VIETNAMESE EFL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ORAL TASKS AND NON-TASKS FROM A TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING (TBLT) PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: This article examines Vietnamese EFL students' perceptions of oral tasks and non-tasks as viewed from a task-based language teaching and learning (TBLT) perspective. Questionnaire data were collected from 188 students from a high school in Vietnam to understand their preferences and perceived importance of tasks and task engagement. The results indicated that these students reported a clear preference for free open-ended oral tasks than structured activities or non-tasks such as asking and answering, acting out a dialogue, and dialogue modeling. At the same time, students wanted to be provided with linguistic support such as vocabulary and grammatical structures. They also valued the importance of oral tasks for numerous reasons including their values for real world use/application, confidence enhancement, skills integration, and language use improvement. However, they reported a low level of task engagement due to many factors, of which, topics, teaching methods and students' limited English proficiency were most frequently cited. In light of these findings, the implications for teaching EFL speaking and adopting TBLT in EFL contexts are discussed.

1.   Introduction

Language education has never been separated from research that seeks theoretical and pedagogical advancements to promote second language acquisition (SLA) and learning. Task-based language teaching (TBL) is theoretically grounded in the assumption that by doing purposeful communicative tasks, learners are likely engaged in real language processing that is conducive to learning (Long, 2015). TBLT has thus been recommended for language instruction (Samuda et al., 2018; Ellis, 2009) and garnered considerable research attention with a large body of studies investigating teachers' perceptions of TBLT and/or its implementation (A. T. Nguyen

et al., 2023; Siddiqui & Winke, 2023 2). Although there are some evaluation studies which probe into students' perceptions of task-based learning via TBLT interventions (Gutiérrez, 2024; Kim et al., 2017; McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007), the wider literature is devoid of studies into more specific aspects of TBLT, degrees of 'taskness', or tasks and non-tasks (Ellis, 2003). The present research fills this gap by examining students' perceptions of tasks and non-tasks as viewed from a TBLT perspective. Furthermore, little research has tapped into student task engagement in association with their perceived importance of tasks, and the underlying reasons. This study aims to answer the following two research questions (RQs):

RQ1. How do Vietnamese EFL high school students perceive tasks and non-tasks?

RQ2. How do they rate the importance of tasks and their engagement in tasks? Why?

The empirical insights from the present study will help advise teachers in implementing oral tasks in particular and TBLT in general in EFL high school contexts. This is particularly significant in the Vietnamese educational context of curricular reform to develop Vietnamese EFL students' communicative competence (Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training - MOET, 2018). It is thus pressing to explore high school students' perspectives regarding their preferences for pedagogical activities including tasks and non-tasks commonly structured in EFL classes and their voices behind the self-reported engagement in oral tasks.

2.   Literature Review

2.1.   *Task-based language teaching (TBLT) and task-supported language teaching (TSLT)*

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) essentializes the role of tasks in driving language learning and development (Long, 2015; Skehan, 2003). Central to TBLT is the notion of tasks defined as meaning-focused activities where meaning making is paramount and involves using any linguistic and non-linguistic resources students have at their disposal to perform the task (Ellis, 2009). As such, the end goal of TBLT is not on the accuracy of language use but the successful completion of the task. In this sense, a task in TBLT is outcome-oriented for the holistic language use that it engenders (e.g., Ellis, 2003Long, 2015).

A weak version of TBLT is task-supported language teaching (TSLT) which refers to the presentation-practice-production (PPP) model (Ellis, 2003). This instructional sequence is grounded in Skills Acquisition theory (DeKeyser, 2017) which posits that declarative knowledge that is introduced in the presentation gets proceduralized through communicative drills in the practice phase. They are quite often referred to as controlled practice through substituting information, asking and answering questions based on given information, and reading out a given dialogue. Imitation through a sample dialogue to act out and teacher modeling are further activities in the second practice phase. It could be said that the other two Ps prepare students for

the last phase of production which targets free communication to develop procedural language use for automaticity (Long, 2015;). In the present study, free open-ended meaning-focused activities without any instructional interventions are referred to as *tasks* and other activities that involve controlled practice built towards the final stage of production are ***non-tasks*** from a TBLT view.

