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Enhancing English Language Proficiency Of Esl Semi-Urban Undergraduate Engineering Students Using Task-Based Instruction

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Abstract:
Language Competence has become the most prerequisite component in college and university students' academic success. The purpose of this study is to understand the differences in English Language proficiency levels of first-year undergraduate students admitted into engineering courses in the academic year 2018-19. A total of 108 students participated in this study from SRIT, a self-financed Engineering college, in the state of Andhra Pradesh, India. After the initial proficiency assessment, these students were provided a 10-week intervention using Task-based Instruction. A one group pre-test and post-test design was carried out as a research design for this study. A teacher made objective English Proficiency Assessment Test (EPAT) was designed as an instrument to examine the English language proficiency of the students. The EPAT includes components such as Grammar, Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension. This test aims to understand students' grammatical competence, lexical competence and reading ability as a part of their English Language Proficiency. The test results were analyzed using SPSS software 22.0. The descriptive statistics and frequency distributions were calculated and based on the calculations students' proficiency levels were categorized. After the intervention, it was observed that there was a significant difference in the group in terms of their English proficiency levels. Hence, this study strongly recommendsTask-based instruction as an effective teaching approach to teachEnglish in regular ESL classrooms.

Key words: *Language Competence, Proficiency Assessment, Task-based Instruction*

Introduction:

Engineering is a field of study where students require understanding the domain, upgrading their knowledge and learning new technologies. In order to have a successful Engineering education, students need to possess required technical skills, mathematical logics, problem-solving techniques and very good English language proficiency. The academic success of engineering students is assessed based on the technical skills they acquire and the grades they achieve in the due course of their undergraduate program. On the other hand, Language Competence has become the most prerequisite component in college and university students' academic success. The academic success of an Engineering graduate, is mainly depends on the way they understand and use the English language. In fact, many of the Engineering students are good at their core technical skills and also good at understanding new technologies and innovations. However, it has been observed that these technically sound undergraduates are facing problems in understanding the lectures, reading the scientific articles, writing their project reviews and analyzing their experimental findings due to inadequate English language skills. Due to this inadequacy, students feel uncomfortable not only in understanding their Engineering subjects, but also it affects their communication in

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the classrooms. Hence, understanding students' English language proficiency at the beginning of the program would be of great benefit to the students and for the teachers.

Testing

Testing is considered as one of the most controversial areas related to any kind of teaching and, at the same time, something that is necessary to make the teaching and learning process complete. In fact, if adequately focused, it checks the effectiveness of the whole process. Bachman (1990: 55) states that the information provided by testing is essential for effective formal education and the feedback can be used to make appropriate changes in the program to further improve learning and teaching. Testing is a critical element in language education and is one of the key areas of interest for applied linguists.

Language Tests

Language tests may be used to assess the performance of students in their first, second or other language in the school, college or university context (Bachman et al. 1999). He further suggested that well-designed tests provide reliable and relevant information about student progress. Hence, great care is exercised in the design of language tests because test scores are used to make inferences about students' knowledge.

Language Proficiency tests are essential for students entering into the university education in many parts of the world. In fact, countries like China, United States and in England various proficiency tests such as College English Test (CET), English Placement Test (EPT), Test of English as Foreign Language (TOEFL), International English Language Testing System (IELTS), Graduate Record Examination (GRE), Graduate Management Assessment Test (GMAT), and Business English Certificate (BEC) tests are conducted for students entering into higher education.

In the People's Republic of China, the College English Test (CET), examines the English Proficiency of Undergraduate and Postgraduate students. This test consists of two levels CET-4 and CET-6. Similarly, California State University (CSU) conducts the English Placement Test (EPT) as a tool to determine the language arts classes admitted into the courses. The students at CSU need to complete the test before they enroll in the courses. This test focuses on reading, composition and essay writing skills. TOEFL is another popular English proficiency test conducted to evaluate the ability of individuals to use and understand English language. This test examines the reading, listening, speaking and writing skills required to perform academic skills. Likewise, GRE a standardized test is conducted by Educational Training Services (ETS). The ETS GRE scores are accepted by most of the top graduate schools for masters programs like MS in USA. This test evaluates verbal, quantitative abilities and analytical writing skills. Unfortunately, in the Indian scenario, no such English proficiency tests are conducted for Undergraduate or Postgraduate students to assess their English language proficiency. But, academically reputed premier institutes like IITs, NITs, Central Universities and some Deemed Universities conduct diagnostic tests in order to understand the English language ability of the students admitted into various Engineering disciplines. However, the situation in the state of Andhra Pradesh is even more feeble because no such tests were conducted for the students in the Engineering colleges. Moreover, students at the undergraduate level follows the customary methods of language learning where they concentrate more on clearing the subject and getting the grade. This may be the reason why students are unable to attain the required English language proficiency to

