



The Effect of Task-based Language Teaching on College Students' Oral Performance

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Abstract:

The aim of this research is to investigate the impacts of Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) on non-English-majored university students at University of Phan Thiet. By using qualitative methodology including questionnaire, observation and semi-structured interview, I can thoroughly understand participants' attitudes and opinions about their difficulties as well as the effectiveness of TBLT in class. I believe that the findings of this research will enhance my students' speaking skills. In addition, this research can help other teachers in my current workplace be aware of the advantages of task-based approach, so they can apply it in their classroom. Furthermore, the findings would be considered as an important source for further studies of other researchers.

Key words: language teaching, task-based approach, speaking skills

I. Introduction

Nowadays, English is considered as an international language all over the world; therefore, if the Vietnamese government wants to develop the education system, improving students' English proficiency must be the priority. According to Zaremba (2006), speaking is the most important communication skill of all the four macro English skills, and the scholar also indicates that employers prioritize applicants' ability of communication skills rather than work experience or academic degrees and certificates. Although English has been taught for a long period of time (primary to high school) in the education system, the fact is that Vietnamese students' English proficiency is still low, especially speaking skills. Zang (2009, p. 32) stated that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students do not often have many opportunities to speak English inside and outside the classroom, so their ability of speaking with English speakers in an international environment is limited. Tam (1997, p. 26) pointed out that if teachers want to improve students' oral performances, it is necessary to provide them with numerous circumstances and frequent speaking tasks. Plenty of EFL students in other countries are encountering this problem and EFL students at University of Phan Thiet are not exceptions.

To help students overcome this obstacle, teachers should create more tasks for students to practice as many as possible, and Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) may be one of the most suitable solutions (Nunan 1992). In Vietnamese context, TBLT has been applied in EFL classroom recently, and its effectiveness on students' oral performance is uncertain. Consequently, I carry out this research with the support from my intermediate non-English-majored university students at University of Phan Thiet. The research questions are:

- a. Does Task-based Language Teaching have an effect on students' oral performance?
- b. How can teachers improve students' oral performance by using Task-based Language Teaching?

II. Literature Review

2.1. Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT)

Farrell and Jacobs (2010, pp. 60-1) explained that the theory of constructivism is the foundation to developing TBLT; therefore, meaning and messages are focused on more than particular forms or samples. They pointed out that in accordance with constructivism theory, learners construct knowledge based on former understandings and experiences; to explore meaning, learners need to connect former knowledge with current experiences; learners are active in working with others with self-reflection; the role of a teacher is considered as a facilitator and a co-constructor of knowledge with learners via query.

The above suppositions denote that learning is not assessed as an inactive progression of taking in information conveyed by teachers. Moreover, learners try to match new experiences and new information adapted to their objectives, concerns, former experiences, and knowledge in an active way (Farrell & Jacobs, 2010). In TBLT, communicative and meaningful task are essential elements and the progression of practicing communicative language is more important than production of accurate language form. Consequently, when teaching a language, teachers should position tasks as the central component of preparation and guidance. It is also considered that a group of communicative tasks ought to be arranged around learning and teaching, and it is essential that the target language needs to be used when these tasks are conducted (Cook, 2008).

2.2. Definition of 'task'

Up to now, there have been various definitions of a task developed through empirical pieces of research in classroom practice. For instance, according to Nunan (1988), tasks are described as classroom activities involving students using target language in understanding, handling, constructing, and interacting while they concentrate on meaning rather than form. A task is considered as an activity involving students in using target language in order to achieve a specific objective in a specific circumstance (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). Moreover, tasks are described as goals or activities which are conducted using target language (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Though a variety of definitions use dissimilar terms, all the definitions do consist of several common key factors: target language needs to be used when students carry out tasks, meaning is emphasized, a goal which is set before conducting a task need to be achieved, the task must be authentic.

2.3. Task types and framework

2.3.1. Task types

Grigg (2005) divided meaning-focused activity into three types: *information-gap activity*, *reasoning-gap activity*, *opinion-gap activity*. According to Pica, Kanagy, and Falodun (cited in Richards & Rodgers 2001), there are five types of tasks: *jigsaw*, *information-gap*, *problem solving*, *decision-making* and *opinion exchange tasks*. Another viewpoint is that tasks are categorized in six different types of tasks: *listing*, *ordering*, *comparing*, *problem solving*, *sharing personal experiences*, and *creative tasks* (Willis, 1996). Whatever types of tasks are conducted, according to Richard and Roger (2001) and Willis (1996), teachers ought to follow the below framework.

