

Speak Beyond Borders: A Systematic Review of Task-Based Language Teaching for EFL Speaking Proficiency

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Abstract

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has drawn much interest in recent years. This study conducted a thorough analysis of 38 articles from 2014 to 2023 that applied the TBLT approach to enhance English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speaking proficiency, utilising the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) from the Web of Science (WoS) database. These articles were selected based on specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. The findings highlight a growing focus on integrating TBLT with technological tools such as Digital Storytelling (DST) and mobile-supported tasks in various EFL contexts, particularly in higher education. The studies are predominantly underpinned by sociocultural theory, cognitive psychology, and constructivism, assessing speaking proficiency through the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Quasi-experimental and mixed methods design using convenience and purposive sampling are common. Data collection frequently involves observations, interviews, and tests. The systematic review reveals TBLT's significant effects on students' speaking proficiency, engagement, risk-taking, linguistic complexity, and motivation, offering essential implications and recommendations for future research and educational practices.

Keywords: task-based language teaching, EFL speaking proficiency, WoS, technology, systematic review

1. Introduction

English speaking proficiency, within the EFL context, is indispensable due to the global status of English as the lingua franca in commerce, education, and international diplomacy (Zeng & Yang, 2024). Effective speaking skills enable EFL learners to participate meaningfully in global dialogues, further their education in English-speaking environments, and expand their career prospects in the international job market. Proficiency in spoken English is particularly crucial in a world where English dominance in digital and media platforms broadens access to information and connectivity (Patel, 2024). In various countries or regions, including but not limited to Japan, Thailand, and China, English is instructed as a foreign language to foster international, social, and economic communication within contextualised learning environments (Parijs, 2000; Chen, 2021).

Nevertheless, this crucial skill is often marginalised in EFL classrooms owing to factors such as the pervasive influence of the grammar-translation method, the scarcity of native-speaker instructors, minimal exposure to the target language, and the challenge posed by large class sizes (Nget, Pansri & Poohongthong, 2020). Consequently, many learners struggle to attain satisfactory proficiency in spoken English. Therefore, it becomes imperative to establish an English learning environment embedded in real-life contexts, incorporating authentic activities and meaningful tasks to facilitate the effective development of students' English communication skills (Chen, 2021).

A series of criticisms against conventional teaching approaches, exemplified by the Presentation, Practice, and Production (PPP) model, have spurred the emergence of innovative teaching approaches aimed at enhancing learners' speaking proficiency, notably Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). TBLT, a development of CLT, has gained prominence as a contemporary trend in language education over the past decades (Liu & Ren, 2021). Evident in the adoption by EFL educators (Fang, Yeh, Luo & Chen, 2021; Lam, 2021), TBLT aligns with the principles of the communicative era by emphasising meaningful and purposeful

activities for language acquisition.

Defined by Ellis, Skehan, Li, Shintani & Lambert (2020) as an instructional approach, TBLT prioritises using authentic, real-world tasks as the foundation for language learning. With a focus on holistic learning, learner-centred instruction, and communication-based methods, TBLT extends beyond reading and writing to encompass spoken language development through collaborative activities in pairs or groups, thereby affording learners increased opportunities to use language (Aliasin, Saedi, Pineh & Wan, 2019; Viriya, 2018). It has become a practical approach in language teaching that has greatly enhanced students' speaking proficiency. Ellis et al., (2020) highlighted that interaction in meaningful contexts helps learners develop fluency and conversational skills more effectively than traditional drill-based teaching methods. By involving students in tasks that are relevant to their lives and interests, TBLT increases motivation and engagement. Branden (2021) argues that motivation in task-based learning environments leads to increased opportunities for language use, which in turn enhances language proficiency. During tasks, teachers can provide feedback and direct attention to specific language forms and structures, which are critical for developing accuracy and fluency. According to Samuda & Bygate (2008), this strategic focus helps learners use the language and refine their understanding and usage of grammatical structures during active communication. Therefore, TBLT might represent a transformative approach in the landscape of EFL teaching, effectively bolstering learners' speaking proficiency through its emphasis on authenticity, engagement, and communicative practice.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Pedagogical Advantages of TBLT

TBLT represents an approach to language instruction that foregrounds the significance of meaning yet concurrently acknowledges the importance of form (Ellis et al., 2020). This pedagogical method emphasises leveraging learners' innate capacities for incidental language acquisition as they utilise language as a meaning-making tool. In doing so, TBLT contrasts markedly with more traditional structural approaches, such as grammar-translation methods, which treat language primarily as an object of systematic instruction and deliberate learning (Liu & Guo, 2020).

Typically characterised by a teacher-centred approach, traditional English instruction limits students' interaction and initiative. In comparison, TBLT prioritises language communication and applying language skills toward communicative functions (Richards & Rodgers, 2008). TBLT adopts a student-centred framework that significantly enhances multilateral interactions between teachers and students (Zheng, 2006). This shift facilitates a more dynamic learning environment and aligns better with contemporary educational paradigms that value interactive and practical learning experiences. For instance, Harris & Leeming (2022) conducted an exploratory sequential study on speaking proficiency development in EFL classrooms, measuring the differential effect of TBLT and PPP teaching approaches at a private university in Western Japan. The findings indicated that students in the TBLT classes showed marked improvement and frequently outperformed their PPP counterparts in these linguistic assessments during the subsequent task. These outcomes support the theoretical underpinnings of TBLT, which posits that the approach enhances long-term language retention. This suggests that TBLT posits that authentic, communicative tasks can facilitate a more naturalistic and integrated pathway to language proficiency, challenging the formulaic methodologies predominant in conventional language education frameworks.

2.2 Theoretical Foundations of TBLT

TBLT is grounded in the CLT philosophy, which emphasises meaningful and authentic communication (Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1995; Littlewood, 2004; Qasserras, 2023); it shares a common goal of developing learners' communicative competence with TBLT but differs in the degree of emphasis on tasks as the central unit of instruction. TBLT draws heavily on critical psychological principles that enhance its effectiveness in second or foreign-language education. Central to TBLT are concepts of "learner-centeredness" and "learning by doing," which are foundational to Piaget's theory of constructivism and Kolb's model of experiential learning, respectively. Additionally, TBLT incorporates the principles of "interaction" and "scaffolding" among peers and teachers, crucial components of Vygotsky's social constructivism, which facilitate cognitive development through socially mediated learning. From a sociocultural perspective, learners acquire new strategies and knowledge as they participate in interactive activities and internalise the impacts of working together. Thus, learning is supposed to occur through interaction, negotiation and collaboration, and instruction should aim to establish an environment serving as a community in which students are likely to apply what they are introduced to through activities (Vygotsky, 1978; Scott & Palincsar, 2009; Lantolf & Minakova, 2021; Xue, 2022). Sociocultural theory emphasises the importance of social interaction and cultural context in language acquisition

(Xue, 2022). These theoretical underpinnings underscore the appropriateness of the task-based approach for fostering effective language acquisition in diverse educational settings (Hasnain & Halder, 2023).

The development of TBLT has been significantly influenced by theorists such as Rod Ellis, Michael Long, and Jane Willis. Long (1985) focused on interaction as the mechanism of language acquisition in his Interaction Hypothesis, which is crucial for developing TBLT. He argued that tasks should provide a reason to use the language and an opportunity for learners to negotiate meaning and modify their language use in real time. Ellis (2003) advocates for a thematic or topical approach rather than a needs-based strategy, as suggested by Long (1985), arguing that this is more effective for EFL learners who may benefit from engagement with coherent and contextually meaningful content. He emphasised the importance of focusing on tasks that promote natural language use among learners, suggesting that such tasks facilitate a deeper acquisition of language structures and vocabulary through task completion. Willis (1996) proposed a three-stage framework for TBLT, consisting of a pre-task, task cycle, and language focus stage, which helps in scaffolding instruction and reflecting on the language used during the tasks. This model was later refined by Jane and Dave Willis (2007) to include pre-tasks, tasks, and post-tasks, further emphasising the iterative language learning process. These models contribute diverse perspectives and structural strategies for implementing TBLT effectively in different learning environments. They also address the pedagogical needs from planning and executing tasks to evaluating task performance and integrating feedback into future task design.

