

## Rethinking Grammar Instruction: A Task-Based Approach in EFL Classrooms

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**Abstract:** Grammar instruction in Vietnamese EFL classrooms has traditionally followed the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), focusing on rule memorization and translation. However, this method often limits student engagement and communicative development. This study compares the effectiveness of the Task-Based Approach (TBA) and GTM in grammar teaching, while also examining students' attitudes toward TBA. A quasi-experimental design was used with 60 university freshmen divided into a TBA experimental group and a GTM control group. Both groups studied the same grammar topics over four months using different instructional methods. Data were collected through grammar pre-tests and post-tests, alongside a post-treatment attitude survey for the TBA group. Results showed that the TBA group achieved significantly greater improvement in grammar scores and demonstrated more consistent learning outcomes. Students also expressed highly positive attitudes toward TBA, citing increased motivation, enjoyment, and practical language use. The study recommends incorporating TBA into grammar instruction and offering teacher training to promote more communicative, learner-centered classrooms.

**Keywords:** Task-Based Approach, Grammar Translation Method, Grammar Instruction, EFL Learners, Learner Attitudes

### 1. Introduction

Grammar teaching has long held a central place in the instruction of English as a foreign language (EFL), particularly in Asian contexts where grammatical accuracy is often equated with language proficiency. In Vietnam, grammar-based instruction is deeply rooted in educational tradition, with the Grammar Translation method (GTM) being the dominant approach across public schools. Characterized by rule memorization, sentence translation, and deductive teaching, GTM remains widely practiced despite its declining favor in global pedagogical discourse. However, growing awareness of communicative competence as the goal of language learning has prompted interest in alternative methodologies, most notably, the Task-Based Approach (TBA).

The Task-Based Approach, emerging from the broader framework of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), redefines grammar instruction by emphasizing meaning over form and learning through doing. TBA situates grammar within authentic tasks that mirror real-life language use, thereby enabling learners to internalize grammatical structures through interaction, problem-solving, and negotiation of meaning. Unlike GTM, which isolates grammar as a subject to be learned, TBA integrates grammatical forms into purposeful communication.

This shift reflects a broader transformation in applied linguistics - moving from traditional prescriptive models toward learner-centered, performance-based pedagogies. Nevertheless, in Vietnam, the uptake of TBA has been gradual. Despite national curriculum reforms that advocate for communicative methodologies, grammar instruction often remains bound by traditional practices, particularly in high-stakes examination-driven environments.

The present study investigates the comparative effectiveness of two instructional approaches teaching English grammar to university freshmen at a university in Vietnam. This research was motivated by the growing need to move beyond traditional, form-focused methods of grammar instruction and toward more communicative, student-centered practices. Drawing on the researcher's direct classroom observations and teaching experience, the study adopts a quasi-experimental design to determine not only which approach better enhances students' grammatical competence but also how learners perceive the experience of learning grammar through tasks. By examining both

performance outcomes and learner attitudes, this study aims to provide a more holistic understanding of grammar pedagogy in Vietnamese universities. To guide this investigation, the following research questions were formulated:

1. To what extent does the Task-Based Approach improve students' grammatical competence compared to the Grammar Translation Method?
2. What are students' attitudes toward learning grammar through the Task-Based Approach?

## 2. Literature Review

Grammar forms the structural backbone of any language. It governs the way words are combined to form meaningful sentences, and thus plays a crucial role in both comprehension and communication. While vocabulary gives learners the building blocks for expression, grammar organizes these elements into coherent structures. According to Bradshaw (2013), grammar is the foundation of communication: "The better the grammar, the clearer the message." Similarly, Wood (1995) emphasized that a strong command of grammar is essential for achieving communicative competence in a second language. Despite its importance, grammar teaching remains one of the most debated aspects of language instruction. Some scholars advocate explicit grammar instruction to foster accuracy, while others argue that it can inhibit fluency and natural language acquisition if overemphasized. In the Vietnamese EFL context, grammar is often taught explicitly and deductively, with a strong focus on rules and forms—a legacy of the GTM.

The Grammar Translation Method is one of the oldest language teaching methods, rooted in the classical teaching of Latin and Greek. It emphasizes the memorization of grammar rules, the translation of sentences between the target language and the native language, and the use of isolated vocabulary and structural drills. Richards and Rodgers (1986) describe GTM as a method with "no solid theoretical foundation," yet it persists in many educational systems due to its perceived rigor and alignment with exam-based assessment. In Vietnamese secondary schools, GTM remains the dominant method of grammar instruction. Teachers present grammar rules deductively, provide model sentences, and assign translation exercises. While this approach may develop students' knowledge of grammatical forms, it often fails to promote spontaneous language use, real-world communication, or learner engagement. As such, students may perform well on grammar tests but struggle with practical language application.

