

# The Impact of Using A Task-Based Writing to promote Business Students Writing Skill

Nouar Ali

Ecole Normale Supérieure - Laghouat / Algeria

nouar2@gmail.com

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## Abstract:

The present research aims at determining the effects of the Task Based Approach on Business students' writing skills so as to suggest and recommend it or discourage its use at English for Business Purposes classrooms. The effect of the Task Based Approach has been measured in different English teaching and learning environments. However, only few studies have been carried out to test the effect of the approach in ESP settings. This research goes further than just implementing the Task Based Approach in ESP classes but it attempts to examine the effect of this teaching pedagogy on students writing skills. It is known that professionals in different business fields communicate mostly via writing, for this reason, writing skill was chosen among other language skills because of its importance to the students 3rd year LMD Banking and Insurance the sample that represents the whole population, that is, the Faculty of Business and Economics at Laghouat University and professional business areas. The current study aims at empirically examining the effect of the Task based Approach. However, random assignment of the participants in this educational experiment was impossible for the researcher, so a quasi-experimental design was utilised to provide as accurate and valid results as possible. The participants in the control and experimental groups were tested before and after the implementation of the Task Based Approach to statistically measure the effects of this teaching approach. The findings showed that the Task Based Approach improved the writing skills of the experimental group in comparison to the control group which was taught using the regular teaching methodology. Pedagogically, the Task Based Approach can be utilised to bring closer the ESP classes to the professional world as the approach is built on real-world tasks to enable the students of business to live up to the expectations and requirements of a globalised and demanding business world.

**Keywords:** Task Based - Communicative Language Teaching - Business English - Writing skill.

## تأثير المقاربة بالمهام على مهارات الكتابة لطلبة الإنجليزية الموجهة للقطاع الاقتصادي

### الملخص

الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو تقييم تأثير المقاربة بالتمارين أو المهام المستنبطة من عالم الشغل، مثل كتابة الرسائل الإلكترونية لشراء السلع بيعها أو طلب خدمات، أو كتابة عقد أو بكل بساطة كتابة سيرة ذاتية لطلب شغل على قدرات، ومهارات الكتابة لطلبة السنة الثالثة بكلية العلوم التجارية والاقتصادية بجامعة الأغواط، وقد تم اختيار الكتابة من بين المهارات اللغوية الاخرى لأهميتها في عالم الأعمال والاقتصاد بوصفها الأكثر استعمالاً في تلك البيئة المهنية.

تم إجراء هذا البحث خطوة تجريبية لتقييم مدى نجاعة هذه المقاربة وذلك لطرحها وسيلة للرفع من مستوى طلبة الإنجليزية في حال كان تأثيرها ايجابيا أو عدم النصح بها في حالة عدم ملائمتها لهذا الوسط التعليمي الخاص والمتطلب.

يعد هذا البحث من أولى التجارب في ميدان تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية لأغراض خاصة. لذلك اتبع الباحث المنهج الشبه التجريبي للحصول على نتائج ذات مصداقية تمكن من الحكم بكل وضوح وموضوعية على مدى ملائمة المقاربة موضوع البحث لتعليم اللغة الإنجليزية لأغراض خاصة لطلبة العلوم الاقتصادية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المقاربة بالمهام - الإنجليزية - القطاع الاقتصادي - مهارات الكتابة - تعليم لأغراض خاصة.

**Introduction:**

English has become the most important language in the world. It is described as the world's language and the language of science and technology. In business, professionals cannot do without English which is a tool of paramount importance to conduct business communication especially on the international scale.

Writing plays a crucial role in the business field as millions of employees in this domain write and receive billions of business e-mails and letters every day to establish internal and /or external business communication. Furthermore, many of us buy products we have read about in printed and online newspapers. This has led to consider written communication as the most important and lucrative type of business means of communication.

The Task Based Approach (hensforth TBA) represents a new direction in Communicative Language Teaching; it is thought to be highly effective and fruitful in the domain of languages for specific purposes for different reasons. For instance, it presents the learner with real-world tasks which improve their proficiency in the target language. Furthermore, TBA is a learner-centred approach that focuses on meaning rather than form, these reasons might make it suitable for ESP classes.

