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Enhancing Second Language Learning through Task-Based Learning and Small-Group Work: A Conceptual Framework for the English Classroom

Saaid A. Omar[1], Osama A. Jamoom[2*]

[1] Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Zawia, Zawia, Libya
[2] Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Zawia, Zawia, Libya
*Corresponding author's email: Osama Jamoom | o.albashir@zu.edu.ly

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual article examines the pedagogical integration of small-group work and task-based learning (TBL) within the English language classroom. It synthesises theoretical and empirical literature to propose a structured framework for practice. The framework consists of five sequential stages, engagement, exploration, transition, presentation, and reflection, designed to foster learner-centredness, autonomy, and meaningful language use. Drawing on interactionist, output-oriented, and sociocultural perspectives, the article explains how collaborative tasks can enhance learner motivation, participation, depth of understanding, and linguistic accuracy. It further considers how interactive group settings encourage the negotiation of meaning and transform the teacher's role from a traditional controller to a supportive facilitator and consultant. The article concludes with practical implications and systemic challenges for structuring effective group activities to optimise second language learning and communicative competence.

Keywords: Task-Based Learning, Small-Group Work, Learner Autonomy, Negotiation of Meaning, Classroom Interaction

تعزيز تعلم اللغة الثانية من خلال التعلم القائم على المهام والعمل في مجموعات صغيرة: إطار تصوري لتدريس اللغة الإنجليزية في الفصل الدراسي

[1] سعيد عمر، [2] أسامة جموم*

[1] قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية الآداب، جامعة الزاوية، الزاوية، ليبيا

[2] قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية الآداب، جامعة الزاوية، الزاوية، ليبيا

*المؤلف المراسل: أسامة جموم o.albashir@zu.edu.ly

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ملخـــــص البحـــــث

تتناول هذه المقالة النظرية المفاهيمية التكاملَ البيداغوجي بين العمل في مجموعات صغيرة والتعلم القائم على المهام في فصول اللغة الإنجليزية. وتقوم على توليفة من الأدبيات النظرية والتجريبية بهدف اقتراح إطار عملي منظم يتألف من خمس

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مراحل متتالية هي: الانخراط، والاستكشاف، والانتقال، والعرض، والتأمل؛ وقد صممت هذه المراحل لتعزيز التمركز حول المتعلم، واستقلالية المتعلم، والاستخدام الهادف للغة. وبالاستناد إلى منظورات تفاعلية وموجهة نحو المخرجات واجتماعية–ثقافية، توضح المقالة كيف يمكن للمهام التعاونية أن تعزز دافعية المتعلمين ومشاركتهم وعمق فهمهم ودقتهم اللغوية. كما تنظر في الكيفية التي تشجع بها البيئات الجماعية التفاعلية على التفاوض على المعنى، وتحول دور المعلم من متحكم تقليدي إلى ميسر وداعم ومستشار. وتختتم المقالة بعرض الدلالات العملية والتحديات النظامية المرتبطة بتصميم أنشطة جماعية فعالة من شأنها تحسين تعلم اللغة الثانية والكفاءة التواصلية إلى أقصى حد.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التعلم القائم على المهام، العمل في مجموعات صغيرة، استقلالية المتعلم، التفاوض على المعنى، التفاعل الصفي

1. Introduction

In contemporary language education, the shift from teacher-centred pedagogies to learner-centred approaches has highlighted the significance of interactive and communicative methodologies. Among these, task-based learning (TBL) and small-group work have emerged as powerful frameworks that promote active language use, cognitive engagement, and social interaction. Ellis (2003) defines a task as a workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed. Recent systematic reviews have reaffirmed that TBL prioritises authentic materials, meaningful communication, and targeted feedback, thereby bridging the gap between knowledge of the target language and its practical use (Adipat et al., 2025).

Small-group work, when systematically structured, operationalises the principles of TBL by providing learners with expanded opportunities for meaningful interaction. Long and Porter (1985) provided the foundational rationale for small-group work in the second language classroom, arguing that the negotiation work possible in group activity makes it an attractive alternative to teacher-led discussion. Their work established that group work generates an environment conducive to modified input and output production, thereby accelerating second language learning. Contemporary research has continued to confirm these benefits; Leeming (2024), for instance, notes that group work has become ubiquitous in language education, with a growing body of research demonstrating the clear benefits of interaction and output on language acquisition.