Emerging from CLT, the Task-Based Approach shifts the focus from form to meaning, and from passive reception to active engagement. TBA views language learning as a process best facilitated through the performance of meaningful tasks. Nunan (1989) defines a task as "a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, producing, and interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form." TBA encompasses a range of activities such as, problem-solving, role-playing, and information gap tasks that require learners to use grammatical structures in context. It encourages group work, negotiation, and learner autonomy. According to Willis (1996), a typical task cycle includes three stages: pre-task (introduction), task (execution and planning), and language focus (form analysis and practice). Grammar is acquired through usage and discovery, rather than isolated instruction.

The GTM and the TBA represent two fundamentally different philosophies of grammar instruction. GTM, rooted in classical education, has historically emphasized the memorization of grammatical rules, vocabulary lists, and sentence translation between the target and native languages. This method is deductive in nature: grammar rules are explicitly taught and then applied through written exercises. While GTM may support learners in developing accuracy and metalinguistic knowledge, critics argue that it fails to foster communicative competence or language fluency (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Research has consistently demonstrated the limitations of GTM in developing students' ability to use grammar in real-life contexts. For instance, Schulz (2001) found that while students taught through GTM could perform well on written grammar tasks, they often struggled in interactive speaking situations. Similarly, Carrell (1984) highlighted the cognitive disconnect between learning grammar rules in isolation and applying them in spontaneous communication. In Vietnam, Tran (2012) observed that GTM-dominated classrooms led to passive learners who were often disengaged from language production tasks. Although Vietnamese students exposed to GTM often perform well on grammar-focused standardized tests, they frequently experience difficulties with spoken fluency and contextual accuracy, particularly in academic or professional settings.

In contrast, the TBA emphasizes the use of language for meaningful communication and integrates grammar instruction within the context of performing authentic tasks. Grounded in CLT, TBA views grammar as a tool to support interaction, rather than an end in itself. According to Ellis (2003), grammar acquisition is most effective when learners are exposed to input that is rich, meaningful, and relevant to the task at hand. In a global context, numerous studies have validated the effectiveness of TBA. For example, Shintani (2011) reported that Japanese learners who engaged in task-based instruction demonstrated greater gains in both grammar accuracy and speaking fluency compared to those taught through form-focused instruction. In Korea, Kim (2008) found that TBA improved students' motivation and led to better retention of grammatical structures. Closer to Vietnam, Nguyen and Newton (2019) studied Vietnamese tertiary learners and discovered that integrating grammar instruction within tasks led to significantly improved spoken grammar accuracy and learner autonomy. The advantages of TBA were also affirmed in Pham's (2016) study of high school classrooms in Ho Chi Minh City, where students exposed to TBA displayed higher engagement levels and better application of grammar in both oral and written forms. Additionally, task-based grammar instruction facilitates peer interaction, collaborative problem-solving, and contextualized grammar use, making it particularly effective in developing learners' communicative competence. However, the success of TBA depends on the teacher's ability to design meaningful tasks, manage classroom dynamics, and guide learners toward noticing and internalizing grammatical forms—a pedagogical skillset still underdeveloped in many Vietnamese schools. Despite these challenges, mounting empirical evidence supports the claim that TBA offers a more effective, learner-centered alternative to GTM, particularly in contexts where communicative proficiency is a key educational objective.

Despite its advantages, implementing TBA in Vietnam faces practical challenges. Teachers are often unfamiliar with the approach or lack training in task design. Students, accustomed to passive learning and exam-oriented instruction, may initially resist learner-centered methods. Additionally, existing curricula, large class sizes, and a rigid assessment system can hinder the integration of task-based pedagogy. Willis (1996) notes that successful TBA implementation requires both pedagogical restructuring and mindset shifts—from both teachers and learners.

Nonetheless, as Vietnam's educational reforms increasingly emphasize communicative competence, task-based grammar instruction is gaining relevance. By encouraging language use in meaningful contexts, TBA addresses many of the limitations inherent in the GTM and aligns with global trends in EFL pedagogy.