The PPP paradigm or TSLT (Ellis, 2009) is widely used in textbook materials as well as training programs for teacher trainees because of its clear structure and user-friendliness (Anderson, 2017). It is contended that it might be a possible option for TBLT in Asian contexts, where teachers select to move from "adoption to adaptation" of TBLT (Butler, 2011, p. 43). Indeed, research has found limited success in TBLT implementation in Asian EFL contexts due to contextual constraints such as large class size (A.T. Nguyen et al., 2023; Siddiqui & Winke, 2023), exam washback (A.T. Nguyen et al., 2023), limited opportunities to use the target language outside classrooms (Butler, 2011; McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007) and teachers' limited proficiency (Park, 2012). Indeed, TSLT is used more often than TBLT in EFL contexts (Boers & Faez, 2023).

Despite its popularity, the PPP paradigm has been challenged for four main reasons (Willis, 1996, p.134). Firstly, learners at the last phase of production might not use the lexical items/structures presented in the first presentation phase. Secondly, if the presented items are made compulsory to use, this is no longer a task (Ellis, 2003). Equally, if overuse of the language items presented in the presentation might lead to mechanical, unnatural use, not purposeful communication. Lastly, many students are not able to communicate in real life settings despite years of formal learning at school. Given these arguments, students' voices need to be researched to further inform instruction. The present study aims to explore students' perspectives on tasks and non-tasks, controlled activities that are sequenced before the final free production.

2. 2. *Previous studies*

Existing research has largely examined teachers' perceptions and their implementation of TBLT (Nguyen et al., 2018; A.T. Nguyen et al., 2023; Siddiqui & Winke, 2023). Much less research has investigated students' perceptions. One such study was conducted by Hood et al. (2009) in a Japanese EFL context, revealing that students expressed willingness and comfort to communicate in English and understanding of the usefulness of TBLT. Hood et al. (2009) contend that TBLT can be adopted in Japanese teaching contexts.

Some evaluation research has explored students' perceptions after the implementation of a TBLT program. For instance, in a Thai EFL university context, through classroom observations, surveys and interviews, McDonough and Chaikitmongkol (2007) found that students held positive attitudes towards TBLT, as they saw its relevance to their academic needs in the real world. Yet, both teachers and students expressed the need for additional time and support to

teach and learn through tasks. In another evaluation study, Kim et al. (2017) investigated students' perceptions of TBLT over a longitudinal intervention, documenting positive changes over time. Students also reported enjoying the opportunities to practice English and interact with others and expressed interest in further learning through TBLT. Positive reactions have also been found in a recent study by Gutiérrez (2024), who focused on university students learning Spanish as a foreign language. Via a longitudinal TBLT program, the author found that students changed their perceptions of the TBLT approach, expressing preferences for it as they had the opportunities to use the target language.

Overall, the majority of research that has examined students' perspectives to date has largely been limited to evaluating students' attitudes and perceptions of TBLT after the introduction of a TBLT program. Research has yet to explore students' perceptions of tasks and non-tasks in the PPP paradigm, a weak version of TBLT that has been widely adopted in Asian EFL contexts (Butler, 2011; A.T.Nguyen et al., 2023). Insights into students' preferences for speaking activities, especially tasks and non-tasks will inform instruction and assist teachers in planning their teaching activities that address the needs of students.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Participants

In total, 188 students from three grade levels (60, 66 and 62 from Grades 10, 11, and 12, respectively) from a high school in Vietnam completed a questionnaire which surveyed their perceptions of tasks and non-tasks in EFL classes. There were 111 male and 77 female students. They were aged from 15-18, and self-rated their English proficiency ranging from A1 to B1 according to the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR). They all had learnt English from Grade 6 and majored in different other subjects rather than English, namely Maths, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Geography, and Literature.

3.2. The questionnaire

This questionnaire survey chose to focus on oral tasks and non-tasks although tasks as viewed from a TBLT approach can involve any skill (Ellis, 2003, 2009) and investigated a more focused aspect of TBLT- 'taskness', which is determined by activities themselves and by teacher pedagogy, which can make an activity achieve more or less of its 'taskness'. In conjunction with Littlewood's (2004) framework, two broad constructs were used to measure the 'taskness' in this study: tasks and non-tasks. The latter include activities that are teachers' pre-task linguistic and non-linguistic preparation and controlled practice activities. These constructs reflect how design and methodology set in the process of teaching and learning. According to Ellis (2003), it is the methodology that matters whereas Nunan (1993) argued that the distinction between the two is not necessary because of their blurring borderlines.

