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Teachers' narratives of developing 21st-century communication skills through task-based language teaching in Nepali higher education

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Abstract

Task-based language teaching (TBLT), as a learner-centered pedagogy, fosters students' overall language skills. However, its application in business and professional communication courses, particularly in South Asian higher education, remains underexplored. Drawing on narrative inquiry, this paper explores English language teachers' storied experiences of implementing task-based instruction in graduate-level business and communication courses in Nepal. Five English-language educators from two university campuses were purposively selected as research participants. The participants' narratives about their use of task-based teaching to prepare their students for effective workplace communication were explored through unstructured and semi-structured interviews. A subsequent focus group discussion provided a space for collective storytelling and for participants to extend, confirm, or contest our preliminary interpretations. The data were transcribed and translated from Nepali into English, and analyzed through narrative analysis of each teacher's account, followed by reflexive thematic analysis across accounts. The study revealed three pertinent themes: TBLT for language and workplace communication skills, TBLT for soft skills development, and TBLT for higher-order communication skills. The participants' narratives suggested that TBLT fosters professional etiquette, presentation, public speaking, negotiation, networking, creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills, as well as language proficiency, preparing students for future communication in business and administrative contexts. The study recommends embedding task-based instruction, task-based needs analysis, and performance-based assessment in business and communication curricula and in teacher professional development.

Keywords

task-based language teaching, 21st-century communication skills, language skills, soft skills, higher-order skills, workplace communication, narrative inquiry, business communication

Introduction

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has now been accepted as one of the most influential language teaching approaches worldwide since the 1980s. The origins of task-based teaching to enhance effective language learning through learner experience, relevance, and intellectual efforts draw on Dewey's experiential views on education in the early 1900s (Ellis, 2009). This approach began with the Communicational Language Teaching Project of Prabhu (1987) when both language teachers and learners were frustrated by the limitations of traditional methods and models, such as the Grammar Translation Method and the Presentation, Practice, Production (PPP) model, which focused on form-focused language teaching (Willis, 1996a). The Grammar Translation Method and the PPP model, developed from behaviorist and structural approaches to language learning, emphasize memorization, accuracy, and habit formation (Cutrone, 2025). The introduction of TBLT led to its rise as a student-centered language-teaching approach, with seminal scholarly contributions from authors and researchers such as Rod Ellis (2009), Skehan (1996), and Willis (1996b). The studies suggest that task-based language teaching, as a transformative pedagogy, enhances learners' skills through their engagement in language tasks. Skehan (1996) emphasizes enhancing learners' accuracy, complexity, and fluency, thereby engaging their cognitive processing through task-based instruction. These features enable TBLT to focus on meaning without neglecting form, in which learners acquire language incidentally through their active engagement in pairs and groups in language tasks for meaning-making (Rod Ellis et al., 2020). Features such as learner engagement in meaningful tasks and activities, including discussions, negotiation of meaning, and interaction, differentiate TBLT from traditional methods of language teaching that emphasize language as an object to be systematically taught and intentionally learned (Rod Ellis, 2021).

The implementation of task-based teaching is increasingly observed in English language curricula to facilitate language learning and enhance communication skills. TBLT was developed to foster language learning through pair or group interaction, cognitive processing, and authentic language use for the negotiation of meaning (Nunan, 2004; Samuda & Bygate, 2008). As a student-centered approach, TBLT enhances teacher and student motivation and engagement and fosters language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and linguistic growth, including rhetorical skills, language aspects, and soft skills (Bhandari et al., 2025). Despite such advantages of task-based language teaching and learning, the focus on content memorization through traditional methods, such as the Translation Method or the PPP model, remains prevalent in English language teaching. Memorization does not foster deeper language development, creates disengagement, overlooks learner diversity, and results in ineffectiveness in fostering spontaneous language use, as well as a lack of real exposure to the target language environment (Mammadova, 2025).

Language tasks are designed to enhance learners' communication skills and facilitate their use in the real-world workplace. Scarino et al. (1988) propose six types of tasks: interaction and discussion, interaction and decision-making/transaction, obtaining information and using it, giving information, sharing personal responses, and personal expressions, to foster learners' creativity and

critical thinking, and to enhance their overall real-world communication skills. These skills enhance employees' performance in communication-related tasks in the workplace. However, empirical evidence on how university teachers in South Asia, and in Nepal in particular, use tasks in business and communication courses to develop students' workplace communication remains limited (Bhandari, 2024; Bhandari et al., 2025), even as employers increasingly prioritize analytical thinking, creative thinking, and leadership and social influence (World Economic Forum, 2025). Moreover, little of this research has listened to teachers' own stories of designing and enacting tasks, even though narrative inquiry has become an established way of understanding how language teachers make pedagogical decisions in context (Barkhuizen et al., 2014; Consoli & Barkhuizen, 2021). In this context, this study explores how university English teachers in Nepal narrate their use of task-based instruction to develop students' workplace communication skills.

Literature Review

This section reviews conceptual and empirical scholarship on task-based language teaching (TBLT) in four strands: the conceptual foundations of tasks, empirical evidence on the effectiveness of TBLT, TBLT in business and workplace-oriented courses (including technology-mediated tasks), and teachers' implementation of TBLT in Asian and Nepali contexts. The review closes by identifying the gap addressed in the present study and is followed by the theoretical orientation that frames the analysis.