### 3. Methodology

This study employed a quasi-experimental research design with a pre-test and post-test control group structure, complemented by a descriptive student attitude survey, to compare the effectiveness of the TBA and the GTM in grammar instruction for university-level EFL learners in Vietnam. The research was conducted at a university in northern Vietnam, selected for its relevance to the national EFL context and the researcher's teaching affiliation, which ensured logistical access and instructional continuity. English is a core component of the university curriculum, with freshmen attending four 50-minute English grammar periods weekly. From a population of 180 students, 60 freshmen aged 18–19 with over seven years of English study experience were selected through simple random sampling. These students were assigned to either an experimental group (Class A, 30 students) receiving TBA instruction or a control group (Class B, 30 students) taught through GTM. Both groups studied the same grammar syllabus and were instructed by equally qualified teachers, with the instructional approach being the only variable. To measure the impact of the interventions, two instruments were employed: (1) a grammar pre-test and post-test, each comprising 50 multiple-choice items on five grammatical areas (imperatives, present simple tense, subject–verb agreement, non-finite verbs, subjunctive mood), scored out of 100 and converted to a 10-point scale; and (2) a student attitude survey, administered only to the experimental group, combining Likert-scale and open-ended questions to explore learners' motivation, confidence, enjoyment, and perceived learning effectiveness under TBA.

The research was conducted over 18 weeks, divided into three stages. In Stage 1 (Week 1), the grammar pre-test was administered to both groups to establish baseline proficiency. In Stage 2 (Weeks 2–17), both groups received instruction on the same grammar topics but via different pedagogical approaches: TBA for the experimental group and GTM for the control group. Instructional time, content, and assessment methods were standardized to ensure comparability. In Stage 3 (Week 18), the post-test was administered to both groups to measure learning gains, followed immediately by the student attitude survey in the experimental group. Data were analyzed to address the

two research questions. To assess the comparative effectiveness of TBA and GTM, the pre-test and post-test scores were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) and inferential statistics including paired-sample t-tests for within-group analysis and independent-sample t-tests for between-group comparisons. A Z-score test was also used to confirm the significance of differences at the 0.05 level. To analyze attitudes toward TBA, survey responses were processed through frequency counts, percentage distributions, and mean score calculations, while qualitative data from open-ended items were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and student perceptions. All quantitative analyses were conducted using SPSS version 20.0.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Pre-Test Results

The pre-test was conducted in Week 1 to establish a baseline for students' grammatical competence. Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics of the pre-test scores for both the experimental and control groups.

**Table 1. Pre-test Results for Experimental and Control Groups**

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Z-Score
Experimental	30	6.41	0.71	
Control	30	6.74	0.64	0.083

The data indicate that the control group (mean = 6.74) scored slightly higher than the experimental group (mean = 6.41), but the difference was not statistically significant ( $Z = 0.083 < 1.96$ ). This confirms that both groups were at a comparable grammatical proficiency level prior to the intervention.

### 4.2 Post-Test Results

The post-test was administered after the 12-week instructional intervention. Table 2 presents the post-test results.

**Table 2. Post-test Results for Experimental and Control Groups**

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Z-Score
Experimental	30	7.96	7.31	
Control	30	7.11	11.23	4.2

Both groups improved in grammatical competence; however, the experimental group achieved a significantly higher mean score (7.96) compared to the control group (7.11). The Z-score ( $Z = 4.2 > 1.96$ ) indicates a statistically significant difference in post-test performance in favor of the experimental group. Moreover, the lower standard deviation in the experimental group suggests a more consistent performance across students, while the control group showed wider variability in outcomes.

### 4.3 Within-Group Comparisons

#### *Experimental Group*

**Table 3. Experimental Group – Pre- vs. Post-test**

Test	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Z-Score
Pre-test	30	6.41	0.71	
Post-test	30	7.96	7.23	9.44

The experimental group demonstrated a notable improvement from pre-test to post-test, with the mean increasing by 1.55 points. The Z-score ( $9.44 > 1.96$ ) confirms the significance of the improvement.

### Control Group

**Table 4. Control Group – Pre- vs. Post-test**

Test	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Z-Score
Pre-test	30	6.74	0.64	
Post-test	30	7.11	11.23	3.46

The control group also improved slightly (mean increase of 0.37), but the magnitude and consistency of the improvement were less than in the experimental group. The higher standard deviation in the post-test suggests that some students regressed or made little progress.

### 4.4 Student Attitudes Toward the Task-Based Approach

To explore students' attitudes toward the Task-Based Approach (TBA), a post-intervention questionnaire was administered to all 30 students in the experimental group. The questionnaire included 10 Likert-scale items and 2 open-ended questions, targeting key dimensions such as motivation, enjoyment, confidence, perceived effectiveness, and preference for future instruction.

The summary of responses to the Likert-scale items is presented in Table 5 below.

