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## Improving 10th Graders' English Communicative Competence Through the Implementation of the Task-Based Learning Approach

El enfoque de aprendizaje basado en tareas como medio para mejorar la competencia comunicativa de estudiantes de grado décimo

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This article reports the results of an action-research project focused on improving students' communicative competence in English through the task-based learning approach. This study was conducted in a co-educational public school in Medellín (Colombia) with thirty-four tenth graders. Actions implemented include the development of a series of tasks and the definition of four thematic units consistent with the syllabus and students' interests and needs. The results evidence students' significant improvements in their communicative competence in English. Findings also show that implementation of the task-based approach was affected by factors related to the teachers' role and others related to students' performance.

*Key words:* Communicative competence, English as a foreign language, language learning, task-based learning approach.

Este artículo presenta los resultados de un proyecto de investigación-acción que se enfocó en el mejoramiento de la competencia comunicativa en inglés de los estudiantes mediante el enfoque de aprendizaje basado en tareas. Este estudio fue realizado en un colegio público mixto de la ciudad de Medellín (Colombia) con treinta y cuatro estudiantes de décimo grado. Las acciones implementadas incluyen el desarrollo de una serie de tareas y la definición de cuatro unidades temáticas acorde con el currículo y los intereses y necesidades de los estudiantes. Los resultados evidencian mejoras significativas en la competencia comunicativa en inglés de los estudiantes. Los resultados también muestran que la implementación del enfoque basado en tareas fue afectada por factores relacionados con el rol de los profesores y otros relacionados con el desempeño de los estudiantes.

*Palabras clave:* aprendizaje de lenguas, competencia comunicativa, enfoque de aprendizaje basado en tareas, inglés como lengua extranjera.

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## Introduction

Despite the support that policies and curricula give to the development of English learners' communicative competence in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts, instruction is still focused on the traditional test-oriented or form-based approaches (Littlewood, 2007; Savignon & Wang, 2003). In Colombia, the National Ministry of Education intends to give teachers and administrators guidelines to develop students' communicative competence through proposals such as the *Estándares Básicos de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés* (Basic Standards of Competences in Foreign Languages: English, Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2006). However, an overemphasis on teaching grammatical forms and written language remains at almost all levels of education and English learners give evidence not only of limited knowledge of linguistic forms, as revealed by national tests (Cely, 2007), but also of an inability to carry out "a simple communicative situation after several years of classroom instruction" (Vélez-Rendón, 2003, p. 191).

The aforementioned problem was evident in the tenth grade English class where this study was developed. The class took place in a co-educational public school located in the Northeast area of Medellín (Colombia). This school had a population of 1,409 students from low and middle-low socioeconomic statuses, and with a low level of English proficiency. The syllabus proposed by the school for tenth grade gave teachers guidelines to develop students' communicative competence, but I noticed that my 34 tenth graders had not developed it enough despite having attended English classes every school year. Several factors contributed to this situation: (1) Students were not provided with enough opportunities to use the English learned in class to communicate ideas or interact spontaneously; (2) my cooperating teacher (CT) taught the class in Spanish and therefore, there was an absence of exposure to spoken English; and (3) the English lessons were focused on preparing the students for their mid-term exams as well as teaching vocabulary,

grammatical structures, and tenses. As a consequence, the use of bilingual dictionaries and exercises involving grammar and translation was frequent.

After observing the aforementioned conditions and the lack of opportunities for my students to improve their communicative competence, I identified the need to implement a teaching approach that would help to improve this competence. Consequently, I decided to implement the task-based learning (TBL) approach based on the framework of TBL teaching proposed by Willis (1996). This approach "combines the best insights from communicative language teaching with an organized focus on language form" (Willis, 1996, p. 1), and in most of the cases where scholars embedded the task-based approach in their teaching instead of other approaches, the results were positive in relation to the students' use of the target language and communicative competence (Lopez, 2004; Tanasarnsanee, 2002). Through this approach, students participating in this study were expected to develop different tasks in class that exposed them to spoken and written English, gave them opportunities to use the language in a spontaneous or planned way, and addressed their attention towards the form and grammar at the end of the tasks.

Considering the facts acknowledged here, this research sought to improve a group of tenth graders' English communicative competence through the implementation of the TBL approach, developing a series of tasks that involved students' interests and fostering students' oral and written production through TBL founded classes. Therefore, in order to frame this research inquiry, I proposed this question: How can the implementation of the TBL approach improve a group of tenth graders' English communicative competence in a public high school?

