
Teaching English grammar to secondary school students in the framework of TELF in Bukavu: Towards a task-based approach

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Abstract: This study examines grammar instruction practices in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom within secondary schools in Bukavu, Democratic Republic of Congo. The study focuses on the predominance of traditional, non-communicative tasks. The objectives of this study are twofold: first, to contribute to the existing discourse on task-based language teaching (TBLT) from the perspective of contexts that are not widely represented in the literature, and second, to examine the nature of grammar instruction in English language education in Bukavu secondary schools. A documentary analysis of nine teachers' lesson preparation cards revealed a significant reliance on mechanical exercises, such as fill-in-the-blanks and multiple-choice questions, which impede students' development of productive language skills. The paper advocates for task-based language teaching as a more effective framework, incorporating pre-task, task-cycle, and post-task stages to enhance meaningful grammar use and communicative competence. The implications of this study underscore the necessity for a paradigm shift in teacher training, moving from a focus on rule memorization to the implementation of interactive, context-rich activities that are aligned with contemporary EFL pedagogy.

Keywords: Bukavu secondary schools, Documentary analysis, English as a foreign language, Grammar instruction, Task-based language teaching

Biographical notes: John Tombola Barabara's academic credentials include a Master of Arts in Education Quality from the Otto-Friedrich University of Bamberg in Germany and a Bachelor's degree in English language teaching from the Institut Supérieur Pédagogique (ISP) of Bukavu. He is currently employed as a lecturer at ISP Bukavu, specifically in the Department of English and African Cultures in South Kivu. In addition to his role as an educator, he serves as a teacher trainer, specializing in the implementation of quality education in developing countries. Mr. John is currently enrolled in the doctoral program in Education at the University of Bamberg, with a research focus on English didactics.

1. Introduction

The quality of teaching is widely recognized as a pivotal factor influencing outcomes within the school system. According to the consensus of numerous language scholars, the pedagogy and acquisition of grammar can be broadly characterized as the body of knowledge encompassing the categories of words, phrases, clauses, and sentences, in addition to the underlying principles that govern the construction of sentences within a given language. Contrary to the supposition of native teachers that grammar is not a prerequisite for effective communication, numerous language scholars posit that grammar plays a pivotal role in the development of learners' general language system. According to Ellis (2006: 84), the term "grammar teaching" is defined as any instructional technique that draws learners' attention to a specific grammatical form. The objective of this technique is to facilitate comprehension and/or production, thereby enabling learners to internalize the form. This paper will examine the divergent perspectives on grammar definition and discuss the role of grammar in the language learning process. It will focus particularly on the integration of grammar into the teaching methodology. The pedagogy of grammar is predicated on the methods by which language users learn and apply grammatical rules to construct sentences for meaningful purposes in specific contexts. According to Brown (2013: 362), grammar can be defined as the system of rules that govern the conventional arrangement and relationship of words in a sentence. In its technical sense, grammar is defined as the set of rules that govern the structure of sentences. It does not

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encompass the rules that govern the relationships among sentences, which are referred to as discourse rules. The task-based approach to language instruction encompasses not only the study of grammar from the teacher to the learners but also all the notions and activities that are developed during the lesson.

As with all subjects, English is taught and learned as a foreign language in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) throughout secondary schools. The overarching objective of the program is to cultivate four key speaking skills in learners: listening, speaking, writing, and reading. Grammar plays an instrumental role in the attainment of these competencies. As a teacher trainer, I possess experience and knowledge regarding the pedagogy of English instruction in Bukavu secondary schools. The crux of the issue with this paper pertains to the tasks employed in grammar lessons, which appear to be inadequate in facilitating the development of the targeted English language skills among students. The objective of this study is to address the issue of inadequate activating tasks during the grammar instruction and learning process. The present paper aims to contribute to ongoing discussions on Task-Based Language Teaching, particularly in contexts that are not widely represented in the extant literature, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo. Moreover, the objective of this study is to examine the nature of grammar instruction in English language education in Bukavu secondary schools. In consideration of the aforementioned circumstances, the central research question that guides this study is as follows: How is the instruction of grammar handled in secondary schools in Bukavu?

