

## Investigating EFL University Students' Attitudes and Perceptions toward Task-Based Learning in English Syntax: A Case Study of the Faculty of Languages and Translation

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استقصاء اتجاهات وتصورات طلبة الجامعة من دارسي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية نحو استخدام التعلم  
دراسة حالة بكلية اللغات والترجمة، جامعة مصراتة:القائم على المهام في تدريس النحو الإنجليزي

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### ABSTRACT

This study seeks to investigate the EFL university students' attitudes and perceptions toward the use of Task-Based Learning (TBL) in learning English syntax. Furthermore, it attempts to examine the effectiveness of this approach in improving students' understanding of syntax, enhancing classroom participation and performance, and identifying the major challenges associated with the use of Task-Based activities. The data were obtained from a sample of 16 sixth-semester students enrolled in an English syntax course at the Department of English, Faculty of Languages and Translation, Misurata University. Data collection was conducted through a questionnaire administered via Google Form at the end of the semester following the implementation of Task-Based Learning (TBL) in teaching the course throughout the semester. The questionnaire consisted of several sections addressing students' attitudes toward Task-Based Learning, their perceptions of the teacher's role, the effect of this approach on their syntactic performance, and the challenges that may hinder its implementation. The results of this study revealed the effectiveness of using Task-Based Learning (TBL) in teaching syntax. (TBL) had a positive impact on students' attitudes, motivation, and classroom participation. High mean scores and statistical significance showed the effectiveness and acceptance of the methodology. At the time students' understanding of complex grammatical concepts improved, the teacher's role in clarifying tasks, observing progress, and giving feedback was crucial. Challenges such as task difficulty, time limitations, and group discomfort were minimal, although some items related to theoretical understanding of TBL were not statistically significant, emphasizing the need to strengthen conceptual awareness.

### الملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف اتجاهات وتصورات طلبة الجامعة الدارسين للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية نحو استخدام التعلم القائم على المهام في تدريس النحو الإنجليزي، وقياس مدى فاعليته في تحسين فهمهم للمفاهيم النحوية وتعزيز مشاركتهم الصفية. تكونت عينة الدراسة من (16) طالبًا من طلبة الفصل السادس بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية اللغات والترجمة، جامعة مصراتة. تم جمع البيانات من خلال استبانة وُزعت عبر نموذج Google Forms في نهاية الفصل الدراسي، بعد تطبيق مدخل التعلم القائم على المهام طوال الفصل. أظهرت النتائج أن استخدام التعلم القائم على المهام كان فعالًا في تدريس النحو، حيث انعكس إيجابًا على

اتجاهات الطلبة ودافعيتهم ومشاركتهم داخل الصف. كما أشارت المتوسطات الحسابية المرتفعة والدلالة الإحصائية إلى قبول الطلبة لهذا الأسلوب وتحسن أدائهم النحوي، خاصة في فهم المفاهيم المعقدة. وأكدت النتائج كذلك أهمية دور المعلم في توضيح المهام ومتابعة تنفيذها وتقديم التغذية الراجعة. ورغم وجود بعض التحديات مثل صعوبة بعض المهام وضيق الوقت، فإنها لم تكن ذات تأثير كبير. ومع ذلك، أظهرت بعض البنود المتعلقة بالفهم النظري للمدخل عدم دلالة إحصائية، مما يستدعي تعزيز الجانب المفاهيمي لدى الطلبة.

**Received:** 02-03-2022 - **Accepted:** 24-02-2026 - **Published:** 16-02-2026

**Keywords** Task-Based Learning (TBL), English Syntax, EFL University Students, Students' Attitudes, Students' Perceptions.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التعلم القائم على المهام، النحو الإنجليزي، طلبة الجامعة، الاتجاهات، التصورات

## Introduction

Syntax is described as the study of the structure of the sentence. (Geldern, 2016). It is how to combine words together to form phrases and well-formed sentences. (Nasution, 2016).