## Theoretical Framework

On this theoretical framework, I briefly present a debate that allowed the evolution of the concept of communicative competence in language learning

and teaching. Secondly, I share some authors' insights on that competence, on the TBL approach, and their relationship. Then, I present a brief state of the art of the research conducted in EFL contexts related to this study. Finally, I state the need for exploring the TBL approach in our EFL classrooms and its effects on the students' communicative competence.

The debate that started the evolution of the concept of communicative competence emerged in the late 1960's. Several linguists called into question the grammatical focus of the grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods of foreign language teaching by arguing that language learning involved more than grammatical competence (Richards, 2006). Chomsky (1959) was among the first researchers to point out the limitations of structural theories of language. He introduced a distinction between competence (the monolingual speaker-listener's knowledge of language) and performance (the actual use of language in real situations). This distinction was then seen as too narrow by Hymes (1972), who believed that communicative competence not only implied the development of a grammatical competence but the ability to use language in a variety of communicative situations, thus bringing the sociolinguistic perspective into Chomsky's notion of competence. As a result of the debate, many linguists started to contribute to the further development of the concept of communicative competence and new methods.

Thereafter, different authors in the field of language acquisition and foreign language learning came out with insights on the communicative competence. One of them was Savignon (1972) who defined communicative competence as the "ability to function in a truly communicative setting—that is, in a dynamic exchange in which linguistic competence must adapt itself to the total information input, both linguistic and paralinguistic, of one or more interlocutors" (p. 8). She described this competence as a dynamic and relative concept that is more interpersonal than intrapersonal, largely

defined by context, and dependent on the negotiation of meaning and cooperation of all the participants involved (Savignon, 1972). Savignon's description as well as Willis and Willis' (2007) insights suggested the implementation of methods and approaches in EFL classrooms that equipped students to improve both their linguistic and communicative competence.

Indeed, one of the approaches proposed to respond to learners' communicative needs was TBL, whose aim is to develop students' ability to communicate. In TBL, communication takes place by using the grammatical system of the language, which supports the idea that "communicative competence' can only exist on a foundation of 'grammatical competence'" (Littlewood, 2000, p. 40). TBL provides students with a learning context that requires the use of the target language through communicative tasks, understanding task to be "a goal-oriented communicative activity with a specific outcome, where the emphasis is on exchanging meanings not producing specific language form" (Willis, 1996, p. 36). Tasks are characterized by integrating language skills, removing teacher-centered instruction, providing opportunities for spontaneous interaction in the foreign language, and increasing learners' fluency, accuracy, and ability to interact in real-life contexts (Willis, 1996). Accordingly, EFL classrooms are well suited for TBL, which is supported by the studies stated below.

Effectively, studies conducted in international EFL contexts have supported the finding that TBL engages learners in certain mental processing that is useful for acquisition, promotes the use of language for a communicative purpose (Ellis, 2000; Nunan, 2005), and enhances students' oral discourse in terms of utterance length or complexity, fluency, and accuracy (Skehan & Foster, 1997). Lochana and Deb's (2006) findings, after conducting a study in an education society in India, suggested that TBL was beneficial to learners not only in terms of proficiency enhancement, but motivation. Likewise, in an experiment in a Brazilian private school, Lopez (2004) found that students learned English more

effectively through TBL because they were using the language to access information, solve problems, and talk about personal experiences, and then were able to deal with real life situations. Moreover, in a book published by Leaver and Willis (2004), they presented some US foreign language programs that implemented task-based instruction, whose major outcomes included student motivation and satisfaction, higher proficiency results, risk taking, better program evaluation results, and curricular flexibility.

Furthermore, in our Colombian EFL context, Gutiérrez Gutiérrez (2005) conducted a study to investigate some ninth graders' oral skills improvements while implementing TBL instruction. She proved it to be effective and concluded that the tasks implemented let students express their feelings and opinions freely and use language meaningfully and effectively. Likewise, Peña and Onatra (2009) conducted a study on TBL in a public school to investigate students' oral outputs. They found that the tasks favored students' fluency, vocabulary, strategies to maintain communication, and promoted the use of language purposefully. In another study, the TBL approach was applied to the design of a multimodal didactic unit, which encouraged authentic communication inside a familiar environment for the students (Facebook), and allowed them to monitor themselves through virtual connections (Aldana Gutiérrez, Baquero Rodríguez, Rivero Ortiz, & Romero García, 2012). The implementation of task-based activities also helped 35 eighth-graders to comprehend and manipulate information, as well as interact meaningfully and spontaneously in an oral way (González Humanez & Arias, 2009). In brief, the aforementioned findings are likely to encourage teachers in our context to feel confident when carrying out TBL in their EFL classrooms, since this approach fulfills fundamental conditions for learning a foreign language, namely exposure, meaningful use, and motivation, as Willis (1996) claims.