2. Literature review

Grammar is defined as a system of structured rules that govern syntax and diction in a specific language (Sorohiti et al., 2024: 46). It dictates the logical arrangement of the lexicon in the process of forming large structures (Richard, 2024: 17). Grammar is a pivotal skill that must be cultivated during the acquisition of a foreign language (Kumayas & Lengkoan, 2023: 98). In the context of grammar instruction, relevant literature is examined, focusing on English as a foreign language and methodologies employed in grammar pedagogy. In a similar manner, this section explores the efficacy of TBLT as a pedagogical strategy for grammar instruction.

2.1. The teaching of grammar in the context of English as a foreign language

Grammar occupies a pivotal role in the pedagogy of English as a foreign language (Barabara, 2021: 91; Sorohiti et al., 2024: 46). Grammar is a critical skill that students must develop, as it positively impacts other competencies, such as writing and speaking (Barabara et al., 2025: 1298). Conversely, grammar is a challenging skill to cultivate, and its pedagogy is equally arduous (Halim et al., 2021; Kumayas & Lengkoan, 2023). This is due to an absence of engaging learning strategies (Sorohiti et al., 2024: 45). In order to address the challenges connected to the teaching of grammar, research suggests the utilization of diverse teaching methodologies in order to address students' perceived challenges (Khreshheh & Orak, 2021; Önalán, 2018), thereby ensuring more effective grammar instruction (Alhaysony, 2016: 197–198).

The present study explores the available literature on the most effective approaches for grammar instruction. Alkhreshheh and Orak conducted a study on the place of grammar instruction in the 21st century by exploring perspectives of English teachers towards the role of teaching grammar in EFL/ESL classrooms. In their research, they discuss inductive and deductive as teaching approaches (2021: 11-12). In the deductive approach, the educator commences with the presentation of explicit rules, subsequently offering illustrative examples and practice exercises. The method is distinguished by its directness, top-down structure, and efficiency in elucidating rules. However, it is important to acknowledge that this approach may not be as conducive to engaging students in the process of discovery. Conversely, the inductive approach is predicated on the premise that learners discover rules through exposure to contextual examples, such as texts and dialogues, pattern recognition, and guided inference. This approach is endorsed by the majority of participants, as it engenders a more profound comprehension and a sense of autonomy. In summary, the authors propose that educators should employ a combination of inductive and explicit strategies, such as real-life tasks and error correction without interruption. Furthermore, they posit that grammar instruction must be complemented by opportunities for practice through drills, games, and communicative activities. Consequently, when teaching grammar, there is a necessity for flexibility in combining direct and indirect grammar instruction, rather than relying solely on explicit rule teaching. However, studies have demonstrated that experienced teachers are likely to possess this competency (Önalán, 2018: 110).

Chang (2011) examined the effectiveness of teaching English grammar through Grammar Translation as compared to the Communicative Approach in the context of Taiwan. Following a period of four months during which instruction was provided, the findings indicated that the experimental group, which demonstrated higher scores in translation than the control group, which focused on grammar, was more successful in achieving the desired outcomes. The author concluded that the Communicative Approach can help learners develop their fluency and that the Grammar Translation Approach can enhance students' accuracy. Therefore, an integration of both approaches is more effective in language classes.

The remediation of students' linguistic difficulties can be achieved through the implementation of task-based language teaching. TBLT is a pedagogical approach that aims to address the limitations of the conventional chalk-and-talk method, which is a long-standing grammar instruction practice (Kumayas & Lengkoan, 2023: 99). Consequently, educators and students employ an array of task-based processes to promote effective engagement among students throughout the instructional period (Mathematics, 2016).

The pedagogy of grammar instruction entails the implementation of tasks that engage students in the application of the target language. Rashtchi and Keyvanfar (2012: 163) emphasize that a grammatical task differs from an exercise in that learners are permitted to articulate their thoughts on the situation without restraint. It is a task that prioritizes learners' attention on the intended meaning for their partner, focusing on the selection of the most appropriate grammatical form

to ensure optimal performance. In addition to conveying meaning, learners endeavor to employ precise grammatical elements to complete the task. Lee (2000: 172) posits that the efficacy of task-based teaching is contingent upon the presence of several key activities. He asserts that a classroom activity or exercise must possess the following characteristics to qualify as a meaningful language learning endeavor: (a) an objective that can only be achieved through the interaction among participants, (b) a mechanism for structuring and sequencing interaction, and (c) a focus on meaning exchange.

