



## **INVESTIGATING THE IMPACT OF TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING ON STUDENT MOTIVATION AND ENGAGEMENT IN THE SRI LANKAN ESL CLASSROOM**

***W. L. D. R. S. Jayawardena\****

*Department of English Language Teaching, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka*

Affective factors such as motivation and engagement play a major role in the success of acquiring/learning English as a second language. A qualitative approach was employed to investigate the impact of task-based language teaching on student motivation and engagement in the Sri Lankan ESL classroom. The study was conducted at the Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya during the first semester of the academic year where the first-year undergraduates were following a compulsory ESL course. Upon arrival at the University, they were divided into classes based on the marks of a placement test. After demonstrating a slightly higher competency than their peers, 35 students managed to proceed to the intermediate competency level. Therefore, purposive sampling was employed and focused group discussions were held with these students belonging to the intermediate competency level. Interviews were conducted with 5 instructors who prepared tasks for these students. The data collected from focused group discussions and interviews were analyzed and presented thematically. The qualitative data gathered from focused group discussions revealed that task-based activities motivated the students to participate in classroom activities more actively, increased their interest in learning ESL, relatable and relevant tasks assigned by instructors that reflect real-life situations increased their engagement, and successful completion of tasks assigned by instructors not only gave them a sense of accomplishment but also broke the monotony in the classroom. The interviews with instructors highlighted the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between student motivation and engagement associated with task-based language teaching in the Sri Lankan ESL classroom. They indicated that students' motivation to complete a task impacted their active engagement and this active engagement in turn increased their motivation which also led to improved attendance. The study provides insights to teachers on providing a more motivating and engaging learning experience for their students by incorporating relevant and meaningful tasks that would ultimately lead to improved language learning outcomes.

**Keywords:** task-based language teaching, English as a second language, motivation, engagement, undergraduates

\*Corresponding Author: [ravishaj@yahoo.com](mailto:ravishaj@yahoo.com)



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*W. L. D. R. S. Jayawardena\**

*Department of English Language Teaching, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka*

### INTRODUCTION

Affective factors such as motivation and engagement play a major role in the success of acquiring/learning English as a second language. “Whereas learners’ beliefs about language learning are likely to be fairly stable, their affective states tend to be volatile, affecting not only overall progress but responses to particular learning activities on a day-by-day and even moment-by-moment basis.” (Ellis, 1994, p. 483 as cited in Temirkhanova, 2022) In the Sri Lankan context, a majority of students learn English as a second language for various academic, professional and social purposes. The task-based language teaching method is essentially important for ESL students over students who learn English as a first language because of its emphasis on meaningful communication and real-world relevance, learner-centered instruction while catering to the diverse needs of learners. The TBLT method has gained significant attraction as a pedagogical approach that prioritizes the use of ‘tasks’ to enhance language learning outcomes. According to Ellis (2009), a language teaching activity becomes a ‘task’ when it primarily focuses on meaning, presents a gap that demands conveying information or expressing opinions, requires the learners to rely on their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources and results in a distinct outcome beyond mere language usage. Central to TBLT is the belief that engaging students in meaningful, real-world tasks can significantly impact their motivation and engagement in the language learning process. TBLT promotes engagement by providing opportunities for students to actively participate and demonstrate behaviours that drive the task forward to successful completion (behaviourally), to pay attention to the quality of interaction, demands of the task, and their on-task performance (cognitively), to collaborate with their peers (socially) and by monitoring and regulating the emotions during task involvement (affectively) (Philp & Duchesne, 2016 as cited in Hiver, et.al. 2023). According to Hiver, et.al. (2023), it impacts student motivation by shaping how learners perceive and engage with language learning tasks. Despite extensive research exploring the relationships between TBLT with motivation or engagement separately, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding comprehensive investigations considering both aspects together, particularly in the Sri Lankan context. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by examining the impact of TBLT on student motivation and engagement, providing a holistic understanding of their dynamics in the Sri Lankan ESL learning context.

The main objective of this research is to investigate the impact of TBLT on student motivation and engagement in the Sri Lankan ESL classroom.

### METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was employed to investigate the impact of TBLT on student motivation and engagement in the Sri Lankan ESL classroom. The study was conducted at the Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya during the first semester of the academic year during which the first-year undergraduates were required to follow a compulsory ESL course for 15 weeks. Upon arrival at the university, they were given a placement test and were divided into English classes according to their proficiency levels based on the marks of the placement test. While most first-year undergraduates fell into the basic competency level classes, only 35 students managed to proceed to the intermediate level class and enrolled for the “Intermediate English for Humanities and Social Sciences” course. Since they demonstrated a slightly higher level of competency than their peers, purposive sampling was



employed and focused group discussions were conducted with this group of students. They had to attend classes 2 days a week, each lasting for 2 hours. The students were met in seven separate groups for focused group discussions. Of the participants, 28 were female students and 7 were male students. The focused group discussions took place face-to-face at the University following the ESL classes. Each focused group discussion lasted for approximately 30 minutes.