Tasks and task-based language teaching

Despite its popularity, the term task has been used inconsistently in language education. Ellis (2009) proposes four criteria that distinguish a task from a form-focused exercise: a primary focus on meaning, some kind of gap that learners need to fill, reliance on learners' own linguistic and non-linguistic resources, and a clearly defined communicative outcome beyond the use of language itself. Long (2015) further distinguishes target tasks, the real-world activities learners will perform outside the classroom, from pedagogic tasks, the sequenced classroom approximations of those target tasks identified through needs analysis. Ellis (2017) also differentiates task-based teaching, in which tasks form the unit of the syllabus, from task-supported teaching, in which tasks serve as the practice stage of an otherwise structural syllabus. These distinctions matter for empirical research because, as Boers and Faez (2026) demonstrate, vague descriptions of what counts as a task make it difficult to judge whether reported outcomes can be attributed to TBLT. East (2021), therefore, argues that TBLT is best understood as a coherent set of principles, including learner-centeredness, authentic language use, and the teacher's role in designing, scaffolding, and reflecting on tasks, rather than as a fixed procedure.

Empirical evidence on the effectiveness of TBLT

A growing body of empirical evidence supports the use of tasks to develop learners' communicative abilities. In a meta-analysis of TBLT programs, Bryfonski and McKay (2019) found a strong positive overall effect of task-based instruction on learning outcomes, together with generally favorable perceptions of TBLT among learners and teachers. Classroom-based comparative studies point in the same direction. In a longitudinal study with Japanese university students, Harris and Leeming (2022) reported greater growth in L2 proficiency and self-efficacy

among learners taught through TBLT than among those taught through a presentation-practice-production (PPP) approach, while Cutrone (2025) reported similar advantages of task-based instruction over PPP for developing EFL speaking. Recent studies in higher education have also extended the focus beyond linguistic gains. Hashim et al. (2025) and Saragih et al. (2025) found that task-based learning fostered university students' communication, teamwork, presentation, critical thinking, and digital literacy skills, and Chunliu and Guangsheng (2025) linked authentic tasks with improved communicative competence.

Nevertheless, this evidence should be read with caution. Boers and Faez (2026) re-examined the primary studies included in an earlier meta-analysis and concluded that many were unsuitable for estimating the relative effectiveness of TBLT programs due to unclear task definitions, poorly described comparison conditions, and confounding variables. Much of the literature also relies on short interventions and test-based outcomes, leaving the development of broader 21st-century communication skills, such as collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking, less explored, particularly from the perspectives of the teachers who design and implement tasks.

TBLT in business, ESP, and workplace-oriented courses

TBLT has a natural affinity with English for specific purposes (ESP), including business communication, because both begin with what learners need to do with language in their target domains. Long (2015) argues that task-based needs analysis should identify the target tasks of a profession, and Malicka et al. (2019) illustrated how such an analysis in an ESP context can inform the design and sequencing of pedagogic tasks. In business education, El Arbaoui (2024) surveyed students and teachers at Moroccan business schools and found that both groups viewed TBLT favorably, primarily because tasks were aligned with learners' academic and professional goals. These findings are pertinent to contemporary labor markets, in which employers rank analytical thinking, resilience and flexibility, leadership and social influence, and creative thinking among the most important core skills (World Economic Forum, 2025). Such skills are rarely developed through memorization-based instruction (Mammadova, 2025), but they are inherent in tasks that require learners to negotiate, persuade, plan, and solve problems collaboratively.

Workplace communication is increasingly digital, and recent scholarship has accordingly examined technology-mediated TBLT. Smith and González-Lloret (2021) propose a research agenda for technology-mediated tasks that considers how digital tools reshape task design, interaction, and outcomes, while Chong and Reinders (2020) synthesize qualitative research on technology-mediated TBLT and highlight both its potential to promote interaction and the importance of careful task design and implementation. In a systematic review, Bhandari et al. (2025) concluded that technology-mediated TBLT enhances teacher and student motivation and engagement, and fosters language, rhetorical, and soft skills. Studies of mobile-supported tasks (Fang et al., 2021) and of tasks completed through email, Google Docs, and video-conferencing applications (Tamayo, 2024) similarly suggest that digital platforms extend opportunities for interaction beyond the classroom.

Teachers' implementation of TBLT in Asian and Nepali contexts

Because teachers translate TBLT principles into classroom practice, their beliefs and contextual conditions strongly shape how tasks are used (Branden, 2016). Research in Asian classrooms has repeatedly shown that teachers reinterpret TBLT considering examination

pressures, large class sizes, curricular demands, and their own understandings of tasks (Butler, 2011; Carless, 2004; Littlewood, 2007). Zheng and Borg (2014), for example, found that Chinese secondary school teachers' understandings of task-based teaching were closely associated with communicative speaking activities and that their practices were shaped by contextual constraints such as examinations and class size. Interview-based research with EFL teachers similarly shows that teachers are often willing to use tasks to promote real-world language use even without formal training, but that doing so requires adapted materials, careful planning, and professional support (Rrita, 2024).

In Nepal, TBLT has received growing scholarly attention, but most studies have focused on school-level teaching. B. Bhandari (2024) reported that secondary school teachers in Rupandehi viewed TBLT as useful for developing students' communication, reasoning, and problem-solving abilities but identified exam-oriented curricula, limited resources, students' reluctance to collaborate, and inadequate teacher training as obstacles. Research on how university teachers use tasks in business and communication courses to prepare students, many of whom are already employed, for workplace communication remains scarce. Furthermore, these studies rely mainly on surveys or single interviews; few have used narrative inquiry to trace how teachers' task practices develop over time and across classroom and workplace contexts (Barkhuizen, 2016; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Research gap and research question

The literature establishes that tasks can foster language proficiency and, increasingly, soft skills, but three gaps remain. First, most studies measure short-term linguistic outcomes rather than the broader communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking skills that workplaces demand (World Economic Forum, 2025). Second, research on TBLT in business and professional communication courses has largely been conducted outside South Asia (El Arbaoui, 2024; Hashim et al., 2025). Third, teachers' own narratives of designing and implementing tasks in Nepali higher education remain underrepresented (Bhandari, 2024; Bhandari et al., 2025). The present study addresses these gaps by exploring how university English teachers in Nepal narrate their use of TBLT to develop students' 21st-century communication skills. To meet the purpose of the study and address the gap, this study was guided by the research question: **(RQ)** How do university English teachers narrate the ways task-based language teaching fosters communication, critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity skills in university students?