As for communicative competence, some publications also dealt with it in our Colombian context. Jaime Osorio and Insuasty (2015) carried out a study to analyze the teaching practices used by some teachers in their English lessons and their effects on the development of students' communicative competence. It revealed the prevalence of the pre-communicative teaching practices over the communicative ones, and a satisfactory influence of the teaching practices on the development of students' communicative competence, more at the level of the pragmatic component than the organizational one. Likewise, González Peláez (2008) conducted a study to establish the relationship between what English teachers understood about communicative competence and what they actually did in their classes. One of her findings showed how hard it was to define what communicative competence is in teachers' own words.

However, despite our finding studies on TBL as regards Colombian classrooms, we feel that few have shed light on how beneficial its implementation can be for students' communicative competence, where both oral and written production are involved. This is the reason why this study advocated for the TBL approach implementation in my particular EFL classroom, where traditional teaching methods were applied as a way to facilitate relevant improvements on students' communicative competence.

## Method

This research follows the qualitative paradigm as described by Merriam (1998), who characterizes qualitative research as understanding the meaning people have constructed, in which reality is a main component, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, and fieldwork is usually involved as well as inductive research strategies. In regard to the type of research, this project was developed under the action research method, following the four-stage cycle suggested by Mertler (2006): planning, acting, developing, and reflecting. This cycle was

proposed and adapted by different authors who have also defined action research as a process of inquiry that is conducted to improve conditions and practices by incorporating change and social action (Carr & Kemmis, 1983; Elliott, 1991; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982; Lewin, 1946). Accordingly, this study used its results to promote changes in the English classes of a public school and to improve the participating educators' teaching practices.

### Planning Actions

As part of the planning cycle of this action research and in order to improve students' English communicative competence, I planned on implementing two teaching actions through a series of steps. The actions consisted basically of (1) defining four thematic units coherent with students' interests, needs, and the syllabus; and (2) implementing the TBL approach through the development of a series of tasks based on Willis' proposal (1996), whose insights significantly guided this study.

Additionally, to collect data for this study, I planned on using the following instruments: (a) field notes to record the events within the classroom; (b) two semi-structured interviews with my CT, one at the beginning and one at the end of my teaching actions implementation in order to know his opinion about my research and the improvements he identified regarding students' communicative competence during my project implementation; (c) a survey of the whole class with multiple choice questions carried out at the end of my teaching actions to identify how students perceived their English communicative competence; (d) two semi-structured interviews with ten students selected and divided into three focal groups according to their participation in the English class, conducted at the same time as my CT interviews with the purposes of learning their opinion about my research, the improvements they perceived in their communicative competence after my implementation, and expanding information gathered through the survey; and (e) students' artifacts, such as written texts and recorded

oral presentations, collected as results of different tasks in order to identify improvements in students' communicative competence.

### Development of the Actions

The aforementioned teaching actions were developed during the acting cycle of this action research carried out throughout the second semester of this study and were aimed at fulfilling the study objectives. For the first action, defining four thematic units, I applied a survey in class to identify topics and activities the students were interested in. Subsequently, my students voted for these topics as their favorite ones: music, movies and TV series, love, and sports. I later integrated these topics to the content established in the course syllabus, creating the four different thematic units for the rest of the year. However, because of issues of time, only two units were covered.

The other action that I carried out was implementing the TBL approach through the development of some types of tasks suggested by Willis (1996) in order to help students improve their English communicative competence. The development of those tasks was also based on Willis' (1996) framework for TBL that consisted of a pre-task stage, a task cycle (task, planning stage, report stage), and a language focus stage (practice and analysis stage). The types of tasks implemented were chosen according to the class content and the tasks' level of difficulty as presented below.

As part of the first unit, I implemented two tasks. The first one involved a listing and a comparing task which consisted of (1) choosing a favorite music style in groups of four, (2) sharing their previous knowledge and writing ideas on the music style, (3) reading an article in English about it, and (4) comparing information and making a list of new data about the music style. In the report stage, students reported orally their previous knowledge and new data to the class; and then, I corrected their pronunciation and written ideas in the focus language stage.



The second task was focused on comparing and sharing personal experiences where students shared in groups of three the music styles they liked the most and least, and justified their answers in English. In the pre-task, we listened to a dialogue exemplifying how to carry out the task and students were given useful vocabulary and expressions to ask for and give opinions. Some difficulties in the task were that few students used English orally in the sharing task and some wrote their preferences in Spanish and translated them into English, losing the opportunity of using spontaneous language. From the discussion, the groups of students took notes on the similarities and differences found in their preferences, which were orally reported later. In the focus stage, students learned some linking words and completed a contextualized paragraph with verbs conjugated in simple present, and some sentences using the auxiliary *do* or *does*. In the practice stage, students wrote an opinion about a music genre using the language learned.