**Problem:**

In the Algerian universities, the teaching and learning of ESP do not yield good results as this is reflected in the students' lack of mastery and proficiency of the target language. This weakness is due to different reasons. For example, the absence of ESP courses and the inadequacy of the teaching materials which led to vagueness of educational objectives as content is chosen randomly and does not serve to improve students' language proficiency and target communicative skills as some teachers focus on developing General English in specialised classes instead of English for Specific Purposes. Moreover, ESP is taught by subject specialists and not by ESP practitioners which is another impediment to a sound specialised instruction of the subject. The Task Based Approach might be a solution for the current teaching and learning situation of ESP in Algeria in general and particularly at the University of Laghouat. This hypothesis leads us to the main questions that the present research attempts to answer. Namely, will the implementation of the TBA improve students' writing skills?? will the implementation of the TBA improve students' communicative proficiency?

**Hypotheses:**

This work aims at testing the following hypotheses:

1-Implementing the Task Based Approach improves the learning of writing in the target ESP classes at the Faculty of Business and Economics, Laghouat.

2-The Task Based Approach promotes the participants' communicative skills.

**Objectives :**

The purpose of this study is to enhance the writing skills and improve the communicative skills of the students enrolled at the Department of Banking, Faculty of Business and Economics, University of Laghouat. To do so, a set of objectives needs to be pointed out:

1- This study attempts to explore the effects of implementing the Task Based Approach on the students' writing skills and mastery of the English language needed in the target situations.

2- The present study aims to equip the teachers of ESP at the Faculty of Business and Economics, Laghouat with an effective teaching method and practical techniques which will enable them to improve learners' writing and communicative skills.

**Importance of the study :**

The need for the study is justified by the lack of research in the field of teaching English for Specific Purposes. Research in the field in Algeria is still raw and needs to be carried out to cater for the needs of students in academic settings. On the whole, the findings from the study are supposed to open up areas for research on the effects of implementing the Task-Based teaching on the students' communicative competence and target language's proficiency.

**Limits of the study:**

This study limits itself to one language skill , that is, the writing skill. Particularly, the teaching of writing in the English for Business Purposes classes through Task Based Approach. In plain English, the current study is limited to determine the effect of the TBA on students' writing and communicative proficiency.

**Theoretical background:**

The Task Based Approach appeared in reaction to traditional teaching methodologies which focused on language-form and teachers rather than communication and learners. Long and Norris (2000) state in this vein, "The term was coined, and the concept was developed by SLA researchers and language educators largely in reaction to empirical

accounts for teacher-dominated, form-oriented second language classroom practice". (Cited in Van Den Branden, 2006, p.1). This approach promotes learner-centeredness and focuses on communication rather than language structure. In this regard, the TBA presents learners with functional tasks that simulate those used in the target workplaces, thus, it values the communicative competence and exchanging meaning among learners rather than linguistic competence.

## **1.2 The Theoretical Background of the Task Based Approach**

### **1.2.1 Communicative Language Teaching**

Communicative Language Teaching is a teaching approach as claimed by Richards and Rodgers (1986), confusingly considered as a method, the CLT is actually an approach because the content, syllabi and teaching practices are not identified. Thus, Communicative Language Teaching welcomes a wide variety of methods and techniques. Richards and Rodgers justify that as they add, "There is neither single authority on it nor any single model that is universally accepted as authoritative". (p. 65).

In short, the CLT is a content-based approach for which meaning is more important than form. Language is thus regarded as a tool of communication. The approach is based on the use of a variety of authentic materials as newspapers' articles, brochures...etc. to meet students' needs and expectations. One very important feature of the approach is its focus on the learner, learners are granted the responsibility on their learning and are considered as the most important participant in the learning process. On the other hand, learners' needs are paramount in communicative language teaching; activities and materials are designed to fulfil those needs and objectives. Importantly, the CLT aims to develop and influence the whole personality and ways of thinking of the learner that is the reason why it is labelled as "holistic".