2.2. A glance at task-based language teaching for grammar

Within the domain of English language instruction, with an emphasis on the implementation of complex tasks, task-based language teaching (TBLT) emerges as a pivotal concern. The theory and practice of teaching second or foreign languages (TBLT) has its roots in the educational paradigm. Consequently, it has spread across the world since the early 1980s, filling the gap created by traditional English language teaching (ELT) methods (Ellis & Shintani, 2014: 134). The acquisition of proficiency in English entails a concentration on developing competencies in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, as well as grammar, necessary vocabulary, and communicative competence (Patel & Jain, 2008: 57; Richards, 2010; Ning, 2011; Willis, 1996). The enhancement of language competencies is predicated on the implementation of activating complex tasks in individual English lessons (Williams, 1983; Kirschner, Paas, & Kirschner, 2009). Complex tasks as part of task-based language teaching embody a unique ability to "offer all the affordances needed for successful instructed language development, whoever the learners might be, and whatever the context" (Van den Branden, Bygate & Norris, 2009: 11).

In addressing the topic of TBLT, it becomes evident that various authors may hold divergent views; however, they are unified in their conception that language proficiency can be attained through the execution of tasks. For instance, learners may develop speaking competencies when they are given and work on tasks designed to improve speaking skills. It is noteworthy that significant discourse concerning the objectives of TBLT places a mandatory emphasis on form (meaningful communication) (Genc, 2012: 69). As Nunan (2004) posits on page 22, an emphasis on form is particularly advantageous for novice learners. The author (*ibid.*) continues to argue that a focus on form fosters "enabling skills" that facilitate authentic communication. A close examination of the form may be facilitated by educators who meticulously select tasks and closely observe learners' interpretations and performances of said tasks (Mayo, 2002). The underlying rationale is that tasks facilitate the construction of language forms and meaning by learners (Kumaravadivelu, 2006: 65), and close attention to forms and meaning serves to stimulate communication (Kumaravadivelu, 2006: 142).

In the context of task-based teaching, three distinct stages are employed. The framework of task-based language teaching comprises three stages: pre-task, task cycle, and post-task. The subsequent stage, referred to as the post-task stage, encompasses a focus on language and dedicated language practice. In a course designed in accordance with the standards established by TBLT, three fundamental stages should be incorporated. These stages have been shown to facilitate teachers' ability to plan the teaching process more effectively and to provide teachers with the opportunity to manage the course's progression.

Pre-task

In the pre-task stage, the topic and task are introduced to the students. The teacher also utilizes this stage to review previous vocabulary. As stated by Ellis (2003: 244), the objective of the preparatory phase is to equip students with the necessary skills and knowledge to successfully complete the task, thereby facilitating the process of learning and skill acquisition. Pedagogues can facilitate the retention of prior subjects that may be pertinent and assist students in accomplishing tasks. As posited by Huang (2010) on page 33, the function of the pre-task phase is to facilitate the comprehension of students regarding the task's instructions by way of the teacher's highlighting of pertinent words and phrases. This preparatory phase is instrumental in ensuring the efficacy of the subsequent task. In the preliminary stage, learners employ their existing knowledge to facilitate task completion in the subsequent cycle stage. Willis and Willis (2007: 160) emphasize that "learners who are allotted five to ten minutes just before the task to formulate a plan for their verbal contributions tend to produce task interactions that are not only lengthier but linguistically richer, with a higher degree of fluency and clause complexity." The preliminary stage of the task is designed to equip students with the skills necessary to produce grammatically accurate sentences. This is achieved by providing students with the opportunity to reflect on the subsequent stages of the task, thereby facilitating their development of the necessary skills.