Subsequently, I developed a task in the second unit related to a TV series. To involve my students' interests, we decided altogether on a TV series that they would like to watch. We watched an episode of the TV series and students had to write a summary, but few of them handed it in. Two tasks were developed based on the TV series. The first one was a sharing of personal experiences task where students wrote an opinion about the TV series using the vocabulary and grammar previously learned. The second task involved the listing, ordering, sorting, and sharing of a personal experiences task, where students in groups of three decided if the TV series watched should be shown in Colombia. They then listed and ranked three arguments that supported their decision, and decided on their best argument. After these tasks, I did not carry out a language focus stage because of time constraints.

All the aforementioned tasks counted on pre-tasks where students were expected to activate their background knowledge, learn useful vocabulary for

the task cycle, pronounce words or write sentences using part of the vocabulary taught, and be exposed to spoken and written English through short readings, dictations, audio recordings, videos, and posters. The task cycles and report stages that were developed involved a variety of activities and students' interests. In these stages, I promoted group work and opportunities for students to speak and write in English with a meaningful purpose. Finally, in the language focus stages, students were expected to improve their writing and speaking in English through the analysis and practice of the language learned throughout the task, and the revision and correction of relevant mistakes made by the group of students in terms of grammar, punctuation, syntax, and pronunciation during the task and report stage.

### Data Analysis

To analyze the data collected, I first transcribed the interviews. Then, I organized the transcripts and journal entries and numbered all the pages. Next, following Altrichter, Posch, and Somekh (1993), I read and coded the data for preliminary categories through open coding, which shed light on broader categories and recurrent themes in the data.

To analyze the survey (Appendix), I first arranged the responses gathered for each list question on a summary sheet and then I tabulated the quantity of responses and set some of them into percentages (Bell, 1993). I finally interpreted and coded the data. In the case of the students' artifacts, I compared some of them to identify changes on students' communicative competence that helped me answer my research question.

Once I finished this analysis, I rearranged all the data in broader categories through focused coding and regrouped excerpts of the data (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Next, I organized the categories in a frequency chart. In order to achieve validity, I triangulated the data obtained from the different data collection sources looking for patterns and recurrent categories, aiming for corroborating findings and verifying their consistency

(Altrichter et al., 1993). In that way, I was then able to construct core themes and draw some conclusions that helped me answer my research question. In the following section, I present a summary of what I found.

## Findings

The processes described in the previous sections, as part of the observation and reflection cycles of this action research, led to some meaningful results in this study, whose purpose was to improve students' English communicative competence through the implementation of the TBL approach. These findings are divided into these two interrelated main themes: *Improvements on Students' English Communicative Competence* and *Factors That Affected the TBL Approach Implementation*. Some sub-themes were also identified, as shown in Table 1. In the following sections, I provide further explanations of each of these findings.

**Table 1.** Main Themes and Sub-Themes Drawn From the Data Analysis

Main Themes	Sub-Themes
Improvements on Students' English Communicative Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improvements on written production.</li> <li>• Improvements on oral production.</li> </ul>
Factors That Affected the TBL Approach Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Factors related to students.</li> <li>• Factors related to teachers.</li> </ul>

### Improvements on Students' English Communicative Competence

Data revealed that students improved their communicative competence through the implementation of listing, ordering and sorting, comparing, and sharing personal experiences tasks as part of the framework for TBL proposed by Willis (1996). Through these tasks students were able to speak and write in English with a purpose despite the language inaccuracy because

sometimes students' progress is more possible after lowering their anxiety by avoiding teacher's corrections (Peña & Onatra, 2009), and in task-based instruction the main concern is not the small pieces of language, but the practical purposes for which language must be used (Brown, 2001).

Nonetheless, students were sometimes able to construct well-structured sentences and activate their prior knowledge. As Forero Rocha (2005) states in her study conducted in a Colombian high-school, it is very important to consider students' prior knowledge when planning a TBL class. Indeed, a good task generates opportunities for learners to experience, activate as much language as possible, and recall and use the language they already know (Willis, 1996; Willis & Willis, 2007). The following extract from my journal illustrates that students were able to use grammar and vocabulary learned previously in class with a meaningful purpose through a sharing personal experience task about justifying the music styles they liked the most and least:

I saw that students could use the grammatical structures and vocabulary learned previously in class to communicate meaning orally. They could use the grammar structures and vocabulary with a purpose that was expressing their music preferences to their classmates. In brief, the task could contribute to the development of the students' communicative competence (Journal, September 6, 2012).