2.3 TBLT and EFL Speaking Proficiency

TBLT has been adapted in various EFL settings to address the specific needs of learners who may need more exposure to English in their everyday environments (Winarto & Aprianti, 2022; Seyyedi, Rasouli & Mohamedamin, 2023). This adaptation often involves tailoring tasks to culturally relevant and contextually appropriate scenarios that motivate learners and reflect their real-world language use needs. For instance, Fang et al. (2021) investigated the effectiveness of mobile-supported TBLT in a large EFL classroom in China. They integrated linguistic scaffolds such as the unscramble games and the linguistic hints into TBLT to support the target vocabulary and the application of vocabulary knowledge and, to some extent, grammar knowledge in a situational conversation. Khoram (2019) investigated the impact of task type and pre-task planning conditions on the accuracy of Iranian intermediate EFL learners' oral performance using two sets of tasks: a "personal set" and a "decision-making set," designed to simulate real-life scenarios enhancing the relevance and applicability for language learners. These tasks illustrate how task-based language teaching can incorporate complex cognitive skills alongside language development, reflecting the practical integration of language use in societal and interpersonal contexts. Similarly, Lee & Kim (2022) compared the effects of input- and output-based planning on the oral performance of low-proficiency EFL college students in Korea. Students were asked to carry out different types of planning, input-based planning (reading) and output-based planning (writing), prior to their oral performance on topics such as "Describe your dream job." These studies collectively underscore the adaptability and efficacy of TBLT in various EFL contexts, demonstrating its ability to meet the diverse needs of learners through contextually relevant and culturally tailored tasks. By integrating practical language use with critical thinking and communicative skills, TBLT enhances language proficiency and prepares learners for real-world challenges, affirming its significance as a robust approach in foreign language education.

EFL speaking proficiency refers to the ability of a learner to effectively communicate in spoken English in contexts where English is not the primary language of communication (Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021). This proficiency encompasses a range of skills, from producing phonetically accurate sounds to using complex grammatical structures and maintaining coherent, interactive discourse in diverse situations (Luoma, 2004). Brown (2003; as cited in Dana & Aminatun, 2022) described five key components of speaking skills that English learners need to master: grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, and comprehension. De Jong (2023) described overall speaking proficiency as a psycholinguistic and social-interactive functional ability, primarily based on Bachman & Palmer's (1996, 2010) model of language ability but explicitly adding emphasis on speed of processing (Hulstijn, 2015; Van Moere, 2012), as well as the predictive or anticipatory skills crucial for successful interaction (Levinson, 2016; Pickering & Garrod, 2004). As de Jong (2023) stated, the construct for English speaking proficiency consists of two main components: strategic (self-supporting, other supporting, and planning) and linguistic competencies (sounds, words and phrases, utterance, discourse, functional and sociocultural). Language research on speaking measurement reveals that some discourse features such as complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF) have frequently been used to quantify EFL learners' oral productions (Elder & Iwashita, 2005; Ellis, 2009; Lambert & Kormos, 2014; Leaper & Brawn, 2018; Li et al., 2014; Mehnert, 1998; Nitta & Nakatsuhara, 2014; Wigglesworth & Elder, 2010; Yan, Kim & Kim, 2020; Yuan & Ellis, 2003; Ariamanesh, Barati & Youhanaee, 2020).

Various tools and frameworks are used to evaluate these aspects, such as the CEFR and the IELTS speaking band descriptors. These frameworks provide standardised guidelines that help teachers assess speaking proficiency at different levels. EFL speaking proficiency is a multifaceted construct that involves mastering linguistic elements and extends to strategic and interactive dimensions (Council of Europe, 2001; IELTS, 2022). These components collectively enable learners to effectively navigate and manage real-time communication in English. This integration of both psycholinguistic processes and social interaction skills is essential for proficient and adaptive use of language in various contexts, as supported by the models proposed by Bachman & Palmer (1996, 2010) and further emphasised by recent research from De Jong (2023) on the importance of speed of processing and anticipatory skills (Hulstijn, 2015; Van Moere, 2012; Levinson, 2016; Pickering & Garrod, 2004).

Teaching speaking skills in EFL settings presents unique challenges. For instance, in many EFL contexts, learners have minimal exposure to English outside the classroom, restricting their opportunities to practice speaking in real-life situations. Many EFL learners experience anxiety when speaking English, which can hinder their ability to communicate effectively (Gumartifa & Syahri, 2021). Cultural norms can affect interaction patterns and communication styles, impacting how learners engage in spoken English (Chen, Dewaele & Zhang, 2021). Many practical strategies can overcome these challenges, such as task-based activities, speaking clubs and language cafes, feedback and correction techniques, and the use of technology. Engaging learners in meaningful, communicative tasks that simulate real-life scenarios can enhance speaking fluency, confidence, and Willingness to Communicate (WTC) (Masuram & Sripada, 2020; Ji & Pham, 2020; Huang, 2023). Establishing informal settings where learners can practice English with peers in a less structured, more relaxed environment helps reduce speaking anxiety (Lee & Xie, 2023). Providing constructive feedback and immediate and task-specific comments can significantly improve accuracy and fluency (Hwang, Rahimi & Fathi, 2024). Techniques vary from direct correction to more subtle recasts that reformulate the learner's errors in the teacher's response, incorporating multimedia tools, online platforms, and language learning apps that offer interactive speaking practice and exposure to diverse linguistic inputs, teaching approaches like collaborative learning, DST and mobile-supported TBLT (Huang, 2023; Jia & Harji, 2022).

2.4 Research Questions

Over recent decades, systematic literature reviews have increasingly focused on the efficacy of TBLT and its impact on English-speaking proficiency. Seraj & Hadina (2021) conducted a systematic review assessing oral English communication skills development among EFL learners from 2010 to 2019. The review highlighted the effectiveness of TBLT, particularly when integrated with peer-mediated strategies, in improving Oral English Communication Skills (OECs). Role-play significantly boosted learners' motivation and confidence in enhancing OECs (Nasihah, 2019; Tipmontree & Tasanameelarp, 2018). Another study by Manzano (2018) found that storytelling within a task-based framework significantly improved speaking proficiency among adult learners in Nepal. Moreover, research by Fasih (2022) explored the washback effect of TBLT on vocabulary assessment among Iranian EFL learners, noting a substantial improvement in students' primary English skills attributable to TBLT. Jia & Harji (2022) reviewed the integration of mobile technologies in task-based learning, affirming its effectiveness across various educational levels and language skills. The systematic review articles analysed provide compelling evidence supporting the efficacy of TBLT in enhancing English-speaking proficiency across various contexts. However, upon closer examination, several gaps in the literature become apparent, warranting further investigation. One significant gap is the predominant focus on immediate or short-term outcomes of TBLT interventions, with a notable dearth of research tracking the long-term effects of TBLT on learners' speaking proficiency. Furthermore, while specific studies such as Manzano (2018) and Fasih (2022) investigate TBLT within the contexts of Nepal and Iran, respectively, there is a clear lack of comprehensive research across a broader spectrum of geographical settings. This raises concerns about the generalizability of TBLT's effectiveness across diverse linguistic and cultural environments. Additionally, while the literature mentions various strategies such as role-play and storytelling, there is an underrepresentation in exploring the depth and variety of pedagogical approaches within TBLT frameworks. There is a particular need for more detailed comparisons of different task-based methods and their specific impacts on language learning outcomes. Moreover, although many reviews focus on adult learners and general EFL populations, they often overlook the impact of TBLT on different age groups, especially younger learners or specific demographic groups who might benefit from customised TBLT strategies. Emerging technologies such as mobile-assisted TBLT, highlighted by Jia & Harji (2022), suggest the potential for enhancing TBLT, yet there remains room for exploration into how newer technologies can further improve TBLT and address its limitations.

This systematic review addresses these identified gaps by analysing 38 research articles related to TBLT and speaking proficiency from 2014 to 2023. This analysis records publication trends, methodological and pedagogical approaches, major findings, identified challenges, and recommendations. The findings aim to enhance the understanding of TBLT in the context of EFL speaking proficiency and provide a valuable reference for researchers. This comprehensive analysis will inform the design and execution of future studies, supporting the development of more effective TBLT strategies tailored to diverse educational settings and learner needs. The following four research questions were addressed:

- (1) What are the publication trends of TBLT in developing EFL speaking proficiency based on the reviewed studies?
- (2) How have researchers approached the studies of TBLT in developing EFL speaking proficiency?
- (3) What are the major findings and identified challenges discussed regarding using TBLT to improve EFL speaking proficiency?
- (4) What recommendations and implications are proposed to mitigate the identified challenges?

