

RESEARCH ARTICLE



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## ENHANCING THE WRITING SKILLS OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN ARTS AND SCIENCE COLLEGES IN SALEM DISTRICT THROUGH TASK BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING METHOD

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### ABSTRACT

The undergraduate students lack in English communication skills because of their family background, education, and their exposure and even psychological reasons. Their medium of instruction in their schools also plays a vital role in shaping their skills. Essentially they all need to know English as college students and they are required to use English as their means of communication not only in their daily routine but also for their academic purposes. Unfortunately the Arts and Science college students in Salem district are very weak in their communication especially in writing skill which is mandatory for them for the very survival. Hence this problem is taken up for study and the new innovative method of task based teaching is adapted to improve and develop their writing skill. The article focuses upon the pre test results and the post test module test results of the students and the analysis of the two results. It describes the task samples administered and how the task based activities and task modules helped the students to grow in their comprehension and enabled them to have a better performance in using the writing skill.

### Aim

To enhance the writing skills of the undergraduate students in Arts and Science colleges in and around Salem district by adopting task based language teaching approach. (TBLT)

**Key words:** task based teaching method, pre test, post module test, errors and writing skill.

### Need for the study

English, as one of the foremost languages in the world, is the medium of International communication. Although, it does not function as the mother tongue of any section of the population, there are small sections of population that speak it with native proficiency. English plays a very important role in education, business and administration. It is the medium of instruction for

higher education in India where the learners who derive from rural areas fail to acquire the language skills as expected. Even the students from urban background struggle as they don't have the first language environment. The students who have Tamil as their mother tongue find it difficult to improve their English language skills when they join Arts and Science colleges. Though the learners have 12 years of school teaching of English as a second language they are poor in communicating. It is

necessary for the undergraduate students to improve their communication skills particularly writing skill. The respondents chosen from Salem district are poor in communication skills and they lack in grammar skills. They could understand a little but their usage of English language is limited since they don't have experience in their homes and surroundings. It is a challenge to make them learn the language.. Thus, this study is undertaken to identify their present status and new methods other than traditional methods are adapted to enhance their writing skill. The activities are planned according to the task based teaching method to impart the narrative writing skills.

### **Modes of Writing**

Writing has various modes and in recent years a lot of research has been done on the concept of "genre" and its role in writing. One branch of genre studies addresses the general types or modes of writing. According to Stifler (2002) "modes of writing or rhetorical modes are patterns of organization aimed at achieving a particular effect in the reader"(p.1). Generally modes of writing have been classified into four types; descriptive, narrative, expository and argumentative (Connor, 1996;Richards and Schmidt, 2002).

The most familiar and simplest mode of writing is narration. Richards and Schmidt (2002, p.337) define this writing mode as "narrative writing reports an event or tells the story of something that happened". The purpose of a narrative text is to inform, entertain and excite the readers (Dickson,Kameenui and Simmons, 2007, p.11) But the most comprehensive definition is the one presented by Jewell (2004): "narration" or a "narrative" provides details of what happened. It is almost like a list of events in the order that they happened, except that it is written in paragraph form. A narration or narrative doesn't have to show any cause and effect; it only needs to show what happened in the order that it happened (p.4). This narrative skill is essential for the college students and this study tries to enhance the narrative writing skill of the respondents through TBLT method.

### **Theoretical Framework: Task based language teaching**

Task based Language teaching method which is the outcome of Communicative approach plays a vital role in promoting communicative language use. Communicative language teaching is an approach than a method. It is a learner-centered and experience based view of second language teaching. The goal of language teaching is to develop what Hymes D.L (1972:272) referred to as "communicative competence". Johnson.K. (1984:193) says that, acquisition of communicative competence in a language is an example of skill development. A wide variety of materials have been used to support communicative approaches to language teaching. According to J.C.Richards (1986:79) there are three kinds of materials currently used and they are text-based, task-based and realia.

