

A Comparative Analysis of Autonomous versus Guided Task-Based Approaches for Enhancing Speaking Proficiency among EFL University Learners

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Abstract

This article explores the relative effectiveness of two teaching methods applied in a unit on Artificial Intelligence for two English as a Foreign Language (EFL) groups of students at the same language proficiency level. The instructor applied different strategies to the two 15 student groups: Autonomous Active Learning (AAL) and Guided Task-Based Learning (TBL). Both methods are acknowledged for their potential to improve speaking proficiency among university-level EFL learners. Although both approaches are based on communicative language teaching and task-based instruction, they should be used according to students' needs, depending on learner autonomy and teacher involvement. Through a review of related literature, an analysis of empirical studies, and a theoretical discussion, this research seeks to clarify the advantages and disadvantages of each method. The results suggest that students flourish in active learning settings where they are highly engaged and interact directly with English speakers. While guided TBL provides chances for memorization and practice, it may restrict vocabulary growth and learning new terms due to insufficient exposure to authentic texts and real-life conversations. By

the end of the study, students in the AAL group showed increased confidence in presenting their projects, whereas those in the TBL group displayed more hesitance.

Keywords: university level, EFL (English as a Foreign Language), Autonomous Active Learning (AAL), Guided Task-Based Learning (TBL), speaking.

1. Introduction

Despite 12 years of English language instruction before their first year of university, Romanian EFL students often exhibit notably low proficiency in speaking skills. Educational institutions' use of teaching strategies both provides language knowledge and promotes its practical application, which should also continue outside the class. Teachers ensure that the foundation is created on which students will reinforce and consolidate through individual work. The methods applied in class represent the frameworks that students will follow in organizing their work. Among the various techniques utilized, Autonomous Active Learning (AAL) and Guided Task-Based Learning (TBL) prove to be particularly effective approaches, both being grounded in communicative language teaching (CLT). The two methods differ significantly in their application, especially regarding the roles of the actors involved, namely the teacher and the students. Teachers' main challenge has been to engage learners in meaningful ways of using the language. This study conducts a comparative examination of AAL and TBL in the context of two university EFL classrooms. By analyzing pertinent literature and evaluating empirical data from classroom practices, this article aims to reveal the advantages and disadvantages of each method in developing speaking abilities.

Within the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) framework, Autonomous Active Learning and Guided Task-Based Learning present different interpretations and applications of these approaches. Autonomous Active Learning is a constructivist educational theory, following Piaget and Vygotsky's ideology, based on the belief that learners create knowledge through experiences and social interactions. In AAL, students are responsible for their learning, researching topics

discussed in the class, and expressing their ideas using relevant language. Conversely, Guided Task-Based Learning assigns a more prominent role to the teacher, developing and facilitating tasks with specific goals, clear structure, and feedback strategies. Although interactive and communicative, TBL often focuses on repetition, precision, and the incremental development of language proficiency through structured tasks.

2. Literature Review

An increasing amount of research indicates the effectiveness of both AAL and TBL in EFL contexts. Investigations into AAL demonstrate its advantages in promoting learner independence, critical thinking, and practical communication abilities (Little, 2007; Benson, 2011). Learners frequently express elevated motivation and involvement in AAL settings, mainly when students drive projects and align their interests. On the other hand, studies focused on Guided TBL emphasize its organized approach as a positive aspect, particularly for learners who may be uncertain or have limited prior experience with language acquisition (Ellis, 2003; Willis & Willis, 2007; Yusnimar, 2019). Furthermore, Yan Yu et al. (2024) have proven the effectiveness of TBL in fostering language development over traditional methods. According to Safitri et al.'s study (2020), their students experienced "problems in speaking due to inadequate knowledge of the language, which in turn made the students feel unconfident to speak." In their research on "task-based learning," the authors found that this approach significantly improved students' speaking skills, particularly in areas such as accuracy, vocabulary, and comprehension. They noted that students could practice various activities, including simple dialogues, turn-taking, information gap exercises, interviews, discussions, short role-plays, and simulations. Practice and teacher-guided activities can offer a clear path for learning and instantaneous feedback, which are vital for language progress in structured settings. Nevertheless, critics suggest that Guided TBL might restrict spontaneous language application and genuine interaction, which are crucial for developing communicative competence. Moreover, excessive

dependence on memorization and scripted conversations can hinder creativity and restrict vocabulary learning beyond what is explicitly presented.

