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Task-Based Microlearning: Fostering Transferable ESL Communication Competencies for Professional Settings

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Abstract

In the modern ESL (English as a Second Language) classroom, preparing learners to transition into the sphere of professional communication requires instructional approaches that are:

a. time efficient

b. transferable to real world contexts

This paper posits that task-based microlearning offers a potent pedagogical strategy to achieve these objectives. The purpose of the study is to explore how short, task-based activities can prepare learners for real world professional communication in time constrained learning contexts. The study adopts a mixed method, classroom-based design with intermediate (B1-B2) ESL learners enrolled in a professional Diploma course. Over a eight-week period, learners engaged in ten to fifteen minute workplace micro tasks simulating authentic professional situations such as responding to emails, delivering brief oral updates, clarifying instructions, participating in discussions and providing feedback. Data was collected through task performance rubrics, learner reflections, classroom observations, and post intervention surveys focusing on skill transferability. Preliminary findings indicate that this approach enhances clarity, professional register, and pragmatic appropriacy in spoken and written communication. Learners demonstrated increased communicative competence and confidence. The short and focused nature of microlearning reduced cognitive load, increased participation, and encouraged Contextualise language use. The study highlights task-based microlearning as a scalable teaching strategy that can be used to align with employability goals, while also accommodating the issue of reduced attention span of learners. The findings offer practical implications for ESL curriculum design and classroom practice in preparing learners for modern day workplace communication needs globally.

Keywords

ESL pedagogy, Microlearning, professional communication, task-based language teaching (TBLT), transferable skills.

BACKGROUND

The impetus for this study stems from the recognition that language acquisition undergoes a contextual shift when applied to specific professional domains. In the context of maritime profession, English is used primarily for brief, task-driven communication rather than extended discourse. Maritime English, as a specialized branch of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), therefore requires instructional approaches that reflect the functional, and situational nature of workplace interactions where communication is often embedded within operations- not merely outside of it. This need highlights the relevance of an approach such as task-based microlearning (TB/ML), which emphasises short, authentic communication tasks designed to mirror real-world operational demands.

Contemporary ESL classrooms increasingly function as transitional spaces between academic learning and professional communication. Learners are expected not only to develop linguistic accuracy but also develop linguistic situational awareness, in order to use English effectively in real-world workplace contexts. Unfortunately, traditional ESL instructional models often rely on conventional and often outdated practices such as extended lessons, isolated skill practice, and simulated tasks that require substantial classroom time. Additionally, these approaches may not adequately reflect the brief, purpose driven communication demands of the learner's future workplace. This challenge is intensified by the fact that, ESL programmes particularly professional diploma and vocational courses- operate under significant time constraints. Learners must acquire transferable communication skills within limited instructional hours while balancing academic and professional commitments. This has created a need for instructional strategies that are both time-efficient and capable of supporting real-world skill transfer.

This necessitates pedagogical approaches that move beyond traditional grammar-translation methods, emphasizing functional language use and authentic communicative engagement [1]. Task-based microlearning (TB/ML) responds to these challenges by combining the authenticity of task-based instruction with the brevity of microlearning. By engaging learners in short, focused micro tasks, TB/ML aims to provide frequent, and Contextualise practice that mirrors real professional communication. Despite its intuitive relevance to modern ESL contexts, the pedagogical potential of task-based microlearning for