This communicative approach in later days evolved as a method called task based language teaching (TBLT). Task -based learning offers an alternative for language teachers. In a task-based lesson the teacher doesn't pre-determine what language will be studied, the lesson is based around the completion of a central task and the language studied is determined by what happens as the students complete it.

Nunan (1989: 10) defines 'task' as: "a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form." Willis, J. (1996: 53) gives the meaning of 'task' as: "a goal-oriented activity in which learners use language to achieve a real outcome." So tasks are activities that require learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allows teachers to control and regulate that process.

TBLT plays an important role in the process of second language learning as it helps the learners to involve in the classroom activities fully and participate in them. (Nunan, 2007). This approach allows the learners to overcome their inhibition and they become familiar with the learning methods. In task-based teaching the materials have to be

organized in some order of increasing task-complexity. The tasks of the same type appear at short sequences and the latter tasks should exploit the kind of reasoning, content familiarity or forms-familiarity likely to result from earlier ones. N.S. Prabhu (1987-88) who popularized this method in India says, "The ordering has necessarily to be partial and suggestive rather than definitive and it depends both on the learners' ability and on the degree of help given by the teacher".

**The advantages of TBLT**

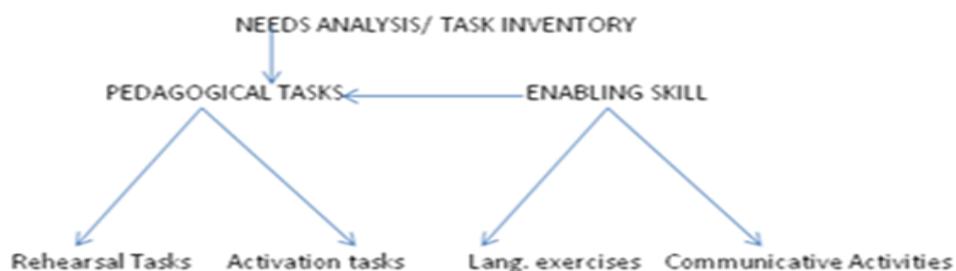
Task - based learning has some clear advantages

- Unlike a traditional classroom approach, the students are free of language control. In all three stages of pre-task, during the task and the post task, they must use all their language resources rather than just practising one pre-selected item.
- A natural context is developed from the students' experiences with the language

that is personalized and relevant to them. With traditional approach it is necessary to create contexts in which to present the language and sometimes they can be very unnatural.

- The students will have a much more varied exposure to language with TBLT. They will be exposed to a whole range of lexical phrases, collocations and patterns as well as language forms.
- It is a strong communicative approach where students spend a lot of time communicating. It is learner centered rather than very teacher-centred by comparison.

A Frame work of TBLT (Nunan,D.1999)



The framework advocated by David Nunan was used for designing the tasks. Also the tasks vary from each other according to the needs of the learners and so it included the recent methods of ICT, Information and Communication technology. ICT offers the learners and teachers a wide range of materials in different modes, and it provides various opportunities for the learners to actively participate and learn the essential structures needed for writing skills through technology and internet.

**Objectives of the research**

- To adapt Task Based Language Teaching method as a tool in classrooms to enhance the narrative writing.
- To impart learning of grammatical items using the tasks/activities.

- To guide and help the learners from the rural background to acquire the skill of continuous writing.
- To show the validity of task based teaching method for improving the writing skills of college students.
- To involve activity based and technology based modules to enable the learners to go through the learning process without inhibition and hesitation.

**Limitations of the study**

As the present study has its wide range of application it becomes necessary that the area is to be restricted to the first year under graduate students of two Arts and science colleges in Salem district. Teaching of the entire writing with its all sub

skills would be very extensive and hence only narrative writing skill is undertaken.

**Selection of the respondents**

The respondents were 40 students studying I B.A. in Christian College of Arts and Science, Salem and forty students were selected from Mahendra Arts and Science College, Salem doing I B.Sc. The subjects were selected from both rural and urban background depending on their schooling. Forty students were male and forty were female students, in which twenty two male students were from rural areas and eighteen male students were from urban areas. Twenty four female students were from rural areas and sixteen female students were from urban areas. All the respondents were divided into 4 groups as rural male, urban male and rural and urban female as their learning process and acquisition would be different.