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perform well and cope up with their academics. Hence, an attempt has been made through this study to explore English language proficiency and identify the differences in their proficiency levels using Task-based instruction.

Problem statement

In India, the number of students pursuing engineering increases every year. According to the AICTE official website, in the year 2016-17, 11.06% of students who choose the engineering education in Andhra Pradesh come from semi-urban regions. The students were admitted to the Undergraduate program depending on their EAMCET rank. But, this entrance test does not include English language component as a criteria for admission which is the medium of instruction. In fact, these students are academically bright and intelligent, but they are often faced with the challenge of using the English language, which is the medium of instruction in the Engineering education. In their four years of the undergraduate program, students are required to listen innumerable lectures, reading academic textbooks, reference books and laboratory manuals, writing their reports, making presentations on various subjects, and communicating with their peers and teachers in English. However, their inadequate English language proficiency prevents them from performing well in their studies, which restricts their academic skills expansion. Further, the lack of English language proficiency limits their opportunities for professional growth. Here the problem arises because of limited English language proficiency, which is a considerable hindrance to their communication. Unfortunately, the English Proficiency Assessments are not part of the Engineering college curriculum and so the students are unable to assess their language proficiency at regular intervals. Based on these observations, this study aimed to understand the English Language skills and explore the differences in first-year undergraduate engineering students' proficiency levels.

Literature Review:

The importance of English language proficiency to enhance academic performance through improved language abilities can never be overemphasized. Students facing difficulties with their communication in English may be unable to function effectively in day to day activities and also in their academics. So, proficiency in the English language will definitely affect and improve students' academic performance.

Relation between English Proficiency and Academic Success:

Adegbove (1993) in his study identified that one of the major factors for students' poor performance in Mathematics is due to lack of English proficiency. During the study, he observed that students' performance in Mathematics examination of Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination (SSCE) in Nigeria is poor compared to English and this happened because of poor reading ability. He also suggested that there is a need to improve English language teaching in order to improve Mathematical skills. High language proficiency could support reading performance in an academic setting and suitably indicate the influence of the English language on students' overall academic performances (Jadie et.al 2012). Azeroual (2013)in his study investigated the problems in reading among the master students in the Arab world. This study revealed that most of the Arab students face difficulty while comprehending a passage due to their inadequate English language proficiency skills which invariably leads to their academic failure. Similarly, Aina, Ogundele &Olanipekun (2013) investigated the relationship between English language proficiency and academic

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performance among 120 students from a college of education in Nigeria. This study found a correlation between English language proficiency and academic performance. Further, it revealed that students in technical education outperformed their counterparts. Students who cleared their English language test performed better than the students failed in both science and technical education.

Rafee, Mustafa, Shahabudin, Razali & Hassan (2011) compared the levels of English language proficiency among the four different domains of students of Universiti Kebangsaan, Malaysia. The results of the study found a difference in the English proficiency between the students of different domains and the students of Engineering, who are selected students of highest admission merit, scored higher than the students of Information Technology, Science and Technology and Education. However, this study observed that the language used at home does not play any role in the differences in students' English proficiency levels. Martirosyan, Hwang & Wangjohi (2015) examined the impact of English language proficiency in the academic performance of International students. 59 students in different years of study enrolled in four-year University in north central Louisiana in the United States participated in the study. The data were collected through a self-reported questionnaire and the findings revealed a significant difference in language proficiency in relation to academic performance in students with high levels of English language proficiency. Racca & Lasaten (2016) studied the relationship between English language proficiency and academic performance among 216 students from the Philippine Science High School. The findings of the study revealed a significant relationship between the students' English language proficiency and academic performance. Thus, it is clearly evident that English language proficiency is vital and lack of adequate language proficiency leads to poor academic performance.