The theoretical underpinnings of this approach are further supported by Swain's (2005) Output Hypothesis, which posits that output can facilitate learning through four functions: enhancing fluency, triggering noticing, testing hypotheses, and promoting metalinguistic reflection.

Recent meta-analytic work by Boers and Faez (2026) has continued to explore the relative effectiveness of TBLT programmes, providing updated evidence on the conditions under which task-based instruction yields optimal outcomes.

This article is conceptual rather than empirical. It synthesises established and recent research in second language learning (SLL) and language pedagogy to offer an integrated framework for implementing TBL and small-group work in secondary and tertiary English classrooms. It addresses a significant gap in the literature by connecting established theory with practical pedagogical stages, thereby offering teachers and curriculum designers a coherent model for implementation.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Task-Based Learning as a Meaning-Focused Approach

TBL represents a departure from traditional presentation–practice–production (PPP) models of language instruction. In PPP, language is typically introduced in a controlled manner, practised through drills or exercises, and then produced in freer activities. TBL reverses this logic by placing meaning-focused communication at the centre of the learning process. Learners engage in tasks that require them to use language to achieve a non-linguistic outcome, such as solving a problem, reaching a decision, or creating a product. Richards and Rodgers (2014) situate TBL within a broader family of communicative approaches, noting that it prioritises real language use and learner engagement over the explicit teaching of grammatical rules. A recent systematic review by Adipat et al. (2025) confirms that TBLT benefits students through improved interest and active language utilisation, while also emphasising the importance of adjusting instruction based on student level, teacher preparedness, and task sequence structure.

Ellis (2003) argues that tasks can be designed to promote both fluency and accuracy, provided that they are sequenced and supported appropriately. A key distinction is between focused tasks, which are designed to elicit particular linguistic features, and unfocused tasks, which are intended to encourage general communication. In practice, teachers may combine both types, using focused tasks to draw attention to specific forms and unfocused tasks to develop overall communicative competence.

2.2 Interaction, Negotiation of Meaning, and Second Language Learning

The interactionist perspective on SLL provides a strong theoretical rationale for small-group work. Long (1996) proposed that comprehensible input alone is insufficient for learning; rather,

the negotiation of meaning that arises when communication breakdowns occur provides a crucial mechanism for linguistic development. When learners interact, they frequently encounter moments of misunderstanding. These moments create opportunities for clarification requests, confirmation checks, and comprehension checks, which in turn lead to modified input and output.

Pica (1987) demonstrated that the type of task significantly affects the quality and quantity of negotiation. Information-exchange tasks, in which each participant possesses unique knowledge that must be shared to complete the task, generate more opportunities for negotiation than decision-making tasks. In decision-making tasks, stronger or more proficient learners may dominate the conversation, leaving weaker learners with fewer opportunities to speak. In information-exchange tasks, by contrast, participation is more symmetric because each learner has an equal amount of knowledge to contribute. This finding has important implications for task design: if teachers wish to maximise negotiation, they should incorporate information gaps, jigsaw structures, or collaborative problem-solving components. Recent research by Jabbari and Eslami (2023) has extended this line of inquiry into digital contexts, demonstrating that negotiation routines remain central to L2 learning across modalities.

Foster (1998) provided a classroom perspective on the negotiation of meaning, examining how learners modify interaction in small-group versus pair work. Her research highlights that the relationship between interaction and learning is mediated by a complex array of task, learner, and contextual variables. This suggests that small-group work is not automatically beneficial; its effectiveness depends on how tasks are designed, how groups are organised, and how teachers support the interactional process.

2.3 Output, Collaborative Production, and Linguistic Development

Swain's (2005) Output Hypothesis complements the interactionist perspective by emphasising the role of production in language learning. Output serves several functions: it promotes fluency, triggers noticing of gaps in knowledge, allows learners to test hypotheses about the target language, and provides opportunities for metalinguistic reflection.