The questionnaire has 19 five-point Likert items (Table 1) and two items that surveyed students' perceptions of the importance of tasks and their level of engagement in actual classroom tasks were in a mixed format, with the follow-up open-ended item asking "why" for students to justify their answer choices.

After careful piloting, the questionnaire was administered to six classes (195 students in total) in a pencil-and-paper format, two classes from each grade at a high school in Vietnam, yielding a return rate of 100%. However, seven students completed only partly of the questionnaire and were thus excluded, leaving 188 cases for analysis. Cronbach alpha values for tasks and non-tasks ranging from .623 to .723, though not very high, were acceptable, according to Field (2018).

Table 1. Cronbach alpha values of the questionnaire (N=188)

	Number of items	Cronbach alpha values
Tasks	5	.640
Non-tasks- forms of linguistic and content support	7	.623
Non-tasks-controlled practice	7	.723

3.3 Data analysis

The questionnaire responses were first entered into an Excel spreadsheet and checked for precision before the numerical data were imported into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) (version 20.0) for analysis. Descriptive statistics, including mean (M), standard deviation (SD), minimum (Min) and maximum (Max) values, were derived from the program for responses to the questionnaire items. Responses to the open-ended question of 'Why' regarding student' perceptions of the importance of tasks and task engagement were analyzed via a theme-based approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) for themes that were emergent from the data in an open-ended format (Cohen et al., 2018). Each new theme was noted in an Excel sheet and coding continued, which facilitated the counting of mentions of each theme and patterns of data.

4. Results

4.1. Students' perceptions of tasks and non-tasks

Descriptive statistics for students' perceptions of tasks are presented in Table 2. Overall, the surveyed students reported a quite strong preference for free oral tasks in the different lessons of the four skills. In particular, a clearer preference was reported for oral tasks in the pre-stage of the reading, listening, and writing lessons (M = 4.14, SD = .69) than in the post-stage of these

lessons (M= 3.96, SD = .76) and in the speaking class (M = 4.02, SD = .72). Consistently, students demonstrated strong preferences for task enactment in their own ways and with their own ideas (items 4, 5), with mean values of >4.00.

Table 2. Students' perceptions of oral tasks in EFL classrooms (N= 188)

Statements	Min	Max	M	SD
1. I like free pair/group discussions, roleplays, or debates about a given issue in the pre-reading, pre-listening or pre-writing stage.	1.00	5.00	4.14	.69
2. I like free pair/group discussions, roleplays, or debates about a given issue in the speaking lesson.	2.00	5.00	4.02	.72
3. I like free pair/group discussions, roleplays, or debates about a given issue in the post- reading, post-listening or post-writing stage.	2.00	5.00	3.96	.76
4. I like the teacher allowing students to carry out given discussions/conversations in our own ways, without linguistic suggestions or modelling.	1.00	5.00	4.09	.92
5. I like the teacher allowing students to use their own ideas to carry out given discussions or conversations.	1.00	5.00	4.04	.89

The questionnaire also explored students' perceived preferences for non-tasks, oral activities with differing levels of pedagogical support. The results are shown in Table 3. Regarding linguistic support, while giving lexical items or grammatical structures was well desired by students (M= 4.39, SD = .69), providing language functions invited more mixed responses (a medium score of M =3.29 (SD= .95). Idea preparation was welcomed by the students (M= 3.96, SD = .70). Teacher modeling was not unanimously preferred (M = 3.54, SD = .92), which is confirmed by a stronger preference for task performance without modeling presented earlier. Yet, a less structured form of pedagogical support, such as providing an outline, was wanted (M = 3.72, SD = .88). The remaining form of instructional support, displaying a written model on the board/computer screen, was not well liked by the participants (M =3.29, SD = .96)

Table 3. Students' preferences for different forms of teacher support (N= 188)