Moreover, Divany et al. (2024) clarify further that syntax plays a crucial role in linguistics which investigates the grammatical patterns in sentences. The text investigates a study of the principal elements in syntax such as: the sentence structure, the relationships between its constituents, hierarchy, and syntactic order.

In addition to highlighting the importance of syntax, Raihana, (2023) emphasizes that English structure plays a vital role to construct well-formed sentences. Moreover, the study of syntax helps in analyzing the complexities of language acquisition, allowing educators to design more beneficial teaching methodologies.

Given the importance of understanding syntax for effective language use, many different methods that have been used to teach grammar over time has become essential to be considered.

According to Brandon, (2006), one of the modern methods that can be used in teaching syntax is Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT). TBLT, which is classified as it is a subcategory of communicative language teaching is considered one of the significant methodologies to teach English. During the last ten years, TBLT has attracted the educators and researchers' attention in different teaching fields and it is used in many subjects.

In the 1980s, with the growing impact of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), the "task" concept is derived from the communicative approach.

Based on the researcher's classroom experience in teaching English syntax, it was observed that students often showed passive learning behaviors and difficulties in understanding complex syntactic concepts when traditional instructional approaches were employed. Therefore, I decided to change my approach to teaching syntax and implemented the Task-based language teaching method this semester.

## Statement of the problem

The study aims to investigate the problem in teaching syntax which is the limited mastery of students' syntactic knowledge. Students need to study syntax in a practical way, practice, think, and apply in the classroom. Students were

used to be passive learners in the classrooms. This study can raise awareness of using TBLT method to teach syntax. As an instructor in the faculty of languages and translation, I have observed that the students whom I have taught in syntax struggle to understand and realize the correct way of studying syntactic structure in general. This issue suggests disconnection between the syllabus content and the way the students use in studying the material. For this reason, this study attempts to explore EFL students' perceptions and attitudes towards the use of Task-Based Learning activities in learning syntax, as syntax is often considered a challenging area for EFL learners.

#### **Research questions:**

This study aims to answer the following questions:

Q1- What are students' perceptions of using Task-Based Learning activities in learning English syntax?

Q2- What are students' attitudes towards the effectiveness of Task-Based Learning activities in learning English syntax?

#### **Significance of the study**

This study focuses on EFL students' perceptions and attitudes towards the use of Task-Based Learning (TBL) activities in teaching syntax, a subject area that is taught in the fifth semester in the faculty of Languages and Translation. Syntax is often considered difficult and abstract for learners. Recognizing students' viewpoints on the teaching method applied in such a challenging subject is crucial, as their attitudes may have a significant effect on their motivation, participation in class, and general learning experience. The findings of this research may help the university instructors in developing a deeper awareness of students' perceptions regarding the use of TBL activities in syntax learning. Such insights could contribute to the adoption of more effective, learner-centered instructional approaches instead of relying only on traditional, teacher-centered methods. Furthermore, this study enriches the field of English language teaching presenting empirical data on the implementation of Task-Based Learning in teaching syntax, an area that has been less explored compared to language skills such as speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Hence, this research may provide a foundation for subsequent studies addressing grammar teaching and modern teaching methodologies in EFL contexts.

#### **Objective of the study**

The objectives of this study are:

1. To examine students' perceptions regarding the use of Task-Based Learning activities in the learning of English syntax.
2. To investigate students' attitudes toward the role of Task-Based Learning activities in facilitating their understanding of English syntax.

#### **Literature review**

##### **The concept of TBLT**

Task-Based Language Teaching has increasingly gained popularity in recent years and is recommended as a forward-looking approach in English Language Teaching (ELT). For many years, TBLT has taken part in the studies of Second Language Acquisition researchers, teachers, curriculum developers, and teacher trainers (Branden, 2006).

The famous and earliest supporters of TBL, Long (1985) and Prabhu (1987) were advocating a system in which learners engage in tasks that focus on meaningful language use rather than language form (Branden, 2006). Prabhu in particular



played a vital role in the development of TBL, as he has raised awareness of the potential of TBL within the ELT community.