**Table 5. Summary of Student Responses to the TBA Attitude questionnaire (N = 30)**

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean
1. I found grammar lessons using tasks more interesting than traditional ones.	56.7%	30%	10%	3.3%	0%	4.4
2. The tasks helped me understand how grammar works in real communication.	50%	36.7%	10%	3.3%	0%	4.3
3. I felt more confident using grammar in speaking and writing after doing the tasks.	43.3%	40%	13.3%	3.3%	0%	4.2
4. Group work and interaction made learning grammar more enjoyable.	53.3%	33.3%	10%	3.3%	0%	4.4
5. I prefer task-based grammar lessons over translation-based ones.	60%	26.7%	10%	3.3%	0%	4.4
6. Tasks helped me apply grammar more naturally in real-life contexts.	46.7%	40%	10%	3.3%	0%	4.3
7. I had more opportunities to speak and write in class when using TBA.	50%	36.7%	10%	3.3%	0%	4.3
8. I felt more motivated to participate in grammar lessons with task-based activities.	56.7%	30%	10%	3.3%	0%	4.4
9. Tasks helped me remember grammar rules more easily.	40%	43.3%	13.3%	3.3%	0%	4.2
10. I would like future grammar lessons to include more task-based activities.	63.3%	26.7%	6.7%	3.3%	0%	4.5

The results clearly indicate a highly positive attitude toward the Task-Based Approach. Over 85% of students agreed or strongly agreed with nearly every positive statement about TBA. The highest-rated items were related to students' preference for future task-based grammar lessons (Mean = 4.5) and increased engagement through task interaction (Mean = 4.4). Only minimal disagreement was observed, and no respondent expressed strong negative



views. These findings suggest that students not only benefited cognitively from TBA but also responded affectively with increased interest, confidence, and motivation.

To gain deeper insight into students' perspectives, two open-ended questions were included in the post-intervention survey for the experimental group:

1. What did you like most about task-based grammar lessons?
2. How did these lessons help you learn grammar better?

A thematic analysis of student responses revealed four prominent themes: (1) enhanced engagement through interaction, (2) contextualized learning and real-life relevance, (3) improved retention and understanding of grammar rules, and (4) increased confidence in language use.

#### ***a. Engagement through Interaction and Collaboration***

A majority of students highlighted the interactive nature of task-based grammar instruction as their favorite feature. They appreciated the opportunity to work in groups and communicate with peers in English, which made the lessons more dynamic and enjoyable.

- *"I liked group work because I could talk to my friends in English. It felt like a game, not a lesson."*
- *"Grammar used to be boring, but now it's fun. We did activities instead of only writing or listening."*

These responses show that TBA fostered a positive emotional climate, helping students overcome anxiety often associated with grammar learning and making them more willing to participate actively in class.

#### ***b. Real-Life Use and Contextualization of Grammar***

Another dominant theme was that students found grammar easier to understand when it was embedded in meaningful tasks rather than abstract rules. Many students expressed that they could now see the purpose of grammar and how to use it in actual conversations.

- *"The tasks showed me when and why to use grammar. It's not just about rules but about what you want to say."*
- *"Now I can imagine using grammar in real life, not just for the test."*

This aligns with TBA's principle of form-in-context and supports the idea that learning grammar through usage enhances both comprehension and transfer of knowledge.

#### ***c. Better Understanding and Memory Retention***

Students also indicated that tasks helped them remember grammar structures more effectively because they had to apply them actively. Compared to passive drills, using grammar in speaking and writing made the rules "stick" longer in memory.

- *"I remember more because I had to use grammar to complete the tasks. I didn't just copy from the board."*
- *"It's easier to learn when we practice and don't just memorize."*

This finding reinforces the "learning-by-doing" principle, a core rationale behind the TBA approach. When students are cognitively and emotionally engaged in language use, they tend to develop deeper understanding and longer retention.

#### ***d. Increased Confidence in Using Grammar***

Many students reported a growth in self-confidence, especially in speaking and writing. They felt more comfortable using grammatical structures because they had practiced them meaningfully during task cycles.

- *"I feel more confident when I speak English now because I practiced using grammar with my group."*
- *"I can make sentences without fear of being wrong because the teacher helped us during the tasks."*

This improvement in learner autonomy and risk-taking suggests that TBA not only builds knowledge but also empowers learners to use grammar creatively and fluently.

In sum, students viewed task-based grammar lessons as enjoyable, practical, and effective. The most frequently cited benefits were greater engagement, real-world relevance, stronger memory retention, and increased confidence. These perspectives align with the quantitative survey results and support the conclusion that the Task-Based Approach can foster both affective and cognitive gains in grammar instruction among secondary EFL learners in Vietnam.