**Description of the Research work**

David Nunan’s task based language teaching method was used for the research work. The activities were designed to involve the students in learning the grammatical items and the skill of continuous writing. The researcher conducted a pre module test to diagnose the level of students and the Pre module test results were tabulated with reference to the errors they committed. The errors were analyzed and interpreted to assess the students learning process and their level.

**Pre test details**

A pre test-I was administered to forty students to assess the improvement of the students. The pre-test-I consisted of four types of questions:

1. Write a story in hundred words
2. Verb and tense
3. Change the negative into positive sentences
4. Prepositions

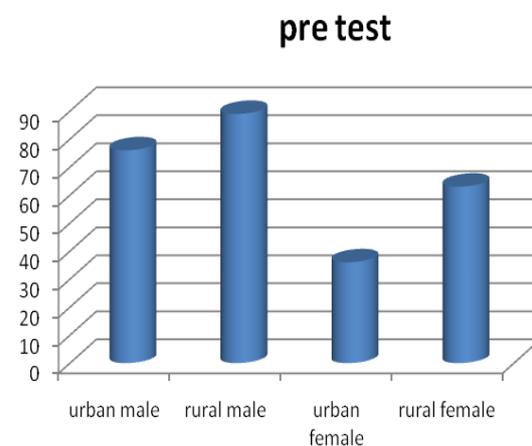
**1. Write a story in hundred words**

Two male rural students have written the first question write a story in hundred words correctly. The entire story has no errors. Two female students, one rural and one urban student have written the second question "write a story in hundred words correctly". The entire answer has no error. She also wrote the fourth question fill in the blanks with suitable verb and tense correctly. All the answers are correct. Other students have committed errors. The total wrong answers are two hundred and sixty

four. The male urban students who have committed errors in the first question write a story in hundred words are seventy six. The male rural students who have committed errors are eighty nine. The female urban students who committed errors in the first question Write a story in hundred words are thirty six. The female rural students who answered wrongly are sixty three. So the errors of female urban and female rural are less than the male urban and male rural students respectively. The errors in the first question, committed by the female urban students are relatively very less (36) when compared to all other errors.

Figure.1 Pre test errors in story writing

No	students	No.of errors
1	urban male	76
2	rural male	89
3	urban female	36
4	rural female	63



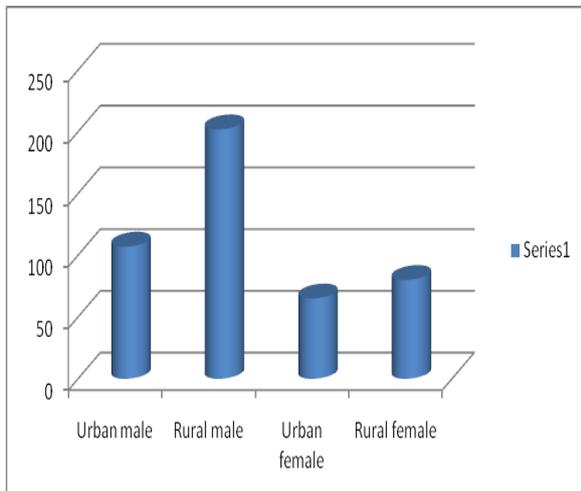
**Pre test – verb and tense**

Except a female student from urban area, all others have committed mistakes. In verb and tense the total wrong answers are four hundred and fifty four out of which the wrong answers of male urban students are one hundred and seven whereas the wrong answers of male rural students in verb and tense form are two hundred and two. When the wrong answers of female rural students are eighty, the wrong answers of female urban students are sixty five only. From this data it is evident that the female students have a strong foundation of

grammar when compared to the male students. The rural students both male and female make more mistakes than the students of urban areas. It can be concluded that generally students derived from rural areas are weak in their grammar which makes their writing skill weak and poor.