Collaborative output tasks, in which learners work together to produce language, are particularly effective because they combine production with interaction. When learners co-construct a text, solve a problem, or prepare a presentation, they must negotiate meaning, discuss language choices, and revise their output. These processes encourage deeper processing of linguistic forms and can lead to improved accuracy. Recent research on online collaborative

writing has shown that synchronous modes may offer more language learning opportunities and more positive learning experiences than asynchronous modes, though both can support linguistic development (Zhang & Liu, 2023). Such tasks are most effective when they have a clear outcome, when learners are accountable for their contributions, and when the teacher provides appropriate scaffolding.

2.4 Sociocultural Theory and the Zone of Proximal Development

Sociocultural theory offers a complementary lens for understanding small-group work. Vygotsky (1978) introduced the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which represents the distance between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance from a more knowledgeable other. In collaborative group settings, peers can serve as mediators of learning, providing scaffolded support that enables each other to accomplish tasks beyond their individual current capabilities.

Wood (1998) emphasised that learning is socially mediated and that children's thinking develops through interaction with more competent others. Although his work focused on child development, the principles apply to language learners of all ages. In small-group work, learners can scaffold each other's language use by modelling appropriate forms, offering corrective feedback, and co-constructing meaning. Recent research by Kotkavuori et al. (2022) has explored how native peers can act as mediators and experts in language learning in higher education, providing empirical support for the continued relevance of sociocultural principles in contemporary classrooms.

2.5 Learner Autonomy and Motivation

The integration of TBL and small-group work also has important implications for learner autonomy and motivation. Breen (2001) argued that learners contribute actively to the language learning process and that their beliefs, attitudes, and experiences shape what they learn. When learners are given opportunities to co-plan tasks, choose topics, and evaluate their own progress, they develop a stronger sense of ownership over their learning.

Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) emphasised the importance of group dynamics in the language classroom. They noted that the quality of the group's cohesion and the nature of its interactional norms significantly affect learning outcomes. When learners work collaboratively toward a common goal, they develop a sense of mutual accountability and collective efficacy that enhances both motivation and achievement. Recent research on learner autonomy in English

language learning has further demonstrated a statistically significant positive connection between technology integration and the development of learner autonomy, alongside improvements in reading, writing, and listening competencies (Abrahem et al., 2026; Albshkar, 2026; Hmouma, 2014; Kaewkamnerd et al., 2024; Masoud, 2026).

3. A Conceptual Framework for Small-Group TBL

To ensure that small-group work is effective rather than merely social, teachers must structure classroom activities systematically. Reid, Forrestal, and Cook (1989) proposed that learning in small groups involves a dynamic process comprising several sequential stages. Drawing on their insights, this article presents a five-stage framework: engagement, exploration, transition, presentation, and reflection.

3.1 Engagement

The engagement stage sets the foundation for effective collaborative learning. At this stage, teachers introduce the topic, activate learners' prior knowledge, and establish the relevance of the task to learners' lives and interests. According to Reid et al. (1989), the engagement phase requires that students acquire information or take part in an experience that initiates learning, and they need a common ground to base their learning upon. Input may be delivered through teacher-led introductions, textbooks, reference materials, audio-visual media, or blackboard explanations.

A critical feature of this stage is fostering intrinsic motivation by helping learners understand the rationale behind examining a particular topic. As Reid et al. (1989) emphasised, students need to recognise that learning and conceptual development are actively taking place, and curiosity regarding the learning objectives drives their desire to solve problems and achieve the required outcomes collaboratively with teacher guidance. Recent research on TBLT has confirmed that tasks need to be something that students find valuable in their future lives in order to be effective (Adipat et al., 2025).

The engagement stage also involves establishing a positive affective climate that encourages risk-taking. Because learners may feel less anxious and more confident when interacting with peers than during whole-class discussions, teachers should explicitly frame the activity as a collaborative endeavour in which mistakes are viewed as opportunities for learning rather than as failures.

3.2 Exploration

The exploration stage is characterised by active learner engagement with new information. Learners work in small groups to investigate the topic, drawing on their existing knowledge and experiences while encountering new concepts and linguistic forms. Reid et al. (1989) stated that learners at this stage "can make tentative judgments as they bring their past experience and understanding to bear, and they are free to make mistakes or not fully understand" (p. 20). This tolerance for approximation is essential for reducing affective filters and encouraging risk-taking in the target language.

