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“The Class Is Full of Competitive Spirit:” A Qualitative Study of First-Year Saudi EFL Female Students’ Perceptions of Task-Based Learning

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ABSTRACT

With the shift toward learner-centered language teaching, studies within the Saudi educational system have explored Saudi EFL students’ motivation, experiences, and perceptions as key factors influencing engagement and achievement. However, limited research has investigated how task-based learning (TBL) is perceived and implemented in culturally specific contexts, particularly among female EFL university students. This study addresses this gap through a qualitative design grounded in Vygotskian sociocultural theory, examining first-year Saudi EFL female students’ perceptions of TBL and the factors influencing their engagement. Drawing on classroom observations and 10 in-depth semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis revealed key themes related to attitudes, task implementation, individual and group work dynamics, and factors influencing task engagement. A central finding was the duality in students’ perceptions, balancing enjoyment and engagement with emotional and cognitive challenges. While initial attitudes were mostly positive, a gradual shift in perceptions reflected growing self-efficacy. This duality, combined with the gradual shift in perceptions, underscores the interplay between supportive learning environments, language skills, self-efficacy, and task-related challenges. Students emphasized the importance of tasks promoting cognitive growth, supported by scaffolding, reflection, and collaboration. This study also highlighted the role of self-directed learning and growth mindset in managing emotions and building confidence. Recommendations include designing tasks with balanced complexity, effective scaffolding, and further research into students’ self-regulation, reflections, and task engagement. By addressing sociocultural and psychological factors, this

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: 10 December 2024 | Revised: 25 January 2025 | Accepted: 27 January 2025 | Published Online: 26 February 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i2.8445>

CITATION

Al Sultan, H., Alkhalidi, N.A., Alsubaie, H.A., et al., 2025. “The Class Is Full of Competitive Spirit:” A Qualitative Study of First-Year Saudi EFL Female Students’ Perceptions of Task-Based Learning. *Forum for Linguistic Studies*. 7(2): 1075–1090. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i2.8445>

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research contributes nuanced insights into task engagement and TBL dynamics in Saudi higher education, advancing the understanding of language acquisition in culturally specific contexts.

Keywords: Task-Based Learning; Task Engagement; Perceptions; Self-Efficacy; Scaffolding

1. Introduction

Research shows that tasks designed to align with learners' goals and needs provide opportunities for collaboration and foster autonomy and active participation^[1-3]. Generally, task-based approaches are often associated with increased motivation, collaboration, and improved language skills^[4-9]. Despite the documented benefits and challenges of task-based approaches, existing studies in Saudi contexts often focus on teachers' perspectives, overlooking students' views and experiences with Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) or Task-Based Instruction (TBI)^[10].

Limited research has focused on task-based learning (TBL) is perceived and implemented in culturally specific settings, such as Saudi Arabia, particularly among EFL female university students. Qualitative research on EFL female students' perceptions of TBL, particularly regarding engagement and achievement in Saudi contexts, remains scarce. This gap is particularly significant given the increasing emphasis on student-centered learning and the interplay of psychological, social, and pedagogical factors in language acquisition and task engagement^[11]. Nunan^[8] explained that TBL adopts a learner-centered approach, positioning learners at the core of the learning experience. In this approach, tasks are intentionally crafted to be stimulating and motivating, offering opportunities for learner input and choice, thereby fostering autonomy and active engagement.

In keeping with global trends that emphasize student-centered learning, this study explores the scope and impact of TBL on the engagement and development of first-year Saudi EFL female university students. The rationale for this study stems from Nunan's^[12] assertion that "no curriculum can claim to be truly learner-centered unless the learner's subjective needs and perceptions relating to the process of learning are taken into account" (p. 177). Nunan^[11] highlighted that most task-based research has mainly focused on learner activities or procedures, often overlooking the influence of contextual factors, interpersonal dynamics, and proficiency levels. He emphasized the need for future research to exam-

ine how these elements interact with task design to optimize learning outcomes. Building on this foundation, this study adopts Vygotskian sociocultural theory to investigate Saudi EFL female university students' perceptions of TBL and what factors influence their engagement. Sociocultural theory, which emphasizes social interaction and guided learning, provides a lens to examine how perceptions of tasks influence engagement, confidence, and language development. Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) underscores the need for guided assistance to help learners acquire knowledge and skills beyond their current level. This framework aligns closely with task-based approaches that promote collaborative learning, meaningful interaction, and real-world language use^[3]. The study aims to explore the following questions:

- (1) How do first-year Saudi EFL female students perceive TBL?
- (2) What factors influence their perceptions of TBL?

2. Literature Review

Task-Based Instruction (TBI), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), task-based learning (TBL), or communicative tasks have gained recognition as effective pedagogical approaches for meaningful interaction, collaboration, and real-world application of language skills^[2, 8, 9, 13]. This study adopts TBL as the overarching framework, following Breen's^[14] definition of a task as

'Task' is therefore assumed to refer to a range of work plans which have the overall purpose of facilitating language learning—from the simple and brief exercise type to more complex and lengthy activities such as group problem-solving or simulations and decision-making. (p. 23)

TBL is valued for its flexibility and goal-oriented na-

ture, but its implementation in Saudi EFL contexts presents unique challenges and opportunities. Research on Saudi EFL students explores motivation, experiences, and perceptions as effective factors in engagement and achievement in the Saudi educational system^[15]. For instance, Alghonaim^[16] found that students preferred a mix of communicative and non-communicative activities, as communicative tasks often induced higher anxiety. Smaller groups were seen as safer and more supportive than speaking in front of the class. Al-Zahrani and Rajab^[15] identified motivation and engagement as central to effective learning.