Figure 2: No of errors made in Verb and Tense:

s.no	Category	No. of errors
1	Urban male	107
2	Rural male	202
3	Urban female	65
4	Rural female	80



In the third type of question Change the positive sentences into negative sentences, no student has answered all the questions correctly. All students have committed errors. The total wrong answers in changing the positive sentences into negative sentences are one thousand and thirty. The wrong answers of rural male students are four hundred and forty eight. The male urban students who have answered wrongly are three hundred and thirteen. The female rural students whose answers are wrong are one hundred and thirty one. The wrong answers of female urban students are ninety five.

Figure 3:Pre test errors in positive and negative

S.No	Category	No. of errors
1	Urban male	313
2	Rural male	448
3	Urban female	95
4	Rural female	131

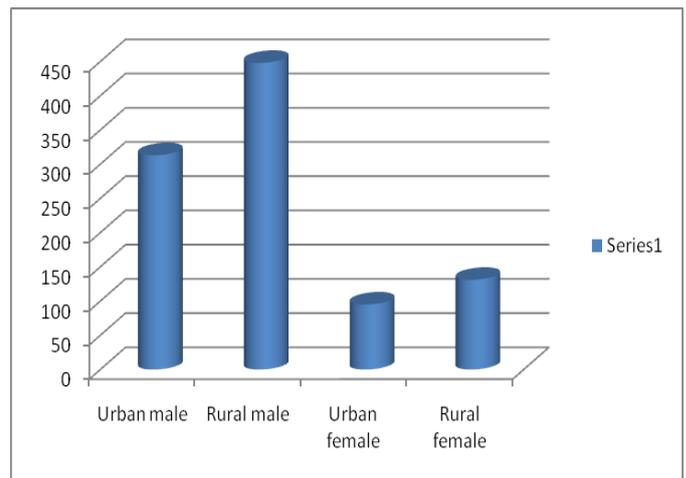
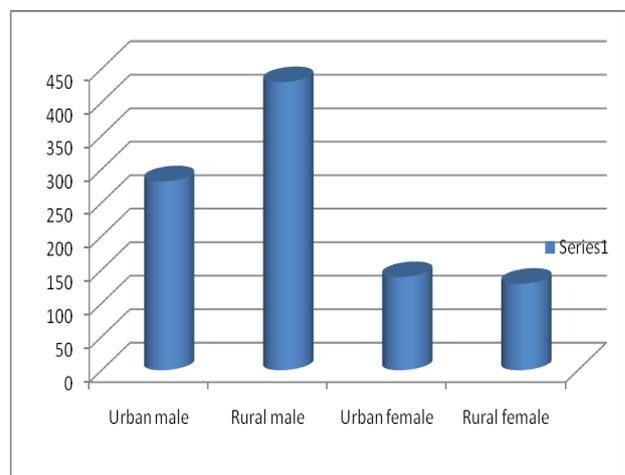


Figure 4.Pre test in using the prepositions

S.No	Category	No. of errors
1	Urban male	282
2	Rural male	430
3	Urban female	139
4	Rural female	129



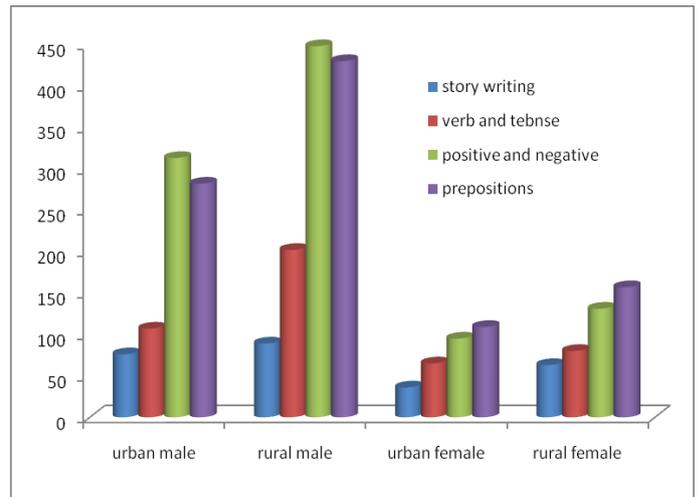
The errors committed in exercises regarding prepositions are again plenty to a total no. of 980. Among these errors the rural male students category tops the errors 430 whereas the lowest errors are committed by the rural female students surprisingly. The urban female students also committed less errors (139) when compared to urban male students,(282). On the whole the female both urban and rural students performed better than the male students and this reveals that more attention and focus should be paid towards the male students and they must be trained in application of prepositions.