3. Method

3.1 Data Base and Keywords

The method employed for this review adhered to the framework established by prior studies (Sarkis-Onofre, Catalá-López, Aromataris & Lockwood, 2021) and followed the PRISMA guidelines. These guidelines constitute a set of criteria designed to help researchers prepare and present diverse systematic reviews and meta-analyses. It is noteworthy that scholars affirm the widespread and successful application of PRISMA across various domains of educational research (Cai, Pan & Liu, 2022; Chong & Plonsky, 2021; Chong & Reinders, 2021).

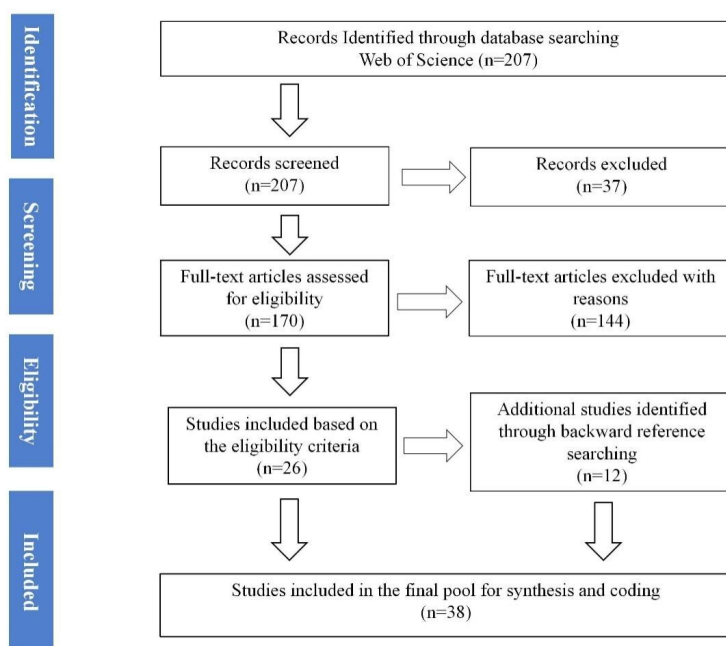


Figure 1. The Search and Selection Process

The search and article selection process is demonstrated in Figure 1. WoS database was used as the search engine to identify the data, as it is deemed one of the most cited and reliable databases in social science research (Xue & Churchill, 2019). Since it includes the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI), the Science Citation Index (SCI), and the Arts & Humanities Citation Index papers, WoS has high-quality papers with relatively high impact factors (Hsu & Liu, 2023). In addition, results in this database are reproducible. As such, multiple scholars (Fu & Hwang, 2018; Shadiev, Liu & Hwang, 2020; Jia & Harji, 2022; Hsu & Liu, 2023) have used WoS independently as the database to conduct their systematic reviews.

The exploration for articles was conducted with terms extracted from pertinent literature sources (Ellis, Li & Zhu, 2019; González-Lloret, 2017; Harris & Leeming, 2022), encompassing expressions such as "task-based language teaching/learning," "TBLT," "English speaking," "oral English," "communication skills," "speaking proficiency," "oral performance," "oral presentation," "speaking skills," "oral proficiency," "EFL," and "English as a foreign language," and among others. These terms were manipulated in diverse combinations, incorporating Boolean Operators ("AND" and "OR") and Modifiers to explore "TS" (i.e., "title," "abstract," "author keywords," and "keywords plus") within every published document in WoS. The formulated search strategy is as follows:

TS=(("*. * speaking" or "speaking *.*" or "oral *.*" or "*.* oral" or "*.* communicat*" or "communicat* *.*" or "pronunciation") and ("TBLT" or "task-based *.*" or "task based *.*") and ("EFL" or "English as a foreign language"))

3.2 The Eligibility Criteria

PRISMA guidelines advocate delineating eligibility criteria into two distinct categories, namely study characteristics and report characteristics, as proposed by Pahlevan-Sharif, Mura & Wijesinghe (2019) and Jia & Harji (2022). The report characteristics encompass inclusion or exclusion criteria denoted by (1), (2), and (3), while study characteristics are encapsulated by (4), (5), (6), and (7).

Inclusion Criteria:

- (1) Articles disseminated through a peer-reviewed journal.
- (2) Articles within the temporal bracket of 2014 to 2023.
- (3) Articles in the full-text format in the English language.
- (4) Articles within an educational context involving participants classified as EFL learners.
- (5) Articles mandated to explicate methodological and pedagogical approaches rooted in TBLT.
- (6) Empirical studies with tangible data relating to TBLT and English-speaking proficiency.
- (7) Articles incorporating elements associated with "task-based," "English as a foreign language" or "EFL," and include any of the specified terms such as "speaking," "oral," "communication," or "communicative."

Exclusion Criteria:

- (1) Articles not published between 2014 and 2023.
- (2) Articles not written in English.
- (3) Formats such as conference proceedings, research notes, editorials, book chapters, review studies, master's or doctoral theses/dissertations, etc.
- (4) Articles outside an educational context or involving participants beyond the scope of EFL learners.
- (5) Articles utilising the TBLT approach for purposes other than enhancing English speaking proficiency.
- (6) Articles lacking clarification on methodological and pedagogical approaches rooted in TBLT.
- (7) Articles not constituting empirical studies on TBLT and English-speaking proficiency.

As of October 31, 2023, a comprehensive search of 207 papers was systematically conducted in the database during the preliminary search. The temporal scope of the chosen articles, spanning from 2014 to 2023, is considered for discerning the developmental trends in the TBLT approach for enhancing EFL speaking proficiency. Following the recommendations of Hwang & Tsai (2011) and Jia & Harji (2022), a 10-year literature review was deemed an effective methodology for exploring recent trends in educational settings. Consequently, studies falling outside the publication timeline of 2014 to 2023 (n=37), those not written in English (n=2), and those categorised as review studies, editorials, books, chapters, master's, or doctoral theses/dissertations, etc. (n=23) were systematically excluded from consideration. The data gleaned from the refined pool of 145 articles were meticulously analysed to scrutinise titles, keywords, and abstracts. This led to the exclusion of irrelevant articles (n=17) or not aligning with the eligibility criteria. Some articles, despite presenting keywords such as "task-based," "speaking," and "EFL" in titles or abstracts, deviated from the focus on TBLT or the enhancement of speaking skills. Further refinement based on content relevance resulted in the exclusion of additional papers (n=102). Ultimately, a curated selection of 26 papers was chosen for the systematic review.

Adhering to PRISMA guidelines, a thorough review incorporates diverse information sources, encompassing electronic databases, reference lists, etc. (Pahlevan-Sharif et al., 2019). Subsequently, a backward reference search was conducted, involving meticulous scrutiny of the reference sections within the 26 selected papers to unveil any pertinent studies that might have been overlooked. It is imperative to note that the referenced papers must conform to the stipulated publication time frame of 2014 to 2023 and fulfil all the predefined inclusion criteria. This diligent process led to the identification of twelve additional papers, thereby culminating in the examination and analysis of a total of 38 papers for this research.

4. Results

Following the set criteria, 38 articles met the inclusion requirements for this systematic review. A predominantly qualitative analysis was undertaken in alignment with the research inquiries, and the ensuing outcomes are systematically delineated and structured across five dimensions: 1) publication trends, 2) theories and learning/teaching methods, 3) participants, 4) research design, sampling, data collection techniques, and 5) major findings and identified challenges.