Theoretical orientations

This study is grounded in the core theoretical foundations of communicative language learning (Hymes, 1972), the interaction hypothesis (Long, 1985), and the sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978). These theories help enhance learners' engagement in interactions, discussions, and the negotiation of meaning, thereby fostering their real-world communication skills. In this study, these theories served as sensitizing lenses rather than a predetermined coding frame: they informed the later stages of interpretation after the teachers' stories had been analyzed on their own terms (Clandinin, 2013; Dahal, 2025).

Communicative language learning

Communicative language learning, as an approach, emerged in the 1970s and 80s when traditional grammar-translation methods and situational language teaching methods received severe criticism for their emphasis on translation and rote learning of language forms. Rooted in sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and Chomsky's Transformational-Generative Grammar, communicative language learning fosters communicative competencies through real-world language use (Tian, 2025). Effective use of communication in students' language development occurs through knowledge and the ability to use the language. Hymes (1972) states that learners need to draw on mental resources, knowledge, and the ability to mobilize these resources in real time.

Although communicative language practice activities are still selected within a predictable range of language use to foster structured communication in this approach, they emphasize interactions and the exchange of information, thereby laying a strong foundation for task-based language teaching (Littlewood, 2007). In addition to helping learners develop communication skills through interaction and fluency in communicative language teaching, task-based instruction encourages language learning through students' active engagement in accomplishing real-world and pedagogic tasks. TBLT, rooted in Second Language Acquisition and Communicative Language Learning theories, seeks to transform traditional teacher-centered methods by promoting collaborative and interactive language learning, and keeping the students at the center (Bhandari et al., 2025). Therefore, despite the communicative approach addressing some needs in language development, efforts to explore more student-centered approaches that ensure learners' engagement in critical thinking, collaboration, and interaction led to the development of more effective approaches, such as task-based language teaching.

Interaction hypothesis model

The Interaction Hypothesis model posits that language learning occurs through interaction, particularly when people exchange ideas to make sense of what another interlocutor expresses (Alasal, 2025). This model claims that learners learn language best when they engage in meaningful interactions. The Interaction Hypothesis Model emphasizes that learners combine their selective attention and language processing capacity to negotiate meaning during language learning. As Ellis (2003) states, the interaction hypothesis, rooted in Hatch's (1978) work on discourse analysis and second language acquisition and in Krashen's input hypothesis models, was advanced to language learning by Long (1981). Negotiation between learners and native speakers or more competent interlocutors initiates interactional adjustment, thereby linking it to language input, internal learner abilities such as selective attention, and output in productive ways (Long, 1996). Thus, by drawing considerable attention in the field of second language acquisition, the interaction hypothesis has led to the development of task-based language teaching, which emphasizes interaction to facilitate language learning.

Sociocultural theory

Sociocultural theory, developed from the work of Vygotsky (1978), stresses that social interactions are essential in students' language learning. It emphasizes that learners acquire language more naturally when they are engaged in social interactions in natural environments,

where more knowledgeable others, such as teachers, seniors, or parents, can facilitate. This corroborates the study by Van den Branden (2016), which highlights the teacher's roles as facilitator, mediator, change agent, and researcher who contribute to students' language learning by designing and implementing tasks that best suit learners' needs, interests, and learning abilities. Similarly, it aligns with other studies that focus on how teachers provide language support or correct learners' production while learners are engaged in a task (Ellis, 2021), and stand back and support learners to accomplish the task on their own (Willis, 1996a). Language learning is affected by three modes of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Gehlot, 2021). The author emphasizes that language learning takes place during pair or group interactions and negotiations, teacher facilitation, and learners' observation and interpretation of the study materials.

The language learning theories highlight the complex interplay among teachers' roles as mediators, facilitators, and change agents; learners' roles as active users of language; and learners' needs, abilities, and interests. The theories also emphasize the need for meaningful social interactions to support language acquisition and to foster students' 21st-century communication skills. In close alignment with these theories, we explore university-level English teachers' narratives about how TBLT fosters collaboration, critical thinking, interaction, and creativity, thereby preparing students for workplace communication.

Methods

Research design

This study employed narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) as a qualitative research design to explore how university English teachers in Nepal experience, interpret, and narrate their use of task-based instruction to develop the workplace communication skills of graduate business and management students. Narrative inquiry rests on the premise that people lead storied lives and make sense of their experiences by telling stories about them; narrative is therefore both the phenomenon under study and the method for studying it (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). It allows for the intimate study of individuals' experiences over time and in context (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). We drew on the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space of temporality (past, present, and imagined future experiences), sociality (the interplay between teachers' personal conditions and the social conditions of classrooms, campuses, and workplaces), and place (the specific institutional settings in which tasks were enacted) as a heuristic for designing the interviews and reading the teachers' accounts (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).Narrative inquiry has become an established methodology in language teaching and learning research because it provides access to experiential knowledge that informs teachers' pedagogical decisions (Barkhuizen, 2022; Barkhuizen et al., 2014; Consoli & Barkhuizen, 2021). Barkhuizen's (2011) notion of *narrative knowledging*, the meaning-making that takes place as teachers and researchers co-construct, analyze, and report stories, was particularly relevant because our aim was not to measure the effectiveness of TBLT but to understand how teachers made sense of designing and implementing tasks in relation to their students' workplace needs. Consistent with the relational ontology of narrative inquiry, we regarded ourselves as co-composers of the teachers' stories rather than neutral collectors of data (Clandinin, 2013; K. C. & Dahal, 2026).