The aforementioned improvements were also evident in the students' artifacts collected. For instance, I found that through sharing personal experiences tasks, students developed the ability to construct personal opinions in English and to justify their answers orally and in a written way, as this student answered when asked about his learning: "I learned to say the why of things, why I like something, and to give my own opinion"<sup>1</sup> (Focus group 2, October 31, 2012). This is contrasted with students'

<sup>1</sup> All of the excerpts from the focus groups were translated from Spanish for publication purposes.



lack of ability to share opinions before the action cycle, as shown by the following student's words when asked about her learning in previous years: "I did not know [how to give opinions]. Maybe we have studied it, but I do not remember" (Focus group 1, October 31, 2012). This finding shows how "engaging learners in task work provides a better context for the activation of learning processes" (Richards & Rodgers, 2004, p. 223) and how the negotiation of meaning in TBL provides the input and output necessary for language acquisition.

After analyzing three different opinions that students wrote before, in the middle and at the end of the implementation about a reading, a music style, and a TV series episode respectively, I found that by the end of the TBL implementation students were able to communicate their ideas in a clearer way and produce more accurate written language without leaving the importance of meaning aside. In this respect, Willis (1996) states that students are likely to make mistakes at first, but they gradually get more accurate as their repertoire of language increases. The three sharing-personal-experiences tasks came with the same instructions and conditions: Students had to write an opinion without any specific length by just using a dictionary, the vocabulary learned in the pre-tasks, and their background knowledge. The aforementioned improvements are illustrated in Figures 1, 2, and 3, which are artifacts collected from the same student.

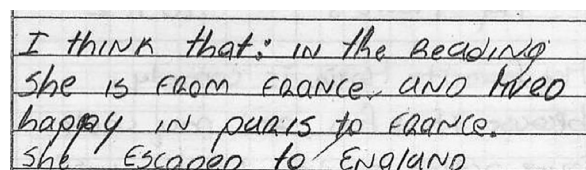
These data also suggest that students' language performance improves after their practice on the same task. Bygate (2001) proved through a larger study on the influence of practicing a type of task that repetition led to greater accuracy, fluency, and complexity of performance on the same task.

As for the oral part, some improvements in learners' fluency, pronunciation, and accuracy were identified. This was evident the several times that I asked students for oral opinions, since their performance showed gradual improvements in terms of pronunciation, fluency, and they were able to construct short but well-structured sentences in a spontaneous way. In fact, in the

study conducted by Forero Rocha (2005), she showed that improvements of students' oral interaction through the use of TBL in a large group occurred as a gradual process, which required providing several opportunities to practice the language; besides, a benefit of task repetition is that learners get more fluency in terms of pausing and speed (Bygate, 2001). In the last focus groups that I carried out, students expressed that they improved their pronunciation and vocabulary thanks to the pre-task activities where we pronounced different words and I assessed students' individual pronunciation. In the following excerpt from one of the final focus groups, a student explained how through the practices on pronunciation he made improvements:

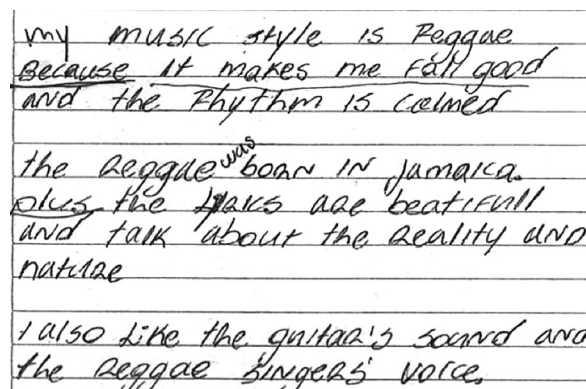
For instance, [the words] that you wrote on the board, [and you asked us about] how to say this [a word], so I started thinking "how do I say that?" If I knew how to say [for example] the word crazy, so I [said] "¡crazy!" (well-pronounced). Then one started being aware of the pronunciation. (Focus group 3, October 31, 2012)

**Figure 1.** Student's Opinion About a Story, May 31, 2012



I think that: in the Reading she is from France, and lived happy in Paris to France. she Escaped to England