Task-based Instruction:

Successful language learning can be achieved by using different methodologies and approaches like Grammar-translation Method, the Direct Method, Audio-lingual Method, and the Communicative Approach and so on. However, during the end of the 20th century, Task-based instruction (TBI) received more interest and gained popularity in the field of language teaching to promote the development of language skills. Prabhu N S (1987) introduced the new language teaching approach TBI in his "Banglore Project" started in 1979 and completed in 1984. The word 'task' is often used to refer to particular activities in the classroom (Prabhu N S, 1987). Scholars like Long and Crookes (1991), Skehan (1998) Johnson (2001), Ellis (2003&2009) and Littlewood (2004) emphasized the effectiveness of TBI in foreign and second language teaching. Task-based instruction is an effective method of teaching the English language which provides language learners an opportunity to engage in interaction while learning in the classrooms. In task-based teaching, students learn language through activities that promote interest and interaction in the classroom (Willis & Willis, 2007). Task-based instruction (TBI) focuses on the utilization of authentic language to carry out meaningful tasks. In foreign language or second language classrooms, teachers' responsibility is to help students to learn through performing particular tasks that they do in the classroom. TBI has attracted more attention and several studies identified the impact of this approach in foreign and second language teaching. In recent times, task-based instruction has received a growing interest in EFL and ESL contexts. It has been widely acknowledged that task-based instruction promotes students' engagement in performing various tasks. While performing

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tasks, students feel less burden which facilitates cognitive growth and promotes language competence by repetitions and negotiations. Studies showed that Task-based instruction has a positive impact on improving learners' language skills. Nguyen H B & Nguyen A H (2018) investigated on students' perceptions of task-based instruction within a high school context in Vietnam. The findings revealed that the experimental group outperformed the control group and participants' apparently agreed to the need for inclusion of Task-based instruction in their regular courses. In another study, Ismaili M (2014) carried out a study to develop speaking skills using task-based instruction in South East European University (SEEU). This study analyzed the effectiveness of task-based approach to develop students speaking skills in academic settings and found significant and highly positive results. On the other hand, researchers suggested that task-based instruction with enhancement activities enhance vocabulary knowledge of the students. The studies also proved that students improved their vocabulary knowledge in terms of size and levels through task-based instruction and the findings revealed significant differences (Topkaraoglu & Dilman, 2014). Similarly, task-based teaching approach significantly contributes the learning process and improves speaking accuracy and fluency (Munirah & Muhsin, 2015). In a recent study, Kamalian B, Soleimani H &Safari M (2017) conducted a study to understand the effect of Task-based reading activities for vocabulary learning and retention among Iranian EFL students. The results showed that using task-based instruction has a significant and meaningful impact on Iranian EFL students' vocabulary development and retention. However, few studies in India identified the effectiveness of task-based instruction in the ESL classrooms.Thus, this study is an attempt to identify the English language proficiency differences of undergraduate students using task-based language teaching.

Objective of the Study:

The objective of the present study was to explore the English language proficiency levels of semi-urban undergraduate students and identify the differences using task-based instruction.

Research Questions:

In order to achieve the above said objective, this study proposed the following research questions.

1. What is the difference in semi-urban undergraduate engineering students' language skills in terms of their proficiency levels?
2. What is the difference in semi-urban undergraduate engineering students' English proficiency levels using task-based instruction through activities?

Research Methodology:

Research Model:

The aim of this study is to assess the proficiency levels of semi-urban undergraduate students and identify whether task-based instruction using activities would increase their proficiency levels. This study assumes that the task-based instruction using activities enhances the proficiency levels of first-year semi-urban undergraduate engineering students in a positive way. For this purpose an experimental method has been followed to find the answers to the research questions. Accordingly, a single group pre-test – treatment – post-test design is employed to identify the differences before and after the task-based intervention.

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Participants:

A sample of 108 students, 67 female and 41 male students, of undergraduate engineering course from India participated in this study. The participants were first-year undergraduate students admitted into an engineering course at Srinivasa Ramanujan Institute of Technology (SRIT), a self-financed engineering college situated in Anantapur District, a semi-urban region in the state of Andhra Pradesh.