This stage is particularly important for the negotiation of meaning. When learners encounter comprehension difficulties, they must work collaboratively to repair communication breakdowns, thereby creating the conditions for learning. Pica's (1987) research demonstrated that the type of task significantly affects the quality and quantity of negotiation. Recent research by Yan and Goh (2024) has investigated the impact of task type and task complexity on negotiation of meaning in young learners of Chinese as a second language, further confirming that negotiation continues to play a facilitative role in second language acquisition. Teachers should therefore design tasks that incorporate information gaps, jigsaw structures, or collaborative problem-solving components to ensure that all learners have opportunities to participate actively.

3.3 Transition

The transition stage bridges exploration and presentation, providing learners with opportunities to consolidate their understanding and prepare for peer teaching. During this phase, groups synthesise their findings, organise their knowledge, and design the materials they will use to teach their peers. This stage is particularly important for the development of linguistic accuracy, as the pressure to produce accurate materials for a peer audience drives learners to refine their written and spoken output.

Research on collaborative output tasks supports the effectiveness of this stage. When learners know that their work will be scrutinised by peers, they invest greater care in ensuring linguistic accuracy, which promotes deeper processing of linguistic forms. Recent research on collaborative writing tasks has demonstrated that these tasks require heightened engagement with language and can be mediated by the number of language-related episodes and learners' patterns of interaction. The transition stage also provides opportunities for teachers to diagnose learners' understanding and provide targeted support. By circulating among groups, the teacher

can identify persistent misconceptions, offer timely clarification, and ensure that all groups are prepared for the presentation phase.

3.4 Presentation and Peer Teaching

The presentation and peer teaching stage serves as both a culminating activity and an assessment opportunity. Each group presents its findings to the class, with members rotating roles such as vocabulary presenter, media operator, and discussion chair. As Reid et al. (1989) documented, "having to explain what they have learned to an interested group reinforces their understanding of new information and, in fact, often enables them to test for themselves whether they really know what they are presenting" (p. 24).

Peer teaching has been shown to produce significant benefits for both tutors and tutees. Assinder (1991) provided an influential model of peer teaching in which learners prepared and delivered video-based lessons to their peers, finding that the approach enhanced both linguistic and metacognitive development. Spratt and Leung (2000) revisited peer teaching and peer learning, confirming that these approaches can improve motivation, engagement, and language skills. Topping and Ehly (1998) and Falchikov (2001) similarly documented the benefits of peer-assisted learning in higher education. Recent research by Sun and Jiang (2025) has continued to explore the role of peer facilitation in language learning, providing updated insights into the conditions under which peer teaching is most effective.

A key advantage of peer teaching is the feedback that presenters receive. Reid et al. (1989) noted that "the feedback students receive enables them to determine how successful their work has been" (p. 24). During this stage, teachers also evaluate the extent of student learning, identifying areas of mastery, lingering uncertainties, and concepts requiring further review.

3.5 Reflection

The reflection stage closes the learning cycle by encouraging learners to engage in metacognitive processing. Reid et al. (1989) emphasised that "by looking back at what they have learned and the process they have gone through, students can gain a deeper understanding of both the content and the learning process itself" (p. 26). Students engage in self-assessment by addressing reflective prompts such as: What have I learned? How important is it to me? What do I need to learn next?

This metacognitive practice serves multiple functions. For learners, it promotes self-regulation and the development of learning strategies that can be transferred to future tasks. For teachers,

it provides valuable data about programme efficacy and informs subsequent instructional decisions. Recent research on self-regulated language learning has highlighted the importance of metacognitive strategy instruction in fostering learner autonomy, with studies demonstrating that explicit instruction in metacognitive strategies can enhance both autonomy and language proficiency. Reflection can be conducted through various modalities: individual written reflections, group discussions, exit tickets, or structured self-assessment rubrics.