**Figure 2.** Student's Music Preferences, September 12, 2012

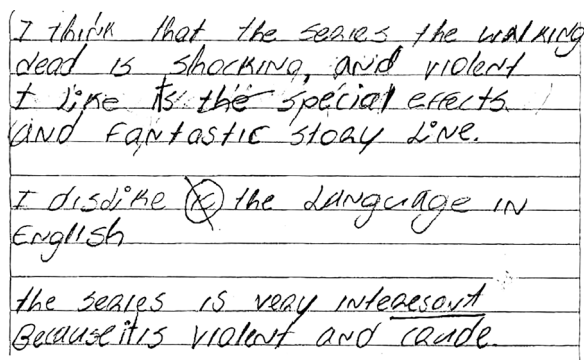


my music style is Reggae because it makes me feel good and the Phythm is calmed

the Reggae was born in Jamaica. plus, the lyrics are beatifull and talk about the Reality and nature

i also like the guitar's sound and the Reggae Singer's voice.

**Figure 3.** Student's Opinion About a TV series,  
October 18, 2012



I think that the series the walking  
dead is shocking, and violent  
I like its the special effects  
and fantastic story line.

I dislike the language in  
English

the series is very interesant  
because it is violent and crude.

Even though most of the students in the last survey gave the same score to their oral and written productions, I found that some students perceived more improvements in either of them, and my CT perceived more improvements in students' written part as this excerpt from his interview at the end of my implementation shows:

According to my observations, I have to recognize that students improved in their use of English, and is more evident the improvement in the written part. (CT's interview, November 2, 2012)

Regarding the survey, 11 students gave a higher score to their written production than to their oral and for seven students the scores were the other way around (Appendix). This finding is consistent with the results of Ellis and Yuan (2005) who, in a study on the effects of task planning on oral and written task performance, found that "the participants' language was more accurate when writing than when speaking" (p. 186).

Students' different perceptions of their improvements were also evident in one of the last focus groups, where a student commented: "I improved my writing ...and [I improved] the pronunciation more or less. Now, I know how to write some things with the words that you gave us." (Focus group 1, October 31, 2012), and another student considered that: "[I improved] the speaking. Someone gives me a text in English and I know how to pronounce it" (Focus group 2, October

31, 2012). Nevertheless, these students' improvements seemed to be also affected by their particular learning styles (James & Gardner, 1995) and participation in class, since the student who commented that her writing improved more than her pronunciation was not very participative in class and the student who expressed that he had improved his speaking skill was a very participative one.

Data also suggested that the TBL approach helped students in learning vocabulary. This is a significant finding because vocabulary acquisition is viewed as a key aspect to achieve a high level of proficiency in the target language (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008) and is a useful tool for learners to maintain a certain degree of communication when they do not have enough knowledge on structures (Celce-Murcia & Rosensweig, 1989). The pre-tasks that students were exposed to during the action cycle, involving posters, readings, games, audio recordings, and pronunciation activities, not only helped the students to develop the tasks but to expand their vocabulary, correct their pronunciation, and improve their ability to express written or oral ideas in English. In fact, the use of creative, colorful, or user-friendly material in the pre-tasks can help the students to increase their vocabulary as well as their understanding and motivation (Forero Rocha, 2005). When I asked about the learning during the implementation, a student in one of the final focus groups expressed that he expanded his vocabulary, which for him makes English learning easier:

One learned the words much more. It is easier for learning English to know the vocabulary ... I [improved my English level] about a 50 percent, in some word pronunciations and some words that I did not know. (Focus group 3, October 31, 2012)

Furthermore, in the survey conducted to learn of my students' perception of their English proficiency level after my implementation (Appendix), 13 students indicated that their English proficiency level improved between 40 and 60%, and 71% of the students rated

their English proficiency level as 3 on a scale of 1 to 5, which can be interpreted as a level that my TBL approach implementation helped to build.

In general terms, the findings presented above are in accordance with the findings of other researchers who suggest that task based activities are effective methods to improve foreign language learners' proficiency in communicative learning (Tanasarnsane, 2002; Willis, 1996).

### **Factors Affecting the TBL Approach Implementation**

Data suggested that some factors affected negatively the TBL approach implementation in my EFL classroom as well as the communicative competence development, which implies different aspects beyond language itself (González Peláez, 2008). Those factors are related in part to some students and others to the teacher's role.

