

Complex Narrative Tasks and Students' Perspectives in Building EFL Communication Habits

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Abstract

This study explores how complex narrative tasks implemented within the Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) framework building communication habits among EFL students in a senior high school in Jakarta. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with students and their English teacher. The analysis revealed four major complexities: vocabulary limitations, grammatical inaccuracies, pronunciation issues, and emotional barriers such as anxiety and low confidence. Despite these challenges, students reflected positively on narrative-based TBLT activities, reporting improvement in vocabulary mastery, pronunciation, and understanding of narrative structure, along with increased confidence and motivation. The findings indicate that consistent engagement in complex narrative tasks not only develops linguistic accuracy and fluency but also encourages reflective and sustainable communication habits. This study highlights the pedagogical value of integrating narrative-based TBLT in EFL speaking classrooms and suggests that teachers design staged tasks with sufficient scaffolding to balance linguistic, cognitive, and affective demands.

Keywords: EFL Speaking; Communication Habits; Narrative Text; Complex Task; Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT)

INTRODUCTION

Speaking has been recognized as one of the most essential skills in English language learning because it directly reflects students' communicative competence and their ability to use language in authentic contexts. In the Indonesian EFL setting, however, speaking continues to be the most challenging skill for learners. Many students hesitate to use English due to limited vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracy, poor pronunciation, and psychological barriers such as anxiety and lack of confidence (Prasetyaningrum et al., 2023). These obstacles prevent learners from developing natural communicative patterns and lead to sporadic use of English in the classroom. For this reason, improving speaking ability requires more than just linguistic accuracy it also demands the establishment of sustainable communication habits that encourage students to use English consistently in various interactions (Goh & Burns, 2012).

The idea of building communication habits is particularly relevant in the Indonesian context, where English is taught as a foreign language with limited exposure outside the classroom. Students rarely have opportunities to practice English in their daily environment, making classroom interaction the main arena to enhance spoken proficiency. As DeVito (2016) argues, consistent practice and reflection are essential in transforming isolated speaking activities into habitual communication patterns. Without repeated opportunities to practice, students may only perform speaking tasks mechanically without internalizing them as part of their learning habit. One approach that has gained increasing attention in recent years is Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). Unlike traditional methods that prioritize grammar explanation or

vocabulary drills, TBLT emphasizes meaningful tasks that simulate real-life communication (Long, 2015; Nunan, 2004; Willis, 1996). Within TBLT, students are encouraged to focus on meaning and fluency first, while accuracy is developed through reflection and feedback. The task cycle consisting of pre-task, task performance, and post-task stages offers structured opportunities for students to engage in purposeful communication, receive scaffolding from the teacher, and reflect on their performance. Studies have shown that TBLT can increase students' fluency, engagement, and motivation in EFL contexts (Chunliu & Guangsheng, 2025; Hakim et al., 2021)

A specific type of task that has proven effective in enhancing speaking ability is the narrative task. Narrative activities, such as story retelling, creating alternative endings, or comparing plots, require students to integrate vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation into meaningful discourse. Narratives are also inherently engaging because they involve creativity, imagination, and emotional connection. According to Anderson & Anderson (1997), narrative texts provide students with a familiar structure orientation, complication, and resolution that facilitates both comprehension and production. Previous studies have reported that narrative-based instruction improves vocabulary retention (Setiyaningsih, 2013), enhances comprehension skills (Laraswati et al., 2018) and promotes collaborative learning (Khoir et al., 2024) In addition, storytelling and digital narratives have been found to reduce speaking anxiety and increase motivation (Bai & Xian, 2024).