Target Cycle

The task cycle stage is defined as the stage in which students endeavor to execute the task that has been assigned to them within an interactional context. The objective of this stage is to cultivate an environment conducive to enhancing students' communication skills. Yayl (2006) emphasizes that learners find the opportunity to utilize the target language to complete the task during the task cycle stage. Moreover, if necessary, learners employ teacher feedback and support. This stage is subdivided into three distinct phases. The task cycle is comprised of three components: task planning, report, and subtitles. The feedback that Yayl (2006) insists on is provided by teachers, especially during the planning stage or the report stage. In the task stage, students endeavor to execute the task assigned by their instructor, whether in small groups or pairs. Teachers are not involved in the students' lives, and instead, they serve in a supervisory role. It is expected that students will thrive in a classroom environment that is devoid of stress, and that their efforts will be directed towards enhancing fluency rather than the precise usage of linguistic elements. During the planning stage, students endeavor to prepare a report that documents their performance of the task.

Post Task

The post task stage, as delineated by Willis and Willis (2001: 178), is characterized as the phase of language focus. The post-task phase is analyzed under two different titles: language focus and language practice. During the language focus stage, students endeavor to comprehend the usage of the language and the rules of the target language. At this stage, students have acquired knowledge regarding specific usages and the precise application of language functions. In the domain of language practice, a diverse array of exercises can be utilized to enhance learners' comprehension.

Nunan (1991: 279) delineates the characteristics of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), which prioritizes tasks in teaching, as follows: an emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language, the introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation, the provision of opportunities for learners to focus not only on the language but also on the learning process itself, the enhancement of the learner's personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning, and an attempt to link classroom language learning with language activation outside the classroom. According to Sanchez (2004: 40), the task-based approach can only be fully understood if it is contrasted with preceding methods and analyzed within the mainstream of communicative methodology. The study's significance, as articulated by Sanchez, lies in its capacity to elucidate the efficacy of TBLT in grammar instruction by conducting a comparative analysis between task-based language teaching and conventional methods.

3. Research methodology

The present study employed a qualitative descriptive design, utilizing an in-depth documentary approach. In addressing the research question, the study focused on grammar instruction, examining teachers' preparation cards through a documentary lens. The documentary approach involves the examination of written materials by a researcher to obtain reliable and useful information. This approach is predicated on the analysis of a variety of documents. Document analysis, defined as a "thorough assessment of documents, be they in hard or soft copies" (Bowen 2009: 27), aims to "reconstruct the knowledge embedded" in them (Bohnsack & Pfaff, 2010: 20). The present study was conducted with the objective of collecting preparation cards from a sample of three teachers employed at three different schools located in the suburb of Bukavu city. In the context of this study, a total of nine preparation cards were collected and subsequently analyzed.

In regard to the analysis, the study entailed a critical evaluation of the tasks designed by instructors for lesson practice. Subsequent to the submission of grammar lesson cards by teachers who had volunteered to participate in the research, the researcher engaged in the reflexive reading and analysis of the concluding part of the lesson. The primary focus on the practical aspect of the lesson stems from the expectation that students will demonstrate their proficiency in the grammar element that has been cultivated during the instructional period. In this regard, as a researcher, I offer a commentary on the exercise, reflecting on its implications for English as the target language. To illustrate, following the instruction on the comparison of adjectives, the teacher may pose sentences to the students, prompting them to formulate comparative sentences. An example is: "Our classroom is big (superiority)". Such a sentence may facilitate students' engagement with the language, despite the inherent ambiguities associated with the inquiry. It does not specify the manner in which students will respond to the question, whether through oral presentation or written composition, either individually or collectively, and so on.

4. Findings and discussions

In the following lines, the results of the reading of the grammar lessons are summarized and elaborated. The findings indicate that the majority of the tasks assigned to the learners for practice consisted of questions that did not involve the utilization of English in its spoken form.

1. In the context of the pedagogy of noun plurals, it has been observed that educators tend to employ a comprehensive selection of model words when designing their instructional materials. However, in the execution of their lessons, they frequently utilize learner words that are not yet familiar to them. For instance, consider the scenario in which an educator requests that their students provide the plural form of a word that appears to be unfamiliar to them. For instance, the word "buffalo"
2. The subsequent point pertains to the implementation of a lesson on possessive pronouns. It was observed that the practice was conducted as follows: the blank space was to be completed with the appropriate possessive pronoun. The pen is ...
3. The lesson focused on prepositions of place, and the exercise was designed to ensure that learners could correctly complete the blank spaces with the appropriate preposition. This exercise was administered to a group of four students in a classroom setting, and the example given was a bench. The text contains an excessive amount of copied and pasted content. A negligible number of pupils are demonstrating adequate levels of academic performance. Additionally, the concept is not without its ambiguities.