#### **Factors Related to Students**

A factor that affected negatively the TBL approach implementation was some few students' lack of willingness to participate in some tasks and group work. Probably, as Willis (1996) asserts, "students sometimes expect 'to be seen but not heard'" (p. 140). Data showed that the students who participated voluntarily were usually the same and some few students participated only when I called on them, as illustrated in the following excerpt from my journal:

I often asked the students if they had any questions about what I was explaining, but they never said anything. Most of the students were very quiet. . . . the students on the right and left side of the classroom were sometimes talking or absent-minded because when I asked them questions about the information I just presented, the students who answered were always those in front and middle of the classroom. (Journal, July 25, 2012)

Apparently, one of the causes of some students' lack of participation was their fear of speaking English

in public or of mispronouncing words, which is one of the important causes that interfere with the students' oral participation in the classroom along with the lack of vocabulary, shyness, and fear of being humiliated (Forero Rocha, 2005; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Urrutia León & Vega Cely, 2010). This was supported by the following student in one of the last focus groups who said: "One rarely likes to speak, for instance, in my case, I don't like to speak a lot in English because I don't know and people laugh at me because I mispronounce" (Focus group 1, October 31, 2012). Nevertheless, data indicated that some of those students' willingness to participate in the tasks improved throughout the days.

In addition, data showed that some students rarely did homework or copied it from classmates. This extract from my journal shows this situation:

I asked the students if they had read the summary that I gave them yesterday from the first episode of the TV series, but any student read it because "they had much homework for today." I shared my disappointment and then, I improvised by asking the students who already knew the TV series to tell their classmates what had happened in the first episode. (Journal, September 27, 2012)

Due to that lack of responsibility, sometimes I had to improvise or develop activities in class that were supposed to be students' homework. This affected negatively the sequence of the planned tasks, which is one of the key aspects in the implementation and effectiveness of the TBL approach (Salaberry, 2001; Willis, 1996)

#### **Factors Related to Teacher**

Data indicated that my implementation of TBL was affected by my lack of experience with this approach and with developing the tasks proposed by Willis (1996). This lack of experience was evidenced at the beginning of the implementation by the long time I devoted to the language focus stages, the development of teacher-centered tasks, my lack of enough modeling and vocabulary given to the students before developing the

tasks, unclear instructions, and the imbalance between the opportunities to produce oral and written English in the tasks. The following excerpt from my journal shows the reasons why a pre-task and task did not work well:

Something that didn't work well in the task was the time devoted to the oral practice because I asked the whole class to present the dialogue, so it took too much time . . . the pre-task didn't work well either because it was very teacher-centered and the students were bored because the activities were not dynamic. (Journal, July 26, 2012)

Regarding the balance between the opportunities to produce written and oral English in class, data suggested that I gave more opportunities to produce written language than oral, which I did not expect because my idea was to improve both as a whole following Willis' (1996) framework for TBL. When asked about the balance in the opportunities, my CT mentioned in his interview that "there were opportunities for both things, but most for the written part" (CT's interview, November 2, 2012). This excerpt from one of the last focus groups also shows that some students perceived the lack of balance:

s8: There were more opportunities for writing than for speaking.  
s7: Yes, more for writing.  
s9: No, for speaking too.  
s8: But for speaking, there were fewer opportunities than for writing. Every class we wrote, and every other class we pronounced. (Focus group 1, October 31, 2012)

Probably, as Willis (1996) states, in large classes like this one to give individuals enough chance to use the language naturally is more difficult.

Furthermore, another thing that could affect the implementation was that I could not follow some of the few steps that Willis (1996) mentioned in her framework for TBL. For instance, the recordings that students may hear of others doing a similar task in order to compare outcomes were not accessible for me because this was my first time implementing TBL, and in agreement with the Peña and Onatra (2009) statement, "letting learners

observe a model during the task cycle is an excellent guide to better understand the purpose and possible outcome of a task" (p. 21).

In a few words, these factors related to the teacher show that some central roles that a teacher should assume in TBL in order to be effective were not properly performed, which include selecting, adapting or creating the tasks, forming a sequence of tasks, and preparing learners for tasks by providing partial demonstration of tasks procedures (Richards & Rodgers, 2004).

### Conclusions and Implications

Based on the findings I obtained, it was possible to conclude that the implementation of the TBL approach through the development of a series of tasks proposed by Willis (1996), coherent with students' interests and needs, succeeded in improving my particular EFL classroom students' communicative competence, which was the main purpose of this study. The exposure to English and the frequent opportunities to use the target language through the different tasks and pre-tasks developed in class, contributed significantly to improve students' oral and written production, which was reflected in the different artifacts collected as well as the students' participation. However, based on the focal groups conducted at the end of this study, some students perceived more improvements in either of them, somehow due to their learning style and willingness to participate in class. Some of the main improvements identified in students' communicative competence included vocabulary increase, fluency, accuracy, and pronunciation.