However, despite these promising findings, most existing studies have focused on short-term improvements in linguistic performance, such as vocabulary growth, pronunciation accuracy, or fluency. While valuable, such studies often overlook the broader question of how repeated engagement in narrative-based tasks can lead to the formation of sustainable communication habits. In other words, the emphasis has been on immediate skill development rather than long-term behavioral change. Moreover, few studies have examined how students themselves perceive the complexities of narrative tasks, and how their reflections contribute to habit formation. This gap is crucial, because students' perspectives provide insights into both the challenges they face and the strategies they employ to overcome them. In the Indonesian EFL context, where classrooms are often characterized by large numbers of students and exam-oriented instruction, understanding how students perceive complex narrative tasks can help teachers design more effective pedagogy. Carless (2007) noted that implementing TBLT in Asian contexts is not without challenges, particularly when students are accustomed to teacher-centered learning. Nevertheless, with careful adaptation, narrative-based TBLT can provide authentic and meaningful opportunities for learners to develop communication skills. What remains underexplored is how such tasks contribute to habit formation a process that integrates cognitive, linguistic, and affective dimensions of learning

To address this gap, the present study investigates the implementation of complex narrative tasks through TBLT in a senior high school in Jakarta. Specifically, it seeks to answer two research questions: (1) What are the complexities found by students in learning narrative through TBLT? and (2) How are students' perspectives on learning narrative complexity tasks? These questions are designed to capture both the challenges and opportunities of narrative-based speaking activities.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to both theory and practice. Theoretically, it extends the literature on TBLT and narrative-based instruction by linking task complexity with communication habit formation. It highlights that habit is not merely the result of repetition, but of sustained engagement in meaningful tasks supported by reflection and feedback. Practically, the study offers pedagogical implications for EFL teachers. By understanding students' complexities and perspectives, teachers can design narrative tasks that balance difficulty with scaffolding, helping learners build confidence and consistency in using English. In this way, the study responds to the urgent need to transform speaking instruction

from isolated activities into habit-forming practices that support long-term communicative competence.

METHOD

This study using a qualitative case study design to examine how complex narrative tasks within the framework of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) shaped students’ communication habits. A case study was chosen because it enabled an in-depth exploration of students’ linguistic, cognitive, and affective experiences during classroom activities. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative case study design is appropriate when the researcher seeks to gain a detailed understanding of a bounded system through rich description and multiple data sources. Similarly, Yin (2018) emphasizes that case studies are particularly suitable for investigating contemporary educational phenomena within their real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident. Thus, employing a qualitative case study allowed this research to capture the complexities of narrative tasks and students’ perspectives comprehensively.

The research was conducted in one eleventh-grade class at a senior high school in Jakarta, consisting of 35 students and one English teacher who actively implemented speaking-focused activities. This site was considered appropriate as it provided authentic conditions for observing narrative-based TBLT in practice. Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. The observation checklist, adapted from DeVito (2016) and Maghfiroh (2022), focused on indicators of communication, including vocabulary use, grammatical accuracy, pronunciation, and emotional responses such as anxiety and confidence. Semi-structured interviews were then carried out with the English teacher and five students who were selected for their active participation. The interviews allowed the researcher to probe deeper into students’ reflections on the complexities of narrative tasks and their perspectives on how these activities contributed to their speaking development. The classroom intervention was conducted across four meetings following the TBLT cycle (Willis, 1996), which included the pre-task, task cycle, and post-task stages.

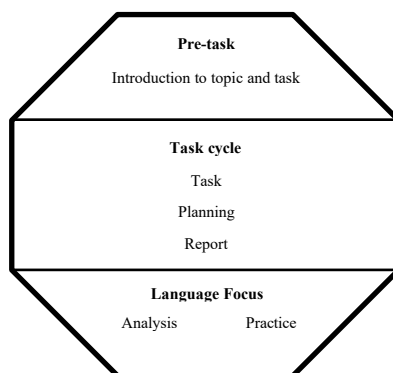


Figure 1. TBLT Cycle (Willis,1996)

In the pre-task stage, students were introduced to narrative texts using audiovisual input and guided questions, with the teacher providing initial vocabulary and pronunciation support. During the task cycle, students worked in groups to reconstruct and retell stories, and later performed their narratives in front of the class. The post-task stage was used for feedback and reflection, where the teacher corrected students’ errors and guided them to reflect on their

performance. Throughout these activities, the researcher observed and documented students' communicative behaviors.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Creswell (2013) The process involved transcribing interview responses, compiling observation notes, and coding them into categories related to linguistic challenges, emotional responses, and reflective processes. Emerging themes were then identified and interpreted to answer the research questions. To ensure the validity of the findings, triangulation was applied by cross-checking data from observations and interviews, while peer debriefing with supervisors was conducted to confirm the accuracy and reliability of the analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The results of this study are presented in accordance with the two research questions: (1) the complexities experienced by students in learning narrative through Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), and (2) the students' perspectives on participating in complex narrative tasks. The discussion integrates observation data, interview excerpts, and relevant theoretical perspectives.