2.3.2. Framework of Task

Pre-task

In this stage, teacher explores the topic with the class, gives clear instructions as well as useful words and phrases. The purpose of this step is to facilitate students to recognize the goal of the task.

Task cycle

Three periods in task cycle are task, planning, and report.

Task: Students usually work in pairs or small group using their existing knowledge to deal with the task. Teacher works as a facilitator who monitors and stimulates students without adjusting students' structure inaccuracy.

Planning: Students prepare to report to the class what outcome was (in writing or orally). Because the report stage is public, teacher gives language advice to students to ensure the accuracy.

Report: Teacher asks several groups to present their outcome or exchange written reports so that everyone can compare results. After that, teacher gives comments on the content of the reports.

Language focus

Language analysis: After teacher comments on groups' performance, students analyze and exchange views on important aspects of the passage or recording transcription. At this time, form is focused and students can enter new words, phrase, or patterns in their notebooks.

Language practice: During or after analyzing language, teachers carry out several exercises in order that students can practice vocabularies, phrases and patterns in the text they have learnt.

2.4. Recent studies

Most pieces of research documented below support the effectiveness of TBLT on teaching and learning, especially students' oral performance.

Hasan (2011) investigated the impact of TBLT on general diploma students' oral performance and speaking confidence awareness at the College of Education in Egypt. The researcher outlined a list of English-speaking competence, and then implemented a speaking competence analysis which was supplemented with an evaluation guideline and a checklist of self-assurance awareness. In this research, an experimental group including 21 students learned in a technique class using TBLT and a control group involving 18 students participated in a similar tenor class but applying the lecture technique. After data analysis, the experimental group had significantly superior results than the control group, which reinforces the usefulness of TBLT in teaching speaking in English.

In a piece of study with first-year students of English in Turkish higher education, Korkgöz (2011) explored the effectiveness of the combination of TBLT principle with videos using in a face-to-face speaking course. The outcome showed the improvement of participants' oral performance as well as the awareness of the value of integrating technology in the lesson.

Although most researchers support the effectiveness of TBLT in teaching target language, there are several viewpoints concerning the weaknesses of TBLT. For instance, Sato (2010) indicated that when teachers use task-based approaches in teaching skills (especially grammar), the usefulness of task-based approaches need to be investigated more.

III. Research Methodology

In order to obtain the three types of information, three qualitative data collection methods are utilized respectively: questionnaire, observation, semi-structured interview.

3.1. Research instruments**3.1.1. Questionnaire**

Kahn 1993, p. 231) stated that a questionnaire is a tool which help respondents give the answers for specific questions or show their reaction by checking items. I choose the questionnaire as my first-stage method to get general information about my participants' English-speaking background as the questionnaire has much relevance to my research. Rich qualitative data is achieved because respondents are allowed to develop their answers by using open-ended questions. This means that I can investigate the participants' attitude about their current English-speaking situations and difficulties.

Beside the advantages of questionnaire, there are several difficulties that I must be careful in order to get real successes. The first attention is that the language of the questionnaire must be carefully considered to be suitable for the group of participants. In another word, I have to modify language of the questionnaire to match the participants' English level, age, social class. Because the participants in my research are university students at intermediate level, I use the language may not be too formal, difficult and avoid using strange terminologies. Another attention is that collecting data from open-ended questions are time-consuming because participant must use their own words to complete full answers which require participants' good writing skill level. I provide participants with sufficient time to ensure that they are comfortable conducting the work without being under time pressure.

3.1.2. Observation

In this study, observation is chosen for the second-stage method to collect data of students' performance. The first advantage of observation is that it supplies a direct access to the research issues under a careful consideration. I actually observe and take note their performance in a certain situation, so the data ensure the high precision, whereas several types of self-report such as interview or questionnaire may not achieve accurate and complete information since participants tend to match their answer with the social desirability. Another strong point is that I can become aware of and analyze the events systematically. Next, observation often requires several forms of recording which means that it supplies permanent records of such events or actions; therefore, it can allow other researchers to carry out further examinations across time or location.