developing transferable workplace communication skills remains largely under-explored, motivating the present study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides a comprehensive overview of existing research concerning microlearning in Second Language Acquisition and its specific applications within English for Specific Purposes. It delves into the theoretical underpinnings of task-based language teaching and microlearning, two methodologies that, when integrated, hold significant potential for fostering transferable ESL communication skills in professional contexts, particularly given the contemporary emphasis on outcome-oriented language learning [2]. Studies have demonstrated that task-based instruction enhances fluency, learner engagement, and pragmatic awareness. However, much of this research focuses on tasks implemented over extended periods or within full-length classroom sessions, with limited attention to time-efficient task design. The integration of microlearning principles, namely brevity and focus on a single skill or sub-skill, offers a promising avenue to address this gap by delivering targeted linguistic and communicative practice in short, easy to digest segments.[3]. This approach is particularly pertinent for the present crop of Gen-Z learners who often exhibit shorter attention spans and a preference for immediate feedback, and technology-driven instructional designs. [2]. This synthesis of task-based pedagogy with microlearning methodologies seeks to address the challenges of time constraints and the demand for practical, transferable communication skills in vocational and professional ESL settings [4].

MOTIVATION AND OBJECTIVE

English learners from semi-urban and rural backgrounds of India often enter professional diploma programmes with limited exposure to authentic workplace communication styles. While their B1–B2 proficiency allows them to understand instructions and participate in classroom activities, many experience difficulty using English confidently and appropriately in time-bound professional interactions such as reporting, clarification, and feedback. This often stems from the lack of opportunities to engage in genuine communicative tasks that replicate the demands of the modern professional environment, thereby hindering the development of contextually appropriate language use [2]. The standardized and abstract lessons, that are mostly sans context, (for instance ordering food at a restaurant, asking for directions etc.) of ESL classrooms will not serve these learners in transitioning into their workplace. Therefore, when it comes to employability, educators are faced with the need for a pedagogical approach that specifically targets the development of transferable communication skills through practical, workplace-relevant activities [4]. Multiple studies speak of classroom practices with, "*a distinct emphasis on technical proficiency in Maritime English, yet a noticeable gap exists in addressing socio-pragmatic aspects of communication. Phenomenological observation reveals a spectrum of cadet engagement levels, prompting a critical re-evaluation of pedagogical strategies. Strategic filling distribution brings to light a disparity between perceived theoretical relevance and the practical application of English, advocating for a more scenario-based approach to language learning*" [5]. This study therefore aims to investigate the effectiveness of task-based micro learning in bridging this gap by providing scaffolded, bite-sized learning experiences that simulate real-world professional communication scenarios, thereby equipping learners with the necessary skills for seamless transition into the modern workforce. The primary objectives of this study are to:

1. Examine the effectiveness of task-based microlearning in developing transferable ESL communication skills among B1–B2 level cadets undergoing maritime training.
2. Explore the extent to which short, workplace-oriented micro tasks support the transfer of classroom learning to professional communication contexts.
3. Investigate cadets' engagement and participation in short, task-based activities within training environments with severe time-constraints.

METHODOLOGY

The task-based microlearning activities were aligned with the communicative demands faced by cadets undergoing professional maritime-oriented training. Each micro task reflected routine workplace interactions common in structured, hierarchical, and time-sensitive environments, such as responding to official emails, delivering brief operational updates, seeking clarification of instructions, refusing requests within constraints, and participating in task-focused discussions. The progression from controlled written tasks to interactive spoken tasks mirrored the communicative trajectory cadets experience as they transition from training contexts to professional settings. By embedding these tasks within short, time-bound activities, the design accounted for the intensive training schedules and cognitive demands characteristic of cadet programmes. Collectively, the micro tasks enabled cadets to rehearse transferable communication routines that are directly applicable to real-world operational and workplace interactions.

This study involves a mixed-methods approach carried out in a Maritime English classroom, to gather:

a. quantitative data on skill development and qualitative insights into learner perceptions and/ or experiences.

The quantitative phase employed a research approach on target groups to assess the impact of task-based microlearning interventions on specific communication competencies and skills. The qualitative phase, meanwhile, utilized interviews and focus groups to explore the nuances of participant experiences and the perceived utility of this pedagogical approach in real-world professional contexts [6].