More recent research, such as Jamal et al.^[17], explored the cultural barriers limiting group participation and the over-reliance on transcripts, which hindered active engagement. Alfares^[18] and Elashhab^[19] reported positive attitudes toward group work but noted challenges like unequal participation and fear of judgment, underscoring the need for better task design. Similarly, Jamal et al.^[17] reported that fear of judgment and a preference for teacher-led instruction frequently inhibit group participation. Research highlights the critical role of task design in fostering student engagement while acknowledging challenges associated with collaborative tasks^[19, 20]. Factors such as cultural barriers, anxiety, and limited classroom interaction often hinder engagement and confidence^[6, 15, 16, 19]. Alluhaydan^[21] explored Saudi students' attitudes toward Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), stressing the need for pedagogical approaches that balance cultural expectations with innovation to enhance student-centered learning. Studies by Alghonaim^[16] and Alluhaydan (2024)^[21] further suggest that Saudi classrooms frequently lack supportive environments that promote interaction, comfort, and confidence, emphasizing the importance of addressing these gaps through targeted instructional methods.

Studies in other contexts further highlight TBLT's potential and challenges. Mudinillah et al.^[22] reviewed studies across various educational levels, from primary to higher education. Their review indicates that TBLT fosters student satisfaction and autonomy, encouraging self-directed learning through interactive and collaborative tasks. TBLT particularly enhances students' performance in speaking and listening skills. Similarly, Chen and Wang^[23] explored the impact of TBLT on first-year undergraduate English major students' oral and written reports to assess its influence on language

competence and cognitive development. TBLT positively impacts language competence, motivation, confidence, and collaboration, and cognitive skills such as critical thinking and organization. Other studies revealed mismatches between teacher and student expectations and preferences for individual tasks due to discomfort in group settings^[8, 24]. These findings illustrate the diverse factors influencing group tasks' effectiveness in TBLT and the importance of task design that balances scaffolding with these factors. While research on TBLT and TBL is expanding, qualitative studies focusing on Saudi EFL female students, particularly first-year university learners, remain scarce. Previous studies^[17, 21] have focused on university-level English programs, primarily examining speaking and listening courses through quantitative or mixed-method approaches. While international research^[25] explored cultural and psychological factors influencing task engagement, Chen and Wang^[23] highlighted pedagogical strategies including self-, peer, and teacher assessment, as well as group discussions and class presentations, in developing positive attitudes and fluency. However, reliance on teachers' or students' perceptions using quantitative and/or mixed methods our understanding of Saudi students' engagement and the influencing factors in TBL university classrooms. In Chen and Wang^[25], the use of semi-structured interviews offered deeper insights into the factors influencing language competence and self-regulation strategies.

Based on the current state of research and the limited findings, this study addresses this gap by adopting a qualitative design grounded in Vygotskian sociocultural theory. It explores the perceptions of first-year Saudi EFL female students toward TBL and the factors influencing their engagement. By emphasizing student-centered learning, this study contributes to the broader literature on TBL in Saudi contexts, offering insights into sociocultural and psychological factors shaping students' views and task engagement. This qualitative approach provides a deeper, more nuanced understanding of students' views and experiences, offering richer insights into task-based learning dynamics, particularly for first-year females in higher education.

3. Methods

3.1. Theoretical Framework

This study, grounded in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory^[26], examines how students' perceptions and learning

contexts intersect, emphasizing the role of social interaction and mediation in cognitive development. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), representing the gap between what learners can achieve and with scaffolding, is central to Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory^[26, 27]. From a Vygotskian perspective, meaningful tasks must be slightly beyond learners’ current abilities. With guided assistance, peer support, and collaboration, learners acquire skills beyond their current capabilities, gradually expanding their ZPD with each new challenge^[28]. TBL is aligned with students’ ZPD, fostering learning and engagement through interactions within a socio-cultural context^[27], fostering linguistic, social, and cognitive growth, particularly for first-year EFL students adapting to higher education.

3.2. Research Design

The research employed a qualitative, exploratory approach to investigate first-year EFL students’ perceptions and experiences with TBL in a university course at a Saudi university. This approach, as described by Bogdan and Biklen^[29], is particularly suited to understanding complex phenomena within their natural settings (e.g., classroom settings). Using methods such as in-depth semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, this research design allowed flexibility to explore emerging themes, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of students’ perceptions and experiences.

3.3. Participants

The participants were ten first-year Saudi female EFL students majoring in English Language at Saudi . All participants were college students, and their marital status was single. They were enrolled in the Listening and Speaking (1) course. **Table 1** provides an overview of the participants, including their names, ages, and language proficiency levels.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and all participants were informed about the study’s purpose and procedures prior to providing consent. To ensure objectivity and minimize bias, we randomly selected ten participants from those who volunteered, with no specific criteria applied. This random selection process aimed to avoid any factors that could influence the findings. Additionally, the names used in this study are pseudonyms, assigned randomly to maintain confidentiality.

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Participant	Age	English Proficiency
Reem	21	High-intermediate
Dua	18	High-intermediate
Maha	19	High-intermediate
Samar	19	Low-Intermediate
Sarah	20	Intermediate
Munera	20	High-intermediate
Halah	19	High-intermediate
Habeebah	18	Low-Intermediate
Lama	20	High-intermediate
Norah	19	High-intermediate

3.4. Data Collection

Data were collected from a ‘Listening and Speaking (1)’ course, a mandatory first-year course for students majoring in English Language in the Department of English Language at a Saudi university. The course spanned 16 weeks during the second semester of the 2024 academic year. Data were collected by undergraduate research assistants. Over eight weeks, the research assistants employed qualitative methods, including ten in-depth semi-structured interviews, and complementary participant observations to gather comprehensive insights. This course was selected because of its strong emphasis on task-based activities, providing an ideal context for examining student engagement and influencing factors.