1. Complexities in Learning Narrative through TBLT

Vocabulary Limitation

A key complexity observed was vocabulary limitation, which became apparent when students attempted to narrate stories but relied heavily on simple and repetitive words. For instance, during a retelling activity, such as *good, bad, happy, and sad*, regardless of the context. For example, one student described a setting as such as *good, bad, happy, and sad*, regardless of the context. For example, one student described a setting such as *good, bad, happy, and sad*, regardless of the context. For example, one student described a setting as:

Observer notes:

S1: "The forest is good... very good... and the bubble is also good."

Such repetition reflects not only restricted vocabulary but also an avoidance strategy when learners cannot retrieve more precise words. Interviews supported this observation, as one student stated:

S4: "Sometimes I don't know the English word, so I just say the same word again."

This aligns with Goh and Burns (2012), who noted that learners with limited lexical resources often fall back on repetition or fillers, resulting in reduced fluency and expressiveness.

Pronunciation Difficulty

Another linguistic complexity was pronunciation difficulty. Words such as *environmental, discourage*, or even simpler verbs like *watched* were often mispronounced, which disrupted intelligibility. For example, during a storytelling performance, a student struggled with the word *environmental*, resulting in pauses and a restart of the sentence. Interviews confirmed that students were aware of this issue, with one stating:

S1: "I feel like my pronunciation isn't very good... sometimes my friends don't understand what I said."

Pronunciation challenges directly impacted students' confidence, supporting Hakim et al. (2021), who emphasized that pronunciation remains one of the most persistent difficulties in Indonesian EFL classrooms.

Grammatical Inaccuracy

Grammatical inaccuracy also appeared as a major challenge. Although narrative texts typically require past tense, many students defaulted to present tense forms. For example, one student narrated:

Observer note:

S1: "She go to forest" instead of "She went to the forest."

In another case, incomplete sentences such as:

Observer note:

S5: "Because she angry"

The word were produced without verb, reflecting difficulties in constructing coherent clauses. Students admitted their uncertainty, as one interviewee said:

S1: "Even when it comes to grammar, like the past tense itself, sometimes I still feel like I'm wrong."

This finding resonates with Skehan's (1998) trade-off hypothesis, which suggest that when learners focus on meaning under task pressure, accuracy tends to decrease.

Emotional Complexities

Beyond linguistic aspects, emotional complexities were also significant. Observations revealed signs of nervousness such as avoiding eye contact, lowering voice volume, and frequent use of silence. In one session, the teacher asked closing questions to assess the students' speaking skills by asking questions related to the stories they had read, such as "Who is the main character in the story?" to S2 and she seemed hesitant and paused for a long time, saying:

Observation notes:

S2: "I forget... what is the name again?"

Appeared visibly anxious Another student, when called upon by the teacher, immediately replied:

Observation notes:

S4: "Please don't choose me. I'm not ready."

Based on interview data confirmed this emotional barrier, with one student stating:

S2: "I'm afraid of making mistakes, feeling embarrassed, and stammering when narrating in English."

These affective factors align with Pakpahan (2022) who argued that speaking anxiety is one of the most persistent barriers in Indonesian EFL contexts. However, repeated practice in the TBLT cycle gradually reduced students' hesitation, highlighting the importance of sustained exposure and supportive classroom environments. In summary, the first research question revealed that students faced a combination of linguistic challenges (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation) and emotional challenges (anxiety, low confidence). These findings confirm that task complexity is not limited to cognitive load but also involves affective engagement. This dual nature of complexity is consistent with Robinson's (2007) Cognition Hypothesis, which emphasizes that increasing task demands requires learners to allocate attention across multiple dimensions.