### **1.1 The Task Based Approach**

The Task Based Approach regards language as a tool of communication and makes the latter a top priority in language teaching and learning, in this concern, Ellis (2003) believes that language is a means of communication rather than a subject for study or manipulation. The TBA proponents agree that learners learn best in classes where English is presented through real contexts and content that do not just endow them with the linguistic competence they need in the target situations but make learning more interesting for them. The TBA as thought by Branden (2006) is supported because it provides learners with

functional tasks that invite them to use language for real-world purposes. It is an approach that advocates the primacy of meaning and communication over form and linguistic purposes. Consequently, the Task-based Approach has become increasingly important to ELT according to Ellis (2005) who argued that the Task Based Approach has become a viable and important teaching methodology and a prominent area of research in the recent years.

### **1.3.1 The Definition of Task**

Various and different definitions have been offered by specialists for the term “task” which is the central idea in the Task Based Approach.. Willis (1996) defines a task as ,“An activity where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose in order to achieve an outcome”. In this statement which probably contains the most accurate definition of “task” Willis points out that communication is the goal behind using tasks which utilise authentic language and materials students need to achieve linguistic success and survival in their future professional environment.

### **1.4 The Task Based Approach Methodology**

Various designs have been proposed for the task based lessons; however, all of them consist of three principal phases: pre-task, task cycle, and language focus.The pre-task is an the introductory phase in the TBA framework in which learners discover the topic and the tasks. The second phase is the task cycle, in this phase the basic assumptions of the TBA about language learning are put to work.. The last phase is the language focus; this phase includes the practice and analysis of what has been done in the task cycle.

#### **1.4.1 The Pre-task Phase**

It is usually the shortest phase for it takes from two to twenty minutes (Willis, 1996).The first phase’s purpose is preparing learners to perform and acquire the language and creating the adequate atmosphere for successful learning.

#### **1.4.2 The task Cycle**

The task cycle is the most important phase in the TBA framework because most of the learning takes place during this stage. This phase contains three components beginning with the first stage which Willis (1996) terms task to the second one, that is, the planning stage, the final stage in the task cycle is referred to as the report.

### 1.4.3 The Task Stage

In this stage the teacher has to play two roles, the first role is monitoring and guiding the learners during the accomplishment of the tasks; he/she should minimize his/her intervention to prompt learners' autonomy, the second role requires the teacher to observe and encourage the learners to communicate in the target language but from what Willis calls slight distance, in case learners resort to the mother tongue, the teacher has to suggest substitutions in English.

### 1.4.4 The Planning Stage

This sections follows the task stage and comes before the report, thus, it forms the central part of this phase, Willis believes that the aim of this stage is to "Help learners plan their reports effectively and maximize their learning opportunities " (p.56) .A sufficient amount of time is allotted in this stage to enable the learners to rehearse what they are going to say or write in the report; practicing and experimenting with the language in the planning stage is deemed to result in well elaborated reports.

### 1.4.5 The Report Stage

This stage is the last one in the task cycle phase and the, "Natural conclusion of the task cycle."(Willis, 1996, p.58) .All the stages that preceded have a common aim which is preparing the learners for this phase. Thus, it is the most important in the framework; however, most of the learning occurs in the planning stage, that is, in the report stage learners have less chance to produce the language. On the other hand, vital activities that engender successful completion of the tasks and the success of the learning process in general such as planning, drafting, and rehearsing are practiced in this stage.

### 1.4.6 The Language Focus Phase

This last phase comprises two stages, the first one is the analysis .Learners are subjected to analysis activities which are usually referred to ,according to Willis (1996), as consciousness raising activities, language awareness activities, or meta-communicative tasks.

Willis (1996) believes that analysis activities have the following goals, "They aim to promote observation through identification, and critical investigation of linguistic features."(p.103). The second phase of this stage is, the practice. It is carried out by the teacher who urges the learners to practice new words and phrases that occurred during or after the analysis, this could be done if the teacher utilises some language focused-tasks

based on the texts students have read or the recordings they have listened to during the precedent phase of this stage.