4.1 The Publication Trends

4.1.1 Emerging Trend and Publication Dynamics

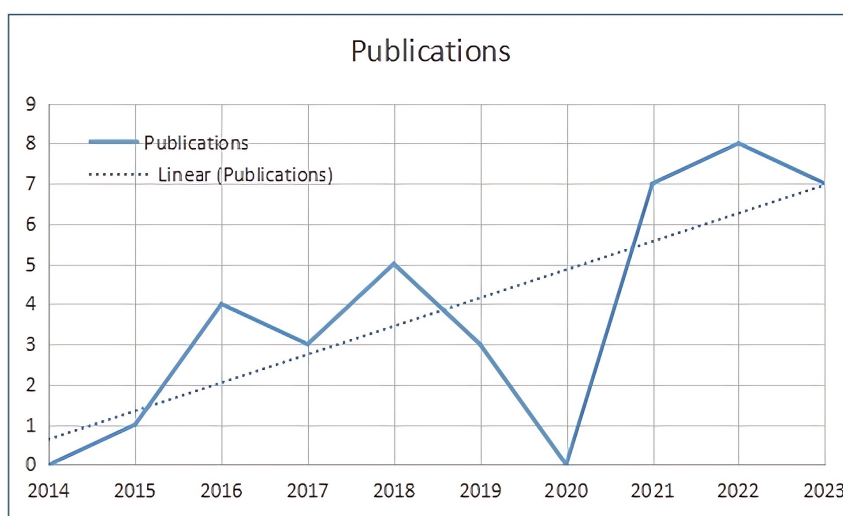


Figure 2. Number of publications by year

Figure 2 illustrates the annual distribution of published articles. Notably, three articles were published from 2019 to 2020, while a substantial majority, comprising 22 articles, emerged within the period from 2021 to 2023. Conversely, 13 articles were disseminated over the initial five years (2014–2018). Remarkably, no articles were recorded as published in the year 2020. Despite the apparent decline from 2018 to 2020, it is crucial to acknowledge the noteworthy surge in the number of publications post-2020, signifying an upward trajectory. The lack of publications in 2020 can likely be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic disrupting traditional classroom settings and the fact that online instruction in EFL contexts has not yet been advanced. However, the increase in online studies after the year 2021 indicates a growing interest in exploiting TBLT's potential in virtual environments to boost communication skills, self-efficacy, and openness to communication.

4.1.2 Global Reach of TBLT for EFL Speaking Proficiency

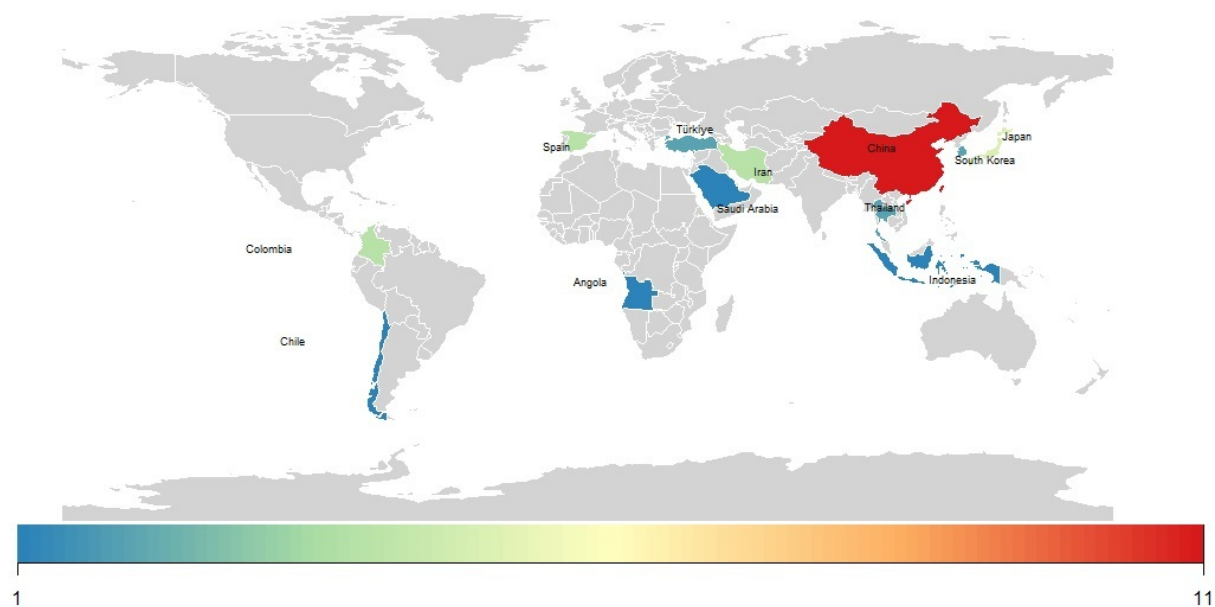


Figure 3. Geographical distribution of publications

Regarding geographical representation, as shown in Figure 3, eleven studies were carried out in China, while five studies emanated from Japan. Furthermore, four studies were conducted in each of the following locations: Spain, Iran, and Colombia. Additionally, two studies each were conducted in Thailand, South Korea, and Türkiye, respectively, with individual studies conducted in Angola, Chile, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia. The 38 articles' geographical distribution, which aligns with earlier research (Ji, 2019), shows a wide range of nations and areas engaged in TBLT research. However, there are still unexplored regions that could provide distinctive perspectives. To further understand how TBLT affects speaking proficiency, research in less-studied EFL contexts like Russia, Germany, Italy, or Egypt, etc., is suggested to be conducted.

4.1.3 Educational Context Distribution in Different Settings

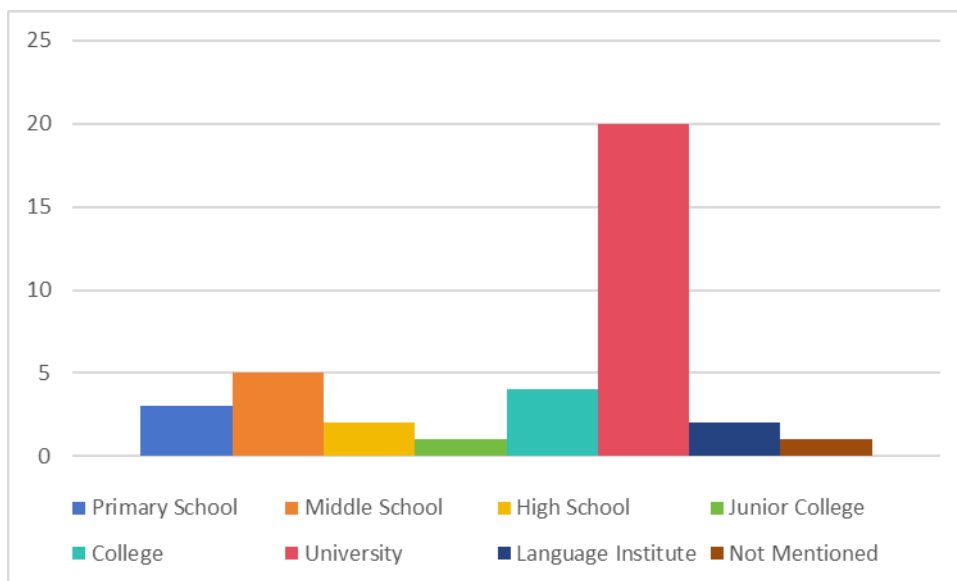


Figure 4. Educational context distribution

Figure 4 illustrates the distribution of educational contexts. The data indicates a notable inclination toward tertiary education, with 20 studies conducted at the university and four at the college level. Additionally, ten significant studies centre on the school sector. Noteworthy examples include studies by Ellis et al. (2019) and Li, Ellis & Zhu (2016), focusing on Chinese middle schools, and studies by Mayo & Agirre (2018) and Gallardo-del-Puerto & Martínez-Adrián (2022a), concentrating on primary schooling. It is important to note that

two of the reviewed articles from Iran specifically conducted studies in language institutes.