**The overall analysis of pre-test results**

The overall error list of the pre test is tabulated and the following chart gives it clearly. From this it is easy to identify the group which is the weakest and which is fairly doing well. The analysis reveals that the rural students both male and female are weaker than the other categories and in some items of test they lack more and make a lot of mistakes. For instance the errors in positive and negative conversion all of them committed a lot of mistakes which draws our attention to their misunderstanding of breaking of verbs despite their less number of errors in verb and tense exercises. From this it is evident that though they try to remember the rules of verb and tense they are very weak in applying them for other purposes.

Figure 5. Overall errors in the pre test

students	urban male	rural male	urban female	rural female
story writing	76	89	36	63
verb and tebense	107	20	65	80
positive and negative	313	44	95	131
prepositions	282	43	109	157



**Task based teaching modules**

Then the teaching modules based on tasks and activities were used to teach the same grammatical items and continuous writing. The researcher acted as a guide and facilitator helping the students to learn the narrative writing skills. Tasks were administered to the respondents. A sample of tasks used for task based teaching method modules are given below.

Figure 6: Task samples

S.N O	TASK	EXPECTED OUTCOME	GRAMMATICALL ITEMS
1.	A family trip narration- a role play	story telling - narrative writing skill	Tenses
2.	A video without audio	organizing the events in narration	sentence structure
3.	A passage without punctuation - with picture	correlating the picture and the story	Punctuation
4	A poster of natural disaster	converting the picture into a continuous writing	preposition, tenses
5.	An interview of a success story	recollecting and structuring the story	Tenses

**A TEACHING MODULE – A SAMPLE**

**The Triangle preposition game**

Grammar : Preposition-Time, place, movement

Level : Higher level students

Time : 40-50 minutes

Material: One large card triangle three strips of paper for nine students.

**Preparation**

The researcher cuts out one large card triangle and three strips of paper for each group of nine students. The researcher dictates the list of prepositions to the class.

2) The researcher arranges the students into groups of nine people around the table and gives each group one of the cards triangles and three strips of paper. The researcher asks them to write these words on the strips of paper and places them in the angles of the triangle: place, time and movement.

3) Within each group of nine, three sit near the place angle, three near the time angle and three near the movement angle.

4) The researcher tells them how the game works:

a) The first team chooses one of the dictated prepositions. They write it on a slip of paper and place it in the most appropriate corner.

b) The second team has to produce a correct sentence with in twenty five seconds. If they write correct preposition they get a point. If they can't write correct preposition they may ask the third team to write correct preposition.

c) The third team of students has to write the correct preposition.

Thus the students play simultaneously in the table of nine. They close the game when time closes.

The sentence must show the place, time or movement meaning of the preposition.

The prepositions learned in the triangle game are listed below.

- 1) They went ashore in the evening
- 2) The river Thames flows through London.
- 3) He came to our help
- 4) The child came running towards me.
- 5) Most cars run on petrol.
- 6) He has come from Patna.