Semi-structured interview

An important method to collect qualitative data that researchers should use is semi-structured interview. According to Rubin (2005), interview is a conversation between the interviewer and the interviewee about a given topic. A semi-structured interview includes two types of questions: closed-ended questions for checking agreement or disagreement and open-ended questions for achieving detailed information and suggestion. Semi-structured interview often follows an observation or informal interview to get a better understanding of the issues before creating meaningful semi-structured questions. I decide to apply semi-structured to obtain participants' attitude, opinions after participating in TBLT class because of many reasons. Firstly, semi-structured interviews allow interviewees to express their opinions and feelings freely in their own words. Secondly, this method can ensure that the qualitative data collected will be reliable and comparable. Thirdly, two-way communication is encouraged which allows the interviewer to know the interviewee received accurate messages. Fourthly, the method provides in-depth information because the participants need to not only answer but also give reasons for their answer. Finally, participants are interviewed individually, so they may feel more comfortable when discussing sensitive issues.

3.2. Participants and procedure

The participants of the study are ten non-English-majored university students (4 males and 6 females) at the age of 20-23 and have the same English proficiency level (intermediate). Those students are anticipated to have considerable experiences in English learning but still encounter language problems in oral performance. Questionnaire, observation, and semi-structured interview are used respectively in this study. Firstly, I obtain the informed consent of my research participants before starting any fieldwork to ensure the participants understand the elements of the research and voluntarily participate. Then I deliver questionnaires containing 5 open-ended questions to ten participants to get general information about their current English-speaking level as well as their difficulties with traditional teaching technique, and collect them after 30 minutes. Task-based Language Teaching is applied in 4 weeks (3 periods a week). Each day, students will speak about a topic such as "Agree or Disagree", "Offer and Request", and so on. There are eleven topics in 11 days and the 12th day is used for practicing all previous lessons. There are three stages in the framework of TBLT lesson, which are: pre-task, task-cycle, and language focus. Students practice in pair and then perform in front of the class. I observe their performance and take note their strengths and weaknesses to see whether they improve or not. After 4 weeks, ten participants participate in semi-structured interviews individually (10 minutes/ interviewee) to get their feeling and opinions after learning in the TBLT class. All data collected from questionnaire, observation, and semi-structured interview will be used for data analysis.

3.4. Data Analysis

After applying questionnaire, observation, and semi-structured interview, I need to keep a hold on my data for later analysis and one of the simplest ways is to keep a research diary (Dahlberg & McCaig 2010, p.146). I can note all the activities relating to my research project such as when the interview took place, interview and observation process and collecting data. The recordings of interviews are transcribed by verbatim transcription that means accurate words have been spoken and who spoke them are written down. The data analysis is based on qualitative approach and I select grounded theory for my research. The purpose of grounded theory is to develop theory inductively that means theory is constructed through observation of the research project. Those observations are constantly compared to each other and any emerging patterns are noted and coded, and

categories generated. Data collection continues until there are no new codes emerging and categories become stable' (Dahlberg & McCaig 2010, p.151). There are three stages of the coding process which are respectively: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

After transcribing the interview recordings, I begin the first stage which is open coding to identify categories that are retrieved from the data. Firstly, I read through my data several times, underline, pick up the main points and write them next to the words. The purpose of this step is to identify what is said and discussed in the interview and put them in categories. The other interviews are also analyzed in the same way to compare, identify similarities and differences among interviews. This work is conducted until all the categories are listed and I choose which categories are suitable for answering my research questions. The next step is axial coding which focuses on putting the data on chart to evaluate the connection between categories and sub-categories. Finally, I use selective coding to explore the core variables and reread the verbatim transcriptions to selectively code any data relating to the core variable that I have recognized.

In order to analyze data from questionnaire and observation, I also apply the same method. With the questionnaire, I analyze their answer, identify similarities and differences and then put them in categories to evaluate their current English proficiency, their level of motivation and problems when studying in traditional class. About the analyzing observation, I focus on observing the process when they perform speaking tasks and analyze their strengths and weaknesses of accuracy and fluency to examine whether their performance after studying in a TBLT class improve or not.