Research Instrument:

The aim of the present study is to understand the differences in semi-urban undergraduate engineering students' proficiency levels. In order to achieve this aim, a teacher made objective type English Proficiency Assessment Test (EPAT) was designed as an instrument and administered to the students. The EPAT includes components such as Grammar, Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension. The main aim behind the design of this test is to understand students' grammatical competence, lexical competence and reading ability as a part of their English language proficiency. The EPAT pattern was designed in such a way that 20% questions related to comprehension, 20% questions related to grammar and the remaining 60% questions related to vocabulary.

Procedure:

The study took place during the first semester of the course. At the beginning of the study, a teacher-made objective proficiency test in the form of pre-testwas administered to the study group. The test consists of 50 questions with one mark each and the participants were provided 60 minutes duration to complete the test. The scores obtained by the study group were then calculated and categorized into proficiency levels. After the pre-test, the study group was provided with an intervention for 10 weeks using task-based instruction. Following the intervention, a post-test was administered to the study group to identify the differences in their proficiency levels. The data collected from the study group in the form of pre-test and post-test were compared using paired sample t-test using SPSS (22.0) version.

Intervention using task-based instruction:

A 10-week intervention using task-based instruction was implemented to the study group. The intervention was designed with the aim to make students enhance their English language proficiency. In the first three weeks, participants were introduced to parts of speech, regular and irregular verbs, countable and uncountable nouns, plural forms. Next, students were provided with activities such as identifying parts of speech, completing the story with the correct forms of verbs, word puzzle to find adjectives. In the following three weeks, students were provided with reading comprehension passages on "Electronic waste" and "Importance of History". After reading the passages, students were provided with the activities such as recall words from meanings, identify words with clues. Later, unscrambled sentences were provided to students to arrange them into a meaningful paragraph. In the end, students in the study group were given cloze reading tasks, a context-dependent activity, where students were required to fill the gaps in the passages using each word only once. During the last four weeks, students in the study group were introduced to vocabulary components like root words, affixes and confused words, collocations, one-word substitutes, phrasal verbs and Idioms and phrases. To understand and use vocabulary, students were provided with tasks such as matching root words, sentence completion using affixes,

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confused word crossword puzzle, completing tables using verbs to form commonly used collocations, finding synonyms with context clues, match them up, replacing words and re-using sentences using one-word substitutes, matching and rewriting sentences using phrasal verbs, a crossword puzzle on phrasal verbs, matching and using idioms in own sentences, fill them up with same word family. In this study, Willis and Willis (2007) framework of task-based teaching method which consists of pre-task, during task and post-task stages were carried out to perform the tasks in the classroom.

Data Analysis:

After collecting the data of pre-test, the scores obtained by the study group were processed to understand the descriptive statistics and frequency distribution. The assessment was carried out using the students' test scores. Accordingly, the study group proficiency levels were classified into 4 different levels, namely Beginner Proficiency Level (BPL), Limited Proficiency Level (LPL), Competent Proficiency Level (CPL) and Advanced Proficiency Level (APL). Later, paired sample t-test was processed to identify the differences in the proficiency levels between the pre-test and post-test scores.

Findings and Discussion:

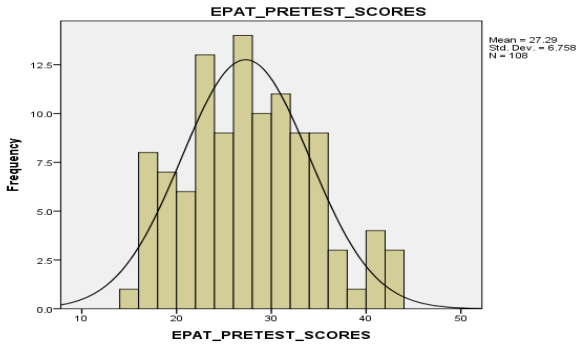
The first research question was meant to understand the English language skills in terms of proficiency levels of first-year undergraduate engineering students. First, the scores of the proficiency test using descriptive statistics were analyzed and presented in Table 1.

