

THE USE OF NOVEL TECHNIQUES IN TEACHING YOUNG LEARNERS IN IRANIAN MIDDLE SCHOOL CONTEXT

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Abstract:

This study investigates the implementation and effectiveness of novel teaching techniques for young learners in Iranian middle schools. Novel techniques considered include task-based language teaching, gamified and digital-game-assisted activities, Total Physical Response (TPR) adaptations for older children, and principled materials development integrating multimodal input. Drawing on a mixed-methods pilot study (classroom observations, pre/post-tests, teacher interviews, and learner questionnaires) conducted across three state middle schools in an urban Iranian province, results indicate measurable gains in engagement, willingness to communicate, and receptive vocabulary, alongside varied effects on controlled productive accuracy. The article discusses implications for teacher training, curriculum design, and phased integration of technological and game-like elements into the Iranian national middle-school EFL curriculum. Limitations and directions for further research are outlined.

Keywords: young learners; middle school; Iran; task-based learning; gamification; CALL; Total Physical Response; materials development.

I. Introduction

Teaching languages to young learners requires approaches that respect children's cognitive, social, and affective development while providing rich, comprehensible input and meaningful interaction. Foundational overviews emphasize age-appropriate activities, play-based tasks, and materials that integrate language and content in ways accessible to children. Contemporary guidance for teaching young learners highlights the value of play, task authenticity, and multimodal materials.

At the same time, second language acquisition research underscores the importance of comprehensible input, meaningful interaction, and opportunities for negotiation of meaning — principles commonly operationalized in task-based and communicative approaches. Integrating digital tools and game-based environments has been proposed to increase motivation and willingness to communicate, particularly in EFL contexts where classroom exposure is limited.

In Iran, recent surveys and local studies report a growing teacher interest in technology integration and learner-centered methods, but also note practical constraints: class size, limited in-service training, and variable access to educational technology. This study examines how novel techniques—task-based lessons adapted for younger adolescents, gamified activities, TPR-informed kinesthetic tasks, and carefully developed multimodal materials—function in Iranian middle-school contexts.

II. Methods and Methodology of Research

Research design: A mixed-methods convergent design was used to combine quantitative measures of language gain and engagement with qualitative insights from teachers and learners.

Participants and setting: Three public middle schools in a medium-sized Iranian city participated. Participants included 120 students (ages 12–14) across six intact classes and six English teachers (all with bachelor's degrees in English or TEFL, varying teaching experience 3–18 years).

Intervention: Over eight weeks, teachers implemented a novel-techniques unit (12 instructional hours) focusing on a single topical strand (everyday life and school routines). Components:

Task-based sequences: authentic tasks (planning a class party, map-based directions) scaffolded from controlled to freer practice.

Gamified sessions: short, teacher-managed digital-game-like activities (vocabulary quests, turn-taking challenges) and non-digital games modeled on game mechanics (points, levels, cooperative goals).

TPR-informed kinesthetic activities: movement-based drills adapted to adolescent sensibilities (role-play with commands, action-based storytelling).

Materials: teacher-created multimodal worksheets, picture strips, and brief audio narratives designed using principled materials-development criteria.

Teachers received a 6-hour training workshop and weekly 30-minute coaching meetings.

Instruments and data collection:

- Pre/post vocabulary and receptive skills test (30 items, teacher-validated).
- Oral performance rubric (fluency & willingness to communicate rating during paired tasks).
- Learner engagement questionnaire (Likert-scale items + open comments).
- Teacher semi-structured interviews (post-intervention).
- Classroom observations (lesson logs and field notes).
- Data analysis

Quantitative data analyzed with paired t-tests (pre vs. post) and effect-size reporting (Cohen's d). Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis to identify perceived affordances, constraints, and suggested adjustments.

III. Results

Quantitative outcomes

Receptive vocabulary: Mean test scores increased from pre-test $M = 14.8$ ($SD = 3.2$) to post-test $M = 19.1$ ($SD = 3.0$). The gain was statistically significant, $t(119) = 17.2$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.57$ (large effect).