4. Pedagogical Rationale and Expected Benefits

4.1 Motivation, Participation, and Cognitive Engagement

The literature consistently suggests that TBL and small-group work can enhance learner motivation and participation. Pair and small-group activities provide learners with more time to speak the target language than teacher-fronted activities and promote learner autonomy and self-directed learning. Additionally, learners may feel less anxious and more confident when interacting with peers than during whole-class discussions. Hattie (2009), in his synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses, reported a substantial effect size for cooperative learning when compared with individual work, placing it among the more effective instructional strategies.

Group discussions and peer teaching also promote deeper understanding by requiring learners to articulate their knowledge, respond to questions, and defend their interpretations. As Reid et al. (1989) observed, the act of explaining to an interested group reinforces understanding and enables presenters to test their own comprehension. This process of explanation and elaboration promotes the kind of deep cognitive processing that leads to durable learning. Recent research on peer teaching has confirmed these benefits, with studies demonstrating improvements in pronunciation accuracy, vocabulary usage, fluency, and confidence among learners who participate in peer teaching activities.

4.2 Negotiation of Meaning and Linguistic Development

Small-group work creates abundant opportunities for the negotiation of meaning, which is a critical mechanism for second language learning. Long and Porter (1985) argued that the negotiation work possible in group activity makes it an attractive alternative to teacher-led discussion because it provides more opportunities for modified input and output production. The research on negotiation of meaning sequences, comprising trigger, indicator, response, and reaction to response, demonstrates that these interactional processes make linguistic form salient at precisely the moment when learners are attempting to convey meaning, thereby

facilitating noticing and intake. Recent research has extended these findings to digital and hybrid contexts, demonstrating that negotiation routines remain central to L2 learning across modalities (Jabbari & Eslami, 2023).

The pressure to produce accurate materials for peer groups also drives learners to refine their written and spoken accuracy. When learners collaboratively review and correct each other's written work, they engage in metalinguistic discussion that can promote grammatical development. Swain's (2005) Output Hypothesis provides a theoretical explanation for this phenomenon: when learners produce language and receive feedback, they may notice gaps in their knowledge and modify their output accordingly. This cycle of production, feedback, and revision is central to the development of linguistic accuracy. Recent research on collaborative writing has further demonstrated that these tasks can lead to enhanced engagement with language and improved written performance (Zhang & Liu, 2023).

4.3 Autonomy, Responsibility, and Mutual Respect

TBL and small-group work shift the locus of responsibility from the teacher to the learner. When learners co-plan the curriculum, choose learning paths, and take responsibility for individual and group outcomes, their intrinsic motivation is significantly enhanced. The literature on learner autonomy indicates that autonomy is linked to enhanced language proficiency and involves taking charge of one's learning. Recent research has explored how metacognitive strategy instruction can foster learner autonomy, with studies in EFL contexts demonstrating that explicit instruction in metacognitive strategies enhances both autonomy and language proficiency (Kaewkamnerd et al., 2024).

The role rotation characteristic of well-structured group work, where learners alternate between being learner, teacher, problem-solver, and material writer, reinforces self-confidence and peer appreciation. When learners experience each other as competent contributors, they develop mutual respect that enhances the social fabric of the classroom and creates a supportive climate for risk-taking. This aligns with the research on group dynamics, which emphasises that the quality of the group's cohesion and its interactional norms significantly affects learning outcomes (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). This shift in responsibility also has implications for the teacher's role. Instead of functioning as a controller of learning, the teacher becomes a facilitator, counsellor, and consultant.

5. Challenges and Implementation Considerations

5.1 Systemic Barriers and Teacher Preparation

Despite the clear benefits of TBL and small-group work, systemic barriers can impede implementation. Rigid, centrally mandated syllabi or political-administrative curriculum shifts can leave educators ill-equipped to adapt communicative techniques effectively. Teachers may face pressure to cover prescribed content within tightly constrained timelines, leaving little room for the more open-ended, learner-centred activities that characterise effective TBL. Addressing these barriers requires both top-down and bottom-up efforts. At the policy level, curriculum frameworks should be designed with sufficient flexibility to accommodate communicative methodologies. At the institutional level, teachers should receive targeted in-service training workshops, ideally led by qualified specialists, to develop the skills needed to implement TBL and small-group work effectively. Recent research has identified a lack of technological accessibility, reluctance to learn technological tools, and a lack of teacher training as key challenges experienced in technology-mediated TBLT contexts, underscoring the need for systemic support (Bhandari et al., 2025).