For instance: The following sentences must be completed with the appropriate preposition of place.

- My copybook is ... the desk
 - My father is ... home
 - I put my shoes ... the bed
 - I am ... you
4. The lesson focused on the comparison of adjectives, with an emphasis on the structure for the purpose of practice. However, a concern regarding the distinction between long and short adjectives was also raised. In instances where the adjectives are not integrated into full, meaningful sentences, the practice is given in full sentences. For instance: The following sentence must be transformed: The classroom in question is characterized by its expansive nature, which can be perceived as a manifestation of superiority.

5. The grammar lesson focused on articles revealed that the instructor provided the fundamental material; however, the practice was predominantly confined to the memorization of definite and indefinite articles. To illustrate this point, consider the following question posed by the instructor: It is imperative to ascertain the quantity of disparate types of articles in the English language. The utilization of these tools for communication purposes merits consideration. The proliferation of theories without a concomitant emphasis on language skills is a matter of concern.
6. Another grammar lesson's preparation card that was examined focused on regular and irregular verbs. The practice, akin to the preceding lesson on articles, centered on the memorization of verb endings and their conversion into simple pasts and past participles. In the context of the same lesson, the instructor furnished the verb "to leave" and subsequently suggested a selection between "left" and "left," which is the past participle of the aforementioned verb.
7. The subsequent lesson centered on the application of the words "just," "already," and "yet" in a sentence that contains a verb in the present perfect. In this lesson, it was observed that the teacher's approach during the practice period was to direct the students' attention toward the usage of "how," "when," "just," "already," and "yet" in a sentence in the present perfect. However, the instructor did not mandate that the students formulate a single sentence incorporating these elements. The number of questions is inadequate for enabling learners to develop fundamental skills in language learning.
8. The subsequent lesson will address the utilization of the prepositions "during," "since," and "for." In the context of the lesson, the instructor provided the students with a series of sentences that necessitated completion through the incorporation of prepositions such as "during," "since," or "for." The exercises primarily comprised the completion of blanks with suitable prepositions. This phenomenon is analogous to the previously observed case in the lesson on prepositions of place. For instance,
 - I left home... the morning.
 - I studied at Tupendane primary school ... 6years.
9. The subsequent grammar lesson's preparation card that was reviewed pertained to the Simple Future. The implementation of this lesson incorporated numerous sentences that posed challenges to learners, including the use of the S. Future Negative form. The sentence has been determined to be clear. For a sentence of this nature, and for learners at this level, the necessity of specifying time is paramount.

The subsequent synoptic table summarizes the data gathered from teachers' preparation cards of grammar lessons.

Table 1: Synoptic summary of findings

S/N	Preparation card number	Topic of the lesson	Designed practice	Comment
1	6	Plural of nouns	Give the plural form of the following words: • Volcano • Buffalo • Chief • Person give five words ending in -o, and three words ending in -f with their plural form	Surely some exercises can help learners to think in the target language, but words to deal with are not given in full sentences. Providing those words in full sentences would be helpful because it would help learners to learn new things. The improvement of language skills is not on the pitch.
2	9	Possessive pronouns	Complete the following sentences • The pen is ... • This class is ...	With fill-in-the blank exercises there is no emphasis on communicative aspect of the language. The questions are ambiguous; they can put pupils into trouble.
3	14	Prepositions of place	The practice consisted of filling the blanks spaces with the correct preposition of place	Pupils do not use their mind before they react on the asked question. Only few learners can work properly, some lazy pupils may succeed while they know nothing.
4	16	Comparison of adjectives	Sentences are given to learners to be transformed by using the correct form of the adjective	The same adjectives for both the proper lesson and the practice. Too much focus on structures
5	7	English articles	Learners are asked to cite the kinds of article. Fill-in-the-blank exercises	Some questions are useless No practice of the language skills that can help pupils practice the tasks taught in their daily speech.
6	11	Simple past and past participle of regular verbs	Multiple choice exercises; that is learners are provided by the simple past of different verbs in one side of a chart and their infinitival forms in the other side	Too much memorization of verbs endings, no emphasis on the writing skill and other language skills. Multiple choice do not promote learners to thing in the target language.
7	16	Use of just, already and yet with the present perfect	Pupils were asked to say when is just, already and yet are used with the present perfect(rule)	Too much emphasis on rules than on the use of working in groups which can help learners to have a short conversation among themselves and develop other language skills. Any skill is being improved.