IV. Findings from data collection

Some key findings were presented after data were collected through the combination of three types of data collection tools. Firstly, most of my participants understood about the purpose of my innovation, the definition and use of task-based framework and role play activities, the content of their lessons as well as procedure of student journals and interviews. Next, only few participants felt confident when acting out role play in front of their classmates. Most of them are still tongue-tied and shy when performing. Finally, the most important finding was that almost participants thought that they engaged with applying task-based framework and role play activities in speaking activities. However, most of them admitted that their oral performance was not significantly improved in general. The findings are clarified by these pieces of evidence below.

Students' understanding about the TBLT activities

The evidence from three types of datasets pointed out that most of the students understand the procedure of task-based framework and role play activities. As can be seen from teacher' notes in observation sheet, most of the participants seemed to be clear about the framework and what they have to do in role play activities. The data obtained from Student C journals showed *"the teacher clearly explained what task-based framework and role play were at the first session, therefore, I understand them thoroughly"*. In the interview, Student D claimed: *"After the teacher explained TBLT framework, I thought that task-based framework was really useful because it had pre-task stage which were useful to know new words and useful structure. At the end of the lesson, I could review these words through language focus"*.

With the same opinion, Student M expressed *"language focus was useful because I could practice new words and phrases again, so I remembered them longer"*. Whereas, in the interview with Student B, she said *"I think the teacher should not only repeat new words and phrases but also help us to discuss more about the topic in language focus"*.

About the teacher' instruction and guideline for role play activities, most of students agreed that the teacher gave them detailed instruction. In student journal, student A said *"At the beginning of the period, the teacher gave us clear instruction, so I knew what and how I had to do"*. Students B indicated *"Teacher explained each step carefully. I just need to follow his guideline and finish the task"*. However, Student C admitted *"I am not a good student and I rarely participate in role play activities; therefore, I do not understand the instruction fully"*. Through my observation, although I encourage them to use English in class, most of them use Vietnamese when practicing with each other.

In connection with content of the lessons, most of participants agreed that the three topics “Home Life”, “Future Jobs”, and “Books” are informative, familiar and appropriate for their level. In Students O journal, she said “*The unit is quite familiar to me because I met these situations in daily communication*”. Besides, student M said in the interview “*If the topic was about politics or religions, I have nothing to say*”. However, through my observation, I realized that they got stuck when pronouncing and putting new words in their conversation such as “*mischievous and responsibilities*” (in unit Home Life), “*vacancy, application form, résumé and jot down*” (in unit Future Job), “*taste, swallow, chew, digest, hard to put it down and hard to pick-up again*” (in unit Books). This difficulty was also confessed by Student E, K, M “*some new words are hard to remember the meaning and pronounce; it is not easy to use them in my role play although I really want to do*”.

Students' confidence in TBLT activities

Through observation, student journals and interview, I recognized that a few students showed their confidence in acting out TBLT activities, whereas the rest were still shy. Based on my observation from week 1 to week 4, I saw that most of them were not so anxious when they practiced in pairs, but their anxiety increased a lot when they performed in front of the class. In addition, I observed that only Student B and D were quite confident in acting out their roles, almost the rest are nervous and their knees and hands were shaking. Most students not only spoke with a shake in their voices but also are all of the shake. In Student K journal, he affirmed:

“I can write anything I want, but I cannot stand in the crowded and say what I want because my previous teachers focused on teaching grammar and simple mechanical speaking task. I have never made a meaningful role play with other classmate before”.

Student E claimed “*When I practiced in pair, I could speak with my partner. However, when performing in class, I forgot a lot of words. It was so pity*”.

Otherwise, two students B and D stated:

“I think that role plays make me more confident than before because I have enough time to practice before performing and the role play situation is not so strange. I sometimes speak in the middle of class, so I do not feel very nervous.”

Students' engagement in TBLT activities.

Generally, most of the students are engaged with the applying task-based framework and role play activities, but the development of engagement varied among students. Based on my observation, eight students appeared to be engaged most in the role play activities and they expressed that “*role play is very fun and interesting, it attracts me a lot*”. In the interview, Students B claimed “*I feel that this is the most amazing course I have joined in; I feel a lot more active than I used to be in traditional classroom*”. Student L stated “*I like acting out role play; it makes me feel as we are not studying a subject, we are playing! The class atmosphere is very cheerful*”.