Aim	:	Awareness of the importance of continuous writing with words of sequence
Level	:	Higher level
Rationale	:	A fiction video as a writing model.
Mateirals	:	Sequences from news items and documentaries.
Preparation	:	Find points in the commentary which are supported by visual illustrations

**Procedure**

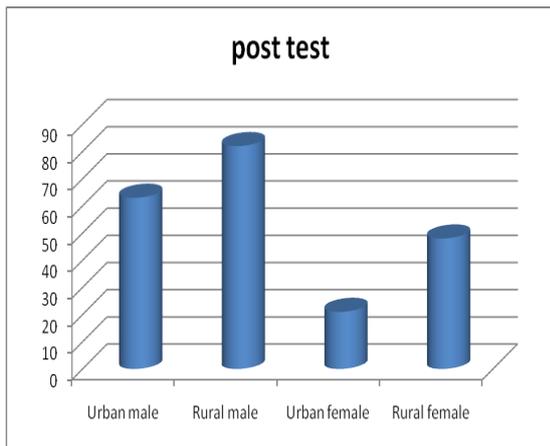
- 1) The researcher explains the instructions how they have to watch and understand the story and how to write a story.
- 2) Plays the clip without audio and asks them to watch and guess the story.
- 3) Asks them to write the story as they understood and collects the stories.
- 4) Plays again with sound and asks them to recheck their understanding and also for feedback.

These kinds of tasks were administered to the subjects and they were trained at various intervals. Their performance was tested periodically and according to it the tasks were of different varieties. Finally their performance was tested by a post module end test and the errors in that test are analysed to see their improvement in their learning and performance.

**Post test errors in Verb and tense**

Figure 7

No	students	NO OF ERRORS
1	Urban male	63
2	Rural male	82
3	Urban female	21
4	Rural female	48

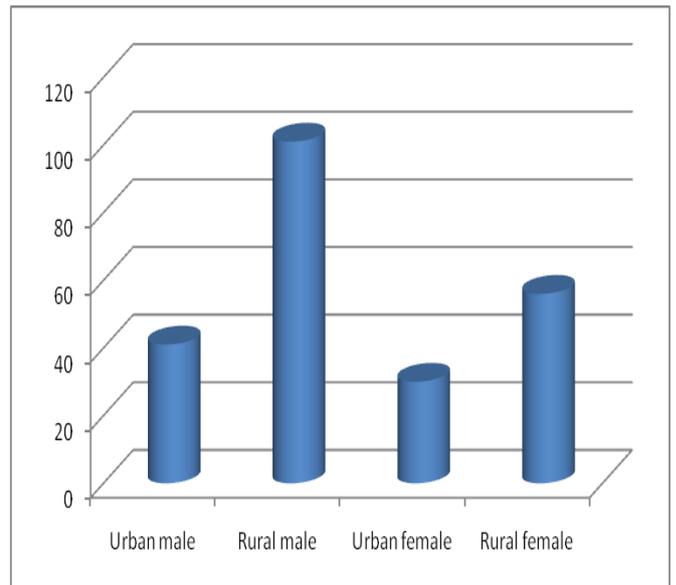


The post test results in verb and test are tabulated and the results show that the errors have reduced considerably. The errors committed by the rural female students reduced to 60% and it is remarkable to know the rural female students improved and their learning capacity is significantly encouraging. Secondly the urban male students performance is better and the errors are reduced to 58.8% and the next follows rural male(40%) and the last is the urban female students errors reduced to 32%. As they had already committed fewer errors in the pre test (65) their growth (21) cannot be observed as a higher one. Rather the vast difference comes in rural female students where their errors reduced from 80 to 48 (60%). The tasks gave them the right motivation to learn better.

**Post test errors in positive and negative**

**Figure 8**

No	students	No.of errors
1	Urban male	41
2	Rural male	101
3	Urban female	30
4	Rural female	56