3.4.1. Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted in person on the university campus by the research assistants between April 22 and April 29, 2024. The interviews lasted between 10–20 minutes and included 20 open-ended questions covering participant background, learning experiences, classroom engagement, perceptions of TBL, task formats, challenges, and enjoyable experiences. Seven interviews were conducted in Arabic and three in English, with translation provided for some questions. Participants responded in Arabic, English, or a mix of both, allowing them to express themselves freely.

3.4.2. Classroom Conversation

Participant observations were used as complementary qualitative methods and conducted over eight weeks, starting at the beginning of the data collection and spread across different weeks to capture varied views on student engagement^[29, 30]. Research assistants observed and recorded field-

notes on participants’ interactions during presentations, listening exercises, quizzes, and classroom activities. As participant observers in some communicative tasks, research assistants documented detailed notes on students’ interactions, engagement, language proficiency, learning styles, teacher’s role, and the classroom environment. These observations provided contextual evidence of students’ actual behaviors, allowing for comparison with their interview responses and enriching the understanding of TBL dynamics.

3.5. Data Analysis

This study employed thematic analysis (TA), a qualitative approach for identifying and interpreting patterns (themes) within the data^[31]. This method allowed for a detailed understanding of participants’ perceptions and experiences. As shown in **Table 2**, we followed Braun and Clarke’s six-phases framework to ensure systematic and rigorous data examination and interpretation.

Table 2. Braun and Clarke’s^[31] TA analysis.

Step	Analysis
Step 1	familiarity with data
Step 2	generating initial codes
Step 3	searching for initial themes
Step 4	developing and reviewing themes
Step 5	defining themes
Step 6	presenting themes with an in-depth description

The primary researcher and research assistants independently familiarized themselves with the data, including interview transcripts, and observations fieldnotes, to develop an initial understanding. Initial codes were generated, consisting of both descriptive and interpretive types. Descriptive codes captured participants’ exact words (e.g., individual or group work, stress, motivation, engagement, anxiety, confidence), while interpretative codes were predefined codes and themes, aligned with theoretical frameworks and constructs (e.g., self-efficacy, autonomy, self-regulation, scaffolding, intrinsic motivation). After independently coding the data, the research team compared results to identify emerging categories and themes, confirming interpretations and enhancing transparency in the analysis. To identify and explore any connections within and across categories and themes, tables were created, facilitating TA and cross-analysis. Multiple coders and frequent debriefing sessions support rigor and

minimize individual bias. A total of 95 initial codes were identified during initial analysis, with additional codes and categories during cross-analysis to create a structured set of themes and sub-themes, until agreement was reached. This systematic approach facilitated a deeper understanding of patterns across responses.

3.6. Positionality

To ensure data consistency and minimize potential biases associated with the collection process, research assistants finished a training session covering qualitative data collection and analysis methods and procedures, standard interview techniques, thematic analysis process, data recording protocols, and ethical considerations prior to data collection. Additionally, the lead researcher conducted a preliminary review of the data to enhance familiarity and establish an initial understanding. To ensure credibility and confirmability, the research team conducted multiple rounds of analysis, after identifying the emerging themes, the research team refined emerging themes to ensure coherence and consistency and to eliminate redundancies. For example, the initial theme “task complexity and design” was initially identified as an influencing factor by the assistant researchers, Later, the lead researcher integrated this theme with “perceptions of teacher’s implementation of tasks” to reflect a more cohesive conceptual category. The systematic and iterative approach enabled a nuanced exploration of patterns, revealing the interconnected factors shaping participants’ perceptions and experiences and influencing factors.

4. Results

Findings revealed six major themes related to students’ engagement, challenges in task execution, and improvement in personal and language skills. Themes related to the first research question, which explored perceptions of TBL, included students’ attitudes toward TBL, perceptions of individual and group tasks, and perceptions of teacher’s implementation of tasks. Themes addressing the second research question, which focused on influencing factors, included, psychological factors, self-efficacy management, and environmental factors. Additionally, sub-themes provided deeper insights, highlighting findings related to topic flexibility, task complexity and design, anxiety, fear of making mistakes,

Table 3. Key Themes Emerging from Participant Responses.

Research Qs	Major Themes
RQ1. Perceptions of TBL	Attitudes toward TBL Perceptions of individual and group tasks Perceptions of teacher’s implementation of tasks
RQ2. Factors affecting students’ perceptions	Psychological factors Self-efficacy management Learning environment

motivation, self-evaluation, reflection, confidence-building. **Table 3** summarizes the key themes that emerged for each question.

Classroom observations confirmed that task complexity and support influenced students’ engagement, aligning with interview findings on task design, scaffolding, motivation, and confidence. Individual tasks increased anxiety and fear of making mistakes, while group tasks fostered a supportive environment, reinforcing confidence-building and self-evaluation. Next, each theme is discussed in depth, with insights drawn from participants’ views and interpretations.