Consequently, Willis (1996) and Nunan (1989) who were considered as influential experts in this field, defined and elaborated the concept of "Task" more comprehensively which contributed to understand TBL in chronological order. These contributions collectively shaped the theoretical and practical foundations of TBLT in modern language teaching.

### **Definition of the term TASK**

Nunan (1989), Willis (1996) and Skehan (1996) share the same view of the term Task definition which is embedded in Task-Based language teaching. Their definitions reveal that the task is an activity which basically involves the learner in using the language to focus on the meaning rather than the form. Nunan (1989) emphasized that by employing the target language in comprehending, producing, and interacting with focusing on the meaning, while Skehan (1996) added solving problems, relating to real life situations, and including a clear objective that can be evaluated based on the outcome. At the end of an activity that resembles real-world use of language, learners are expected to focus on conveying meaning through communicative activities.

The (definition- view- perspective) is aligned with that of Willis (1996) who defines the task is that a communicative activity aimed at achieving a specific outcome. In the light of the preceding perspectives, it can be argued that all the previous definitions appear to agree that the essence of a Task is grounded in focusing on the meaning, achieving communication, and existence of a clear goal that guides learners' classroom activity.

Building on this shared emphasis on meaning, communication, and goal orientation, the definitions proposed by Prabhu (1987) and Skehan (1996) shift the focus of the task to solving problem through mental processing, ultimately leading to a clear and evaluable outcome.

Unlike Prabhu (1987) and Skehan (1996), Long's (2015) definition represents a relatively broader and more general view of tasks, as it is any piece of work performed by an individual for personal or others' benefit, whether voluntarily or for reward. This definition is relatively different from the previous ones, as it is broad in scope and not limited to an educational or classroom context.

### **Related Studies**

Behboudi and Rahmany (2023) conducted a mixed study to investigate the effect of Task-Based Teaching (TBT) on learning syntax among EFL learners with different intelligence types. The study involved 48 intermediate learners who were divided into experimental and control groups. A teacher-made grammar test and the Multiple Intelligences Developmental Assessment Scale were used as instruments. After 20 instructional sessions, the results of the t-test revealed that the group taught through task-based instruction significantly outperformed the control group in syntactic knowledge. The findings support the effectiveness of TBT in enhancing grammar learning, which aligns with the instructional approach adopted in the present study

Ruso (n.d.) (1999) examined the influence of Task-Based Learning (TBL) in EFL classrooms using an action research approach. The study involved 55 EFL students, and data were collected through questionnaires, learner diaries, and

semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that implementing TBL created more variety in lessons, increased student motivation, and enhanced language performance. Learners reported a preference for task-based lessons over teacher-centered instruction, as tasks provided more opportunities for self-expression in the target language. These results highlight the positive role of TBL in promoting learner engagement and motivation

Bhandari (2020) discussed Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) as a contemporary approach in EFL contexts. The study explored the characteristics of TBLT, teacher and learner roles, and teachers' perceptions of using language tasks in classrooms. Using an ethnographic approach, the findings indicated that although teachers held positive attitudes toward TBLT, many lacked sufficient methodological knowledge to implement it effectively. The study highlights the importance of teacher awareness and training when applying task-based instruction

The study complements the present research by addressing perceptions of TBLT, particularly from the teachers' perspective.

Collectively, these studies provide a broad understanding of task-based instruction in EFL education, though they differ in emphasis. While Behboudi and Rahmani (2023) provide quantitative evidence of the effectiveness of task-based instruction in improving learners' syntactic achievement, Ruso (n.d.) highlights its positive impact on learner motivation, engagement, and classroom participation. In contrast, Bhandari (2020) shifts the focus to the instructional context, emphasizing that despite teachers' positive attitudes toward TBLT, successful implementation requires adequate methodological knowledge and training. Therefore, the studies are interconnected in their support for task-based instruction. Together, they show that task-based teaching influences not only language achievement but also learner attitudes and the role of teacher preparedness.