Researchers' positionality

All three authors are teacher-researchers in Nepali higher education. The first and third authors teach English and business communication courses at Tribhuvan University campuses and have used tasks in their own classes, while the second author teaches qualitative research methodology and has experience in narrative and autoethnographic inquiry (Luitel & Dahal, 2021). This insider position helped us build rapport, share linguistic and cultural understandings, and gain access to the participants' professional worlds; however, it also carried the risk of reading our own assumptions about TBLT into the participants' stories. We therefore wrote reflexive memos throughout fieldwork and analysis, and the second author, who was less familiar with the participants, acted as a critical friend who questioned emerging interpretations (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023; Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Research site and participants

The study was conducted at two campuses of Tribhuvan University in Butwal, Rupandehi district, Lumbini Province, Nepal, which offer graduate programs in business studies and management [e.g., MBS/MBA] that include compulsory English and business communication courses. One was a constituent campus of Tribhuvan University, which runs the Master of Business Studies (MBS), in which students are offered a three-credit managerial communication course as, one of the core courses. On the other hand, the second was an autonomous community campus accredited by the University Grants Commission, Nepal. The campus offers a three-credit course—managerial communication—for its Master of Business Administration (MBA) and Master of Business Studies (MBS) programs. Both institutions are in the Rupandehi district. While the number of students in MBS at both campuses is more than 50 in MBS, the MBA class consists of only 36 students. Many students in these programs are working adults who attend morning classes and work in banks, cooperatives, government offices, and private firms during the day. This made the setting particularly suitable for examining how classroom tasks relate to workplace communication.

Five English teachers were selected through purposive, criterion-based sampling (Dahal et al., 2024). The inclusion criteria were (a) at least five years of experience teaching graduate-level English or business communication courses, (b) experience in using tasks in these courses, and (c) willingness to participate voluntarily and to share their experiences over several conversations. The number of participants was guided by information power rather than saturation (Malterud et al., 2016): the aim was narrow, the participants were highly specific to that aim, and the dialogue was sustained through repeated interviews and a focus group, which allowed depth rather than breadth. Small numbers of participants are typical in narrative inquiry for this reason (Barkhuizen et al., 2014; Clandinin, 2013). To protect their identities, the participants are referred to as Teachers A to E. Table 1 summarizes their profiles.

Table 1

Participants' profiles

Participant	Gender	Highest qualification	Teaching experience (years)	Course(s) taught	Campus	Interviews
Teacher A	Male	MPhil	17	Managerial Communication	2	First round: 60 min; Follow-up: 40 min
Teacher B	Female	MPhil	17	Managerial Communication	2	First round: 60 min; Follow-up: 30 min
Teacher C	Male	PhD	16	Managerial Communication	2	First round: 60 min; Follow-up: 20 min
Teacher D	Male	MPhil	12	Business Communication	1	First round: 50 min; Follow-up: 30 min
Teacher E	Female	Master	5	Business Communication	1	First round: 50 min; Follow-up: 30 min

Data collection

Field texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) were generated between February 2026 and June 2026, after ethical approval, through narrative interviews, follow-up semi-structured interviews, and a focus group discussion (Neupane et al., 2026). Each participant took part in [two] individual interviews of approximately [60–70] minutes, conducted [face-to-face at their campuses / online] at times and places of their choosing. The first interview was unstructured and opened with a broad prompt (e.g., "Could you tell me how you came to use tasks in your business communication classes?") to invite participants to share their experiences in their own terms and in their own sequence (Mishler, 1986; Riessman, 2008). Subsequent semi-structured interviews followed up on the episodes, critical incidents, and tensions in the earlier stories and were organized around temporality, sociality, and place, for example, how their task practices had changed over time, how students' workplace experiences entered the classroom, and how institutional conditions enabled or constrained tasks. This movement from open narration to focused follow-up reflects the iterative and relational character of narrative interviewing, in which each conversation builds on the previous one (Barkhuizen et al., 2014; Dahal, 2025). After the individual interviews, we held a 90-minute focus group discussion with all five participants. Rather than treating it as a means of validating the individual accounts, we used the focus group as a space for collective storytelling, in which participants responded to one another's experiences and to our preliminary interpretations and thereby extended, confirmed, or contested them (Birt et al., 2016; Neupane et al., 2026). The interviews and the focus group were conducted in Nepali, and participants were free to move between Nepali and English, because using their preferred language allowed them to express nuance and emotion more fully (Morris, 2015; Temple & Young, 2004). All conversations were audio-recorded with the participants' permission and transcribed verbatim, yielding approximately

10 hours of recordings and 100 pages of transcripts. We also wrote field notes and reflexive memos after each conversation.