4.2 Theories and Learning/Teaching Methods

The review encompasses a diverse array of theories. Cognitive psychology (n=13) emerges as the most extensively employed theoretical framework. Numerous theories and models are firmly grounded in cognitive psychology (Sternberg, 2016), exemplified by the Triadic Componential Framework (Kim & Taguchi, 2015; Malicka, 2020; Zhang, Zhang & Zhang, 2021; Ren, Peng & Wu, 2023a; Young & Son, 2023), the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Fang et al., 2021), Limited Attention Capacity (LAC) (Qiu, 2022; Zhang & Zhang, 2022; Ren, Wu & Peng, 2023b), Skill-acquisition Theory (Li et al., 2016; Harris & Leeming, 2022), and Skill-learning Theory, among others. Constructivism (n=7) is prominently featured in the reviewed articles (York & Dehaan, 2018; Rahimi, 2022; Portilla Arciniegas & Camacho Vásquez, 2017; Viriya, 2018; Khoram, 2019; Chen, 2021), as is the sociocultural theory (n=6) (Mayo & Agirre, 2018; Aksoy-Pekacar, 2023; Fang et al., 2021; Harris & Leeming, 2022; Eslami & Kung, 2016; Cutrone & Beh, 2018). Additionally, other notable theories or models include SDT (n=1), Expectancy-value Theory (n=1), Self-directed Learning (SDL) Theory (n=1), ENGAGE Model (n=1), Hashimoto's Model (n=1), etc.

The reviewed articles include a range of teaching/learning methods. Among the 38 scrutinised studies, TBLT emerges as the predominant method. Supplementary methods include Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) (n=3), Technology-mediated TBLT (n=2), and Game-based Language Learning (GBLL) (n=2). Various other methods are also employed, encompassing the Inquiry-based Approach, Technology-Enhanced TBLT, DST, Group Work Method, Metacognitive Strategies, Strategic Planning Approach, Task Modality and Pair Formation Method, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), and Mobile-assisted Role-playing Method.

4.3 Participants

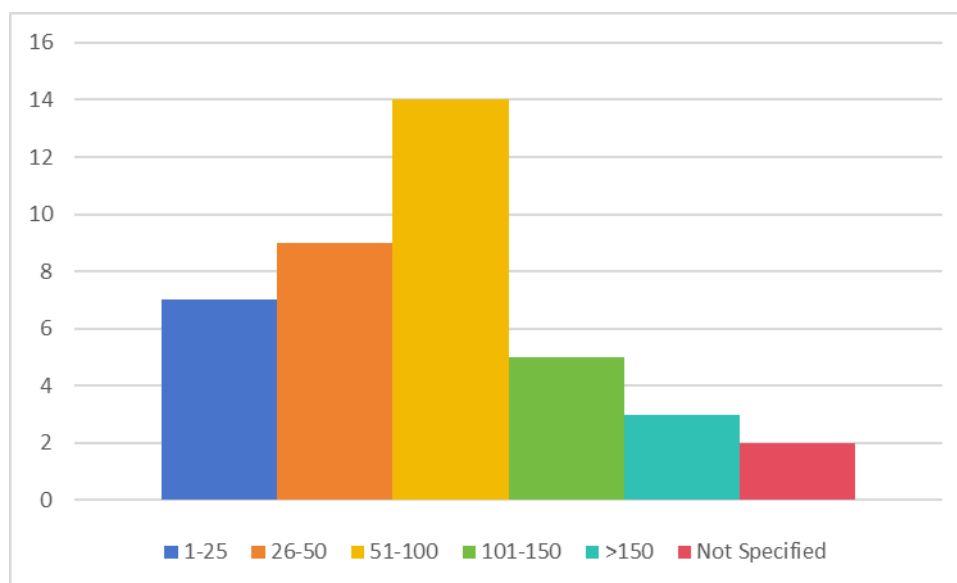


Figure 5. The number of participants

An examination of participant distribution, illustrated in Figure 5, reveals variations in participant counts across the articles. Specifically, participant counts fall within distinct ranges: less than 25 (n=7), 26–50 (n=9), 51–100 (n=14), 101–150 (n=5), and more than 150 (n=3). Notably, two studies did not specify the number of participants.

In evaluating the English proficiency of participants, a prominent tool to assess learners' language levels is the CEFR (n=12). Aligned with the CEFR, language users are categorised into three primary levels: Basic (A level), Independent (B level), or Proficient (C level). These broad classifications are further delineated with two sub-levels for each main level, providing a nuanced depiction of learners' language competencies (Leonor et al., 2017). Beyond the CEFR, various other instruments have been employed to measure English proficiency. Notably, the Oxford Quick Placement Test (QPT) (n=3), Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) (n=3), Key English Test (KET) (n=2), College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) (n=2), Grammaticality Judgment Test (GJT), and Elicited Information Test (EIT) (n=2), as well as The General English Proficient Test (GEPT) (n=2), play significant roles in the assessment landscape. The reviewed studies also encompass

instruments like Cambridge Young Learners English: Flyers Speaking (n=1), First Certificate in English Examination (FCE) (n=1), and more.

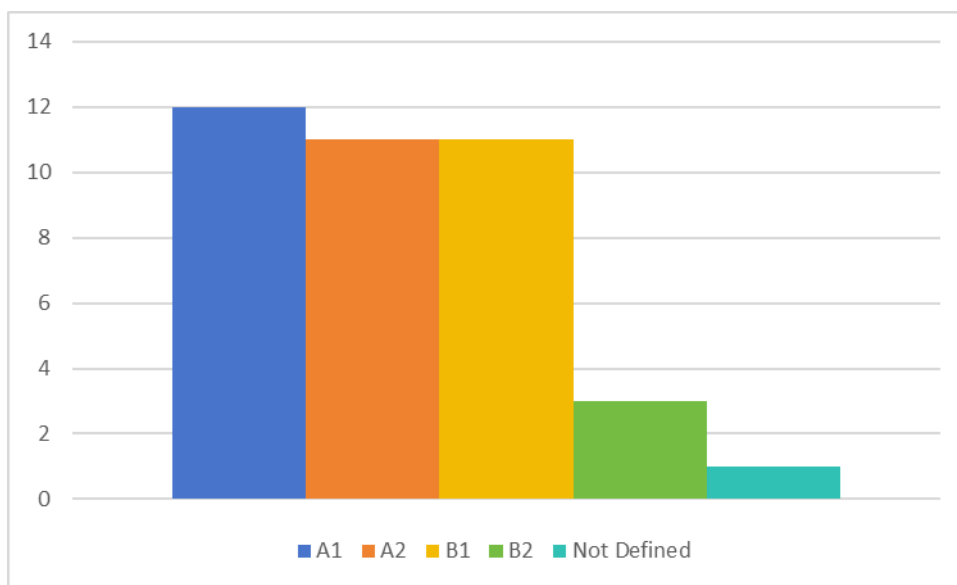


Figure 6. English proficiency of the participants

Figure 6 depicts the English proficiency of participants in the reviewed studies. The results unveil a deliberate focus on individuals with low to intermediate levels of English proficiency. Precisely, participants' proficiency aligns with CEFR categories, with counts for A1 (n=12), A2 (n=11), B1 (n=11), and B2 (n=3), as per the CEFR standards. Notably, one study did not specify the English proficiency level of the participants.

4.4 Research Design and Methods

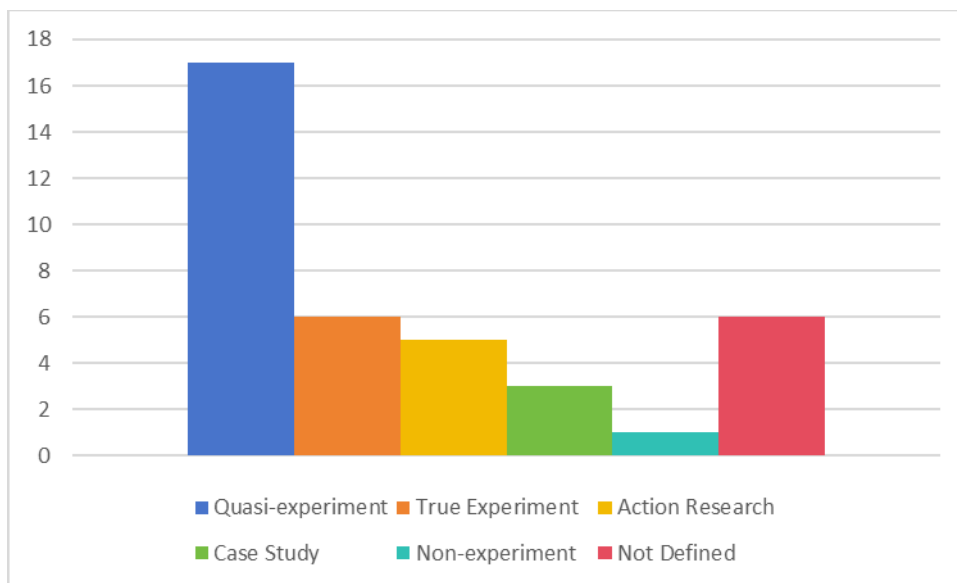


Figure 7. Research designs

Figure 7 reveals a diverse array of research designs, with a notable inclination towards quasi-experimental design (n=17), followed by true experiments (n=6), action research (n=5), case studies (n=3), and non-experimental methods (n=1), while six studies lack a clearly defined research design.