#### 4.5 Discussion

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that the TBA is more effective than the GTM in improving grammatical competence among Vietnamese EFL learners. This outcome supports a growing body of research in second language acquisition, both internationally and within Vietnam, that advocates for more communicative, learner-centered pedagogies in grammar instruction.

Consistent with Ellis (2003, 2006) and Willis (1996), the results of the current study suggest that grammar acquisition is facilitated when learners are actively engaged in meaningful communication. The experimental group, which participated in task-based lessons involving interactive problem-solving, role-playing, and contextualized grammar use, demonstrated significant improvement in grammar performance compared to the control group. This aligns with Shintani's (2011) findings from Japan and Kim's (2008) research in Korea, where TBA was shown to enhance learners' fluency and accuracy in spoken grammar. Similarly, Nguyen and Newton (2020) found that Vietnamese learners improved their spoken grammatical accuracy when grammar was taught through communicative tasks rather than abstract rule memorization. In the present study, students in the TBA class not only scored higher on the post-test but also showed more consistent performance, as indicated by a lower standard deviation, reinforcing claims from previous studies that TBA promotes not only learning but learner confidence and equity.

Furthermore, classroom observations supported these quantitative results. The TBA classes were marked by higher levels of engagement, collaboration, and authentic use of language, echoing Beglar and Hunt's (2001) observation that tasks stimulate intrinsic motivation. Students in the task-based group were more participative, demonstrated improved confidence in applying grammar in communication, and were more likely to retain knowledge due to repeated practice in real-life contexts. In contrast, the control group followed the GTM approach characterized by rote memorization, mechanical translation drills, and limited opportunity for spoken interaction. Although the control group exhibited a minor improvement in test scores, the greater variability in student performance (as reflected in the high standard deviation) suggests that the GTM method benefits only a subset of learners—likely those already proficient or highly motivated by form-focused instruction. This reflects Schulz's (2001) findings that GTM may support test-based performance but fails to cultivate holistic communicative ability.

However, while the results align broadly with prior findings, some differences are noteworthy. Unlike studies in tertiary or adult education contexts (e.g., Olsen, 2010; Clark, 2009) where TBA sometimes yields slower initial gains due to learners' unfamiliarity with open-ended tasks, the high school students in this study appeared to adapt quickly to the method. This could be attributed to the teacher's careful scaffolding and the use of culturally relevant tasks, which aligns with Willis's (1996) emphasis on well-sequenced task cycles. Additionally, unlike some prior studies that reported resistance among students accustomed to traditional methods (Tran, 2012), the students in the experimental group responded positively, possibly due to the novelty and interactivity of the tasks. This may indicate a generational shift in learning preferences among younger Vietnamese learners, who increasingly expect engaging, communicative, and authentic learning experiences.

Overall, this study confirms the growing consensus in applied linguistics that grammar instruction, when embedded in communicative tasks, is more likely to lead to sustained and functional language acquisition. It also contributes

local evidence from a Vietnamese high school context, supporting curriculum reform initiatives that seek to move beyond traditional, form-focused instruction.

## 6. Conclusion

The findings of this study affirm that the TBA is more effective than the GTM in enhancing the grammatical competence of Vietnamese secondary EFL learners. Students taught through TBA not only showed significantly greater gains in post-test scores but also demonstrated more consistent performance across the group. In addition to cognitive improvements, students expressed strongly positive attitudes toward the task-based learning experience. They found grammar lessons more engaging, practical, and easier to remember when taught through interactive tasks. These outcomes highlight the potential of TBA to address both linguistic proficiency and learner motivation—key pillars in successful language education. The results support prior international and local studies that advocate for communicative, learner-centered approaches to grammar teaching and provide compelling evidence for rethinking traditional methods in the Vietnamese EFL classroom.

In light of these findings, several implications emerge for language teaching practice and curriculum development. Teachers should consider incorporating task-based grammar instruction that emphasizes real-life language use, collaboration, and contextual understanding. Professional training programs should be offered to equip teachers with the necessary skills to design and facilitate effective tasks. Education authorities and curriculum designers should also recognize the value of student feedback and learner engagement in shaping grammar pedagogy. Moving forward, it is recommended that future studies explore the long-term impact of TBA, its application across diverse language skills, and its integration with traditional methods for a more balanced instructional approach. By placing learners at the center of the grammar learning process, task-based instruction holds promise for fostering not only grammatical accuracy but also communicative confidence and autonomy.

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