### **Research Gap**

Although earlier studies highlight the effectiveness of task-based instructions in improving grammar, motivation, and teaching practices, little research has focused on university learners' perceptions and attitudes toward using task-based activities specifically for learning English syntax. This lack of focus reveals a research gap that the current study attempts to fill.

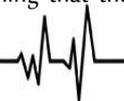
### **Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

The study utilized a quantitative descriptive survey design to gather the research data. This involved analysing students' perceptions toward Task-Based Learning in learning syntax.

#### **Participants**

Sixteen students enrolled in the English syntax course at the Department of English, Faculty of Languages and Translation, Misurata University. The convenience sampling method was adopted to select the participants, as they were the only students taking the course at the time of the study. This non-probability sampling method was chosen due to its practical benefits in exploratory research. It enabled the researcher to collect data from participants who were easily accessible. According to Creswell (2012), convenience sampling is a sampling that the researcher selects



participants because they are willing and available to be studied.

### Instruments

Data were obtained from students taking the English syntax course at the Faculty, where the course was delivered through the Task-Based Learning (TBL) approach over the entire semester. Upon completion of the course, the researcher, who served as the course instructor, distributed a questionnaire to collect students' feedback.

### Delimitations of the Study

1. The study is delimited to fifth-semester students at the Faculty of Languages and Translation, as the Syntax course is part of their curriculum in this semester.
2. The research is limited to the use of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) activities in teaching Syntax, while other teaching methods and instructional approaches are excluded.
3. The study focuses on examining students' understanding and attitudes toward learning Syntax through TBLT rather than measuring their actual proficiency levels or performance.

Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to other students, courses, or teaching methods.

### Analysis of Statistical Results

This section provides an in-depth analysis of the statistical results derived from a questionnaire aimed at assessing the attitudes and perceptions of EFL university students towards using Task-Based Learning (TBL) in their English syntax course at the Faculty of Languages and Translation, Misurata University. The analysis is based on measuring the scale's reliability, testing the normality of the data distribution, and conducting a One-Sample t-test to determine the significance of the mean score differences.

#### 1. Reliability Analysis:

The journey of validating the research instrument begins with Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, which scored **0.701** for all 24 items of the questionnaire. This value is considered acceptable and indicates a good degree of internal consistency. In educational and social research, values exceeding 0.70 are a strong indicator that the items on the scale cohesively measure the same underlying construct. This level of reliability instills confidence in the subsequent analyses, allowing us to proceed with the assumption that the data is robust.

#### Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.701	24

#### 2. Test of Normality:

Before employing parametric tests like the t-test, it was crucial to verify the assumption of normal data distribution. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests were applied to the four main sections of the questionnaire. All significance values (Sig.) were greater than the 0.05 alpha level, ranging from 0.094 to