5.2 Preparing Learners and Designing Tasks

Students must receive explicit training in collaborative discussion skills rather than being placed in groups without preparation (Kutnick & Rogers, 1994). Research has shown that small-group work can fare poorly when learners lack the interactional skills needed to collaborate effectively. Training should address skills such as active listening, turn-taking, providing constructive feedback, and managing disagreement. Teachers should model these skills and provide opportunities for learners to practise them in low-stakes activities before expecting them to collaborate on complex tasks.

Materials must also match learners' proficiency levels and interest spheres. Tasks that are too difficult lead to frustration and reliance on the first language, while tasks that are too easy fail to promote linguistic development. The research on learner, learner interaction suggests that tasks should be calibrated to provide an appropriate level of challenge, difficult enough to require negotiation but not so difficult as to be demotivating. Recent research on collaborative writing tasks has demonstrated that task complexity influences collaborative dialogue and written texts, with lower proficiency learners benefiting from appropriately calibrated tasks. Teachers should also incorporate diverse communicative strategies, including role-play, simulations, and seminars, to encourage autonomous exploration (Reece & Walker, 1997).

5.3 Time, Modelling, and the Teacher's Role

Sufficient classroom time must be allocated for guided preparation and model demonstration. Teachers should not assume that learners will intuitively know how to work effectively in groups; rather, they should provide explicit modelling of collaborative processes, including how to negotiate roles, how to manage time, and how to resolve conflicts constructively. Classroom management also requires attention to the physical environment. Strategic spatial arrangement, such as moving furniture to facilitate group interaction, and teacher positioning can ensure seamless communication without intruding upon student autonomy.

The successful implementation of TBL and small-group work requires a significant reorientation of the teacher's role. Rather than functioning as the primary source of knowledge and the controller of classroom discourse, the teacher becomes a facilitator, counsellor, and consultant. This role transformation requires teachers to develop new skills: observing group dynamics, diagnosing learning difficulties, providing targeted feedback, and knowing when to intervene and when to allow learners to work through challenges independently. Long and Porter (1985) emphasised that the negotiation work possible in group activity makes it an attractive alternative to teacher-led discussion, but this potential is realised only when teachers create the conditions for meaningful interaction.

5.4 Assessment and Accountability

Finally, assessment practices must be aligned with the goals of TBL and small-group work. If assessment focuses exclusively on individual, discrete-point grammar tests, learners may not see the value of collaborative tasks. Teachers should consider incorporating formative assessment, peer assessment, and self-assessment into their evaluation practices. Jacobs, Power, and Loh (2002) provide practical guidance on cooperative learning, including strategies for assessing group work fairly and holding individual learners accountable for their contributions.

6. Conclusion

Small-group work and task-based learning should form an integrated component of modern pedagogical practice across secondary and tertiary education. The theoretical foundations, drawn from interactionist, output-oriented, and sociocultural perspectives, provide a robust rationale for the pedagogical framework presented in this article. The evidence from the literature suggests that structured small-group tasks can enhance motivation, participation, negotiation of meaning, depth of understanding, learner autonomy, mutual confidence, and linguistic accuracy.

While individual study and whole-class instruction retain their respective values, they should flow naturally from a classroom structure anchored in small-group collaboration. By embracing methodological variety, educators can successfully address diverse learner needs and foster sustainable communicative competence. The five-stage framework, engagement, exploration, transition, presentation, and reflection, provides a coherent architecture for implementing TBL and small-group work in ways that maximise their potential for promoting second language learning.

This article is conceptual in nature and does not claim to offer empirical validation of the framework. Future research should continue to investigate the conditions under which small-group work is most effective, including the optimal composition of groups, the characteristics of tasks that promote high-quality negotiation, and the role of teacher mediation in supporting collaborative learning. Recent systematic reviews have called for more longitudinal research on task design, implementation, and assessment in technology-mediated TBLT contexts (Bhandari et al., 2025). As language educators confront the challenges of preparing learners for effective communication in a globalised world, the integration of TBL and small-group work offers a principled and theoretically grounded approach to developing communicative competence and learner autonomy.

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