learning (autonomy, engagement, skill development). The study adhered to ethical considerations: participation was voluntary, and student identities were kept confidential.

Classroom sessions followed a three-phase TBL cycle: pre-task, task performance, and post-task feedback/reflection. In pre-task phases, the instructor introduced the writing topic (e.g. environment, technology) and provided necessary input (e.g. sample texts, brainstorming). Students then worked in pairs or small groups to complete the main task within the class period, with the teacher acting as a facilitator. In post-task sessions, students presented their drafts, received peer and teacher feedback, and collaboratively revised their work. This cycle repeated for each writing task throughout the semester.

The qualitative data (field notes, interview transcripts, student reflections) were analyzed using thematic coding. Through iterative reading, common themes were identified concerning student autonomy, motivation, writing performance (fluency and accuracy), and thinking skills. These observations were compared against themes in the literature on TBL and writing instruction to triangulate findings.

Findings

Increased Learner Autonomy and Engagement: Students took greater initiative in the learning process under TBL. Because tasks were meaningful and student-centered, learners often took responsibility for organizing their work. For example, when groups were assigned to write a survey report, students autonomously negotiated roles (researcher, writer, editor), planned the outline, and set their own deadlines. This process mirrors Aldosari and Alsager's (2023) finding that varied, problem-solving tasks "provide a lot of flexibility" and elicit strong student engagement. Many students reported feeling more "in control" of their learning. By making decisions about content, structure, and language use in their writing projects, students exercised agency and developed self-directed learning habits. These observations align with prior research suggesting that TBL fosters autonomy by having learners "organize, implement, and evaluate their own work".

Notably, autonomy appeared linked to motivation. According to focus-group discussions, students appreciated the relevance of tasks to real-life contexts, which made them more enthusiastic. This finding echoes Elsayed's (2020) conclusion that students' interest in given tasks and a sense of competence are "utterly essential" for motivating EFL learners. The task topics were chosen to connect with students' experiences (e.g. writing about local issues or future career interests), and many students commented that this personal relevance kept them focused. As one student explained, "[Working on a report about my major] made me care more about using good English." These qualitative impressions suggest that TBL's emphasis on meaningful communication effectively promoted learner engagement and autonomy in this Libyan context.

Fluency and Communicative Practice: The tasks naturally increased the amount of writing (and talking) students did in class. During group work, students frequently conversed in English while drafting, editing, and discussing ideas. This emphasis on meaning over form is characteristic of TBL. As Ellis (2003) notes, TBL "prescribes teaching methodology in broad terms... as 'fluency' rather than 'accuracy'". In practice, many students produced larger volumes of text than they would in a traditional grammar-focused lesson, indicating improved writing fluency. For instance, groups drafting the research proposal exchanged ideas freely to meet the task's goal, even if grammar mistakes occurred. The instructor observed that the TBL approach led to more sustained use of English: students spent a large portion of class time communicating their ideas (consistent with the advantage that "students spend a lot of time communicating").

This enhanced fluency was reflected in their written work. Later drafts showed students taking more risks with language and more complex sentences than in their previous teacher-led exercises. They built new vocabulary into their drafts organically as needed to complete tasks. These outcomes mirror findings from the literature: by engaging learners in authentic communication, TBL encourages meaning-based output and repeated practice, which develops fluency. In summary, when class time centered on completing purposeful writing tasks, students naturally practiced writing English more, thereby enhancing fluency.

Accuracy and Peer Feedback: Simultaneously, TBL provided opportunities for improving linguistic accuracy. In the post-task phase, groups shared drafts and gave each other feedback under teacher guidance. This peer-correction process helped students notice and fix errors, leading to more accurate final texts. In the present study, instructors noted that many final drafts were noticeably improved from initial versions. This accords with Thirakunkovit and Boonyaparakob (2022), who reported that students' collaborative writing outcomes were "linguistically more accurate" because peers "help one another to pay more attention to language". For example,

one group revised their report by correcting verb tense and agreement errors pointed out by classmates during a review session. Such immediate feedback cycles gave students a chance to reconcile meaning and form.