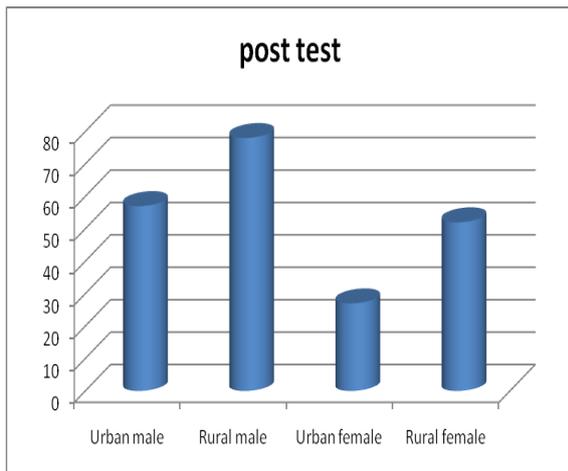


The errors committed by the students in the category of conversion of positive into negative have remarkably reduced. The urban male, rural male, urban female and rural female students' reduced from 313 to 41, 448 to 101, 95 to 30 and 131 to 36 respectively. In fact the total errors in this category in pre test is higher than any other category (987) which is reduced to 208, one fourth of the errors are reduced. Among them the urban male students' development is exceptionally higher. Their 86% of the errors are reduced from 313 to 41 and also rural male, urban female and rural female student's errors are reduced to 77%, 68% and 72% respectively. It is evident that their comprehension and application of conversion of positive and negative has improved a lot through the tasks they've done.

**Post test errors in prepositions**

**Figure 9**

No	students	No.of errors
1	Urban male	57
2	Rural male	78
3	Urban female	27
4	Rural female	52

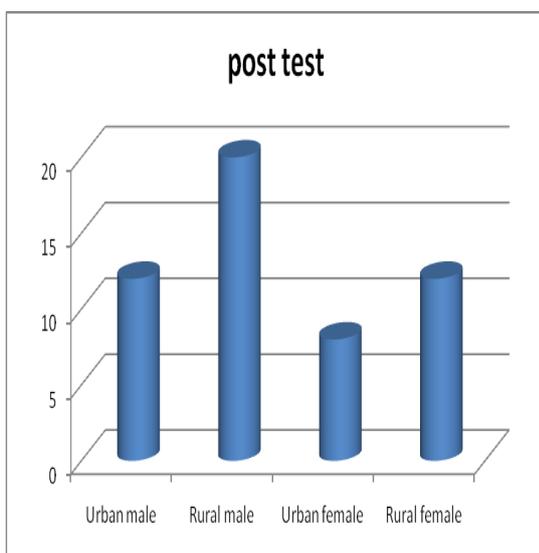


The post test errors in prepositions when compared to the pre test are reduced to 78% and it is surprisingly higher in the category of rural male students leading to 82% and the rural female students errors are reduced to less 67%. The total errors are reduced from 985 to 214.

**Post test errors in story writing**

**Figure 10**

No	students	No.of errors
1	Urban male	12
2	Rural male	20
3	Urban female	8
4	Rural female	12



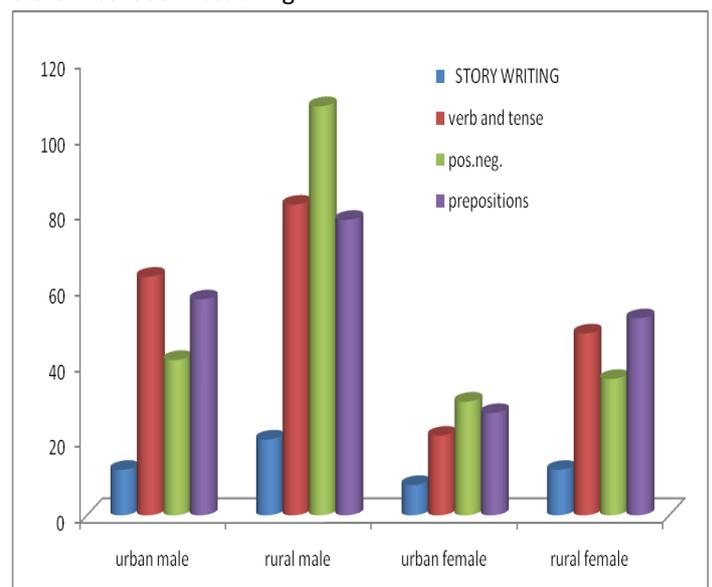
The post module end test result shows that the story writing errors are reduced to a great extent to an 80% from 264 to 52. Amazingly both the rural male and rural female students errors reduced to 77% and the urban male students' errors reduced to a higher percentage 82% and the urban female students' errors reduced to the least 67%.