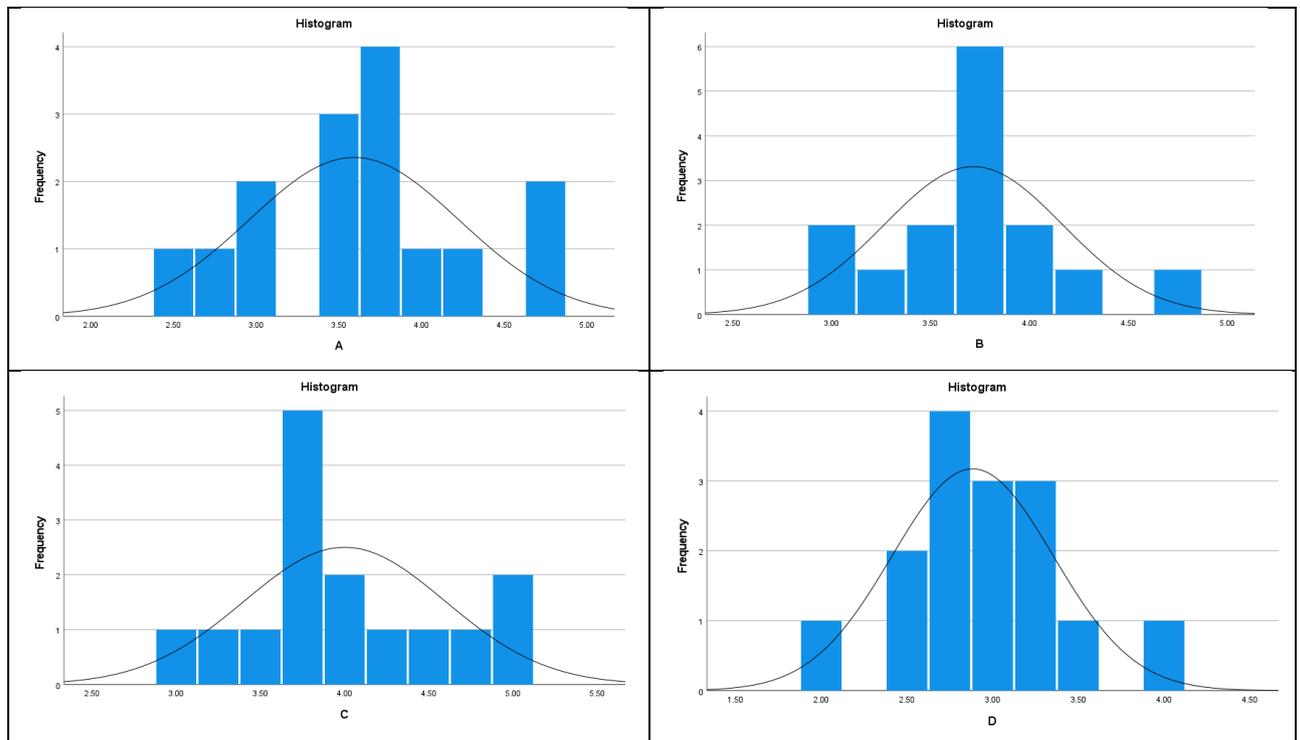


0.781. This result clearly indicates that the data follows a **normal distribution**. This finding is methodologically significant as it justifies the use of the parametric One-Sample t-test, thereby strengthening the validity and reliability of the subsequent findings.

### Tests of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
students' attitudes towards TBL	.135	15	.200*	.965	15	.781
Teacher's role and task clarity	.204	15	.094	.929	15	.262
students' performance n syntax	.195	15	.128	.935	15	.320
challenges facing students in TBL	.171	15	.200*	.948	15	.494

3.



4.

### 3. One-Sample T-Test:

This test forms the core of the analysis, aiming to determine whether the mean responses of students differ significantly from the neutral midpoint (typically a value of 3 on a 5-point Likert scale). The results paint a comprehensive and nuanced picture of student attitudes.

- **Strongly Positive and Significant Attitudes:**
- **In Section 1 (Students' Attitudes):** Items (1, 2, 3, 4, 5) recorded high means (ranging from 3.73 to 3.87) and very low significance values ( $p < 0.01$ ). This demonstrates a **statistically significant and robust positive attitude** towards

learning syntax through tasks. It confirms that students not only learn but also enjoy the process and feel motivated (especially items 4 & 5). These findings provide quantitative evidence for the success of TBL in altering the typically dry perception of grammar.