3. Methodology

This research involved two university-level EFL groups, each comprising 15 students with comparable proficiency levels. One class utilized the Autonomous Active Learning method, while the other employed Guided Task-Based Learning. Throughout the unit, both groups concentrated on enhancing their speaking abilities through project-oriented activities. Data collection techniques included classroom observations, student presentations, vocabulary evaluations, and self-assessments. Additionally, the instructor noted her views on student development and engagement.

4. Results and Discussions

Student engagement and autonomy were significantly higher in the AAL group compared to the TBL group, leading to greater language fluency, confidence, and expressive ability. Student Engagement and Autonomy Learners in the AAL group exhibited significant levels of engagement and responsibility for their educational experience. They took the initiative to choose project subjects, perform independent research, and prepare their presentations. Such results have also been confirmed by other studies, such as the study by Ismail et al. (2023), which states that “using authentic assessment techniques can help students develop their character and skills since they expose them to real-world situations.” This level of autonomy boosted their intrinsic motivation and readiness to take risks while using English. Conversely, students in the TBL group completed assignments the instructor gave and engaged in activities within a more structured environment. Although this method ensured uniformity and permitted focused language practice, it did not generate the same enthusiasm or independence observed in the AAL group. With the AAL, students displayed remarkable progress in expressing their ideas, addressing questions, and expanding on their thoughts. Classroom presentations highlighted enhanced fluency, consistent vocabulary, and more natural speech patterns. These students also

indicated that they felt more assured in communicating in English in real-world situations. In contrast, while precise in their language use, TBL students often depended on memorized scripts and showed hesitation during unscripted interactions. Their presentations were typically well-organized and grammatically correct but lacked spontaneity and richness in vocabulary.

The exposure to debates in the AAL group significantly enhanced vocabulary acquisition through contextual learning, unlike the more structured but limited approach in the TBL group. The AAL group's exposure to genuine materials and conversations was crucial to their vocabulary growth. Students learned new words in context, enabling them to deduce meanings and apply them appropriately. This incidental learning process led to more vibrant and expressive language use. In contrast, the TBL group primarily came across vocabulary through teacher-chosen texts and task materials. While this approach effectively reinforced familiar words and introduced specific language concepts, it provided limited chances for discovering and experimenting with new vocabulary.

The AAL and TBL approaches represent different performances for teachers, each method having distinct implications for student autonomy and learning outcomes. The AAL approach implied a transformation in the teacher's role, shifting from a provider of knowledge to a facilitator and mentor. Teachers offered guidance, resources, and feedback, and the students were responsible for their learning process. Although this shift was initially challenging, it ultimately paid off, as it encouraged a more collaborative and responsive learning atmosphere. TBL educators maintained more authority over the learning process, delivering explicit instruction, corrections, and task management. This method was especially advantageous for students requiring direction or who struggled with independent learning. However, it may have unintentionally stifled initiative and self-expression.

This comparative analysis highlights the significance of synchronizing instructional methods with educational goals and learner characteristics. Autonomous Active Learning is especially effective in improving speaking skills, encouraging learner autonomy, and enhancing

engagement. It focuses on real-world communication, preparing students for genuine language use beyond the classroom. Even if AAL offers comfort and flexibility, it requires considerable learner accountability and self-management, which may not be suitable for every student. It also requires educators to concede some control and adapt to more flexible, student-centered roles. Although more conventional in its structure, guided TBL provides essential support for language acquisition, particularly in the initial stages. Its emphasis on accuracy and repetition aids in solidifying grammatical foundations and building confidence. Despite its advantages, TBL may be inadequate in fostering the spontaneous and adaptable use of language essential for effective communication.

5. Conclusion

Educators ought to adopt a blended approach that utilizes the strengths of both methodologies. For example, during the early phases of a unit, Instructors can use Task-Based Learning (TBL) to introduce essential language components and establish foundational skills. Instructors can introduce Autonomous Active Learning (AAL) as students develop confidence to promote independence, creativity, and genuine language practice. Teacher training should focus on the competencies required to support AAL, including scaffolding methods, project management skills, and formative assessment techniques. Schools and curriculum developers must provide the necessary resources and adaptability to facilitate these dynamic learning environments. Effective topic selection is essential, as it often acts as the initial hook to draw students into group discussions. Language education aims to empower students to use English confidently and competently across various settings. Educators can more effectively support the intricate language acquisition process by creating learning environments that combine structure with freedom and guidance with exploration. Consequently, the accurate measure of effectiveness is demonstrated in real conversations on diverse topics with English-speaking individuals.

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