



APPLYING A TASK-BASED APPROACH TO TEACHING VOCABULARY TO ESP LEARNERS

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Abstract: Vocabulary development is crucial in English for Specific Purposes (ESP), where learners must master terminology specific to a profession or academic discipline. Traditional vocabulary instruction, often centered on memorization, may fail to ensure long-term retention or meaningful use. This article examines the benefits of a Task-Based Learning (TBL) approach to teaching vocabulary in ESP contexts. It outlines a structured methodology for integrating TBL in the ESP classroom and discusses outcomes related to learner engagement, vocabulary acquisition, and communicative competence.

Key words: ESP, Task-Based Learning (TBL), lexical knowledge, communication skills, fluency and confidence, assessment.

In ESP contexts, vocabulary instruction plays a central role in equipping learners with the linguistic tools needed for professional or academic success. Whether in business, medicine, engineering, or law, ESP learners require specialized lexical knowledge that extends beyond general English. Conventional approaches, such as word lists, translation, or gap-fill exercises, often result in surface-level learning and limited practical application. Task-Based Learning (TBL), a communicative approach grounded in real-world language use, offers a more dynamic and learner-centered alternative. In TBL, learners perform meaningful tasks that mirror real-life activities in their field of interest. These tasks provide opportunities to encounter, process, and apply vocabulary in authentic contexts. This article explores the implementation of a TBL approach to vocabulary instruction in ESP classrooms, providing a structured methodology and discussing observed benefits and challenges. ESP is a learner-centered approach focused on developing communicative competence in specific domains such as medicine, law, business, or science. The vocabulary needed for effective communication in these areas tends to be both specialized and context-dependent. As such, vocabulary instruction in ESP must go beyond frequency-based lists and aim for contextualized learning. TBL emerged from communicative language teaching and emphasizes meaning-focused activities. According to Willis (1996), TBL consists of three main stages:

1. **Pre-task:** The teacher introduces the topic, highlights useful vocabulary, and provides input.
2. **Task cycle:** Students complete a meaningful task in pairs or groups.
3. **Language focus:** Learners reflect on their language use and focus on form.

Tasks can be information-gap activities, simulations, problem-solving tasks, or project-based assignments. TBL promotes cognitive engagement, encourages collaboration, and supports the

use of target language in a purposeful way.

TBL supports vocabulary learning by:

- Providing exposure to new words in context.
- Encouraging repeated and meaningful use of vocabulary.
- Promoting active learning and learner autonomy.
- Linking vocabulary learning with communicative functions.

The TBL framework was implemented with a group of 20 intermediate-level adult learners enrolled in an ESP course focused on Business English. Learners ranged from university students preparing for internships to professionals seeking workplace communication skills.

The vocabulary tasks were designed based on the following principles:

- **Authenticity:** Tasks reflected real workplace scenarios (e.g., writing a business proposal).
- **Relevance:** Vocabulary was chosen based on frequency and importance in the target field.
- **Cognitive demand:** Tasks required critical thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving.
- **Collaboration:** Pair and group work were emphasized to promote peer learning.

In the Pre-task Phase stage, learners were introduced to the topic (e.g., marketing strategies) through an engaging input activity (e.g., short case study, video, or infographic). Key vocabulary was highlighted and practiced briefly in context. For example, in a unit on marketing, words like “target audience,” “value proposition,” “branding,” and “competitive advantage” were introduced through real company examples.

Learners worked in small groups to complete a task. For example:

- Create a marketing pitch for a new product.
- Conduct a SWOT analysis for a fictional company.
- Simulate a business negotiation with a client.

During the task, learners used the target vocabulary naturally while focusing on completing the task, not on language accuracy. The teacher monitored, took notes on errors or successful usage, and offered assistance only when necessary.

After the task, learners reviewed the language they used. The teacher provided feedback on vocabulary usage, corrected errors, and led a focused practice activity such as a vocabulary quiz, synonym matching, or sentence-building exercise. Learners reflected on which words were useful and how they could be applied in future tasks.

Tasks that closely simulated professional activities boosted learner motivation. For example, creating a product pitch allowed learners to take ownership of the language and perform a task that felt meaningful and useful. Group work encouraged collaboration, idea sharing, and negotiation in English. Unlike rote memorization, tasks provided multiple exposures to target vocabulary in varied contexts. Learners used new terms to express their ideas, heard them used by peers, and revisited them in post-task reviews. This led to improved recall and more accurate use in subsequent lessons. Because vocabulary was tied to communicative goals, learners developed not only word knowledge but also fluency and confidence in using ESP-related language. They were better prepared for situations such as job interviews, presentations, and

client meetings.

Some challenges included:

- **Preparation time:** Designing meaningful tasks requires careful planning.
- **Mixed proficiency levels:** Stronger students sometimes dominated group tasks.
- **Vocabulary overload:** Too many new words in one lesson could overwhelm learners. A balance between quantity and depth of vocabulary instruction had to be maintained.

Implementing TBL in ESP vocabulary teaching requires:

- **Task alignment:** Tasks should reflect learners' future language needs.
- **Vocabulary selection:** Focus on high-frequency, high-value terms in the professional field.
- **Scaffolding:** Support students through pre-task modeling and vocabulary exposure.
- **Assessment:** Evaluate both task completion and vocabulary use through performance-based assessments and reflective logs.

Teachers need to be trained in task design and classroom management techniques that support learner-centered approaches. A bank of task templates for different ESP fields (e.g., medicine, law, tourism) can aid implementation and save time.

In summary, the task-based approach to vocabulary teaching in ESP classrooms offers a powerful alternative to traditional methods. By anchoring vocabulary in authentic, meaningful tasks, learners develop not only lexical knowledge but also communicative confidence and fluency. Despite some challenges, the benefits of learner engagement, contextual vocabulary acquisition, and improved performance make TBL a valuable strategy in ESP pedagogy. Future research could focus on longitudinal studies to assess long-term vocabulary retention and on adapting TBL for online ESP courses. Overall, TBL proves to be a practical, motivating, and effective method for teaching vocabulary in the context of English for Specific Purposes.

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