Data analysis

Analysis moved from field texts to research texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) in three overlapping stages. First, the transcripts were translated from Nepali into English by the first author and checked against the audio recordings by the third author, who is also bilingual. We treated translation as an interpretive act rather than a neutral transfer of meaning, discussed problematic expressions together, and retained Nepali words where English equivalents would distort meaning (Temple & Young, 2004). Second, following Polkinghorne's (1995) distinction between *narrative analysis* and *analysis of narratives*, we read each participant's transcripts holistically and composed an interim narrative account of each teacher's experience of using tasks, organized around temporality, sociality, and place, so that the storied and contextual character of their experiences was preserved (Barkhuizen, 2016; Riessman, 2008). These interim accounts were shared with the participants for comment before the focus group. Third, we analyzed across the five accounts using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021, 2022), moving through familiarization with the data, coding, generating initial themes, developing and reviewing themes, refining, defining, and naming themes, and writing up. Codes were generated inductively from the teachers' words, and the theoretical orientation (communicative competence, interaction, and sociocultural mediation) informed interpretation only at the later stages of theme development. Coding was managed in MS Excel. The three authors met regularly to compare codes and interpretations and resolved differences through dialogue rather than inter-rater agreement scores, consistent with the reflexive orientation of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Dahal, 2025). This process generated three themes, which are presented in the Findings together with extended excerpts that retain the teachers' voices.

Trustworthiness and ethical considerations

We judged the quality of the inquiry against both general criteria for qualitative trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010) and criteria specific to narrative inquiry, such as the plausibility and coherence of the research texts, wakefulness to our own assumptions, and the relational responsibilities of the inquirers (Clandinin, 2013; Polkinghorne, 2007). Credibility was supported by prolonged engagement through repeated interviews, participants' responses to their interim narrative accounts, and the focus group discussion, which allowed participants to confirm, extend, or challenge our preliminary interpretations (Birt et al., 2016). Transferability was supported through thick descriptions of the participants' institutional contexts and extended verbatim excerpts, which allow readers to judge the resonance of the findings with their own settings. Dependability and confirmability were supported by an audit trail of recordings, transcripts, translations, codes, interim narratives, and analytic memos; by reflexive memoing on our insider positions; and by the authors' collective review of codes and themes (Dahal, 2025; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). The study received ethical approval from the Research Management Cell at Lumbini Banijya Campus, Tribhuvan University, which serves as the institutional ethics review committee of the campus for non-biomedical social and educational research (approval reference no. LBC-20260116-0012, on 16 January 2026, prior to data collection. The study was conducted in accordance with the relevant guidelines and regulations and with the ethical

principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. The participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence, and they gave written informed consent, including consent for audio recording and for publication of anonymized excerpts (Alhabsi, 2024). Because narrative research involves sharing personal and professional stories within small academic communities in which colleagues may recognise one another, we treated ethics as relational and ongoing rather than as a one-off procedural requirement (Clandinin, 2013; K. C. & Dahal, 2026). We used participant codes, removed identifying details such as campus names and students' employers, and gave the participants the opportunity to review and withdraw excerpts before publication. Audio files and transcripts were stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team.

Findings

The examination of data obtained from interviews and a focus group discussion demonstrated the following recurring patterns closely associated with the research problem, purpose, and methodological roadmap. This section presents the teachers' narrated experiences of using TBLT to foster university students' communication skills for the workplace.

TBLT for language and workplace skills

The teachers' narratives from the interviews and the focus group discussion suggested that implementing task-based teaching in business and communication courses fosters both language proficiency and workplace communication skills. The participants shared that both pedagogic and real-world tasks they used with their students were effective in enhancing the learners' proficiency in language use.

> *Teacher A: Students feel comfortable using English with their peers, so I form groups consisting of both bright and slow learners. We create simulated organization environments, where students role-play different roles and use language skills accordingly.*

> *Teacher B: I design or collect tasks from internet sources that require writing, correcting, editing, and presenting the students' work in class. This has enhanced my students' confidence in language use and respect for peers and others from different cultures.*

> *Teacher D: Sometimes my students and I discuss problems related to communication, for example, writing emails, reports, letters (internal and external), proposals, etc. Students gather necessary information and work in groups to create these things.*

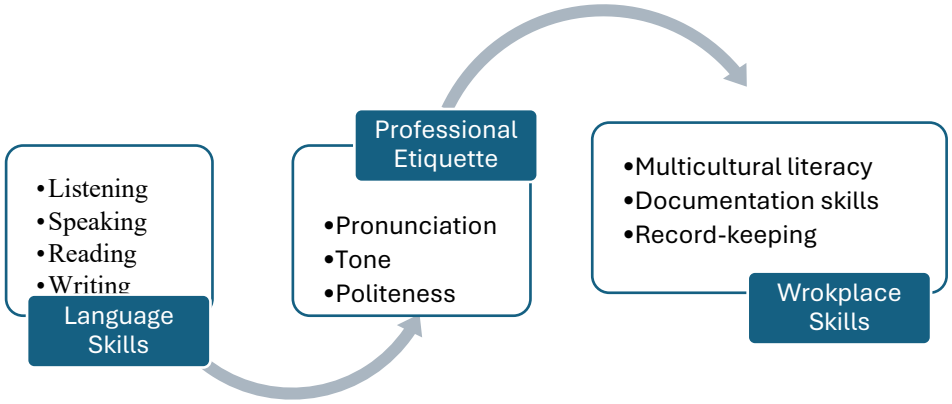
> *Teacher E shared her experience, "For the last few years, I have noticed that my students have become more responsible for their own learning. They share all activities via Gmail and Google Docs to keep records of all activities and use them when needed."*

The data demonstrated that authentic, real-life task-based language communication enhances learners' confidence in using language and improves their politeness and communication etiquette, which are essential for professional communication in the workplace. The participants' interview excerpts revealed that carefully designed TBLT lessons help engage students in task

completion with interest and assess their learning effectively when students are engaged in authentic tasks, helping them adapt to workplace communication. The findings draw on the participants' experiences, where Teacher E stated, ″Since I started using tasks from the workplace and internet sources, such as videos, photographs, texts, etc., to support the curriculum, my students have become more responsible in their own learning.″

