

organize and make their points. TBLT also implies that education and learning must be recognized as an act in which a learner plays the role of an active constructor of knowledge. It will also provide teachers with an enhanced estimation of the thinking and learning potential of students (Norton & Toobey, 2004).

And finally, although genuine task-based textbooks are not available on the market yet, ESP teachers may adapt the present materials if they wish to use a task-based approach. Doing so, by locating and designing goal-oriented communication tasks and designing post-task phases, ESP teachers may develop materials to create a situation in classroom which generates the type of behavior required for successful completion of a given task. The tasks designed should take into account both target situation needs and learning needs; therefore, by adjusting the level of difficulty of the tasks, teachers may work with authentic texts from the start.

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Therefore, the researcher administered a pretest to both groups. By doing so, the researcher wished to make sure that the two groups did not differ significantly at the outset of the study. After the test, the t-test statistical procedure was applied. The following table reveals the results.

t-test for the posttest scores				
Group	N	X	SD	t-observed
Ge	30	36.2	5.63	3.03
Gc	30	38.1	5.62	
P<0.05    d.f = 58    t-critical = 2.00				

Since the calculated t-test (1.29) does not exceed the t-critical value (2.00) at 0.05 level of probability for d.f. = 58, it may be concluded that the samples are not significantly different and probably behave as samples from the same population at the beginning of the study.

At the end of the study, a teacher-made test was given to the control and experimental groups in order to find out the probable differences between the performances of the two groups on a task-based reading comprehension. Then in order to confirm or reject the null hypothesis, a t-test was run at the end of the study. The results revealed that the calculated t-test exceeded the critical value (2.00) at 0.05 level of probability for d.f. = 58; therefore, the researcher felt justified and safe that the null hypothesis could be rejected. Consequently, the treatment (TBLT) that the experimental group received during the semester had proved effective. The two groups were not

significantly different at the outset of the study; however, they behaved differently on the final test. The researcher is satisfied to claim that the final calculated t-test (3.03) at 0.05 level of probability is due to the independent variable (TBLT). The following table summarizes the data analysis.

R	Ge	T1	X	T2
R	Gc	T1		T2
R = Random		G = Group		T1 = Pretest
X = Instruction		T2 = Posttest		
Ge = Experimental group			Gc = Control group	

## Conclusions and implications

Generally speaking, in task activities at college level, the goal is to read a text and do something with the information. According to the results of this study, it can be cogently concluded that assigning students real-world tasks conveys to them the value of reading for message and influences their reading comprehension positively. Task activities provide students with something to do after reading and enhance interest and recall on the part of students. In other words if students are involved in the process of learning, they feel that they are doing something that will be later use; consequently, better comprehension takes place. Furthermore TBLT places learners in situations that require authentic use of language in order to communicate (Fried-Booth, 1997). As a result, learners find they need skills to plan

In task cycle students are actually involved in doing the task and using whatever linguistic resources they possess to achieve the goals of the task. In this phase teacher may provide help or elucidation in the case of a breakdown in communication.

In post-task phase the teacher has an opportunity for form-focused work. Some of the specific features of the language that occurred during the task are identified and analyzed. Therefore, the teacher can work on functions, syntax, words, categories of meaning or use, and phonological features.

Because of the fact that texts were used as the main source of input in this study, some criteria were followed in order to choose texts and control the difficulty of the tasks. Following Wilson (1986) texts were selected according to criteria such as the density of information, the author's style, the amount of unfamiliar Lexis, and the diagram to print ratio. The difficulty of the task was also controlled – without interfering with the principle of authenticity-by keeping these criteria in mind: information density, redundancy – rephrasing and restatements used to simplify, length, speed at which a task should be done, and visual support.

On the basis of texts, at elementary stages, the students were assigned to do a variety of tasks such as labeling a diagram or table (location and transfer of information), choosing a topic or the main idea for a paragraph or text (extraction and transfer of information), and putting some jumbled statements in the order that occurred in a text, e.g. about an operation on a lathe (transfer and evaluation of

information). At more advanced stages, students were assigned to study a text, e.g. about grinding or turning, and then write down the steps to machine a workpiece to the specified dimensions. Here is an example of the tasks assigned for the first few sessions.

Students received a text about dimensioning in engineering drafting and a drawing that was slightly different from the one in the text. The teacher introduced topic-related words that were useful in accomplishing the task. The assignment was to study the texts, which was about different kinds of lines used for dimensioning and the locations that each size should go. Then students were asked to identify different lines on the drawing and insert the given sizes in appropriate places. The accomplishment of the task depended upon understanding the text. After the students achieved the goal of the task, the teacher began to work on problematic areas. At the end of the class students were evaluated on the extent they achieved the goal of the task rather than language itself.