Quantitatively, rubric scores for content, organization, and language accuracy increased from first to final drafts of tasks (although precise counts were not recorded, the trend was clear in classroom assessments). Students themselves recognized this progress. During interviews, one participant said, “When friends point out a mistake, I don’t get embarrassed; I learn how to fix it.” In a way, the collaborative nature of tasks built a supportive environment. Even students who were initially anxious about grammar tended to relax and focus on communication, then paid attention to form during revision stages. This finding is consistent with broader studies showing that collaborative, task-based writing can significantly improve EFL learners’ writing accuracy and complexity.

Critical Thinking and Creativity: The writing tasks demanded cognitive engagement beyond sentence-level writing. Students had to analyze information (e.g. interpreting survey data), organize arguments, and meet academic conventions. This stimulated critical thinking. According to student reports, working on a full research proposal or literature review forced them to evaluate what details to include and how to structure their ideas logically. Such higher-order processing aligns with the notion that meaningful tasks “improve learners’ creative capacity and critical thinking skills”. For instance, when drafting their discussion sections, students debated which findings were most important and how to word justifications. These exchanges evidenced critical engagement with content; in teacher journals, it was noted that students had to compare different viewpoints and justify choices.

Creativity also increased. Given open-ended assignments, groups experimented with different formats (some designed charts or infographics as part of their reports), and they came up with novel ways to approach challenges (e.g. creating mock interview dialogues for data collection). In open questionnaires, several students mentioned feeling “like real researchers” and taking pride in the originality of their projects. This qualitative improvement echoes Marashi and Dadari’s (2012) observation that TBL “significantly benefitted learners ... in terms of both their writing skills and creativity”. In short, the freedom and responsibility inherent in task-based projects encouraged students to think critically and creatively about their writing, rather than simply applying rote formulas.

Positive Perceptions of TBL: Overall, students expressed favorable views of the task-based approach. When asked about their experience, many reported that the tasks made class more interesting and worthwhile. In particular, they appreciated the chance to produce “real” texts with a clear purpose. As one group put it, “Before, I wrote sentences about nothing; now we actually write a project that matters.” This resonates with Thirakunkovit and Boonyaparakob’s (2022) findings: students had a “positive perception of the task-based collaborative writing” because it gave them deeper insight into writing processes and improved their content and organization. Similarly, in our classes, students noted improvements in their writing that they could see in their own drafts, boosting confidence. A common theme in interviews was that peer support made language practice less intimidating. According to our results, once students overcame initial uncertainty, they embraced the approach – reflecting Dobao’s (2012) idea that peer collaboration provides “opportunities for growth” through co-construction of knowledge.

Challenges and Opportunities: Despite these positives, implementing TBL had challenges. From the instructor’s perspective, designing authentic tasks and materials required significant preparation time. During some classes, the teacher observed that a few students felt overwhelmed by the freedom and the amount of work. This matches Thirakunkovit and Boonyaparakob’s note that tasks can be “hard to implement” and might demotivate students if

not managed carefully. In our case, a minority of students expressed initial frustration with group dynamics or time constraints. For example, one student said, “It was new for me to write with others; I wasn’t sure how to start.” Nevertheless, as tasks progressed, most students adapted and acknowledged the value of the process.

The Libyan EFL classroom context also presented hurdles. Large class sizes and limited access to resources (e.g. library, internet) sometimes hindered research tasks. Some students lacked confidence in their language ability, so the teacher had to scaffold support, especially in pre-task phases. However, these challenges highlight important opportunities: they point to the need for gradual integration of TBL and for teacher training. The literature suggests (and our experience confirms) that with careful planning, such as providing clear instructions, examples, and checkpoints, many obstacles can be mitigated. Notably, our findings echo Alshenit’s (2025) study of Libyan writing instructors, which reported that while teachers saw the benefits of creative, task-oriented instruction, they also needed support (e.g. workshops) to implement it successfully. This implies that institutional backing (teacher development and sufficient resources) is crucial to fully harness TBL’s advantages.