Table 1: EPAT pre-test scores descriptive statistics (minimum, maximum, mean & standard deviation) (N=108)

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
EPAT Scores (Pre-test)	108	15	42	27.29	6.758

The results of the English proficiency assessment test show that students scored a mean score of 27.29 (6.758) in the pre-test. The test scores also reveal that 15 was the minimum score and 42 was the maximum score obtained by the students in the pre-test. The pre-test results were represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: EPAT pre-test scores (mean, std. dev) (N=108)



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Following the descriptive statistics of the pre-test proficiency scores, the frequency distribution was processed to categorize the study group into 4 different proficiency levels according to the scores obtained by the participants. Participants who scored below 20 (out of 50) wereplaced inBeginner proficiency level, between 21-30 were placed in Limited Proficiency level, between 31-40 were placed in Competent Proficiency level and between 41 to 50 were placed in Advanced Proficiency Level. The frequency distribution of scores and proficiency levels were presented in Table 2.

Table 2: EPAT pre-test frequency distribution & proficiency levels (frequency distribution &percentage) (N=108)

EPAT Scores Frequency Distribution (pre-test)			
Scores	Proficiency Levels	Frequency	Percentage
Below 20	Beginner Level	18	16.7
Between 21-30	Limited Level	55	50.9
Between 31-40	Competent Level	30	27.8
Between 41-50	Advanced Level	5	4.6
Total		108	100.0

The results in the table 2 show that 18 (16.7%) students were placed in the Beginner Proficiency Level, 55 (50.9%) students in Limited Proficiency Level, 30 (27.8%) in the Competent Proficiency Level and only 5 (4.6%) students among 108 were placed in the Advanced Proficiency level. The results in the above table reveal that majority of the students were found below the expected proficiency levels.

In order to answer the second research question, to find the differences in students' English proficiency levels, a paired sample t-test was processed using the SPSS (22.0). Firstly, the results of the post-test scores in terms of descriptive statistics are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: EPAT post-test scores descriptive statistics (minimum, maximum, mean & standard deviation) (N=108)

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
EPAT Scores (Post-test)	108	18	48	34.13	6.847

The results of the English proficiency assessment test show that students scored a mean score of 34.13 (6.758) in the post-test. The test scores also reveal that 18 was the minimum score and 48 was the maximum score obtained by the students in the post-test. The post-test results were represented in Figure 2.

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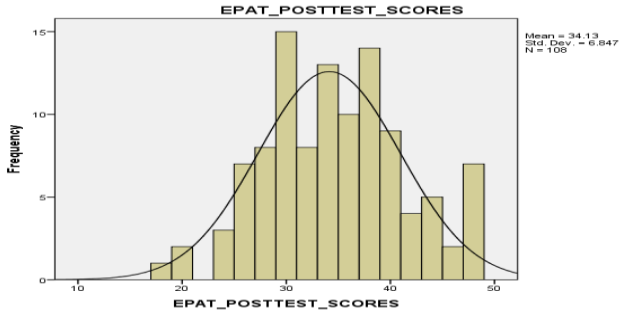
Figure 2: EPAT post-test scores (mean, std. dev) (N=108)



Subsequently, the frequency distribution of proficiency post-test scores were categorized and presented in the Table 4.

Table 4:EPAT post-test frequency distribution & proficiency levels (frequency distribution &percentage) (N=108)

EPAT Scores Frequency Distribution (post-test)			
Scores	Proficiency Levels	Frequency	Percentage
Below 20	Beginner Level	3	2.8
Between 21-30	Limited Level	33	30.6
Between 31-40	Competent Level	54	50.0
Between 41-50	Advanced Level	18	16.7
Total		108	100.0

The results in the table 4 show that only 3 (2.8%) students were placed in the Beginner Proficiency Level, 33 (30.6%) students in Limited Proficiency Level, 54 (50.0%) in the Competent Proficiency Level and about 18 (16.7%) students among 108 were placed in the Advanced Proficiency level. These results clearly show that the students' proficiency levels were increased from pre-test to post-test. Finally, to find the significant differences between the pre-test and post-test scores a paired sample t-test was processed and the findings were presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Paired-samples test results for pre-test and post-test

Paired Samples Test								
	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
EPAT (Pre-test) EPAT (Post-test)	-.602	1.023	.098	-.797	-.407	-6.117	107	.000