### **Data analysis**

*Research question:* Does TBLT aid reading comprehension of Technical and Vocational students in ESP courses?

*Null hypothesis:* TBLT does not aid reading comprehension of Technical and Vocational students in ESP courses.

The raw scores by themselves cannot confirm or reject the null hypothesis; in addition, the means of the scores do not help so much in achieving a conclusive result.

purpose, depending on the information needed and the task to be carried out, means applying different strategies. Since the acquisition of reading skill to consult English textbooks or catalogs may be students' main reason for following ESP courses, authentic texts can be used from the start by controlling the difficulty of the tasks (Wilson, 1986). The same texts can be also used at different points during a semester, each time with a different task or purpose.

The last point to mention is that because of the nature of the tasks assigned, students inevitably have to use the other skills in classroom, too. Hutchinson & Waters (1987) argued that although need analysis reveals that reading ability is what ESP students need, learning to read effectively encapsulates writing, knowledge of sound and rhythm of a language and speaking. However, since this study concerns the role of TBLT on reading comprehension and texts are used as the main sources of input for accomplishment of tasks, the present study focuses on this component of language.

## Method

### Subjects

Sixty male students participated as subjects in two groups of thirty in this study. The participants were selected on the basis of random sampling from the students of Machine Tools at Mofateh Technical and Vocational Center in Hamedan. The subjects, in the form of two thirty classes, had all passed more or less the same courses. Moreover, the two

classes were homogeneous as far as general knowledge of English was concerned. The age range of the subjects was from 19 to 23.

### Design

The design of this study was "pretest posttest control group design." Sixty college students took part as subjects in two groups of thirty.

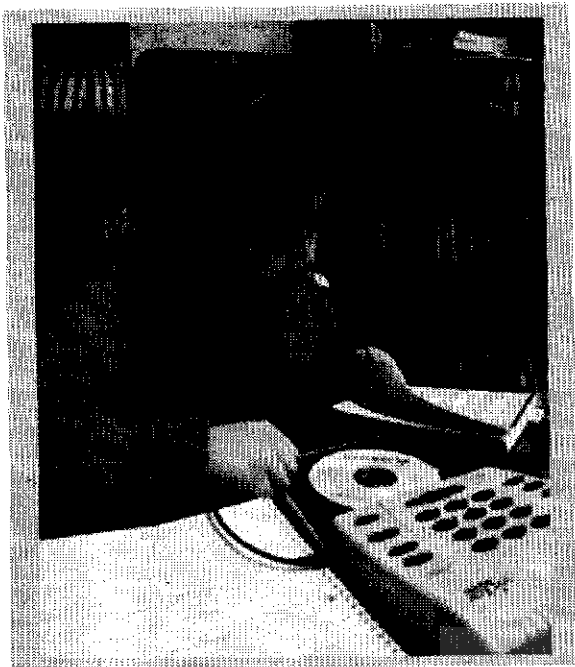
t-test for the pretest scores				
Group	N	X	SD	t-observed
Ge	30	27.9	4.31	1.29
Gc	30	27.26	3.79	
P<0.05		d.f = 58	t-critical = 2.00	

### Procedure

The two classes were conducted two hours a week, and the study lasted for a semester. In the control group class, the teacher introduced the new words and phrases, and the students began to translate the passages and answer the comprehension questions. For the experimental group, the same passages were redesigned to fit a task-based framework. The procedure is explained below.

TBLT requires the teacher to set up and monitor a situation in which task-based learning can take place. Therefore, following Estaire & Zanon (1990), Gatbonton (1994), and Willis (1990), the class time was divided into three phases: **pre-task**, **task cycle**, and **post-task**.

In pre-task phase the teacher's responsibility is to introduce and create interest in doing a task, then (s)he activates topic-related words and phrases that will be useful in carrying out the task; that is, (s)he provides linguistic and conceptual input for a given task.



Therefore, tasks selected in this approach must satisfy a number of criteria:

1. Authenticity of language and content
2. Economy: that is, tasks that have maximum coverage of language items to maximize efficiency of language learning
3. Tasks must include conceptual, linguistic and physical aspects. This means that each task has an identified and relevant specific-subject content; is at an identified, appropriate and manageable linguistic level; and has an identified and appropriate performance requirement (Wilson, 1986).