Discussion

The findings indicate that Task-Based Learning holds substantial promise for Libyan EFL academic writing instruction. By embedding meaningful tasks in the curriculum, instructors can shift students into active roles, encouraging autonomy and practical language use. Students in this study became responsible for their learning – setting goals, solving problems, and reflecting on their progress. This outcome is significant in a context where traditional instruction often positions the teacher as the primary source of knowledge. Echoing the Saudi study by Aldosari and Alsager (2023), we observed that a well-varied task inventory (surveys, role-plays, real writing assignments) can maximize engagement and “autonomous learning”. In other words, TBL naturally incorporates learner-driven elements, which align with contemporary educational goals of promoting self-directed, critical thinking students.

Moreover, emphasizing communication through tasks supports fluency development. Consistent with Ellis (2003) and communicative theory, the students in our classes focused first on conveying meaning and completing the task before fine-tuning form. This ordering appeared beneficial; fluent expression during task performance later provided a meaningful basis for addressing accuracy. The resulting writing showed both increased complexity and improved correctness. As Thirakunkovit and Boonyaparakob (2022) demonstrated, task-based collaborative writing significantly enhances multiple writing dimensions (content, organization, vocabulary). Our results align with this: learners made noticeable progress in structuring their essays and selecting appropriate academic language. The cooperative element of TBL was key to this accuracy gain, since peers acted as editors and supported each other’s attention to detail.

Crucially, TBL tasks also nurtured higher-order skills. Students reported that tasks required them to analyze information, make decisions, and justify their writing – all markers of critical thinking. For example, deciding what evidence to include in a report forced groups to evaluate relevance and credibility. These cognitive processes were richer than those encountered in isolated drill exercises. In turn, handling such complex tasks boosted learners’ confidence and interest in writing. This result is consistent with the view that TBL fosters creativity and critical thinking alongside language learning. It also suggests that academic writing classes can serve dual purposes: not only teaching English, but also developing students as independent thinkers.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the implications are clear. TBL promotes learner autonomy by design, which is crucial in the Libyan context where students have few opportunities to use English outside the classroom. By engaging in real communicative writing projects, students practiced decision-making and self-assessment – behaviors linked to autonomous learning. In practical terms, instructors should continue incorporating tasks that require student initiative (e.g. project proposals, peer review cycles). Such activities naturally integrate reading, writing, speaking, and critical analysis, reflecting modern views of literacy. Additionally, the collaborative nature of tasks builds important interpersonal skills (teamwork, negotiation), which are valuable outcomes in any educational setting.

However, successful implementation of TBL requires addressing the noted challenges. Instructors should be prepared for an initial adjustment period: providing clear task models and gradually increasing task complexity can ease students into this learner-centered mode. Institutional support is also vital; as the creative thinking study (Alshenity, 2025) recommends, workshops or mentoring can help teachers design effective tasks and manage classroom dynamics. The positive student responses seen here suggest that such efforts would be well-received. Ultimately, the advantages of TBL – enhanced autonomy, fluency, accuracy, and critical thinking – align with the goals of tertiary education in Libya. By situating language learning in authentic, meaningful contexts, educators can better prepare students for academic challenges ahead.

Conclusion

This qualitative study has demonstrated that Task-Based Learning can enrich EFL academic writing instruction in Libyan universities. Anchoring lessons in real-world writing projects engaged students more deeply than traditional exercises. The task-based approach yielded multiple benefits: students took charge of their learning, practiced English communication extensively (improving fluency), and refined their writing through iterative peer-supported revision (enhancing accuracy). Crucially, the need to plan and execute meaningful tasks stimulated critical thinking and creativity, skills rarely cultivated in conventional grammar-driven instruction. Despite the extra effort required from instructors and some initial student resistance, the overall response was positive.

These findings suggest that Libyan EFL programs should consider integrating TBL into the writing curriculum. Adopting tasks like research reports, debates, and collaborative essays can help bridge the gap between classroom learning and real academic writing demands. To maximize success, teachers may need training on task design and assessment, and administrators should allocate class time and resources accordingly. Future research could build on this work by quantitatively measuring writing gains or exploring long-term impacts of TBL. For now, the evidence indicates that moving towards a task-based pedagogy offers a promising pathway to foster learner autonomy, improve language proficiency, and develop critical thinking – all essential outcomes for students at Sabratha University and beyond.

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