8	19	Use of since; during and for	Fill-in-the-blank questions	Too limited questions in term of enhancing learners faculties in the acquisition of the four language skills
9	23	The future tense	Learners were asked to transform some sentences in the future	The future is a time and not a tense, the context in the exercises is out the reach of children, no emphasis on communication activities.

Source: Primary data

These patterns suggest a teaching approach that prioritizes form over function, where grammar is practiced through rules, blanks, transformations, and matching rather than through meaningful use of language. In essence, learners are frequently tasked with identifying or reproducing accurate forms, yet they are seldom provided with opportunities to engage in meaning-based negotiation, to inquire, or to articulate their own conceptualizations in the target language. This approach suggests an adherence to a conventional grammar-teaching model as opposed to a communicative one. Subsequently, the exercises appear to offer limited opportunities for classroom communication, as they are predominantly individual, controlled, and closed-ended. While such tasks can assist learners in identifying grammatical errors, they do not effectively promote speaking, interaction, or real-life language application. Consequently, while pupils may be acquainted with the rule, they may still grapple with its fluent application in conversation or writing.

A substantial body of research has demonstrated that grammar instruction should be grounded in task-based teaching methodologies, encompassing the pre-task, target cycle, and post-task phases. The preparatory phase, preceding the task, is designed to equip students with the necessary skills and knowledge to complete the task, thereby facilitating the desired acquisition (Ellis, 2003, p. 244). Pedagogues have the capacity to facilitate the retention of prior subjects that may be pertinent and assist students in accomplishing tasks. In the target cycle, learners have the opportunity to utilize the target language to complete the task cycle stage. In the event that such assistance is required, students may request feedback and support from their teachers (Yayl, 2006). The post-task is analyzed as a language focus and language practice (Willis & Willis, 2001: 178).

The integration of grammar instruction within a communicative approach is imperative, as language proficiency is contingent upon the effective utilization of grammatical components in the target language (Richard, 2024, p. 18). In the context of this study, the types of questions that teachers use for grammar lessons include multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank questions. Multiple-choice questions provide students who have not been adequately prepared with the opportunity to guess, and these guesses, even when incorrect, receive credit. This pedagogical approach introduces students to malformations, which have the potential to influence their subsequent engagement with the material. The questions in the fill-in-the-blank section appear to be elementary and insufficient in scope.

These inquiries should not be incorporated into a task-based approach to language learning, as they do not facilitate the comprehensive development of the four language learning skills. In the execution of such tasks, students are tasked with reproducing the grammatical aspects that have been discussed in the lessons. Consequently, there is a possibility that these individuals may not possess the full construct of language grammar, which emphasizes form and meaning. This assertion is supported by the work of Kumaravadivelu (2006: 65), who suggests that the absence of visible skills, such as speaking, writing, and grammar, can hinder successful language learning. Richards (2010) and Ning (2011) further emphasize the pivotal role of these skills in language acquisition. Given the significance of grammar in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction (Barabara, 2021; Sorojiti et al., 2024), it is recommended that a multifaceted approach be adopted in the teaching of English grammar. This approach involves the integration of diverse methodological strategies to ensure that students develop the desired competencies (Chang, 2011; Önal, 2018).

5. Conclusion

This study illuminates’ deficiencies in Bukavu's EFL grammar instruction, where rote tasks predominate, hindering communicative competence. A communicative classroom would more often include pair work, group discussion, role play, information-gap tasks, or contextualized problem-solving, all of which create real reasons to use language. In this case, the lesson design appears to prioritize correctness and memorization over interaction and language production. Adopting TBLT-via structured pre-task activation, fluency-oriented cycles, and reflective focus offers a pathway to meaningful grammar integration. To ensure that teacher training aligns with global standards and cultivates competencies for authentic language application, it is imperative that these strategies be accorded a higher priority. Further research could consider the interventions of TBLT for the development of English skills.

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