### **TBLT and advantages**

The assumption behind TBLT is that language should not be "atomised and practiced in small increments" (ibid., p.19) rather it can be well learned when students are placed in a situation where they have to use linguistic resources available to them to achieve meaningful communication. Therefore, the principle of task-based language learning is that

students learn a foreign language best by carrying out task-based language learning activities. The task is the main objective (Mascetti & Stoks, 2002). The role of the teacher and teaching materials is to structure the lessons so that understanding of the concept develops together with the ability to manipulate and control the linguistic aspect of the task. In other words, the teacher sets up and monitors a situation in which task-based learning can take place. The teacher's intervention is plausible only in those cases that communication will break down; that is, problems are only dealt with if and when they arise (Seedhouse, 1999; Wilson, 1986). Some advantages of TBLT are as the following:

1. TBLT has a richer potential for promoting language learning than do other syllabus types (Long & Crooks, 1993).
2. TBLT is learner-centered, rather than language centered (Ellis, 2003).
3. Students can work with authentic texts from the beginning (Breen, 1984).
4. Students learn by doing (Wilson, 1986)
5. Students will be intrinsically motivated when the course is based on their immediate needs (ibid).
6. Students can be evaluated on their ability to perform a task according to certain criteria rather than their ability to successfully complete a discrete-point test (Ellis, 2003).

Assigning a task means giving students a real purpose and having a purpose means having a reason to read and approaching a text with a particular goal in mind. A task approach conveys to students the value of fluent and efficient reading, because reading for a specific

In order to achieve homogeneity between the two groups, a Nelson test was administered to select two groups of thirty. The subjects in the control group were required to study texts, translate them, and answer some non-task-based comprehension questions, while the experimental group was taught on the basis of TBLT.

At the end of the term, a teacher-made test was given to the students to determine the influence of treatment on the experimental group. Drawing on the t-test, the researcher came up with the t-observed that was greater than the t-critical value at the .05 level of significance. Therefore, the paper suggests that despite the traditional approaches adopted at Technical and Vocational Centers (TAVC) in which students are required to read texts and translate them into Farsi, TBLT is an instructional approach that contextualizes learning by presenting students with problems to solve and prepares them well for accomplishing some tasks in the world outside the classroom.

**Key Words:** task-based language teaching, reading comprehension, ESP

## Introduction

Traditionally, in ESP courses students are required to read texts, translate them into Farsi, and answer comprehension questions. The problem with traditional approaches is that they don't consider reading as being purpose driven, and comprehension questions generally address all information in the text in an undifferentiated manner as if all ideas or aspects of the text were equally important. However, rarely in real-world reading do we pay equal attention to everything in a text, and exercises that lead students to approach a text in this way may well remove the important element of interest from the reading process (Nunan, 1993). In this paper we will try to review the purpose of ESP, the concept of task, and investigate probable advantages of TBLT.

## ESP

Hutchinson & Waters (1987) note that ESP owes its growth to expansion in scientific, technical, and economic activity on an international scale, development in the fields of linguistics-shift of attention away from

defining the formal features of language to discovering the ways in which language is actually used in real communication, and emphasis on learners' needs and interests as having an important influence on their motivation to learn.

Therefore, they define ESP as "...an approach to language teaching which aims to meet the needs of particular learners" (p.21); consequently, all decisions as to content and method should be based on the learner's reason for learning.

## Task

The definition of task adopted in this paper follows Willis (1990, p.127): "By a task I mean an activity which involves the use of language but in which the focus is on the outcome of the activity rather than on the language used to achieve that outcome." As this definition implies, learning is done by doing and materials are no longer viewed as merely texts to which students are exposed but as activities the learners must engage themselves (Seedhouse, 1999).



# Iranian ESP Students' Reading Comprehension in Task-based Language Teaching Approach

Majid Hokmi, Mofateh Technical and Vocational  
Center, Hamedan, hokmi123@yahoo.com

## چکیده

هدف تحقیق حاضر، بررسی میزان درک مطلب در درس های زبان فنی براساس شیوه آموزش «فعالیت محوری»، توسط دانشجویان کاردانی رشته ماشین ابزار بود. برای نیل به این هدف، آزمودنی هایی که از لحاظ سطح مهارت زبانی همگن بودند، به دو گروه کنترل و آزمایش تقسیم شدند. آزمودنی های گروه کنترل به شیوه سنتی متونی را ترجمه می کردند و حال آن که همان متون براساس شیوه آموزش «فعالیت محوری» به گروه آزمایش تدریس می شد. نتیجه تحقیق حاکی از این بود که شیوه آموزش به روش «فعالیت محوری»، تأثیر به سزایی بر درک مطلب آزمودنی های گروه آزمایش داشت.

کلیدواژه ها: آموزش به روش «فعالیت محوری»، درک مطلب، انگلیسی برای هدف های ویژه

## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the teaching of reading comprehension in ESP courses within the paradigm of task-based language teaching (TBLT), concentrating on Machine-Tools students at Mofateh Technical and Vocational Center in Hamedan. Two homogenous groups of students, who were taking their ESP courses, participated as the subjects in two groups of thirty, a control group and an experimental group. They were male and their age range was 19-23.