Another important aspect that contributed to the improvement of students' English communicative competence was the importance given to meaning and purpose over the importance given to the language form in the different tasks developed. As students addressed their attention towards the form and grammar at the end of the tasks, they could use the language in a more spontaneous and meaningful way during the tasks

avoiding teachers' correction and peers' critique, which are important causes of students' anxiety (Peña & Onatra, 2009). In this way, students advanced from translating and writing isolated sentences to writing meaningful short paragraphs and expressing their opinions through tasks, such as the sharing of personal experiences one. Nevertheless, all of this was a gradual process where activating students' previous knowledge as well as the tasks repetition played an important role because this led to the increase of accuracy, fluency, vocabulary, and a better performance on the same task, as students' repertoire of language increased and their management of the task cycle as well (Bygate, 2001; Willis, 1996).

As for the factors related to teacher and students, I concluded that the role teachers assume in the TBL approach differs from the role in more "linguistic" or structure-oriented approaches, but it is equally crucial and affects the effectiveness of the approach implementation. Likewise, students' performances and improvements are somewhat affected by the teacher's role and their own learning styles (James & Gardner, 1995).

Additionally, this study entailed some implications for teachers' practice. The first one is that teachers should pay careful attention to providing students with enough exposure to English and balanced opportunities for oral and written production in order to improve their communicative competence. Also, teachers should not forget how much influence students' interests, learning styles, and needs have on their learning process and production. These implications, however, should be seen in a contextualized way, taking into account the reality of the students who participated in this study and the fact that this was the first time they developed tasks through the TBL approach.

In the end, this project provides a better understanding of the effects of the TBL approach on students' English communicative competence, and contributes to the ongoing corpus of research knowledge regarding the TBL approach and communicative competence in EFL classrooms (Ellis, 2000; Gutiérrez Gutiérrez, 2005;

Littlewood, 2007; Lochana & Deb, 2006; Nunan, 2005; Savignon, 1972; Willis, 1996). Further research on these issues could explore to what extent the TBL approach can improve students' communicative competence in different settings and learning conditions.

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### Appendix: Responses of Survey Applied After the Teaching Strategies Implementation<sup>2</sup>

Participants: 31 students (ss) of 34

<b>Question 1. Mark with an x the statement that best describes how you feel in relation to different areas of your English level:</b>	<b>Always</b>	<b>Almost always</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Rarely</b>	<b>Never</b>	<b>No Response</b>
Pronounce well the words learned in class.	0	15	13	2	0	1
Speak fluently.	0	2	17	10	2	0
Use good spelling when you write.	1	11	17	2	0	0
Write coherent sentences in the correct order.	4	11	11	5	0	0
Use grammatical structures learned in class correctly (simple present).	5	11	11	3	1	0
You are able to ask classmates for opinions.	3	12	7	8	0	1
You are able to give your personal opinion about music, tv series and movies in a written way using simple sentences.	4	9	13	5	0	0
You are able to give your personal opinion about music genres, tv series and movies in an oral way using simple sentences.	3	8	18	2	0	0
You use varied vocabulary (speaking and writing).	2	8	13	8	0	0
You can write coherent and clear paragraphs.	2	10	13	5	1	0
<b>Questions 2, 5, and 6. Being 1 the lowest level and 5 the highest, rank from 1 to 5:</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	
Q2. Your English level at this moment.	0	3	22	6	0	
Q5. Your oral English production level.	0	3	22	6	0	
Q6. Your written English production level.	0	2	19	10	0	
<b>Question 3. Mark with an x the percentage that describes your English level progress:</b>	<b>5 - 20%</b>	<b>20 - 40%</b>	<b>40 - 60 %</b>	<b>60 - 80%</b>	<b>80 - 100%</b>	
Number of students	4	9	13	5	0	
<b>Question 4. If you consider that your English level improved, mark the characteristics from the class that helped you more (you can mark several options):</b>						<b># of ss</b>
The opportunities to speak English in class.						22
The vocabulary learned before every task.						18
The way the teacher taught (Task based learning approach).						16
The possibilities to write in English inside and outside the classroom.						15

<sup>2</sup> All the questions in this survey were translated from Spanish for publication purposes.

The exercises and grammar worksheets developed at the end of every task.	15
The listening activities in English.	9
The homework that the teacher assigned.	9

**Interpretations of Questions 5 and 6:**

Eleven students assessed their written production at a higher level than their oral production (Eight ss: oral = 3 and written = 4. Three ss: oral = 2 and written = 3/4). Seven students assessed their oral production at a higher level than their written production (Five ss: oral = 4 and written = 3. Two ss: oral = 3 and written = 2). Thirteen students assessed their oral and written production at the same level (3); just one student considered both production skills in level 4.