The rest of the class felt that TBLT motivated them to speak English although the motivation is still insignificant. Students C affirmed “*I don't like English and I hate speaking English; however, I may change my mind a little bit after this course*”.

Nevertheless, in the last week of my innovation, when I introduce the role play activities for new lesson, I heard somebody yawned and complained “*Role-play again? Nothing new, teacher?*” I observed class and saw the disappointment on active students' faces. This might be the main reason for the decrease of students' engagement in role play activities. Student B expressed in her journal “*I really like role play activity; however, the teacher should change other types of tasks because I am bored with doing the same things for a long time*”. In the interview, student C also claimed:

“Role play was attractive in the first and second week. I was not happy when participating in role play activity in the final week. I want to learn in different ways to avoid being tired. Different tasks make me understand more about the topic”.

V. Discussion

This research project aims to identify students' reactions toward TBLT in an EFL classroom and whether it engages students in speaking activities or not. The findings revealed that most of the students engage in TBLT framework and role play activity. TBLT also helps students thoroughly understand the lesson whereas the development of students' confidence is not significant. The research was considered as a success one because it could answer the research aim and research questions clearly, it was conducted in a small scale with a small number of participants, the triangulation ensured the validity and reliability of data, and the data were carefully analysis with strong evidence.

Although the effect of TBLT on learners' engagement in speaking activity was recognized in this research, unexpected problems were mentioned by the learners. Firstly, six students stated that in the final week of the project because doing the same thing all the time resulted in the falling level of interest. Furthermore, the finding showed the degree of engagement in TBLT activities was different among students. Eight students made a significant development of engagement whereas others showed a slight or insignificant improvement. As I mentioned in the context of the innovation, a variety of the target students' learning styles might primarily cause the differences in learners' progresses. Based on my observation, student journals and interviews, I realized that my students did not have a significant improvement of oral performance. It is because of the fact that insufficient time available to implement the innovation led to unrealistic expectation for students' improvement in oral performance.

In term of confidence, although most of them are more confident in asking the teacher for help and practicing with their partners, they were still shy and tongue-tied when acting out role play in front of classmates. However, two students B and D appeared confident because they had experience in speaking in front of the crowd before, and I realized that their oral performance is not bad. It proved that students' language ability and perception of language ability can affect students' confidence level in presenting their work in front of the class. The students believed that if they studying with TBLT approach, they could be more confident and improve their oral performance.

VI. Conclusions

The purpose of the research is to investigate the students' engagement with task-based language teaching in speaking activities at University of Phan Thiet. Based on the findings of this study, the two research questions are answered as follow:

1. How does Task-based Language Teaching help students engage in speaking activities?

The majority of students engaged in the role play activity with task-based framework, although the level of engagement was different among them. Eight participants showed their significant engagement and the rest admitted they had slight engagement in the activity. Most of them showed their excitement when participating in the activity. Although their confidence was improved, they still shook and felt tongue-tied when presenting in class. However, most of the students believed that they could solve this problem partly or totally if they studied with this approach longer.

2. Why does Task-based Language Teaching help students engage in speaking activities?

From the data collected, I found that the students had studied with traditional methods emphasizing grammar tasks to get good marks for their school exams for a long time. They rarely had opportunities to practice speaking and their speaking tasks were quite simple, which were mainly individual and choral repetitions. Therefore, they felt bored and lack motivation. When they studied with role play activity and task-based framework, they thought it was more interesting than repetition task. Role-play encouraged students to interact with others, create an active and comfortable learning atmosphere, and let them feel that they were playing rather than studying. Moreover, many students claimed that task-based framework provided them with clear and useful steps to practice their speaking tasks.

In summary, I learned that most of students want to participate in communicative activities and interact with other classmates. Students who were only taught with simple tasks might need to practice meaningful

communicative tasks in a long time to improve their lacking of confidence and oral performance. Based on the finding of the research, the teacher should be flexible and creative in designing the classroom activities to ensure that students do not feel bored with doing the same things. Most of students enjoy innovative teaching method and diversity of tasks; consequently, the teacher must be enthusiastic in refreshing teaching tasks and creating active learning environment. Finally, with the success of this research, I continue to implement TBLT in a longer period to get precise assessment about its effect on students' oral performance.

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