In summary, RQ1 revealed that students faced dual-layer complexities: linguistic (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation) and affective (anxiety, low confidence). These findings confirm that complexity in TBLT is multidimensional, involving both cognitive and emotional demands. This is consistent with Robinson's (2007) Cognition Hypothesis, which emphasizes that increasing task complexity forces learners to allocate attention across form, meaning, and affective factors simultaneously.

2. Students' Perspectives on Narrative Complexity

The second research question examined how students perceived their participation in complex narrative tasks. Despite the difficulties, students generally expressed positive perspectives about learning through complex narrative tasks. Many acknowledged significant vocabulary and pronunciation improvement.as one interviewee said:

S1: "I learned lots of new vocabulary and how to pronounce it correctly."

Another explained:

S2: "I feel like there are many words that are unfamiliar, so I know their meaning and enrich my vocabulary."

This shows that while vocabulary was initially a source of difficulty, repeated exposure in narrative contexts transformed it into an opportunity for lexical development. This perception shows that initial lexical difficulties eventually became opportunities for growth. In line with Bai and Xian (2024), who found that storytelling tasks expose learners to novel vocabulary and encourage active use in context.

Students also highlighted growth in confidence and motivation. Several expressed that narrative tasks encouraged faster thinking and creativity. One student said:

S3: "I feel more confident and can think faster because I have to come up with new storylines."

Another highlighted the structural demand:

S4: "We have to be able to make sentences that require us to explore new vocabulary so that the stories are coherent and good."

Such reflections suggest that narrative tasks not only train linguistic skills but also cultivate affective resilience. These findings support Chunliu and Guangsheng (2025), who reported that digital storytelling increased both engagement and confidence in L2 contexts.

A further perspective emphasized awareness of narrative structure and reflective learning. Students mentioned that they gained a clearer understanding of the generic structure of narratives, including orientation, complication, and resolution. One student reflected:

S5: "I understand the structure for creating a complete narrative story, from orientation to resolution."

Such awareness suggests that the tasks encouraged learners not only to perform but also to reflect on their performance, fostering habits of monitoring and self-correction. This supports Robinson's (2007) claim that task complexity, when appropriately sequenced, stimulates learners to attend to both form and meaning. Furthermore, the second research question revealed that students perceived narrative tasks as beneficial for their linguistic development, confidence building, and reflective awareness. These perspectives show that students recognized the long-term value of repeated narrative practice, even if the tasks were challenging.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that complex narrative tasks simultaneously presented students with challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, students struggled with limited vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracy, pronunciation difficulties, and emotional barriers such as anxiety. On the other hand, these same challenges became catalysts for learning, as students reflected on their difficulties, improved their performance over time, and reported higher levels of confidence and motivation. This cyclical process indicates that communication habits were not formed instantly but emerged through repeated exposure to complexity, supported reflection, and scaffolding. The conceptual model presented in Figure 1 illustrates this dynamic. Complex narrative tasks trigger linguistic and emotional complexities. Through engagement, reflection, and teacher feedback, students gradually transform these complexities into learning opportunities. Over time, this process leads to the formation of sustainable communication habits, enabling students to use English more consistently and confidently in classroom contexts.