The results in table 5 show that a paired samples t-test was conducted to compare the proficiency level differences between students' pre-test and post-test scores. It also reveals the significant difference in the scores of pre-test (M=27.29, SD=6.758) and post-test (M=34.13, SD=6.847) proficiency levels; t(107)= -6.117, p=0.000. The results show a

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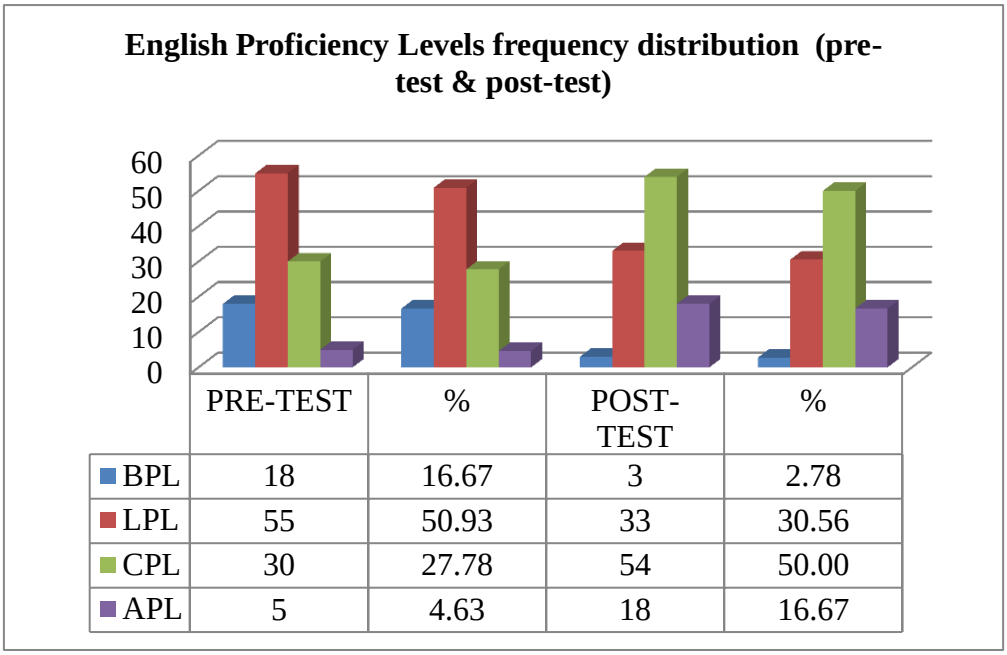
significant difference in their proficiency levels. Thus, these results suggest that using task-based instruction showed a positive impact on the students English language skills in terms of their proficiency levels. On the other hand, figure 3 illustrates the students' proficiency level differences in terms of test scores frequency distribution to support the above results.

Figure 3: English Proficiency Levels frequency distribution



	PRE-TEST	%	POST-TEST	%
BPL	18	16.67	3	2.78
LPL	55	50.93	33	30.56
CPL	30	27.78	54	50.00
APL	5	4.63	18	16.67

Conclusion:

In summary, this research study was carried out to understand the first-year semi-urban undergraduate engineering students English language skills in terms of their proficiency levels and identify the differences in their language skills using task-based instruction. The findings of the study clearly revealed a difference in students' proficiency. In the pre-test majority of the students were placed in the Beginner and Limited proficiency levels, less number of students were placed in the Competent level and only 2 students were able to place in the Advanced level. On the other hand, in the post-test, after providing an intervention using task-based instruction the number of students placed in the Beginner proficiency and Limited level decreased. In fact, the number of students placed in the Competent level and Advanced levels increased in good number. This clearly shows that task-based instruction showed a positive impact on students' language skills and enhances their proficiency levels. Students also opined that these kinds of teaching methods using tasks and activities motivated them and helped them in learning the language. They also expressed their interest in learning the language through tasks and activities in pairs and groups. Thus, the task-based teaching method enabled them to learn and engage in self learning, group learning and mutual learning in the classrooms. Teachers may attempt to plan a well designed task-based language teaching using well planned activities based on the available online resources and ICT tools like Google classrooms and wiki pages to enhancestudents' English language skills.Further, this study also recommends that in order to assess students' language

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skills teachers may also consider proficiency tests as an integral part of their teaching and carry assessments frequently in the regular classrooms throughout their course period.

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