- **In Section 2 (Teacher's Role):** Items (9, 10, 11) also showed high means (3.80, 4.20, 3.80) with strong statistical significance ( $p < 0.01$ ). The exceptionally high mean for item 10 (4.20) highlights the **critical importance of the teacher's interactive role** during task implementation. Students clearly value the teacher's active monitoring and immediate feedback, perceiving it as a key factor in deepening their understanding. This transforms the teacher's role from a mere knowledge transmitter to a facilitator and guide.
- **In Section 3 (Students' Performance in Syntax):** This section yielded the highest means and the most powerful statistical significance. Items (13, 14, 15, 16) are all highly significant ( $p = 0.000$ ), with means ranging from 3.87 to 4.13. Item 15, concerning "drawing phrase markers," achieved the highest t-value (6.859), strongly confirming that **hands-on tasks significantly and effectively developed a complex analytical skill** among students. This is powerful evidence that TBL enhances not only motivation but also higher-order cognitive skills in syntax.
- **Neutral or Non-Significant Points:**
  - Item 6 ("I would like all subjects to be taught by TBL") and item 8 ("I have studied a subject using TBL before") were not statistically significant. This is logical, as item 6 expresses an overly broad future preference, and item 8 measures a past reality that may not have been sufficiently widespread. Item 7, regarding a "clear understanding of what TBL is," was on the cusp of significance ( $p = 0.068$ ), suggesting that while students experience its benefits, the theoretical framework of the methodology might still need further explicit clarification.
- **Challenges:**
  - This section provides a balanced perspective, largely refuting potential drawbacks. Items describing a genuine challenge (e.g., task mismatch, difficulty participating) received low means (below 3), with some showing negative statistical significance. This indicates that **students tended to disagree with the existence of these challenges**.
  - For instance, item 19 ("Tasks are longer than the time") with a mean of 2.33, and item 23 ("I feel embarrassed in groups") with a mean of 2.13, are both statistically significant in the negative direction. This strongly suggests that students affirm that **time was sufficient and group work was not a social hindrance**. In fact, item 22 confirms that group work actually increased their confidence (mean 3.73,  $p = 0.010$ ).
  - Items 18, 21, and 24 were not statistically significant, implying that students generally perceive the tasks as aligned with the syllabus, feel capable of participating, and find the classroom environment acceptable.

#### **Overall Analytical Conclusion:**

The statistical analysis provides robust and reliable evidence (supported by the scale's reliability and normal data distribution) that the use of Task-Based Learning in teaching English syntax to Libyan EFL students is met with **overwhelmingly positive attitudes**. The findings transcend mere acceptance, demonstrating a **tangible improvement in student performance**, particularly in complex analytical tasks like phrase structure analysis.

Furthermore, the results validate the effectiveness of the teacher's new facilitative role and refute the notion that TBL poses significant challenges. These findings strongly support recommendations for the wider implementation of this methodology, while also suggesting that a clearer theoretical introduction to TBL for students could further maximize its benefits.

### One-Sample T Test

#### Students' attitudes towards TBL

		Mean	Sig. (2-tailed)	t
1	I have a positive attitude toward learning kinds of syntactic structure through TBL.	3.80	.001	4.000
2	Learning syntax through TBL changed the mood of classes.	3.80	.009	3.055
3	I prefer predicting parts of speech through tasks rather than memorizing them.	3.73	.010	2.955
4	When the teacher gives us the time to practice the lesson through tasks, I feel enjoyed.	3.87	.004	3.389
5	TBL motivated me to participate in each task actively.	3.87	.001	4.026
6	I would like all the subjects to be taught by using TBL in the future.	3.13	.610	.521
7	I have clear understanding of what TBL is.	3.47	.068	1.974
8	I have studied a subject by using TBL in my academic work.	3.07	.792	.269

#### Teacher's role and task clarity

9	The teacher clarified each ask effectively.	3.80	.000	4.583
10	When I do tasks and the teacher walks and checks my answers, I learn syntax more meaningfully.	4.20	.001	4.294
11	I need more guidance from the teacher to understand the tasks.	3.80	.005	3.292
12	The instructions of tasks sometimes confused me.	3.07	.792	.269

#### Students' performance in syntax

13	The way of using tasks made me understand clearly.	3.87	.000	4.516
14	Task-based activities helped me know the difference between category and function.	3.93	.000	4.525
15	Doing tasks during each lesson improved my ability to draw the phrase marker.	4.13	.000	6.859
16	I can identify the difference between the head-modifier relationship and the head-complement relationship better after doing TBL activities.	4.07	.000	4.675

#### Challenges facing students in TBL

17	Some syntax tasks are not easy for my level.	3.07	.792	.269
18	Tasks do not always match the syntactic structures topics we study.	2.67	.238	-1.234-
19	The tasks are longer than the time.	2.33	.027	-2.467-