4.1. Perceptions of TBL

4.1.1. Students’ Attitudes toward TBL

All participants expressed positive attitudes toward TBL, appreciating their interactive and topic-based design. They stressed the tasks’ benefits for fostering speaking and listening skills, as well as participation. Nine participants perceived the effectiveness of TBL in boosting engagement and improving practical language skills. For instance, Reem expressed how the tasks made learning enjoyable and encouraged practice in new ways. Similarly, Dua appreciated the interactive nature of TBL, finding it effective for language improvement. “The activities were very good because they involved conversations and discussions, which helped me improve my language skills.” While Reem and Dua highlighted enjoyment and involvement, Halah found topic-based tasks valuable for not only improving speaking but also enhancing structured preparation and idea organization. “When we get topics to talk about, it’s interesting because you prepare, organize your speech, and it improves your speaking.” These statements suggest that positive engagement with TBL encompasses relevance, interest, meaningful involvement in discussions, practice in novel ways, and structured opportunities for preparation and gradual skill enhancement.

Despite overall enjoyment, eight participants expressed mixed views—valuing engagement and skill development but highlighting challenges such as language difficulties, task overload, stress, and uncertainty in task completion. Norah highlighted her enjoyment of specific tasks, like show-and-tell, but admitted to feeling stressed during execution. Norah further expressed feeling overwhelmed speaking English initially and during certain tasks. “When you start speaking in English for the first time, it’s hard to breathe.” Norah’s statements reflect a dual view of TBL. While recognizing the value of the activity in improving self-expression, feeling stressed during the activity and overwhelmed by speaking English, especially as a beginner, that TBL can be demanding and can evoke anxiety. Similarly, Maha remarked, “I enjoyed the activities, but sometimes they were challenging because I wasn’t sure how to complete them.” Both participants acknowledged the benefits of TBL, with Maha emphasizing their value in fostering engagement. However, their comments “*hard to breathe*” and “*challenging*” point to the impact of emotional and cognitive demands, task complexity, and a lack of confidence. Overall, participants’ attitudes toward TBL reflected a balance of enjoyment, engagement, and occasional challenges.

4.1.2. Perceptions of Teacher’s Implementation of Tasks

Participants expressed dual perceptions of the instructor’s task implementation strategies, highlighting both benefits and challenges. Participants appreciated the instructor’s role as a facilitator, recounting her ability to guide and motivate them. At the same time, they voiced concerns about unfamiliar topics, task difficulty, time constraints, workload, and instructional clarity.

Topic Flexibility

Reem and Maha praised the diversity of tasks. Participants further (Samar, Halah, and Dua) highlighted the role of

topic choice in increasing task engagement. Samar expressed, “It depends on the topic she gives us. If we can choose one that suits us best, that we can excel in more, then it’s more enjoyable.” This reflects her belief that they perform better on tasks when given the freedom to choose topics they enjoy and feel confident in. Lama noted that selecting topics of interest encouraged better preparation: “When you get to pick a topic you care about, you spend more time preparing, and that makes you feel ready to speak well.” Halah elaborated on how topic flexibility improves her speech organization and delivery. Task format also affected emotional responses. Maha preferred gamified quizzes over traditional format (paper quiz). This suggests interactive and gamified tasks can reduce stress and enhance focus and performance.

Task Complexity and Design

Lama and Reem found the volume and intensity of tasks especially challenging as first-year students. Emphasizing time constraints and topic unfamiliarity, Lama stated, “She gave us topics that were profound, and we should cover all the information about the topic in 3 minutes. I felt it was impossible.” Halah shared,

The doctor gave me a presentation on topics like social life, mental health, women, and it was a challenge for me because the topic I chose was a bit hard...It took me a long time to prepare and give my best.

These quotes reflect the importance of considering task relevance, preparation time, and cognitive load to enhance task engagement. Reflecting on their views of exams, Halah described how a timer in pop quizzes increased stress and led to errors. “I am so stressed because it’s so fast, it has a timer... Sometimes I get false answers because I’m so anxious.” Participants’ views suggest that time-constrained tasks heightened anxiety and limited task engagement. Halah and Samar highlighted how language proficiency gaps added complexity. For example, Halah admitted using her phone to translate unfamiliar words.

Dual Perceptions

The instructor’s strategies were perceived as both motivating and challenging, based on participants’ preference, readiness, and emotional comfort. Their dual views reflect an evolving perception of tasks, shifting from stress to adaptability. Samar and Reem initially felt overwhelmed by the

workload but later appreciated its purpose in improving fluency. Similarly, Samar reflected, “I thought the tasks were too overwhelming, but then I realized that she was giving us these things to help us speak more fluently and confidently.” Maha also acknowledged the tension between task difficulty and progress, noting “sometimes I feel the tasks are above our level, but I also think if they were at our level, we wouldn’t improve.” Lama acknowledged her initial stress and its positive impact improving her time-management skills. “The number of tasks in a short time was stressful, but it pushed me to manage my time better.” These quotes reflect a gradual recognition of the contextual and cognitive changes, emphasizing the need for sufficient scaffolding and gradual progress in task complexity to enhance students’ engagement and comprehension.

4.1.3. Perceptions of Individual and Group Tasks

Participants shared varying views on individual and group tasks, reflecting the strengths and challenges of each approach. Individual tasks were appreciated for fostering autonomy, focus, and emotional comfort, while group tasks promoted collaboration, idea exchange, and social interaction. Additionally, a hybrid approach was favored by some, depending on task complexity and group dynamics.