Statements	Min	Max	M	SD
1. I like to be given some vocabulary or grammatical structures before discussing a given issue in pairs or groups.	1.00	5.00	4.39	.69
2. I like to be given some language functions (disagreeing/agreeing or accepting or declining an invitation, etc.) before carrying out conversations about a certain issue.	1.00	5.00	3.29	.95
3. I like to be given an outline before carrying out our own discussions or conversations in pairs or groups.	1.00	5.00	3.72	.88
4. I like to be given some ideas before carrying out pair or group discussions about a given issue.	1.00	5.00	3.96	.70
5. I like to be given a model (written on the backboard or shown on the whiteboard) before discussing a certain problem in pairs or groups.	1.00	5.00	3.29	.96
6. I like the teacher to model the discussion/ conversation with one or two students before students carry out discussions in pairs or groups.	1.00	5.00	3.54	.92

Table 4 presents students' perceptions of non-tasks, which particularly focus on controlled activities. Structured speaking activities asking and answering using the provided information (M= 3.26, SD = .83) or grammatical features (M= 3.38, SD = .97) received mixed responses. They appeared not to enjoy controlled practice such as asking given questions and answering (M= 2.70, SD =.96). Reading out a given dialogue in pairs (M = 3.18, SD = 1.03), substitution activities, matching ideas (M = 3.38, SD = .86) and rearranging dialogue exchanges (M =3.07, SD =.96) elicited divided opinions. Note that the SD values were quite large, suggesting a great deal of individual variation.

Table 4. Students' perceptions of oral non-tasks in EFL classrooms (N= 188)

Statements	Min	Max	M	SD
1. I like pairwork, one asking questions, the other giving answers based on the information provided.	1.00	5.00	3.26	.83

2. I like pairwork, one asking and the other answering questions using grammar points given.	1.00	5.00	3.38	.97
3. I like pairwork, one asking the questions provided and the other giving answers.	1.00	5.00	2.70	.96
4. I like pairwork/groupwork where students practice reading out a given dialogue.	1.00	5.00	3.18	1.03
5. I like substitution activities where students practice in pairs/groups to replace information in a given dialogue with the cues given.	1.00	5.00	3.27	.96
6. I like matching activities where students work in pairs/groups matching given ideas and themes before carrying out discussions/ conversations about a certain issue.	1.00	5.00	3.38	.86
7. I like re-arranging activities where students work in pairs or groups re-arranging the exchanges of a given dialogue and then acting out this dialogue.	1.00	5.00	3.07	.96

4.2. Students' perceptions of the importance of tasks and task engagement

4.2.1. Students' perceived importance of communicative tasks and reasons

In the questionnaire, students were also asked to rate the importance of oral tasks on a five-point Likert scale. The results demonstrated that most students considered communicative tasks as important (M = 4.03; SD = 0.06) and gave different reasons for their evaluation. Table 5 presents students' justifications for their perceptions.

Table 5. Students' justifications for perceived importance of tasks (N = 188)

Justifications for importance of tasks	Number of mentions	% (out of number of students
1. Essential for real world use/application (jobs, job interviews, studies, transactions, …)	93	49.47
2. Building up confidence	76	40.43
3. Improving integrated skills	55	29.26

4. Improving grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation	55	29.26
5. Learning English is to communicate.	51	27.13
6. Learning from friends/communication	31	16.49
7. Relaxing	23	12.23
8. Opportunities for expressing one's viewpoints	20	10.64
9. Improving thinking/creativity	8	4.26
10. Widening knowledge	8	4.26
11. Improving groupwork skills	1	.53
12. Improving self	1	.53
13. Consolidating knowledge	1	.53
14. Updating knowledge	1	.53

The majority of the sampled students believed that tasks are important for real-world English use (93 mentions, or nearly 50%). These students additionally viewed communicative tasks as a way of building up confidence, which ranked second in mentions (76 or 40.43%). Improving grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation and enhancing integrated skills each had 55 mentions as additional values of tasks. In addition, 51 students perceived that learning English is learning to communicate and 31 cited learning from friends/communication through oral tasks. Many students, 23 and 20 regarded tasks as a forum for stating their viewpoints and as relaxing, respectively. Several other benefits that students perceived with communicative tasks, though in smaller figures, included improving thinking/creativity, widening knowledge, improving self, being updated, and enhancing group work skills.