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Participants

Participants were cadets enrolled in a professional diploma programme, and the average demographic was nineteen years of age. All participants demonstrated B1–B2 level English proficiency, enabling them to engage in structured technical communication tasks while still requiring pedagogical support for workplace language use. Participation was part of regular classroom instruction. Ethical considerations, including informed consent and anonymity, were strictly adhered to throughout the study. This demographic profile provides a near-typical representation of the maritime trainee community.

The teaching approach was implemented over an eight-week period as part of a professional English course. Learners participated in task-based microlearning activities, each lasting ten-fifteen minutes. The micro tasks simulated authentic workplace communication, including responding to emails, delivering brief oral updates, clarifying instructions, participating in discussions, and providing feedback. Tasks were embedded into regular lessons and followed a simple cycle of task briefing, task performance, and brief reflection and/or feedback.

Data was collected using multiple tools to capture both observable communication outcomes and learner perceptions of skill transferability. Task performance rubrics used during micro tasks included clarity of expression, use of professional register, and pragmatic appropriacy in spoken and written communication. These rubrics were shared with the learners and provided a consistent criterion for monitoring their progress across the eight-week period.

Learners also filled out brief reflection notes at regular intervals that complemented performance data. These reflections focused on perceived relevance and utility of the micro tasks, challenges faced during task completion, and instances where learners applied classroom communication strategies in simulated workplace contexts.

Classroom observations were also used to record metrics such as learner participation, engagement levels during different activities, and interaction patterns during the activities. This helped contextualise performance outcomes and identify recurring behaviours related to confidence and peer interaction.

Finally, post-activity surveys were administered to gather learner perspectives on the transferability of communication skills developed through the micro tasks. Survey items explored factors such as learner's cognitive load, self-confidence in applying these skills beyond the classroom and their perceptions of relevance to real-world professional communication. This comprehensive data collection strategy aimed to triangulate findings, thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of the research conclusions regarding the efficacy of task-based microlearning in ESL instruction for professional communication [7].

STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTION

This study contributes to ESL pedagogy by providing classroom-based evidence for the effectiveness of task-based microlearning (TB/ML) in developing transferable workplace communication skills. The study demonstrates that short, task-based activities rooted in workplace realities can support measurable improvements in clarity of expression, use of professional register, and pragmatic appropriacy, as evidenced through performance rubrics and observations. Further, this research documents how micro tasks can be systematically integrated into regular ESL instruction without overshooting class time. Data showed improved task completion within time limits and greater control over concise, purpose-driven communication. This study also addresses a critical gap in existing literature by offering a practical, replicable model for integrating microlearning into ESL curricula, particularly for vocational training contexts such as maritime education.

Most importantly, it provides robust evidence that participants were able to apply classroom-practised communication lessons to workplace simulations, professional discussions, and real-life training contexts. These outcomes suggest that repeated exposure to authentic micro tasks supports learners by bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical professional demands.

The study also examines the learning challenges faced by underrepresented demographics such as Intermediate level maritime- trainee cadets from semi-urban (or peri-urban) and rural areas of India, who possess considerable functional English proficiency but limited professional communication competence.

Overall, the findings offer practical, evidence-informed guidance for ESL educators seeking time-efficient strategies aligned with employability and modern workplace communication demands.

RESULTS

This section presents the aggregated findings derived from the multi-faceted data collection approach, including quantitative analyses of task performance rubrics and qualitative insights from reflection notes, surveys, and classroom observations.

Task Performance Outcomes Learner Performance was Assessed using Task

performance rubrics on a 10-point scale across five criteria: clarity of communication, task completion, professional register, pragmatic appropriacy, and time management. The mean rubric score increased from 4.5 in Week 1 to 6.0 in Week 8, indicating measurable improvement in professional communication performance. Additionally, 64% of learners demonstrated observable improvement across multiple rubric criteria by the end of the study period. Gains were particularly evident in clarity of communication and pragmatic appropriacy during workplace-oriented micro tasks such as oral updates, clarification requests, and email responses.