#### **1.4.7 Teachers' Roles in the Task Based Approach**

In the past, the focus was put on the teacher that had a total control on the learners and the learning process in what was referred to as teacher-centred classrooms. Richards and Rodgers (2001) enriched the list of roles a teacher has to play which are specific to the TBA. The first role is a selector and sequencer of tasks, the teacher is the only responsible for creating, selecting, and modifying tasks according to learners' interests, needs, and linguistic proficiency.

#### **1.4.8 Learners' Roles in the Task Based Approach**

The TBA utilises a learner-centred approach in language teaching, the role of the learners is not limited to attending lessons especially in ESP settings; Ken Hyland (2006) asserts that, "Learners have to take on new roles and to engage with knowledge in new ways when they enter high education." (p.8) Richards and Rodgers (1986) found that the learner should play a number of roles. First, a group participant. As group and pair work are favoured in the TBA, learners have to learn to share information and to contribute in making meaning with their classmates. Second, risk taker, many tasks require the learner's creation and interpretation of some information about which he/she lacks linguistic background, in this respect, they have to learn to live with uncertainty and errors. Third, the learner should be an innovator. He/she should be encouraged to experiment with using language in different ways that involve using new words and structures in different contexts. Furthermore, learners are assigned to conduct more sensitive roles as they actively participate in curriculum design which has become a collaborative activity and other complex activities. Nunan (1998) states that, "Learners are involved in decisions on content selection, methodology, and evaluation". (p.146).

#### **2.4 The Task Based Approach to Teaching Writing**

The TBA stresses notions such as purpose, audience, context, and identity of writers' texts to finally ensure that the end-product achieves its communicative purposes and is socially adequate. Writing is thus used by the learner as a tool to achieve a communicative outcome. Moreover, context is of a paramount importance in the TBA approach to writing). Context is what guides students to write a text that they could benefit from as the contextualization applied in this approach ensures exposure to the vocabulary and

structures related to learners' specialism, besides; it provides learners with insights about the process they should undergo, the purposes their texts should have, and the audience they write for.

TBA writing lessons are divided into three stages as stated by Willis (1996) , "This end-product will first be introduced orally or through reading in the pre-task phase then discussed as an integral part in the task stage ,drafted collaboratively at the planning stage and finalized for the report stage".(p.62).Willis supports the use of a model text in the first stage which serves to set the context whereby audience and purpose of the students' end-product are established. Later in this stage, the teacher presents the learners with a set of preparatory activities that aim at activating topic-related words and phrases and background knowledge necessary to understand tasks and tasks instructions.

### **Procedures**

#### **Méthodology:**

The quasi-experimental method is used when randomization which is , "*The best way to establish internal validity of a research study*". (Marczyk ,*et al.*, 2005, p. 137) is absent .Moreover, the authors state that the method in which randomization is present is referred to as a true-experiment whereas the method which lacks this element is a quasi-experiment which means in English "sort of experiment". As previously mentioned, the pre-designed academic formation of students who have been subjected to the study made the equal assignment of the participants to the experimental or control groups impossible, thus, it is impossible for the researcher to control some external factors such as learners educational background, level of the English language, gender, and age which are considered to be extraneous variables.

#### **The Pre-Test and Post Test of the Experiment:**

The researcher has chosen the pre-test-post-test quasi- experimental design because it would solve the stated problems of control the fact that increases the validity of the research findings.

#### **Description of the Pre-test:**

Before the introduction of the experiment (treatment) a pre-test of writing was conducted in the two classes which represent control and experimental groups. The participants were informed that they were taking part of the study and their performances' evaluation would not affect their course grade. In the pre-test, the students were asked to write an e-mail (not

more than two paragraphs) to their supervisor to inform him about a problem that occurred in their company and recommend solutions to solve that problem. The aim of this target-situation production task is to test students' ability to communicate their ideas appropriately using English as well as the mastery of language form and vocabulary. The time allocated for the test is forty-five minutes .It should be noted that the researcher himself has evaluated the answers and not the ESP teacher. Finally, it should be pointed out that the researcher made ample efforts to balance the level of difficulty of the pre-test and the post-test to increase the validity and reliability of the results.