As shown in Table 6, only a small number of students (11/188) considered communicative tasks as unimportant, with exam pressure being the leading reason. Other reasons include "*grammar is more important*", "*there is no need to use English outside school*", and "*communicative tasks are difficult.*"

Table 6. Students' justifications for perceived unimportance of tasks

Justifications for why oral tasks are not so/as important.	Number of mentions
1. Examination pressure	8
2. Grammar is more important.	1
3. Communicative tasks are difficult.	1
4. No need to use English outside school.	1

4.2.2. Students' perceived engagement in learning through oral tasks

The final item asked "How often do you engage yourselves in performing actual classroom discussions, role-plays, or debates, etc. (if any) that your teacher uses in the classroom?" and students selected from 1. (Almost) Never, 2. Rarely, 3. Sometimes, 4. Usually, and 5. Always). The results revealed that notwithstanding the importance students perceived of tasks as above (M=4.03; SD= 0.06), their level of engagement in actual classroom tasks was, surprisingly, much lower. In particular, the majority of student voices fell in the 'sometimes' category (M=3.24; SD= 0.689). They provided reasons as summarized in Figure 1.
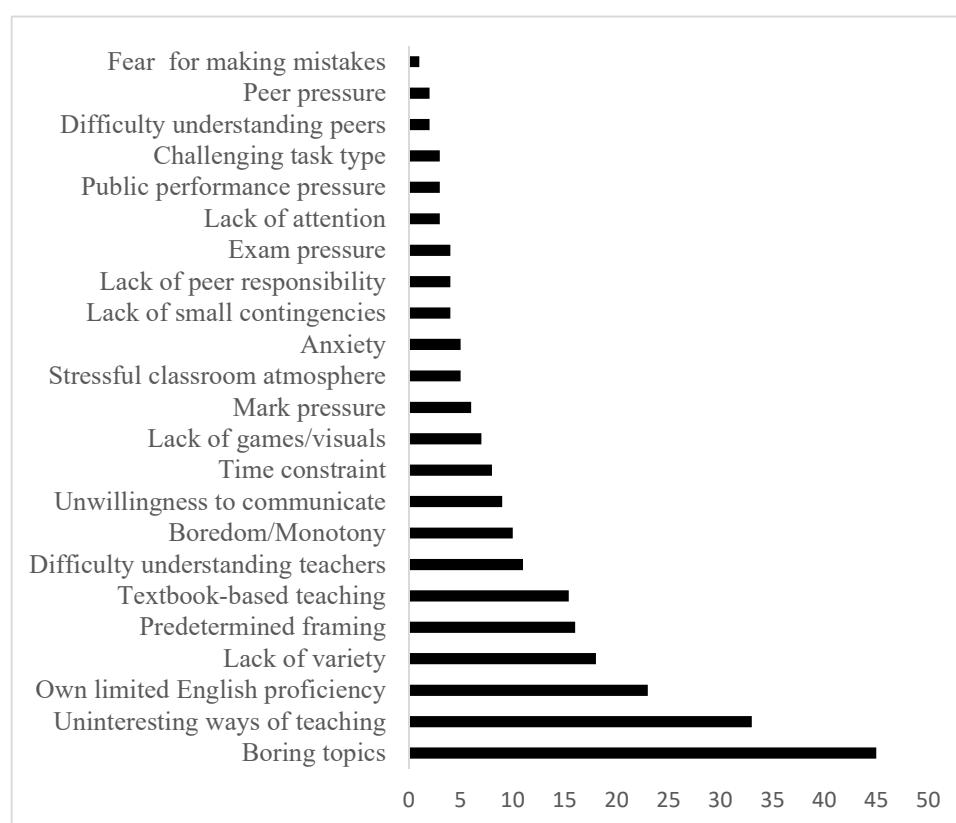
Figure 1. Factors in task engagement

Clearly, topics ranked first in mentions by the students in the sample (around 43 %). Ways of teaching or organizing tasks were another common reason, accounting for 32% of the student mentions. Furthermore, textbook-based teaching, pre-determined framing, lack of variety or repetition, comprehension difficulty and boredom were the next frequent reasons that students voiced as constraining their output, and hindering them from engaging in given tasks.