Figure 1

TBLT for language and workplace skills



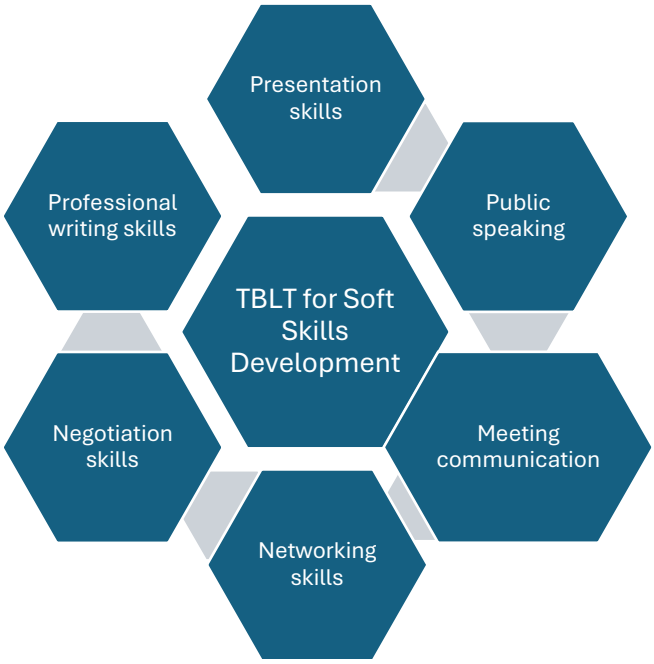
On the whole, the teachers' narratives suggest that TBLT increases learners' self-confidence in language production, improves vocabulary, spelling, revising, and thinking skills, thereby enhancing their confidence in text construction and collaborative skills (see Figure 1). Thus, through authentic interactions, learners develop 21st-century communication skills within TBLT frameworks, including fluency, accuracy, and the negotiation of meaning.

Task-based language teaching for soft skills development

Teachers' perceptions and experiences revealed that carefully designed and implemented language tasks foster learners' soft skills, required for contemporary workplace business and administrative communication. Teacher A stated, "I engage my students in group presentations. They meet in person or sometimes via email and Google Docs. They discuss and negotiate the meaning. They present a report and make a presentation on it. It has helped them develop confidence". Similar experiences were shared by Teacher C as "I use both self-designed and downloaded tasks in the class. They choose their own team leader for the presentation turn by turn, so most of the students have developed confidence to work in teams and face the masses." The teachers shared that their role was to assist students in pathfinding during task accomplishment. Teacher E shared, "When I assign them tasks, they first bring a lot of content into the class. However, I help them use only the materials required to complete that day's tasks".

Figure 2

TBLT for soft skills development



Task-based language teaching (TBLT) curricula emphasize that language is predominantly a means of communication, which is acquired through meaningful tasks (Azizifard, 2024; Rod Ellis, 2009; Willis, 1996b). Learners are expected to develop their communication skills through pair or group work, helping each other understand the message, and developing communication for real-world purposes (see Figure 2). The participants' narratives also demonstrated TBLT's pragmatic applications in the workplace. Teacher B stated:

> *Most of my students have dual roles, students in the morning and employees at other organizations in the afternoon. The practice of writing reports, proposals, and emails, and their presentation in classes has enhanced their networking and negotiation skills in their workplaces.*

Teacher D stated:

> *My students come from different cultures, and they speak Nepali, Maithili, and Magar. They easily shift language codes during task discussion. However, it helps other students to learn more about others' cultures. I believe this helps them adapt to multicultural workplace communications, thereby enhancing their respectful communication skills.*

Task-based language teaching for higher order communication skills

The teachers' narratives suggested that TBLT enhanced students' creativity, collaboration, and time management skills. Teacher C stated, "I'm sometimes surprised to see my students

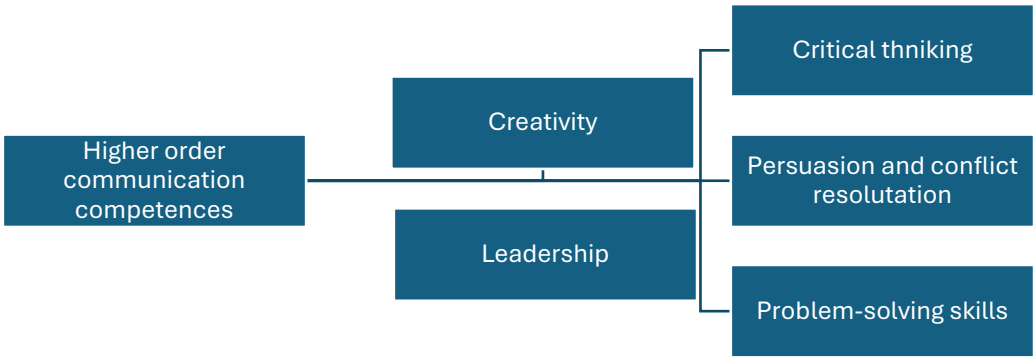
performing beyond their capacity. When I put them in teams, they come up with several solutions to a problem." Teacher B added, "They bring their own records of interactions with customers in the workplace, and the videos are used as tasks in the classroom. They report both verbal and non-verbal communication, politeness, word choice, etc., of the interlocutors in the videos." Carefully designed language tasks foster creativity and critical thinking skills in students through active engagement in pedagogic and real-world tasks.

Communicative language tasks foster learners' leadership and interpersonal skills for collaborating on work with team members to accomplish tasks. Teacher A stated, "Since I began using real-world tasks such as conducting meetings, passing information onto others in pairs and groups, my students have developed active listening skills." Likewise, Teacher E shared similar experiences regarding TBLT's contribution to enhancing communication skills in working students. She stated, "My students have improved writing and presentation skills while working with their peers. They discuss, negotiate meanings, and guide their slow-learning peers to meet standards." Teacher D emphasized collaborative learning through tasks. He said, "The tasks, such as group presentations, email writing, and CVs, enhanced my students' language skills and interpersonal skills if the tasks match their interests and level."