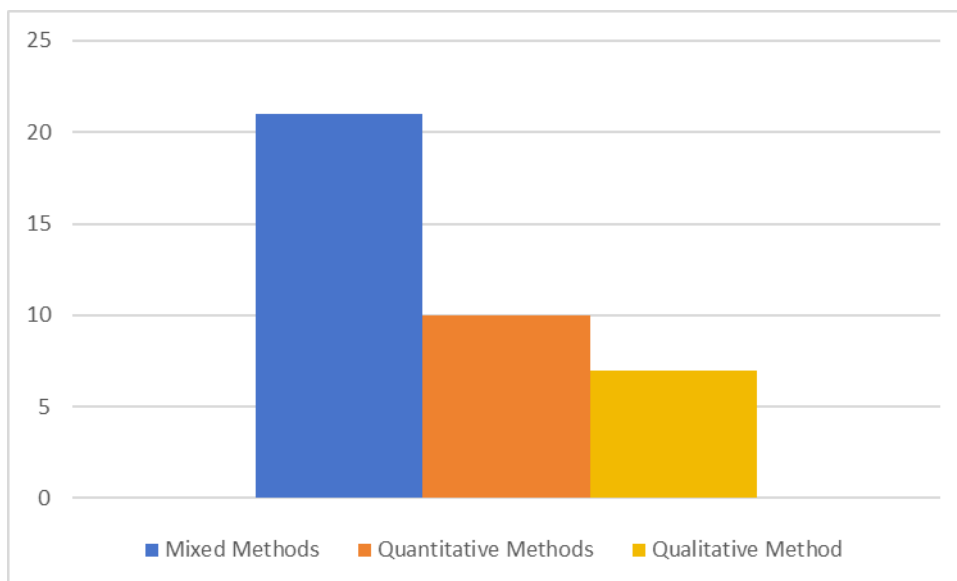


Figure 8. Research methods

Figure 8 emphasises the prevalence of mixed methods (n=21), complemented by studies employing quantitative methods (n=10) and studies opting for qualitative methods (n=7) in the domain of TBLT and EFL speaking proficiency.

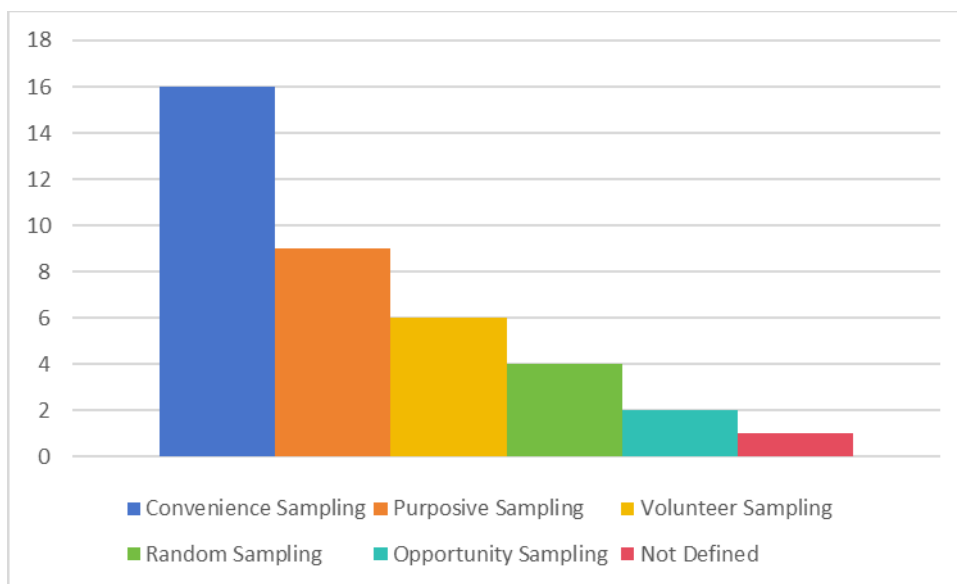


Figure 9. Sampling techniques

Figure 9 delineates the sampling techniques. As per the findings, convenience sampling emerges as the predominant technique (n=16), followed by purposive sampling (n=9), volunteer sampling (n=6), random sampling (n=4), and opportunity sampling (n=2). Additionally, one article did not specify the sampling technique.

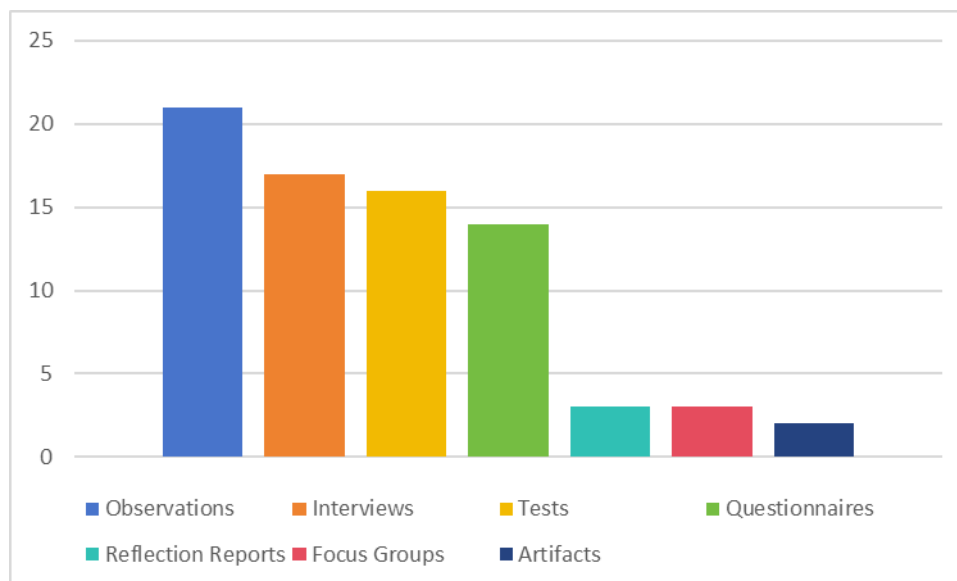


Figure 10. Data collection techniques

The data collection techniques elucidated in Figure 10 illuminate the prevailing methods employed in the reviewed studies. Observations stand out as the most frequently utilised technique (n=21). Interviews (n=17), tests (n=16), and questionnaires (n=14) closely follow. Reflection reports (n=3), focus groups (n=3), and artifacts (n=2) are less frequently employed in the reviewed articles.

4.5 Findings

The 38 reviewed articles employed diverse data collection techniques, including observations, interviews, tests, and questionnaires, to investigate the effectiveness of various TBLT teaching approaches on participants' EFL speaking proficiency. Results indicated a notable improvement in students' speaking proficiency post-TBLT intervention. Notable outcomes included increased engagement, risk-taking, linguistic complexity, motivational benefits, and willingness to communicate. Various task types and planning conditions in TBLT significantly impacted EFL learners' accuracy in speaking ability, leading researchers to hypothesise that TBLT plays a crucial role in enhancing learners' English-speaking proficiency.

Among the various teaching or learning methods, technology and collaborative learning emerged as pivotal contributors to advancing students' speaking skills within TBLT. Fang et al. (2021) observed that the mobile-supported TBLT group outperformed the traditional TBLT group on vocabulary and conversation comprehension tests. Huang (2023) found that DST tasks significantly enhanced English-speaking proficiency by providing abundant opportunities for oral communication. Ulla and Perales (2021) noted the positive impact of group work in a task-based learning classroom, corroborated by Aksoy-Pekacar (2023), emphasising creating a collaborative environment through extracurricular discussion activity. Mayo and Agirre (2018) established that proficiency-paired groups exhibited significantly greater collaboration in oral tasks with a written component (OWT). Chen's study (2021) reinforced the benefits of technology tools and collaborative learning environments in enhancing English proficiency.