### **Description of the Post-Test**

The post-test is conducted after the treatment period reached its end. It aims at measuring the effects and changes in learners' level of proficiency which occurred as a result of the utilisation of the Task Based Approach .The researcher prepared a post-test similar in nature and difficulty with the pre-test. The latter was validated by the teaching staff that collaborated in the realisation of this educational experiment before conducting it. During the process of designing the post-test the researcher took the level of the Algerian students into consideration, for that reason the post-test as the pre-test was composed of one question requiring the learners to write a business e-mail to write an e-mail to a supplier ordering a new appliances (Printers, cartridges, computers, etc and asking some questions about them. The students had forty-five minutes to accomplish the task.

### **Sample :**

The participants of the present empirical study are the Students of the third-year LMD enrolled in the economic sciences' classes at the University of Laghouat during the academic year 2013-2014. It is important to mention that the population is composed of 118 learners; the sample that is the subject of this study consists of 56 students divided into two groups, control and experimental. The need of the English language proficiency is of paramount importance for this population that is about to be graduated and will be directed to different sectors of the economic and public administrations.

### **Procedures:**

In order to test the mentioned hypothesis, the researcher adopted an experimental design that consists of pre-testing both control and experimental groups to evaluate their writing skills before the introduction of the treatment to eliminate bias elements and to attribute the potential changes to the implementation of the TBA. The second procedure in this

research work is the introduction of the treatment, that is to say, the implementation of the Task Based Approach. The researcher has relied on business tasks extracted from Neil Wood's (2003) "*Business and Commerce*". It is important to clarify that syllabus design and materials writing are not the subjects of this study which limits itself to the task-based teaching methods and practices. The last procedure was the post-test which both groups have undertaken. This instrument was the tool by which the effect of the Task Based Approach is determined. It is important to mention that the tests administered, that is, the pre-test and post-test are statistically analysed which allows the researcher to correctly and precisely interpret the findings of the educational experiment.

### Statistical analysis :

#### 3.1. The Pre-test

The pre-test served as a valuable information resource and control element that provided the researcher with details about the participants' level and proficiency in the English language .The test was validated by a panel of ESP teachers at the faculty that held this study. The pre-test was primarily designed to determine the difference between the two groups, experimental and control groups, to control bias in the results so as to increase the validity and reliability of the whole study. Moreover, the test focused on examining students' linguistic competence, writing skills and communicative abilities to fit the principles of ESP. In this respect, grammatical constructions were not tackled in this test but this important element in language learning was not neglected during the implementation of the treatment. The quantitative data resulting from both tests were numerically analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Science. The results of the pre-test taken by both groups are sketched in the following tables.

Table number six presents us with the average score of the control group.

**Table 1. The Pre-test mean score of the control group**

Group	Number	Mean
Control Group	28	8,3571

The next table includes the mean realized by the experimental group:

**Table2. The Pre-test mean score of the experimental group.**

Group	Number	Mean
Experimental Group	28	8,2232

The difference between the mean scores of the experimental and control groups is provided below:

$$(X1) = 8, 3571$$

$$(X2) = 8, 2232$$

$$(X1) - (X2) = 8, 3571 - 8, 2232 = 0, 1339$$

The calculation provided above reveals that there is no noteworthy difference between the mean scores of the control group and the experimental group. The difference between the means is only 0, 1339. This confirms that the participants in the control and experimental group are from the same sample and they have almost the same level of writing and communicative competences before the introduction of the experiment. The findings allow the researcher to measure the progress or regression in the experimental group's level of proficiency and attribute any positive or negative changes to the Task Based Approach which is the teaching approach adopted to instruct this group.

### 3.2. Post-test

After the end of the treatment, the post-test was carried out as it was clarified in the previous chapter. Importantly, the researcher and teachers involved in the current educational experiment have done their best to maintain the same level of difficulty of the pre-test; this establishes validity of the tools of measurement employed in the study.