Learner Participation and Engagement

Participation data revealed a steady increase in learner engagement across the intervention period. The average number of learners actively participating per micro task rose from 17 in Week 1 to 25 by Week 4, reaching 29 by Week 8. A total of 27 learners attempted oral communication tasks, reflecting increased willingness to engage in spoken professional interactions. There was an 82% reduction in non-participation, suggesting that short, focused micro tasks lowered barriers to active involvement.

Transferability of Skills

Post-intervention survey data indicated positive perceptions of skill transferability. Twenty-eight out of forty learners (70%) reported applying communication routines practised during micro tasks to workplace simulations. Twenty-seven learners reported increased readiness for professional communication, while twelve learners indicated using email or oral communication routines outside the classroom context.

Task Effectiveness

Learners' ratings of task usefulness varied by task type. Feedback tasks were rated as "highly useful" by 29 learners, followed by oral update tasks and clarification tasks (27 learners each), and email-based tasks (14 learners). These responses indicate higher perceived relevance for interactive and spoken micro tasks.

Cognitive Load

Survey responses showed that learners perceived the micro tasks as easy to manage (4/5) and useful (4/5), while also being appropriately challenging (3/5). No learners rated the tasks as overly demanding, suggesting that the short duration and focused design supported sustained engagement without excessive cognitive load.

Consistency of Tasks

Learners completed an average of three micro tasks per week, resulting in approximately 22 micro tasks over the eight-week period. This ensured consistent exposure to professional communication practice across varied task types.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the potential of task-based microlearning (TB/ML) as an effective strategy for developing transferable ESL communication skills within time-constrained professional training contexts. The observed improvement in task performance scores from Week 1 to Week 8, alongside increased learner participation, suggests that short, focused tasks can support meaningful language development without requiring extended instructional time. These results align with the principles of task-based language teaching particularly when used with learners who may have limited attention spans and intensive training schedules. The increase in participation indicate that TB/ML lowers affective barriers to communication, especially for learners with B1–B2 proficiency. The structured yet low-pressure nature of micro tasks appears to encourage risk-taking and active engagement, which are essential for developing spoken professional communication skills. This is further supported by evidence suggesting that task-based approaches create engaging and motivating learning environments, prompting learners to actively participate in lessons [8]. Most importantly, it supports the development of reusable communication routines rather than isolated language forms. These findings position TB/ML as a future-oriented ESL approach that bridges classroom learning and workplace communication demands.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

TB/ML ticks three major boxes that are all too important in ESL learning: **relevance** by focusing on short work based tasks, **efficiency** by targeting specific professional competencies without overwhelming cognitive resources, and finally **scalability** that makes it ideal for multi-proficiency classrooms. By integrating bite-sized, actionable learning modules into existing curricula, educators can foster autonomy and self-confidence in learners, enabling them to practice professional communication in low-stakes environments before applying these skills in high-pressure workplace scenarios.

CONCLUSION

This study had set out to examine whether task-based microlearning could address the dual demands of time efficiency and real-world transferability in ESL instruction for cadets preparing for professional communication.

Implemented over an eight-week period with B1–B2 level learners, the TB/ML framework integrated short, authentic workplace tasks into a structured professional training context.

The results demonstrate consistent gains across multiple dimensions of professional communication. Improvements in rubric-based performance, increased participation, and reduced non-participation indicate that micro-scale tasks can support both skill development and learner engagement. Survey data further suggests that learners were able to transfer classroom-practised communication routines to workplace simulations and external professional contexts, indicating functional use of language beyond the classroom.

Taken together, the findings show that TB/ML does more than offer a time-saving alternative to traditional instruction. It provides a pedagogically grounded way to embed professional communication practice within intensive training programmes, while maintaining authenticity and learner involvement. For cadets this approach supports gradual confidence-building and increased readiness for professional interaction.

Overall, this study provides evidence that task-based microlearning can serve as a practical, future-oriented model for integrating employability-focused ESL instruction into professional and vocational training environments.

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