20	The time specified for each task was sufficient.	3.60	.007	3.154
21	I find it difficult to participate in doing tasks actively.	2.67	.173	-1.435-
22	Working in groups during TBL tasks increased my confidence to share my answers.	3.73	.010	2.955
23	I feel embarrassed and shy when doing tasks in groups.	2.13	.010	-2.982-
24	The classroom environment sometimes makes it hard to focus on tasks.	2.87	.546	-.619-

### Findings and Discussion

The statistical analysis of the questionnaire presented clear evidence that the use of Task-Based Learning in teaching English syntax contributed to enhancing the students' perceptions and their classroom performance. The high mean values, in addition to the strong statistical significance, reflect a clear acceptance of the methodology and confirm its effectiveness in university education.

Firstly: the results revealed statistically significant positive attitudes toward Task-Based Learning.

The items related to engagement, motivation and classroom atmosphere indicated that the students did not merely accept the method; rather, they exhibited significant levels of participation. This enhances student motivation while reducing the conventional rigidity commonly observed in grammar-focused courses.

Secondly; the results confirmed the central role of the teacher in the successful implementation of Task-Based Learning. Items related to clarifying tasks, ongoing monitoring, and providing immediate feedback achieved high mean scores and strong statistical significance. This aligns with educational literature emphasizing that TBL transforms rather than removes the teacher's role, positioning them as a guide and facilitator. Students appear to value this interactive role, particularly in an analytically demanding subject such as syntax.

Regarding academic performance, the results revealed the strongest effect sizes. Items addressing the comprehension of complex grammatical concepts-including Category versus Function distinctions, syntactic structures (Head-modifier / Head-complement), and constructing Phrase Markers-achieved the highest mean scores and strong statistical significance. These outcomes suggest that task-based learning enhances not only students' attitudes but also fosters analytical thinking and advanced cognitive skills.

Concerning challenges, the study presented a balanced picture. Items related to task complexity, time pressure, and discomfort in group activities showed low mean scores, reflecting that students generally did not consider these factors problematic. Importantly, collaborative work itself was shown to positively influence self-confidence and engagement, highlighting that a cooperative classroom environment can act as a facilitating factor rather than a barrier.

However, some items did not demonstrate statistical significance, such as students' desire to apply TBL across all courses or their clear understanding of its theoretical framework. This indicates that students engage more effectively with the practical implementation of the methodology than with its theoretical structure, highlighting the need to enhance their conceptual awareness of the theory's philosophy.

In general, the results indicate support for the study's main hypothesis, which suggests that task-based learning is an

effective pedagogical approach for teaching English syntax in the Libyan university context. The outcomes are also in line with a range of previous studies demonstrating that TBL fosters student motivation, facilitates active participation, and increase deeper comprehension of linguistic concepts.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

This study showed that using Task-Based Learning (TBL) can really make a difference in teaching English grammar to university students. Students seemed more interested and motivated when they worked on tasks, and they participated more actively in class. This created a more positive and interactive learning atmosphere. The results also showed that students understood difficult grammar points better when they learned through tasks instead of only traditional explanations.

The teacher's role was very important throughout the process. Clear instructions, guidance during the tasks, and timely feedback helped students stay focused and confident. Although there were a few challenges, such as limited time and some difficulties in group work, these problems were not major. However, it was clear that some students did not fully understand the theoretical idea behind TBL, which means they may need more explanation about how and why this method is used.

Based on these findings, a few practical recommendations can be made.

First, students should be given clearer explanations about what TBL is and how it helps their learning. When students understand the purpose of tasks, they are more likely to take them seriously.

Second, teachers may benefit from training sessions or workshops that focus on how to design meaningful and effective tasks. Good planning can make a big difference in the success of this approach.

Third, time management in the classroom is very important. Students need enough time to think, discuss, and complete their tasks without feeling rushed.

Finally, TBL should not be limited to one course only. It can be used in other English subjects as well to help students become more active, confident, and independent learners.

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