The results of the post-test are presented in the following tables:

**Table 3.** The post-test mean score of the control group

Group	Number	Mean
Control Group	28	7,5357

The table (3) demonstrates the mean score obtained by the control group. It is noticed that students' mean in the post-test has regressed compared to their performance in the pre-test.

The next table shows the mean score of the participants of the experimental group that received the treatment:

**Table 4.** The Post-test mean score of the experimental group

Group	Number	Mean
Experimental Group	28	8,9286

To figure out the difference between the means the following mathematical operation has been conducted:

$$(X1) = 7, 5357$$

$$(X2) = 8, 9286$$

$$(X2) - (X1) = 8, 9286 - 7, 5357 = 1, 3929$$

This calculation shows that the difference between the mean scores of the control and experimental groups has become more important compared with the difference between the means of the same groups in the pre-test .

#### **Results:**

The participants of the experimental group had performed in the post-test better than they did in the pre-test and far better than their colleagues in the control group who were taught via the current teaching method. The subjects in the experimental group were successful to a certain extent in producing a relevant and effective business e-mail as they were taught using authentic materials and real-world tasks the fact that allowed them to not just write in a correct, coherent, and cohesive manner but to respect the moves of business genres as the TBA is a combination of the product and process approaches to teaching writing. The analysis and practice phases allowed the students to revise and practice grammar and that helped them to produce grammatically sound pieces of writing which was not the case for the control group whose teacher ignored the revision of tenses and other grammatical features as the teaching method he utilised was not flexible and did not allow the revision of grammar which is thought to be done in the previous years. The findings prove the hypothesis of this research that the implementation of the Task Based Approach improves ESP learners' writing skills.

#### **Perspectives:**

Teachers need to apply and practice the Task Based Approach in ESP classes because it proved in this study as well as in previous studies that it is an effective tool to enhance students' communicative proficiency and writing skills. Urging the teachers to make use of the Task Based Approach is supported by the following reasons:

- 1- The language practiced and explored by the learners arises from their needs which make the TBA lesson enjoyable and motivating, thus, it is adequate and relevant to their future professional context's requirements.

- 2- The TBA offers more chances to write than any other teaching approach for Students intensely practice writing because they write to perform the task and write the report .
- 3- Teachers need to implement the Task Based Approach because it creates a real environment for students to communicate in English as the researcher noticed during the experiment carried out in the present study that subjects in the experimental group spent more time communicating in English than those in the control group.
- 4- The Task Based Approach offers the learners more exposure to target language. They are exposed to a wide range of lexical items, phrases, and collocations in addition to language forms which directly contribute to building professional vocabulary.
- 5- The TBA should be used in the Algerian specialised classes because it promotes learner-centeredness and increases students' motivation which are proven by pedagogues that they are the right ingredients for educational success.

### 3.5. Suggestions for Further Studies

After the presentation and discussion of the results, the following recommendations are proposed to teachers and researchers in the field of business English :

- 1- A longitudinal true-experiment is recommended to overcome the weaknesses of the current research and to confirm the present study's results .
- 2-A descriptive study should be carried out to record students attitudes reactions towards the implementation of the TBA.

#### **Conclusion:**

The scores and results of this experimental research reveal that the Task Based Approach had positive effects. The approach brought forth important improvement of learners' writing and created a real business English environment because it led to more focus on function and meaning than on structure. The quantitative results are a strong and valid proof that the TBA can really enhance and improve learners' writing .

Finally, despite the valuable insights provided by this cross-sectional study, a longitudinal research is highly needed to prove or disprove the acquired results as well as to overcome the difficulties encountered by the researcher as he conducted the present work which might have limited the positive effects of the TBA. For instance, the lack of time devoted to

training the teachers on the principles and practices of the approach. Besides, the lack of a task-based curriculum and syllabi toughened the task of the researcher and obliged him to design tasks that were used during this educational experiment, therefore, exceeded the limitations of this research that was limited to exploring the effects of the TBA.

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