Individual Tasks: Autonomy and Challenges

Four out of ten participants (Habeebah, Samar, Munera, and Norah) preferred individual tasks for their benefits independence, time management, concentration, and personal control. Habeebah emphasized the flexibility they provide. “I like to finish everything. Also, I love to do it by myself.” Habeebah elaborated on the importance of working at her pace and making independent decisions, avoiding challenges related to group dynamics. “By working alone, I can take my time and work because I want to, not because the girls tell me to.” Similarly, Samar appreciated autonomy and highlighted the cognitive benefits of organizing and processing ideas at a personal pace. “When I’m alone, I can gather my thoughts at the time I want.” Dua viewed individual tasks as reinforcing self-centered effort. The point about avoiding external demands and stressors was also emphasized by Munera. She viewed emotional comfort and reduced stress as key gains from individual tasks, indicating that focusing on personal ideas requires mental clarity. However, individual tasks presented challenges, particularly related to stress and lack of

peer support. Sarah noted, “It’s possible that if the work has many details, I feel stressed about how I can complete it all, and this is a challenge for me.” This is exemplified in our classroom observations, where some participants struggled with comprehension, highlighting the importance of collaborative learning environments. For instance, despite simple instructions, participants struggled with English comprehension, requiring frequent clarifications to grasp tasks fully.

Group Tasks: Collaboration and Challenges

Three participants (Dua, Sarah, and Lama) preferred group tasks, underscoring their collaborative strengths, including idea exchange, diversity of skill levels, peer learning, mutual support, and social engagement. Sarah pointed out the efficiency gained from defined roles within the group. “If we divide the work among us and each girl knows her role, we will accomplish our work more accurately and efficiently.” Sarah highlighted the benefits of peer learning and the diversity of skill levels enhancing understanding and refining skills within groups. This reflects her understanding of shared knowledge and active learning, as students with varying abilities learn by teaching others and receiving feedback. Classroom observations revealed that participants frequently sought help from each other regarding meanings, pronunciations, and sentence constructions. This allowed for a rich exchange of ideas and perspectives.

Despite these positive views, group tasks posed challenges such as coordination issues and differing opinions. Samar voiced frustration about coordinating group meetings which made it difficult to collaborate effectively and meet deadlines. Another challenge was dealing with disagreements among group members. Munera explained, “The problem with group tasks is when the opinions differ and each girl insists, she is right and the other is wrong.” Munera suggests that diversity of opinions can lead to tension, hindering the group’s ability to reach a consensus. These comments illustrate while group tasks have benefits, effective communication and coordination are essential to enhance productivity and manage conflict.

A Hybrid Approach: Combining Individual and Group Tasks

Six participants (Reem, Samar, Munera, Halah, Norah, and Habeeba) preferred a combination of individual and group tasks, depending on the task and group dynam-

ics. Halah explained, “if it’s a big one, yes, I prefer it with a group, and if it’s small and easy, I prefer it by myself.” Halah’s preference reflects how task complexity influences the choice between group and individual work. Conversely, Reem emphasized the importance of mutual understanding and shared goals and skills in determining group success. “If the group understands me, and we can accomplish and innovate together, then I’m okay with working with them. But if the group is not cooperating, I prefer to be alone.” This suggests that participants’ preferences for individual or group tasks are influenced by both personal learning styles, situational demands, and dynamics of collaboration.

4.2. Factors Affecting EFL Students’ Perceptions of TBL

Findings also revealed that psychological factors, students’ skills and characteristics, and learning environment, impacted participants’ perceptions toward TBL and their task execution.

4.2.1. Psychological Factors

The participants’ views revealed significant psychological factors influencing their engagement in TBL and their performance, including stress, apprehension, and motivation. Stress and apprehension limited participants’ engagement, while extrinsic motivators (e.g., grades, feedback, peer interaction) and intrinsic motivators (e.g., personal interest and enjoyment) enhanced performance, development, and created a more engaging learning environment.

Stress, Apprehension, and Fear of Making Mistakes

Participants identified psychological factors such as stress, apprehension, and fear of making mistakes as key challenges affecting their perceptions of TBL. Stress was linked to limited language skills, task-related factors (i.e., complex topics, time constraints, and pop quizzes), social pressure (i.e., presenting in front of peers), and internal factors (i.e., fear of mistakes and lack of confidence).

Six participants (Norah, Samar, Dua, Halah, Sarah, and Munera) found it challenging to articulate their thoughts in English, especially in front of classmates, due to limited language skills, fear of making mistakes, and inexperience. Sarah noted, “As a first-year learner, the main reason for our fear of making mistakes is that we have little experience.” Samar mentioned that speaking in front of classmates was

initially intimidating due to concerns over accuracy, word choice, meaning, or pronunciation. This highlights how stress is not only an emotional response but also a cognitive challenge, as it stems from limited language abilities, psychological factors, and internal doubts that significantly impact task engagement. These insights reflect how limited language abilities, psychological factors, and internal doubts impact task engagement.

Samar, Lama, Habeebah, and Sarah noted that working on challenging topics under limited time, combined with low confidence and limited experiences, increased stress and anxiety. The recurring mention of stress in participants' accounts stresses its pervasive and multifaceted nature. Stress arises from both internal and external factors, such as self-doubt, lack of preparation, and environmental pressures like strict deadlines and peer evaluations. Sarah specifically mentioned that presentations heightened her stress, indicating how external conditions often amplify internal fears. "The thing that stresses me the most is when the doctor asks us to give presentations because I get very nervous when I present and speak in front of other girls." This reflects how task-related factors and social factors can trigger fear of judgment, limiting task engagement and performance. Conversely, Maha expressed frustration over her hesitation to speak, despite knowing the answer. She shared,

I always regret not participating in the class, and it's not shyness; it's not about the teacher or the peers; I just don't know the real reason. But it could be I want to develop myself so I can be more confident in my answer; I think Dr. Nora doesn't see my creative side.

This quote underscores the complex interplay between self-doubt, fear of judgment, and the desire for self-improvement.