Over all errors in post module end test

**Figure 11**

students	urban male	rural male	urban female	rural female
STORY WRITING	12	20	8	12
verb and tense	63	82	21	48
Positive and negative	41	101	30	36
prepositions	57	78	21	48

Among all the four categories in the post test the story writing has remarkably improved and the total errors committed by all the students reduced from 264 to 52 and it is a significant percentage of 80%. Except verb and tense (53%) the errors are reduced from 987 to 208 (76%) in positive and negative and 978 to 204 in prepositions (79%). The overall analysis shows clearly that the students have considerably improved in their learning through the adaptation of tasks methods in teaching.

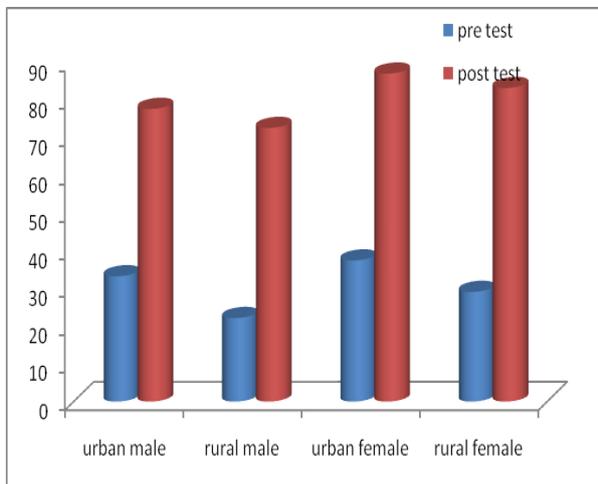


**RESULTS**

The post module tests were conducted in different stages to observe their growth and development and the post module end test results were tabulated and analyzed to assess their final improvement. Both the results, the pass percentage in the pre test and the post module end test were compared and assessed to derive the findings.

Figure 11: Comparison of pre test and post test results

NO	Category of Students	Pre test - pass percentage	post test - pass percentage
1	urban male	33.3	77.77
2	rural male	22.2	72.72
3	urban female	37.5	87.15
4	rural female	29.15	83.33



**Findings of the study**

In the pre module test, the rural students secured poor marks and they committed more errors when compared with the urban students in all the four types of questions whereas in the post module end test they committed less error

- ▶ Out of 22 rural male students only 22.2% cleared the test and out of 18 urban male students only 33.33% cleared the test. Out of 24 rural female students 29.15% and out

of 16 urban female students 37.5% cleared the test.

- ▶ The students learned the components of narrative writing skills easily through the TBLT without any inhibition
- ▶ In the post module end test the total errors of narrating a story decreased from 264 to 52 to 80% roughly. One fourth of the errors were reduced in their writing.
- ▶ The post module end test shows a remarkable improvement. Out of 22 rural male students 72.72% cleared it and out of 18 urban male students 77.7% cleared the test. Out of 24 rural female students 83.33% and out of 16 urban female students 87.5% cleared the test.
- ▶ Though the male students both rural and urban shown an improvement of 72.72% and 77.77% it is less when compared to the female students whose pass percentage is 83.33% and 87.5% respectively.
- ▶ The rural female students' pass percentage moves from 29.15% to 83.33% and their improvement is higher when compared to all other categories of students.
- ▶ The TBLT can be adopted to enhance the writing skill of students both urban and rural.

**Suggestions**

This study is limited to a particular district and only a few colleges and it can be extended to many different colleges.

Variations in students categories can be more by dividing them into to the category of mother tongue, type of schooling they had, (state board, CBSE etc.)

Not only the narrative writing skill but also other writing skills can be included with their sub skills

A course work incorporating the task based activities can be prepared and it can be suggested as their text book.

A special bridge course containing these activities can be administered to these students as they enter into the colleges.

**CONCLUSION**

Task based language teaching method proves to be successful for helping the students to acquire the writing skills. This method can be

adapted to any level of students to acquire other language skills.

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