Oral performance / willingness to communicate: Oral rubric scores rose from $M = 2.1$ to $M = 3.4$ (on a 5-point scale); paired t-test significant, $t(119) = 11.6$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.06$. Observers noted more voluntary turns and longer turns in task-based and game sessions.

Controlled productive accuracy: Improvements were smaller and not statistically robust for grammar-focused items ($d \approx 0.23$), suggesting novel techniques favored fluency and vocabulary over controlled grammatical accuracy within the timeframe.

Further observation revealed that students' attitudes toward English learning shifted noticeably during the study. At the beginning of the semester, 58% of learners described English lessons as "difficult" or "boring" in the pre-questionnaire. After the intervention, post-questionnaire data showed that 81% of students rated English lessons as "enjoyable" or "interesting," and 74% expressed a stronger desire to use English beyond the classroom context (e.g., watching videos, chatting online).

Teachers also noted improvements in classroom dynamics: students who were previously shy or passive began volunteering for interactive games and pair-work tasks. Peer collaboration increased, with learners providing mutual feedback and help in task completion. Observers documented a rise in student-student communication in English, even during non-assessed group tasks.

In addition, teacher reflections revealed that using novel techniques encouraged them to experiment with new lesson structures and to move away from traditional grammar-translation methods. Several teachers reported that students “seemed more focused” and “remembered new words longer” when lessons incorporated movement, visuals, or game elements. However, they also mentioned challenges such as managing noise levels during active games and ensuring equal participation among students of different proficiency levels.

Finally, student performance data triangulated with teacher observations suggested that learners who engaged more actively in game-based and movement-based tasks achieved greater vocabulary gains and demonstrated higher oral fluency, indicating a strong connection between classroom participation and language development.

Qualitative outcomes

Thematic analysis produced three primary themes:

Increased motivation and interaction: Students reported enjoying gamified and task-based sessions; teachers observed higher on-task behavior and peer interaction.

Practical constraints: Teachers cited large class sizes and limited access to devices as obstacles to fully digital implementations; time constraints also limited extended task cycles.

Teacher development needs: While teachers found the methods pedagogically valuable, they requested more sustained training on designing tasks and on assessment aligned with communicative goals.

IV. Discussion

The study’s mixed-methods findings suggest that integrating novel techniques—task-based sequences, gamified activities, and kinesthetic TPR adaptations—can positively impact engagement, receptive vocabulary, and willingness to communicate among Iranian middle-school learners. These outcomes align with broader literature on young-learner pedagogy and SLA which emphasize meaningful tasks, rich input, and affective benefits of playful activities.

The strong gains in receptive vocabulary and willingness to communicate mirror results from prior studies showing that digital gameplay and task design can enhance learner participation and communicative readiness. Reinders and Wattana’s study, for example, linked digital gameplay with elevated willingness to communicate — a mechanism plausible in this study’s gamified sessions as well.

However, the modest gains in controlled grammatical accuracy reflect a well-known trade-off: communicative and play-based methods boost fluency and lexical acquisition, but focused accuracy often requires targeted, form-focused practice. A balanced curriculum should therefore incorporate both task-based communicative cycles and explicit form-focused follow-ups. Additionally, systemic barriers (class size, time, limited hardware) constrain how fully technology-dependent interventions can be implemented in many Iranian state schools; incremental, low-tech gamification and teacher-created multimodal materials can be a pragmatic bridge.

V. Conclusion

Novel pedagogical techniques—task-based learning, gamified activities, and TPR-adapted kinesthetic tasks—show promise for increasing engagement, vocabulary acquisition, and communicative confidence among

young adolescent EFL learners in Iranian middle schools. Implementation success depends on teacher training, classroom management adaptations, and phased integration that accounts for resource constraints. Curriculum designers and policymakers should support professional development focused on task design, principled materials development, and low-cost ways to gamify learning. Future research should use larger samples, longer intervention periods, and randomized controlled designs to test long-term impacts on both fluency and accuracy.

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