Motivation

Motivational factors, including grades, positive feedback, peer support, topic relevance, and preparation enhanced participants' task engagement and skill development. Sarah reflected: "Maybe what motivates me the most to participate is the possibility of earning extra marks for the question or task." Dua mentioned positive feedback. Halah praised the peer support and opportunities for idea exchange within groups. Munera's statement, "When I understand

and prepare for the lesson ahead of time, this encourages me to participate," highlights the significance of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement in task execution. Preparation and prior understanding boost motivation and classroom participation, suggesting that these practices can enhance confidence and reduce stress, ultimately leading to more effective and positive task engagement. Samar emphasized how activities and varied topics helped her improve. This reinforces her earlier belief that having the freedom to select topics leads to better performance in tasks and is more enjoyable.

Other participants (Halah, Habeebah, Lama) also shared that motivational factors, combined with personal interest and enjoyment, fostered engagement and performance. Habeebah said, "The grades... And because I want to learn and improve. I love the English language." This statement suggests that task engagement and language improvement can be influenced by a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Group work was also seen as a tool to foster motivation, a sense of engagement, and personal growth. Reem stated,

I feel it my skills, because when I was alone, I didn't feel like I was improving my weaknesses, but when I sat with my group members, I got excited to participate, and my participation changed; each of them changed something in me.

This quote illustrates a shift in motivation, task engagement, and self-perception. The phrases "my participation changed" and "each of them changed something in me" emphasize how collaborative learning and group dynamics foster greater engagement, personal development, and the belief in her ability to improve, highlighting the transformative impact of peer interaction on self-development and motivation. Participants' insights reveal that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators contribute to enhanced engagement, performance, and skill development.

4.2.2. Self-Efficacy Management

Findings revealed that self-efficacy management was a major skill demonstrated by participants. This theme ties together the psychological and behavioral strategies participants employed to navigate TBL challenges. Self-

efficacy encompasses three components: self-evaluation, self-regulation, and confidence building.

Self-Evaluation

Maha, Reem, Halah, Dua, and Habeebah showed a strong self-evaluation by reflecting on their own strengths, weaknesses, preferences, and accomplishments. Habeebah emphasized aligning tasks with individual learning preferences, highlighting listening, speaking, and reading as effective for language improvement. However, her statement, “I’m a listening person. I learn by listening” underscores the significance of matching personal strengths to preferences to enhance task engagement and progress. Similarly, Maha displayed awareness of both her linguistic limitations and creative abilities. She elaborated, “I feel if I developed my language, I would find it easier.” Later she noted, “I feel the doctor didn’t see the creative side that I have,” and expressed frustration that her creativity was not acknowledged by the instructor, underscoring the role of language proficiency in leading to greater ease and fuller engagement in TBL. Classroom observations revealed that participants who regularly evaluated their own performance and expressed high self-confidence and excellent language skills contributed unique and creative ideas during class activities.

Self-Regulation

Conversely, Reem provided insights into her development of writing, listening, and organizational skills. She reflected on her challenges in organizing thoughts for note-taking and credited listening exercises provided by the instructor and consistent practice with improving her ability to structure ideas over time. Reflecting on a previous classroom experience, she shared,

“Like today, it was the first time I’ve written comprehensive notes, despite some spelling mistakes. I was able to do so because I understood the material well. Previously, I tended to write simple sentences, but this time I produced more elaborate notes, though they still contained errors.”

Reem’s reflections demonstrate growing metacognitive skills, as she recognized both her growth and challenges, such as spelling mistakes. The ability to produce more complex and comprehensive notes suggests a positive assessment of her own progress. She identified understanding the ma-

terial as a foundation for more engagement with TBL and noted how self-regulation (produced more elaborate notes) enabled her to produce more complex and comprehensive notes. Sarah also demonstrated determination to work on self-improvement, conveying a proactive attitude to overcome current challenges. “I will work on myself and improve.” By reflecting, Lama and Halah also demonstrated adaptability, treating time constraints as an opportunity for personal growth. Halah also took her peer’s performance as a tool to improve her own work. “I was the last one because I wanted to see what other classmates were talking about so I could be different.” Overall, the findings emphasize how participants’ self-reflection and self-evaluation helped them regulate their abilities to manage pressure, adapt to challenges, and promote their task engagement and personal growth.

Confidence-building

Participants reported a steady increase in their self-confidence throughout the course, attributing this growth to continuous practice, emotional support, and developing self-efficacy. Munera, Reem, Samar, and Lama, for example, reflected on overcoming initial fears over time. Samar elaborated, “So, in the beginning, it was very terrifying, but with the exercises that the doctor gave us, everything became easier for me.” The phrase “*everything became easier for me*” indicates the transformative effect of regular, structured tasks in overcoming language challenges, reducing anxiety, and fostering confidence. Dua confirmed, “I think the tasks have improved my listening and speaking because they push me to talk in front of people, which made me more confident.” Dua also noted the long-term impact of repeated experiences of such TBL. “It will reduce fear in the future, when we do a presentation.” These reflections illustrate participants’ understanding of how repeated exposure to tasks reduces anxiety and fears and reinforce their self-efficacy, allowing them to approach speaking with greater confidence. Participants also described a gradual process of managing anxiety and building self-assurance. Habeebah, for example, shared how she calmed herself during tasks, demonstrating emotional resilience. “Maybe nervous and my mood changed. I make myself come down.” This suggests that emotional management is crucial for both maintaining task engagement and fostering confidence-building and self-efficacy.