Working with peers and the teacher across all three phases of tasks (pre-, while-, and post tasks) enhances students' creativity and critical thinking skills. Teacher D and Teacher E shared similar experiences: task engagement enhances students' skills in interacting with others to obtain necessary information about the issues they are investigating, analyzing their strengths and shortcomings, and making decisions. In the focus group discussion, Teacher C added, "There are students from different cultures in my class. They bring experiences and examples from their own cultures and help others understand each other's cultures." During task completion, learners draw on their existing knowledge of language and collaboratively contribute to construct new knowledge.

Figure 3

TBLT for higher order communication competences



The students are encouraged to apply their existing language knowledge in and out of the classroom in real-life situations to enhance their communication skills (Ahmed & Bidin, 2016). Teacher C stated:

> *I allow students to use both their mother tongue and the target language during the task completion. Sometimes they debate. However, I encourage them to present the findings in*

English. This has improved their confidence in conflict resolution and problem-solving while working on tasks.

Discussion

This study explored how university English teachers in Nepal narrate the ways TBLT fosters students' communication, critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity skills in business and communication courses. The participants' narratives suggest that TBLT contributed to three interrelated outcomes: language and workplace communication skills, soft skills, and higher-order communication skills. This section interprets these results in relation to the reviewed literature and the theoretical orientation of the study. Narratively, these outcomes were not discrete effects of a method but were embedded in the teachers' professional histories, their institutional conditions, and their students' dual lives as learners and employees (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Barkhuizen, 2016).

TBLT as a Bridge between Language Learning and Workplace Communication

The first theme indicates that teachers used tasks that mirrored the target tasks of business communication, such as writing emails, reports, letters, and proposals, as well as role-playing in simulated organizations. In Long's (2015) terms, these activities functioned as pedagogic tasks derived from real-world target tasks, which explains why teachers perceived them as relevant to students' future work. This resonates with El Arbaoui (2024), whose business school participants valued tasks for their connection to professional goals, and with studies reporting that authentic tasks strengthen learners' confidence, pronunciation, politeness, and appropriate language use (Chunliu & Guangsheng, 2025; Mapiro & Permata, 2024). The teachers' accounts of students planning, drafting, editing, and presenting written documents are also consistent with Gonzalez and Pinzon (2019), who found that TBLT supports all stages of the writing process.

The interactional character of these tasks offers a theoretical explanation for the teachers' observations. Pair and group work created opportunities for the negotiation of meaning and interactional adjustment that the interaction hypothesis identifies as central to language development (Long, 1996), and peer collaboration has been shown to promote problem-solving and comprehension among EFL learners (Chen & Lin, 2021). Teacher A's practice of grouping more and less proficient learners can be interpreted through the sociocultural notion of the zone of proximal development, in which more capable peers scaffold others' performance (Vygotsky, 1978). The teachers' reports that students recorded and shared their work through email and Google Docs further align with research on technology-mediated TBLT (L. P. Bhandari et al., 2025; Smith & González-Lloret, 2021) and with studies showing that digital tools extend interaction and allow learners to revisit their work (Fang et al., 2021; Tamayo, 2024). In workplaces where much communication is digitally mediated, such tasks may therefore develop digital communication practices alongside language proficiency.

Tasks as Sites for Soft Skills and Intercultural Communication

The second theme suggests that group presentations, rotating team leadership, and report writing helped students develop confidence, teamwork, networking, negotiation, and public speaking skills. These results corroborate recent findings from Malaysian higher education, where

task-based learning fostered communication, teamwork, digital literacy, presentation, and problem-solving skills (Hashim et al., 2025; Saragih et al., 2025). They also correspond closely with the skills employers currently prioritize, including leadership and social influence, resilience, and flexibility (World Economic Forum, 2025). A distinctive feature of this study is that many students studied and worked simultaneously. Teacher B's account is that classroom tasks enhanced students' negotiation and networking in their workplaces, suggesting a two-way transfer in which workplace experiences inform classroom tasks and tasks, in turn, feed back into workplace practice. This dual role may strengthen the authenticity that task-based scholars consider essential for meaningful tasks (Ellis, 2009; Long, 2015).

The teachers' descriptions of students moving among Nepali, Maithili, Magar, and English during task discussions highlight the role of multilingual resources in task performance. Rather than viewing such code-switching as a deficiency, the teachers treated it as an opportunity for students to learn about one another's cultures and communication styles, which echoes Cogen's (2001) argument that collaborative tasks can develop multicultural literacy and prepare learners for diverse workplaces. In linguistically diverse contexts such as Nepal, permitting the strategic use of learners' languages during the pre-task and task phases while requiring English in the report phase (Willis, 1996b) appears to balance inclusion with target-language development. The teachers also described their role as facilitating rather than transmitting content, which aligns with the conception of the TBLT teacher as facilitator, mediator, and task designer (Ellis et al., 2020; Van den Branden, 2016).