5.   Discussion

The present study examined Vietnamese EFL high school students' perceptions of oral tasks and non-tasks as they are conceptualized from a TBLT perspective. The results revealed that students reported a strong preference for free open-ended tasks than non-tasks. The structured activities alongside the presentation and practice phases in the PPP paradigm or TSLT were less preferred and elicited more mixed responses. The findings are generally consistent with those in evaluation studies (Gutiérrez, 2024; Kim et al., 2017; McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007) or survey research (Hood et al., 2009) in which students had positive perceptions of TBLT. That students preferred free open-ended tasks and free enactment of oral tasks in one's ways without modelling does not align with predominant traditional teaching via a PPP paradigm in Asian contexts (Butler, 2011;) due to different contextual factors such as class size, limited opportunities to use the target language outside classroom as well as exam washback (Nguyen et al., 2023; Siddiqui & Winke, 2023). This suggests the need to take specific teaching and learning contexts into account. The students in the present study were from a public high school where students majored in different subjects, which might represent a different sample from students in other EFL contexts, though within Vietnam.

It is significant that students rated the importance of tasks very high, as they viewed the different values of tasks including their real-life application, embedded opportunities to develop the integrated skills and language knowledge, build up confidence, learn English through communication, express one's viewpoints and learn from others. These are refreshing in the context of limited uptake of TBLT implementation in Asian contexts (Butler, 2011; A.T. Nguyen et al., 2023). A smaller proportion of students did not consider tasks as important for similar reasons cited in existing literature (A.T. Nguyen et al., 2023; Siddiqui & Winke, 2023) such as the constraint of an EFL environment that presents limited language use outside the classroom and exam pressure that does not focus on purposeful communication. Unlike other studies (Butler, 2011; Littlewood, 2004), contextual constraints such as knowledge-based examinations and a lack of communication outside classrooms were not predominantly raised as barriers to student perceptions of the importance of tasks in learning English in this sample.

It is also interesting to note that while students highly valued tasks, they reported a quite low level of task engagement. The finding is understandable, as many students attributed their low task engagement to boring topics, teaching methods, lack of variety, their limited English proficiency level and their unwillingness to communicate. That said, this could be insightful since high evaluation of tasks does not necessarily mean students are engaged in the tasks that the teachers ask them to do.

6.   Conclusion and Implications

The present study explored high school students' perceptions of tasks and non-tasks and the data were collected in a high school in Vietnam via a questionnaire. The findings demonstrated that students preferred free open-ended tasks to non-tasks or structured activities. In addition, while students were well aware of the importance of tasks for their different values, their p task engagement was reportedly lower.

In light of the findings discussed above, there are a number of pedagogical implications for EFL speaking instruction and TBLT implementation. Firstly, teachers should not view TBLT and PPP as two competing approaches, but rather use them appropriately in their particular contexts. To that end, understanding students' voices is crucial to plan appropriate oral tasks to engage them in using the target language. Students' positive perceptions of oral tasks could be viewed as a motivation for teachers to incorporate tasks into classroom practice for language learning enjoyment (Dewaele, et al., 2017). Since structured activities or communicative drills before the final task, the last phase of the PPP model, were not well received, they might need skipping, or at most briefly introducing so as to allocate more time for students to express themselves freely in the production phase. However, some students might need help with linguistic items before the task, thus it is prudent not to turn this activity into an exercise. Next, in order to motivate students in oral tasks, variety could be the guiding principle (Ur, 2024), that is, topics, tasks, and pedagogical techniques should be varied to engage students, especially young teens like high school students who might get bored easily through repetition and a lack of task relevance to their needs and interests. Equally important is the choice of updated topics relevant to teenagers' life and interests. Finally, participating in informal conversations with students and conducting needs analysis (Long, 2015) will provide teachers with insights into how students want to be engaged in oral tasks, what activities they find most relevant and needed for themselves. This will enable teachers and materials writers to plan and design tasks and/or non-tasks that they enjoy, thus promoting learning.

The present study surveyed quite a large sample of participants (188 students). While this has provided robust quantitative data, these students were from one single school, thus limiting its power to generalize findings to other high school contexts in Vietnam and beyond. In addition, the grade variable was not taken into consideration in the present study and as such differences in reported preferences for tasks and non-tasks or different forms of pedagogical support were not known for each grade level (Grades 10, 11, 12). Gender and other learner variables such as learning experiences and proficiency should also be examined in future research.

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