4.2.3. Learning Environment

All participants underscored the importance of constructive feedback, teacher responsiveness, and a competitive classroom atmosphere in shaping their positive perceptions of TBL and of their progress. Reem, for example, expressed how receiving positive feedback from her instructor not only boosted her confidence but also enhanced her sense of progress, noticing that recognizing her improvement made her feel good about herself. Likewise, Habeebah emphasized the positive impact of teacher interaction on skill development, stating “I love when the doctor talks with us, and that makes our skills good.” Maha noted how the competitive spirit in the classroom encouraged her participation. Reem emphasized how bonus marks created an engaging and competitive atmosphere. She expressed, “You feel the class is full of competitive spirit.” Halah reflected on a classroom scenario explaining how moments of confusion during classroom discussions were addressed by the instructors’ attentive and proactive support, stating,

In the classroom discussion, I always like when it hits me, like when I look at my classmates with a smile and I ask her “Did you understand it?” and she said “No,” and I looked at the other one “Did you?” The doctor knows that we are confused, so she helps us with that.

Halah’s example illustrates the importance of feeling supported by the instructor in challenging tasks. This reflection underscores the critical role of instructor awareness and attentiveness in fostering a positive learning environment. Additionally, the overall energy and active participation in the classroom played a critical role in motivating students. Dua, for example, noted, “The energy in the class is great, with everyone participating and showing enthusiasm.” This comment suggests that a dynamic and participatory environment can promote students’ engagement with TBL. Below, we discuss the findings in relation to the existing literature and the theoretical framework.

5. Discussion

5.1. Dual Perceptions and Self-Efficacy

Our findings align with previous research^[5] on the importance of learner agency and control in task-based language

teaching. Participants’ perceptions significantly influenced engagement and learning performance and outcomes^[4]. Positive attitudes were supported by self-efficacy, scaffolding, and interaction^[26, 32, 33], while communicative tasks (e.g., games or presentations) fostered speaking skills and engagement^[32].

Psychological factors, including self-evaluation also shaped engagement and learning performance^[23, 34]. Structured tasks and feedback promoted self-regulation and gradual growth^[23, 35]. Both this study and prior research highlight the role of self-evaluation in boosting confidence, task engagement, and language performance^[34, 36]. Alghanmi^[34] noted that structured tasks and interventions promote gradual shifts in students’ perceptions and self-regulatory skills, with emotional and cognitive demands balanced by motivation, peer and teacher feedback, and supportive environments. Findings suggest that growth in language skills requires reflection, adaptability to gradual complexity of tasks, and constant support^[23]. Participants valued peer feedback and scaffolding to organize ideas and improve performance, combined with their recognition of situational demands and dynamics of collaboration reflects their evolving self-regulation strategies^[35].

Metacognitive strategies, including reflecting on both growth and challenges, helped students manage emotional challenges and regulate learning. Newman^[37] emphasized “meta talk” for improving approaches to tasks, which is critical but often difficult in language learning. While Kumaravadivelu^[38] focused on cognitive processes during task performance, our study complements this by exploring psychological factors (motivation, fear of making mistakes) and external factors (peer interaction and environments), offering a broader view of task engagement^[16, 21]. Self-efficacy was crucial for enhancing motivation, persistence, and resilience during challenges^[33, 39]. Self-regulated learning maintained focus and adapted strategies effectively^[40–42]. This study also highlighted the role of self-directed learning effectively^[42, 43] and growth mindset in managing emotions and building confidence. Participants who employed self-regulation strategies—including reflection, reflection, emotional management, confidence-building, and viewing difficulties as opportunities for growth—exhibited a growth mindset, characterized by adaptability and motivation. Positive task perceptions were linked to peer interaction (related-

ness) and autonomy, sustaining engagement^[22]. Nevertheless, participants reported both motivating and challenging experiences. Tasks initially caused stress but were later appreciated for improving fluency and time management. This shift highlights the role of self-efficacy in adapting to challenges. Well-structured, progressively complex tasks are essential for maintaining engagement and promoting meaningful learning.

5.2. Group and Individual Tasks

Participants' dual perceptions captured the complex dynamics of individual and group tasks, reflecting both benefits and challenges^[19]. Individual tasks supported autonomy, focus, and emotional comfort, while group tasks promoted collaboration, idea exchange, and social interaction^[18]. Preferences shifted based on task difficulty, group dynamics, personal learning styles, situational demands, emphasizing the need for flexibility. While reflecting on their experiences with individual and group tasks, participants highlighted the benefits of 'collaborative dialogue'^[44]. Peer scaffolding enhanced understanding, confidence, and skills^[9, 37, 45]. Despite challenges like maintaining focus and resolving conflicts, peer collaboration promoted learning through shared ideas and emotional support^[16, 18, 44, 46].

5.3. Scaffolding and Task Design

From a Vygotskian perspective, tasks that are too simple fail to stimulate cognitive growth. Participants emphasized the importance of tasks promoting cognitive growth, supported by scaffolding, reflection, and collaboration^[27, 36]. Maha's statement, "But I also think if they were at our level, we wouldn't improve," reflects the Vygotskian emphasis on designing tasks within ZPD. Gradual scaffolding combined with progressively complex tasks promoted adaptability and engagement, while alleviating participants' initial stress^[26, 47, 48]. Similarly, Long (2014)^[49] noted that tasks designed within each participant's ZPD enhanced confidence, motivation and linguistic competence. Confidence-building, a cornerstone of Vygotskian theory, emerged as crucial for skill development and task engagement^[26]. Participants reported a steady increase in their self-confidence, attributing this growth to continuous practice, emotional support, and developing self-efficacy.