Task design and higher-order communication skills

The third theme indicates that open-ended, problem-oriented tasks, such as analyzing recorded customer interactions, conducting meetings, and generating multiple solutions to a problem, fostered creativity, critical thinking, active listening, and conflict resolution. Such tasks meet Ellis's (2009) criterion of a clearly defined, non-linguistic outcome, and their open outcomes required learners to recognize problems, interpret, argue, and evaluate rather than reproduce information, which are core components of critical thinking (Marashi & Mirghafari, 2019; Pithers & Soden, 2000). Teachers shared experiences during the focus group discussion and corrected each other's language use, reflecting collaborative dialogue through which learners co-construct linguistic knowledge (Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Their attention to accuracy, fluency, and complexity is consistent with Skehan's (1998) cognitive framework and with Scarino and Liddicoat's (2009) argument that tasks shift learning from knowing about a language to using it for communicative purposes. At the same time, Teacher D's remark that tasks were effective only when they matched students' interests and levels underscores the importance of selecting and sequencing tasks appropriately (Kos, 2024). The collaboration between the teacher and students in selecting task issues, designing communication tasks, and refining them enhanced students' higher-order communication skills.

Contextualized TBLT: possibilities and constraints

Although the teachers' narratives were largely positive, they should be interpreted alongside research indicating that TBLT in Asian contexts is often adapted, reinterpreted, or constrained by examinations, large class sizes, and limited resources (Butler, 2011; Carless, 2004; Zheng & Borg, 2014). In Nepal, schoolteachers have reported similar constraints (B. Bhandari,

2024). The practices described in this study, such as combining self-designed and downloaded tasks, embedding tasks within existing business communication syllabi, and permitting the use of learners' first languages, suggest a locally adapted model that may sit between task-supported and task-based teaching (Ellis, 2017). Making this distinction explicit is important for future research because unclear task definitions limit the comparability of findings across studies (Boers & Faez, 2026). Theoretically, the results show how communicative competence (Hymes, 1972), interaction (Long, 1996), and sociocultural mediation (Vygotsky, 1978) operate together in business communication classrooms, with tasks serving as the site where language, workplace genres, and interpersonal skills are developed simultaneously.

Implications

The study has implications for curriculum developers, institutions, and teachers. First, business and communication curricula in Nepali universities could be organized around target workplace tasks identified through task-based needs analysis involving students, teachers, and employers (Long, 2015; Malicka et al., 2019). Second, teacher professional development should focus on designing, sequencing, and assessing tasks and on using digital tools to support task performance (Bhandari et al., 2025; East, 2021). Third, assessment practices should move beyond memorization-based examinations toward performance-based assessment of authentic tasks, so that curricular intentions and classroom practices are aligned.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study has limitations that also suggest directions for further research. It drew on the narratives of five purposively selected teachers from two campuses who already had experience of implementing TBLT; the results therefore, represent teachers' perceptions rather than measured learning outcomes. Students' and employers' perspectives, classroom observations, and task artifacts were not included. Moreover, as narrative inquiry, the study foregrounds the teachers' storied interpretations, which are shaped by memory, self-presentation, and the relational context of the conversations; the accounts are therefore situated and partial rather than generalizable (Polkinghorne, 2007; Riessman, 2008). Future studies could triangulate teachers' narratives with classroom observations, students' reflections, and employers' evaluations, and longitudinal or mixed-methods designs could examine whether the skills developed through tasks transfer to workplace performance over time (Harris & Leeming, 2022). Further research could also examine how emerging digital and generative AI tools reshape the design and implementation of tasks in business communication courses.

Conclusion

Drawing on the narratives of five university English teachers, this study suggests that task-based language teaching can serve as a transformative pedagogical approach (Luitel & Dahal, 2020) that, in the teachers' experiences, enhances necessary communication skills and constructively responds to students' needs to develop workplace communication. The findings reveal that both pedagogical and real-world tasks in business communication courses prepare students for effective communication essential in the modern workplace. The task-based instruction enhanced students' language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) as well as

workplace skills, including professional tone and etiquette, multicultural literacy, and communication skills for documentation and record-keeping. Similarly, the study explored how professional business communication skills, required in the workplace, are fostered through tasks in business communication curricula. The teachers narrated that task-based teaching fostered students' presentation, negotiation, networking, and public speaking, as well as professional email, report, and proposal writing skills. The narratives also pointed to the development of higher-order communication skills through carefully selected business communication tasks designed by the teachers and collected from online. The important skills enhanced through task-based instruction included creativity, critical thinking, persuasion, conflict resolution, and problem-solving, thereby enhancing learners' leadership skills. As perceived by the teachers, these skills are likely to support students' productivity in the workplace.

The findings of this study can provide guidelines for language teachers, curriculum designers, and institutions to more effectively integrate task-based instruction into English and business communication curricula and classroom practices. While the implementation of task-based language teaching demonstrated improvements in students' language and communication skills for the modern workplace, further research is needed to assess the extent to which these changes translate into sustained practices in workplace settings. Further longitudinal studies could better explore the effectiveness of task-based language teaching.

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Author contributions

LPB: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Validation, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, **ND**: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **BLB**: Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

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Data availability statement

Owing to the personal and potentially identifiable nature of the narrative data, the full transcripts are not publicly available. De-identified excerpts are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Generative AI statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Grammarly (EDU version) only for grammar and language editing. No generative AI tool was used to generate content, analyze data,

or interpret results. The authors reviewed and edited all text and took full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Declarations

Ethical approval

The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the Research Management Cell (RMC), Lumbini Banijya Campus, Butwal, Tribhuvan University, Nepal, which serves as the institutional ethics review committee of the campus for non-biomedical social and educational research (approval reference no. Ref. No.: LBC-20260116-0012; date of approval: 16 January 2026). All procedures performed in this study were carried out in accordance with the relevant guidelines and regulations, including the research ethics guidelines of Tribhuvan University and Lumbini Banijya Campus, and in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki of the World Medical Association.

Consent to participate

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation, including consent for audio recording and for the publication of anonymized excerpts.

Consent to publish

All participants provided their written consent for publication.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest for the authorship and/or publication of this article.

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