Moreover, researchers conducted comparative analyses between traditional teaching approaches and TBLT, as well as among different task types' effectiveness on learners' speaking proficiency. Harris & Leeming (2022) compared PPP and TBLT, highlighting the immediate task performance benefits of explicit language introduction through PPP, while post-task focus on language through TBLT led to more substantial language development. Qiu (2022) observed that participants produced more accurate and complex speech in the short speech task than the picture-based storytelling task. Mulyadi, Wijayatiningsih, Singh & Prastikawati (2021) advocated the role-play task as a fruitful technique for ESP learners to practice English speaking performance with task adjustments. Khoram (2019) discerned significant differences between individual planning personal tasks (IPPT), group planning personal tasks (GPPT), and group planning decision-making tasks (GPDT), emphasising the impact of diverse task types and planning conditions on learners' speaking ability.

Researchers also noted variations among English learners with different proficiency levels across different contexts. Qiu (2022) found that higher-proficient learners outperformed lower-proficient ones in fluency and

lexical complexity, attributable to more comprehensive linguistic resources and more autonomous speech production. Higher-proficient learners generated more complex sentences in the short speech task, while lower-proficient participants marginally elevated structural complexity in the picture-based storytelling task. Esfandiari, Mahmoudi & Davaribina (2021) highlighted significant differences in speaking performance between cognitively more and less active EFL learners, emphasising cognitive activity's impact on performance.

Scholars underscored the importance of task modality, task complexity, and Language-related Episodes (LREs), investigating the relationships among these factors. Task modality significantly influenced the occurrence and resolution of LREs, with more LREs and resolved instances in the speaking+writing task compared to the speaking task (O'Grady, 2019). Gallardo-del-Puerto and Martínez-Adrián (2022b) emphasised more significant differences in form-based LREs than in meaning-based LREs. Regarding task complexity, Malicka (2020) observed participants in the simple–complex sequencing condition exhibiting more incredible speed, lower error rates, and more significant structural complexity at the clausal level in the most complex task. Kim & Taguchi (2015) highlighted the influence of task complexity on the learning of request-making expressions in EFL classroom contexts, with the complex task group showing more sustained learning outcomes than the simple task group.

4.6 Identified Challenges

This section addresses challenges identified in the reviewed articles, categorised into methodological and pedagogical challenges. Methodological challenges encompass concerns about the design, analysis, or reporting of research-related reports (Mbuagbaw, Lawson, Puljak, Allison & Thabane, 2020). Pedagogical challenges within a study pertain to issues emerging during the investigation of teaching practices and the subsequent exploration of their impact on student learning (Head, 2020).

Several methodological challenges have emerged. Firstly, a recurrent concern revolves around the modest sample sizes, as evident in studies by Aksoy-Pekacar (2023) involving 15 volunteer students, Torres-Rodríguez & Martínez-Granada (2022) with 18 seventh-grade students, and Ortiz-Neira (2019) comprising 23 eighth graders. Furthermore, certain studies grappled with notable limitations regarding sample features such as gender and region. For instance, Khoram (2019) conducted a quasi-experiment focusing on 80 female participants, and the overemphasis on a single gender may restrict the external validity of the research, impeding the application of insights to both male and female learners. Consequently, the study's capacity to offer comprehensive and widely applicable recommendations for enhancing speaking proficiency in EFL contexts may be compromised.

Methodological constraints present another challenge, with reliance on self-reported data and the absence of control groups compromising internal validity. For example, York & Dehaan (2018) conducted action research on students' perceptions toward a constructivist approach, collecting data through questionnaires, and O'Grady (2019) employed a balanced design to investigate the impact of pre-task planning on speaking test performance for English-medium university admission, collecting data with scales. The reliance on self-reported data from survey questionnaires and scales raises concerns about social desirability bias and the accuracy of reflections. Moreover, Campo (2016) conducted action research on 30 tenth graders, collecting data from field notes, semi-structured interviews, surveys, and students' artefacts without any control conditions; Portilla Arciniegas & Camacho Vásquez (2017) executed a case study on 24 university students collecting data through observations and interviews without a control condition. The absence of control groups in these studies renders it challenging to attribute observed improvements solely to the applied methodologies. Another prevalent issue most studies encounter is practical constraints and disparities in experimental design. Practical constraints lead to variations in group sizes and difficulties in controlling various influencing factors, such as the curriculum, the teaching methods, learners' personalities, exposure to the target language outside of class, and students' plans and goals for the future. These challenges underscore the importance of a robust experimental design in language teaching studies (Cutrone & Beh, 2018).

The pedagogical challenges identified in the reviewed studies encompass various considerations. One recurring concern is the potential memorisation of tasks due to task repetition, especially when learners complete the same tasks, such as describing the same pictures or telling stories with the same topic multiple times (Malicka, 2020; Ren et al., 2023a). This poses questions about the authenticity of learning experiences. Challenges in game-based learning present another layer of complexity. Studies highlight issues such as a high volume of pre-task activities, difficulties in learning game rules, and the excessive use of the first language (L1) during gameplay (Torres-Rodríguez & Martínez-Granada, 2022; York & Dehaan, 2018). Striking a balance between game-based activities and language learning objectives becomes a noteworthy pedagogical concern. The oversight of individual differences, such as language proficiency, prior language learning experience, and cognitive abilities,

in the context of task modality raises concern (Mayo & Agirre, 2018; Gallardo-del-Puerto & Martínez-Adrián, 2022a; Ren et al., 2023b). This highlights the necessity for personalised pedagogical approaches that account for the diversity of learners. The sustainability of increases in WTC directly after task-based interventions raised questions about the enduring impact of pedagogical treatments (Cutrone & Beh, 2018; Huang, 2023; Rahimi, 2022; Ebadi & Azizimajd, 2023). The absence of delayed post-tests highlighted a gap in understanding the longevity of treatment effects. Meanwhile, longitudinal studies that provide insights into the sustained impact of group work on language learning outcomes (Ulla & Perales, 2021; Chen, 2021) become crucial for understanding the long-term benefits and challenges associated with pedagogical interventions.

5. Discussion

Thirty-eight articles were reviewed in the present study aiming to understand the effect of TBLT on English speaking proficiency in the EFL context and have an in-depth insight into the methodological and pedagogical approaches, identified challenges, implications, and recommendations in this field.

5.1 Technological Integration in TBLT

Since the 1980s, TBLT has gained prominence in second language acquisition (SLA) and language education (Robinson, 2012; Chong, 2020). Over the past decade, and especially in the last five years, research has increasingly focused on integrating TBLT with CALL or technology-mediated tasks to advance both fields and inform practice. Recent studies have explored TBLT applications using technologies like Webquest tools, mobile-supported tasks, DST, and digital games. These technologies provide access to authentic materials, enhance communication and collaboration, and allow individualised learning experiences (González-Lloret, 2019). TBLT offers a framework for designing communicative, meaningful, and engaging tasks that develop a broad range of language skills (Ellis et al., 2019). The merging of TBLT with technology shows promise for enhancing language development and performance, suggesting fruitful directions for future research (Chen, 2021; Huang, 2023).

5.2 Educational Diversity in TBLT Research

The analysis of educational settings in the reviewed articles shows a clear preference for tertiary education, reflecting Coombe & Shehadeh's (2012) observation that most TBLT research targets university students. This focus is likely due to the active involvement of higher education professionals in enhancing English proficiency among young adults. However, diversifying research across different educational landscapes is crucial for a broader understanding of TBLT's effectiveness. Challenges in implementing TBLT in school-age settings include large class sizes and resource limitations, highlighting the need for approaches tailored to various learning environments. In places like Iran, English Language Institutes (ELIs) are critical social venues influencing female identity development and language learning. While these insights might be relevant to other EFL contexts where ELIs play a significant role, further research is needed to generalise these findings internationally. Expanding research to include adult education, language schools, and vocational training can enrich our understanding of TBLT's impact across diverse settings. Investigating TBLT's application across different age groups could uncover age-specific learning differences, informing targeted instructional strategies. Comparative analysis across various educational levels and cultural contexts will enhance our comprehension of TBLT's nuanced effects.