Despite challenges such as limited language skills, psychological barriers, and self-doubt affected task engagement, the role of clear instruction, preparation, and scaffolding central in encouraging self-regulation and participation^[15, 50]. Structured activities, such as peer discussions and group presentations, along with the freedom to choose topics, promoted agency and preparedness for complex tasks^[38, 51]. These strategies were regarded as both motivating and appropriately challenging, aligning with participants' preferences and emotional readiness.

Reflective practices and self-efficacy management also emerged as core elements of effective scaffolding. Through observation and evaluation of their strengths, challenges, and progress, participants foster metacognitive awareness and emotional resilience. McCaslin and Daniel^[3] emphasized that self-evaluation is central to personal growth, while Bruner^[36] underscored reflective thinking as integral to constructing knowledge and fostering independence. Self-efficacy emerged as a multidimensional construct, integrating self-evaluation, self-regulation, and confidence building, all of which were central to participants' engagement in self-regulated learning (SRL)^[23].

McCaslin and Daniel^[3] identified social interaction, challenging tasks, and responsive feedback as major scaffolding strategies that promote self-regulated learning (SRL) and meaningful social activity. Furthermore, the importance of social connections and emotional support in motivating learners, reducing stress, and fostering engagement within a collaborative environment is evident in Vygotsky's^[26] work.

These findings further underscore the value of integrating differentiated instruction (DI) and Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, emphasizing scaffolding, collaboration, and ZPD^[52, 53]. Previous research demonstrated that implementing DI in environments fostering autonomy, collaboration, and personal growth significantly boosts engagement and performance^[53, 54]. Participants reported that their preferences and needs were acknowledged through various strategies within a supportive environment, aligning with the learner-centered approach inherent in DI. Consistent with prior findings^[53-55], implementing effective DI enhances students' motivation, active participation, and self-confidence. DI significantly enhanced engagement, cognitive skills, and autonomy, in both independent and collaborative settings^[34, 53, 54]. Together, these findings contribute to a holistic educational

experience that not only promotes academic success but also supports the overall wellbeing of students.

6. Conclusions

While minimal attention has been given to Saudi EFL females and their perceptions of TBL, this qualitative study provides insights into their views and examines the factors influencing their engagement. TA revealed key themes related to attitudes, task implementation, scaffolding, and individual and group work dynamics. A central finding was the duality in participants' perceptions, balancing enjoyment and engagement with emotional and cognitive challenges. While attitudes were mostly positive, the gradual shift in perceptions reflected growing self-efficacy. Consistent with Chen and Wang's [23] findings, participants demonstrated gradual progress in their linguistic, interactive communication, and cognitive skills, driven by their increased confidence and the use of self-, peer-, and teacher's scaffolding [32, 52]. Effective SRL emerged through task design, pacing, and assessment, fostering growth and reflection [3]. Furthermore, addressing psychological barriers, such as anxiety and stress is essential for maintaining engagement and improving learning outcomes, while building self-confidence helps manage these challenges effectively [17, 21, 23]. To conclude, this study underscores the value of DI and dynamic, learner-centered approaches to TBL design, where psychological needs, instructional support, and social dynamics are carefully considered.

Though this study is more exploratory than conclusive, it holds significance in the current Saudi context, diverging from the predominantly quantitative approaches that have characterized most Saudi classroom research. This study acknowledges several limitations, including a small, culturally specific sample and a focus on Saudi Arabian educational settings, which limits generalizability. More conclusive evidence can emerge from future studies that expand participant diversity by including males, co-educational groups, and students from varied cultural and academic backgrounds would enhance applicability. Longitudinal approaches should be applied to explore the sustained impact of TBL on self-regulated learning [22]. Recommendations include designing tasks with balanced complexity, effective scaffolding, and further research into students' self-regulation, self-evaluation, self-

reflection, and task engagement. Educators are encouraged to integrate scaffolding strategies, including clear instructions, structured guidance, self-reflection, instruction in self-evaluation, and timely feedback to help learners navigate TBL effectively while fostering their confidence and efficiency.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, H.A.S.; methodology, H.A.S. and N.A.A.; validation, H.A.S.; formal analysis, H.A.S., N.A.A., H.A.A., and F.A.A.; investigation, H.A.S. and ; resources, H.A.S., N.A.A., and H.A.A.; data curation, N.A.A., H.A.A., and F.A.A.; writing—original draft preparation, H.A.S., N.A.A., H.A.A., and F.A.A.; writing—review and editing, H.A.S.; supervision, H.A.S.; project administration, H.A.S.; funding acquisition, H.A.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding

This work was funded by the Deanship of Scientific Research, Vice Presidency for Graduate Studies and Scientific Research, King Faisal University, Saudi Arabia Grant number [KFU250320].

Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of King Faisal University of Saudi Arabia (protocol code KFU-REC-2024-MAR-ETHICS2107, approved on March 20, 2024)

Informed Consent Statement

Verbal and written consent obtained from all participants prior to submission of the article.

Data Availability Statement

The data collected for the findings of this study are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions. Participants' consent was limited to use within this study and did not include data sharing provisions. For further inquiries,

please contact the corresponding author.

Acknowledgements

The authors extend sincere gratitude to the Deanship of Scientific Research, Vice Presidency for Graduate Studies and Scientific Research, King Faisal University, for funding this project.

Appreciation also goes to my undergraduate students, Lama Khalid Aldahmasi and Dalal Saleh Alkhalidi, for their assistance in contributing to an earlier version of this manuscript. Special thanks go to the participants for sharing their views and experiences.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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