Interviews were also conducted with 5 instructors who taught ESL to students at the intermediate competency level. Of the respondents, 3 were female instructors and 2 were male instructors. They prepared the tasks that were assigned to students during ESL classes. All the interviews were done in person during work hours. These interviews lasted for approximately 1 hour.

After the focused group discussions and interviews were transcribed, the data were analysed around three major themes aligning with the research objective.

- 1) Impact of task-based language teaching on motivation
- 2) Impact of task-based language teaching on engagement
- 3) Relationship between motivation and engagement in the ESL classroom

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Impact of task-based language teaching on motivation

During the focused group discussions, the students revealed that the TBLT method motivates them to participate in classroom activities more actively, Successful completion of tasks assigned by instructors gives them a sense of accomplishment and breaks the monotony of the ESL classroom. The frequencies of their responses are presented in the table below.

Impact of TBLT on Motivation	Frequency
Task-based activities motivate to participate in classroom activities more actively.	28
Successful completion of tasks assigned by instructors gives a sense of accomplishment.	31
Task-based activities break the monotony of the ESL classroom.	35

Many students reported that they enjoyed completing the assigned tasks which motivated them to participate more actively in classroom activities. They remarked “Learning ESL through tasks that weren’t like regular assignments was enjoyable. The tasks were interactive and made us want to participate more” and “After completing an assigned, task we were curious about the upcoming tasks and that motivated us to participate eagerly in classroom activities.”

They also described the sense of accomplishment they achieve by completing the tasks assigned by their instructors: “It was very rewarding to receive positive feedback from our instructors for the tasks we completed” and some students reported, “Finishing the tasks given by our instructor made us feel as if all our hard work were paid off.”

Several students expressed that “Tasks made boring ESL classes fun and made it something that we look forward to every week” highlighting that task-based activities broke the monotony of the ESL classroom.

### Impact of TBLT on engagement

The students revealed that task-based activities increased their engagement and interest in learning ESL during the focused group discussions. They also mentioned that relevant and relatable tasks reflecting real-life situations assigned by their instructors made them more engaged in the lesson. The frequencies of their responses are presented in the table below.



Impact of TBLT on engagement	Frequency
Task-based activities increase engagement and interest in learning ESL.	31
Tasks assigned by instructors reflect real-life situations that are relevant and relatable which increases engagement.	35

Many respondents revealed that task-based activities increased engagement and interest in learning ESL: “Tasks made our lessons more interesting. Every week, we would look forward to our ESL class” and “The variety of tasks in each lesson made time fly by. We were so engaged, and before we even knew, the class was over.”

All respondents unanimously stated that tasks reflecting real-life situations, which are both relevant and relatable, significantly increased their engagement in the classroom. They remarked “Our instructors give us tasks that we can easily relate to and that made us more involved in completing them because it added a sense of purpose to our learning” and “The tasks reflecting real-world situations made us deeply engaged in the lesson as it enabled us to see how we can practically apply the things that we learned in class”

### **Relationship between Motivation and Engagement in the ESL classroom.**

During the interviews held with instructors, they revealed that when students are motivated to do a task, they are more likely to engage in that task actively and when they are engaged in the task and participate actively, it further increases their motivation. They remarked “We’ve noticed that when students are genuinely interested in a task, they put more effort into it and are more engaged throughout the process until they complete it” and “When students are actively involved in a task, their unending efforts to succeed shows their motivation” highlighting the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between motivation and engagement associated with task-based language teaching in the Sri Lankan ESL classroom. Their remarks align with the findings of Hiver, Phil & Wu (2023) that “learners’ task motivation affects subsequent task engagement and is itself affected by it. Seeing task motivation as both a precursor to and a byproduct of task engagement allows both motivation and engagement to be integrated while still being distinguished as separate constructs.”

Some instructors also reported that “When they see that the task is relevant to their own lives, their motivation to complete it increases, and that leads to greater engagement”

Moreover, they also noted that incorporating task-based language teaching led to a significant improvement in student attendance. They remarked “When task-based language teaching was incorporated to the course even the students who usually get absent attended the ESL class every day.”, and “Their eagerness to find out the upcoming tasks improved their attendance.”

### **CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study investigated the impact of TBLT on student motivation and engagement in the ESL classroom in the Sri Lankan context. The study revealed that the TBLT method significantly and positively impacted students’ motivation and engagement in the Sri Lankan ESL classroom. According to the findings, task-based activities motivated the students to participate in classroom activities more actively. The successful completion of tasks assigned by instructors not only gave them a sense of accomplishment but also broke the monotony in the classroom. Moreover, task-based activities increased the students’ engagement and interest in learning ESL. The relevance and relatability of tasks, that reflected real-life situations, were particularly highlighted by students as factors that increased their engagement in the classroom. The insights from interviews with instructors highlighted the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between student motivation and engagement associated with TBLT in the Sri Lankan ESL classroom where they indicated that students’ motivation to complete a



task impacted their active engagement, and this active engagement, in turn, increased their motivation. TBLT was also found to be positively impacting students' attendance. The study provided insights to teachers on how they can provide a more motivating and engaging learning experience for their students by incorporating relevant meaningful tasks which would ultimately lead to improved language learning outcomes.

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