5.3 Pedagogical Insights in TBLT

Researchers have based their studies on educational theories like sociocultural theory, cognitive psychology, and constructivism, employing various teaching methods integrated with TBLT. For instance, GBLL has proven engaging and effective in enhancing language skills by providing a structured learning path (York & Dehaan, 2018), while technology-mediated TBLT has improved English speaking proficiency by enabling meaningful and collaborative practice (Ziegler, 2016). These methods also allow flexible learning regarding time and place, provide timely feedback, and help teachers evaluate student performance more effectively. Thus, integrating TBLT with technology represents a promising direction for language education, though further research is needed to confirm its efficacy across different settings and student demographics.

The comprehensive review highlights various TBLT-enhanced educational activities to improve speaking and language development in an EFL context. Activities include role-playing, exchanging personal information, and written and spoken tasks conducted in self-selected or proficiency-paired groups, emphasising diverse language encounters and collaborative learning. Research reveals varying participant numbers and levels of English proficiency, demonstrating TBLT's adaptability to different group sizes and educational contexts. However, inconsistencies in reporting participant numbers suggest a need for more transparent reporting to enhance

research validity.

Assessment tools vary widely beyond the CEFR, including KET, CET-4, QPT, TOEIC, and technology-mediated tools like computer-adaptive tests, reflecting the diverse methods used to assess English proficiency (Chapelle & Voss, 2008; Herzog-Punzenberger, Brown, Altrichter & Gardezi, 2023). Studies typically focus on participants with low to intermediate proficiency levels (A1-B2), indicating a gap in research for methods supporting higher proficiency levels (B2 and C1). This gap suggests an opportunity for future research to develop strategies for learners aiming for higher fluency and accuracy.

According to Richards & Rodgers (2001), TBLT has a significant drawback: it may emphasise accuracy in favour of fluency. This might be a challenge for students who need to improve their language proficiency in both accuracy and fluency. An additional issue is that it necessitates a great deal of originality and initiative from the instructor. Teachers unfamiliar with the technique or lacking the requisite abilities to execute it properly may find this problematic (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Beyond the textbooks and accompanying materials typically found in language classes, TBLT also requires additional resources. This might make implementation difficult, especially in situations with few resources. For most studies, the laborious job design process and worries about possible expenses causing inequality are major problems. Future studies should improve task design efficiency and create resources or tools to help teachers address these problems. It is also essential to investigate methods of lowering technology costs and increasing accessibility for all students, regardless of their financial situation (Portilla Arciniegas & Camacho Vásquez, 2017).

Managing big groups and addressing their behavioural issues are crucial to maximising the efficacy of language learning programs. Low motivation and involvement are issues that students face, which highlights the need for more creative task designs and TBLT activities (Viriya, 2018). To generalise results, a more comprehensive range of academic fields and a more diversified participant pool must be considered. Controversial results from the reviewed articles were also embraced by in-service teachers on their motivation, possible time constraints, and level of involvement. Further research endeavours may entail more cooperation with in-service teachers, considering their experiences and obstacles (Qiu, 2022). To help in-service teachers become aware of the tenets and methods of TBLT and implement them successfully in the classroom, efforts might be made to provide teachers with training courses (Rahimi, 2022).

5.4 Methodological Insights in TBLT Research Design

Exploring alternative designs and cutting-edge qualitative techniques like phenomenology or narrative inquiry is essential for a more nuanced understanding of TBLT's influence when diving into the complexities of research design, where quasi-experimental design and mixed methods predominate. According to Frechette, Bitzas, Aubry, Kilpatrick & Lavoie-Tremblay (2020), these different designs or methodologies can broaden the research's viewpoint and help us better comprehend learners' individual experiences with TBLT. The outcome shows a heavy dependence on convenience sampling, consistent with how TBLT is used in educational contexts. The aims of TBLT research are met via purposeful and voluntary sampling, which demonstrates intentional participant selection. Researchers need to weigh practicality against bias since the sparing use of random and opportunity sampling raises questions regarding the representativeness and generalizability of findings. Understanding the dynamic nature of TBLT implementation is crucial, as evidenced by the standard data collection techniques, including observations focusing on a real-time evaluation. Interviews, tests, and questionnaires are distributed in close succession, demonstrating a thorough methodology for obtaining information, assessing language proficiency, and comprehending subjective experiences. The relative underutilisation of non-traditional techniques such as artefacts and reflection reports points to a chance for researchers to investigate various approaches for gathering rich, contextual data for TBLT research.

6. Recommendations

6.1 Pedagogical Recommendations

Innovative task designs are crucial to prevent the potential memorisation of tasks and to maintain learner engagement. Researchers should explore varied and dynamic tasks that challenge learners, promote critical thinking, and encourage spontaneous language use. Incorporating real-world scenarios and interactive elements can enhance the authenticity and effectiveness of the tasks.

Technology should be leveraged to create personalised and flexible learning experiences. MALL, DST, and GBLL are promising areas that can be further developed. These technologies can provide tailored feedback, adapt to individual learner needs, and offer engaging and interactive platforms for language practice.

Effective implementation of TBLT in diverse classroom settings requires well-trained teachers. Professional development programs and training courses should be provided to in-service teachers to familiarise them with TBLT principles and methodologies. These programs should focus on practical strategies for task design, technology integration, and classroom management to ensure successful TBLT application.

There is a need to investigate the impact of gender differences and cultural contexts on the effectiveness of TBLT. Understanding how these factors influence learning outcomes can lead to more inclusive and culturally sensitive teaching practices.

Research should also explore cognitive and emotional factors such as speaking anxiety, motivation, and confidence in a TBLT framework. Identifying strategies to address these factors can significantly enhance the effectiveness of TBLT in improving speaking proficiency.

6.2 Methodological Recommendations

Future research should aim to address methodological challenges by employing robust experimental designs, reducing reliance on self-reported data, and ensuring the use of control groups. Detailed reporting of participant characteristics, research contexts, and intervention procedures will enhance the transparency and reproducibility of studies.

To validate the long-term effects of TBLT interventions, future studies should incorporate control groups and employ longitudinal designs. This approach will help ascertain the sustainability of improvements in speaking proficiency and provide insights into the enduring impacts of TBLT methodologies.

Larger and more diverse samples are necessary to enhance the generalizability of findings. This includes considering various age groups, proficiency levels, genders, and geographical regions to understand TBLT's effectiveness across different contexts comprehensively.

7. Limitations

It is necessary to note a few limitations of the current study. WoS was the database utilised in this review, and specific retrieval and selection criteria were applied. That said, not all facets of the literature on TBLT and speaking proficiency were covered. Because of this, some articles about TBLT for enhancing speaking proficiency may be omitted. Some readers would contend that it is difficult to draw firm conclusions from an empirical standpoint with so few papers. As Shadiev & Liang (2023) point out, there is no hard rule on how many papers must be included in a systematic review. Many relevant systematic review studies have reviewed an equivalent or a smaller number of articles. For instance, Jia & Harji (2022) examined 37 articles, Shadiev et al. (2020) focused on 30 articles, Kehing & Yunus (2021) delved into 20 articles, Zhou (2021) examined 15 articles, and Falah et al. (2022) reviewed eight articles. To locate papers that could have been missed from this review, researchers may consider various databases, keywords, and selection criteria for systematic review investigations in the future.

8. Conclusion

This systematic literature review included the last ten years' worth of published articles on TBLT and EFL speaking proficiency. The review covered 38 studies, highlighting the publication trends and pedagogical and methodological approaches, key findings, identified challenges, proposed recommendations, and limitations in TBLT. The findings indicate that TBLT significantly improves EFL learners' speaking proficiency, with notable enhancements in engagement, linguistic complexity, and willingness to communicate. Technology integration and collaborative learning methods emerged as crucial factors in advancing speaking skills. Different task types and planning conditions significantly impacted learners' speaking accuracy and complexity. Comparative analyses between traditional teaching approaches and TBLT further supported the effectiveness of TBLT in fostering language development. Future research on TBLT and language proficiency could be guided by the current study, which serves as a resource for educators and researchers. Researchers could also concentrate on some other areas that were not addressed in this study.

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