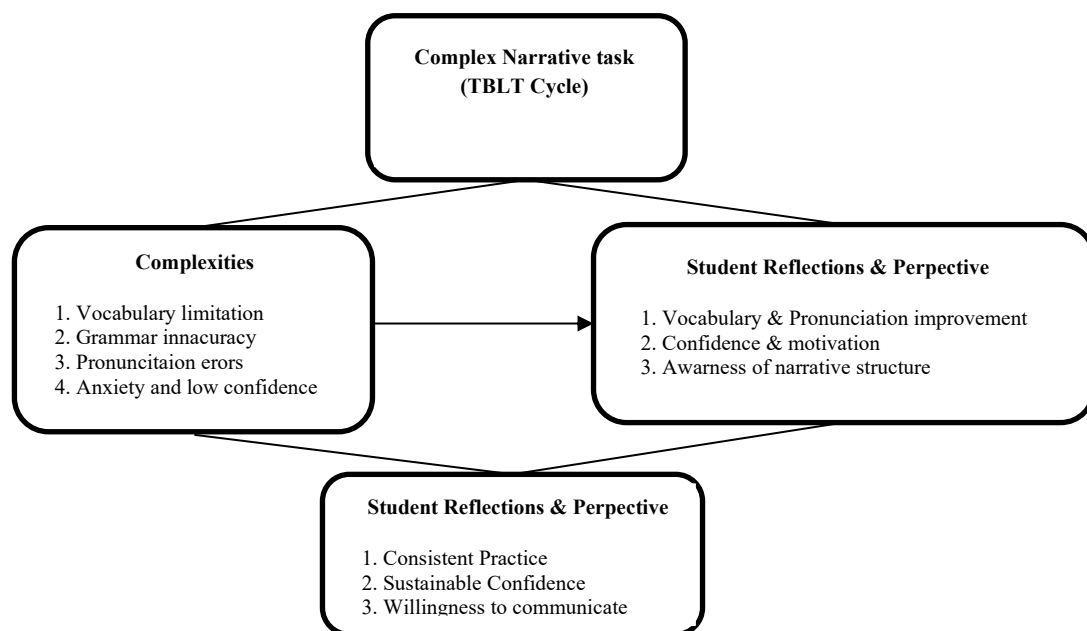


Figure 2. Model of Communication Habit Formation through Complex Narrative Tasks (Researcher’s analysis, 2025)

This study contributes to the literature by extending previous research, which often emphasized short-term gains in specific skills such as vocabulary (Setyaningsih, 2013; Vural, 2013) or comprehension (Khoir et al., 2024). The present study highlights the longitudinal aspect of habit formation, showing that communication habits can be developed through complex tasks that combine cognitive, linguistic, and affective demands. This finding is theoretically aligned with the Cognition Hypothesis (Robinson, 2007) and pedagogically relevant for EFL teachers seeking to move beyond isolated speaking exercises.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the implementation of complex narrative tasks within Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) to explore how such activities shaped communication habits among Indonesian EFL students. The findings showed that students encountered multiple complexities, including limited vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracy, pronunciation errors, and emotional challenges such as anxiety and low confidence. These complexities, however, did not simply hinder learning; they also became opportunities for growth. Through repeated practice, reflection, and feedback, students began to develop greater vocabulary mastery, improved pronunciation, clearer awareness of narrative structure, and stronger motivation and confidence in using English. Over time, these processes contributed to the gradual formation of sustainable communication habits. Despite these insights, the study was limited in scope. It involved only one class of eleventh-grade students in a Jakarta high school, and the duration of the intervention was restricted to four meetings. In addition, the reliance on qualitative methods such as observation and interview may have introduced subjectivity, and the dual role of the teacher as researcher may have influenced student responses. Therefore, the results should be interpreted cautiously and not generalized to all EFL contexts. Future studies are encouraged to involve larger and more diverse populations, longer interventions, and mixed-method approaches that combine qualitative and quantitative evidence.

Based on the findings, several suggestions can be made. For teachers, designing narrative tasks with gradual complexity is recommended, beginning with simpler activities and progressing toward more cognitively demanding tasks. Adequate scaffolding such as vocabulary input, pronunciation drills, and constructive feedback is essential to help students overcome anxiety and internalize language use. For students, narrative tasks should be viewed as opportunities for practice and habit-building rather than as isolated classroom assignments. They are encouraged to practice consistently, reflect on their performance, and embrace mistakes as part of learning. For future researchers, studies on communication habit formation should be extended to other contexts, including technology-assisted narrative tasks, to explore how digital tools may further support speaking development. In conclusion, this study has highlighted the dual nature of complexity in narrative-based TBLT: while students face significant challenges, those very challenges can become pathways to long-term communicative growth. By turning complexities into opportunities for reflection and practice, narrative tasks can play a main role in building communication habits that extend beyond the classroom and support sustainable language learning.

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