

Effects of Task-based Language Teaching Approach on EFL Students' Oral Performance -- Tested by Ismart Application

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Abstract: This study investigates the impact of task-based speaking activities on non-English major students and evaluates their perceptions regarding the usefulness of such activities. This study involved fifty-eight non-English major students enrolled in the second course of General College English. Pre-test and post-test assessments were utilized to evaluate participants' oral proficiency, while a questionnaire gauged the experimental group's attitudes toward task-based speaking activities. Results indicate that students in the experimental group exhibited greater improvement in oral proficiency compared to those in the control group, who received traditional instruction.

Keywords: task-based language teaching approach, speaking activities, oral performance

Introduction

English serves as a pivotal pathway to success across diverse domains. It enables access to cutting-edge advancements since a significant portion of business communications, online resources, and scholarly publications worldwide are in English. According to Brown, speaking is both a receptive skill and a crucial aspect of language learning^[1]. Essentially, speaking serves as the most common means of communicating messages to others, highlighting the fundamental importance of effective communication skills^[2].

Recently, with the Belt and Road Initiative, to meet the needs of cultivate international competence intelligence, English holds significant importance. People engage in learning English not only out of interest to access English-language entertainment but also to secure better job opportunities. This is attributed to the limited opportunities EFL learners have to practice English outside the classroom context^[3].

The study will be conducted to respond the following questions:

- 1) What impact do task-based speaking activities have on the oral performance of EFL students?
- 2) How do EFL students perceive the utilization of task-based speaking activities?

1. Literature review

Proficiency in speaking is pivotal for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners as it holds significance across academic, social, and professional domains. Mastery in speaking enables learners to excel academically, engage effectively in social interactions, and enhance their prospects in professional settings^[4].

The Task-Based Language Teaching Approach (TBLT) is a widely recognized method of teaching second languages worldwide. Central to the success of TBLT is the incorporation of tasks, which focus on communicative functions rather than language structures^[5].

Willis highlights the paramount importance of speaking skills, noting that individuals proficient in a language are commonly referred to as speakers of that language^[10]. The significance of speaking extends beyond the boundaries of educational institutions to encompass various real-life settings such as workplaces, social gatherings, and political assemblies^[5].

1.1 Application of task

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is a language instruction framework rooted in second language acquisition research and holds significant influence.

1.2 Features of TBLT

Nunan both highlight the key features of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)^[5]. Pham emphasizes that TBLT primarily occurs within the classroom environment, prioritizes meaning over form, is inherently motivating, and adopts a learner-centered approach^[6].

Nunan outlines TBLT features as prioritizing the development of communication skills through interactive use of the target language, introducing authentic materials before engaging in learning activities, offering opportunities for learners to focus on both language and the learning process itself, and valuing and incorporating learners' personal experiences in classroom learning^[5].

1.3 Types of tasks

Prabhu categorizes tasks into three types: information-gap, reasoning-gap, and opinion-gap^[7]. Willis expands on task classification, identifying six types: listing, sorting, comparing, problem-solving, sharing personal experiences, and creative tasks^[10]. In the present study, all Task-Based Speaking Activities (TBSA) utilized in speaking lessons are designed based on the task types proposed by Willis^[10].

1.4 Effects of TBLA

Torky investigated the effectiveness of communicative interactive tasks in enhancing secondary students' speaking skills and found that these tasks improved motivation and speaking ability while also eliciting positive attitudes toward speaking^[9]. Similarly, Richards & Weber observed improved oral presentation skills and positive attitudes towards speaking tasks among students at a public school in Colombia^[8].

Erten and Altay compared task-based and topic-based speaking activities, discovering that task-based activities fostered a more collaborative learning environment and provided more opportunities for real-life language use^[2].

In conclusion, previous studies demonstrate the positive impact of TBLT and TBSA on EFL learners' oral performance. These findings provide the theoretical basis for the current study, which aims to investigate whether TBSA enhances EFL learners' oral performance.

2. Methodology

The study employed a comprehensive mixed-method approach to evaluate the effectiveness of Task-Based Speaking Activities (TBSA) on EFL learners' oral proficiency.

2.1 Participants

Participants in the study consist of 58 non-English major students, typically aged 18-19 years old, who are required to complete four general English courses ranging from level 1 to level 4 as part of the university curriculum. Upon recruitment, these students had completed level 1. They are divided into two groups: an experimental group comprising thirty students (sixteen females and fourteen males) and a control group consisting of twenty-eight students (twenty females and eight males).

2.2 Instruments

To address the research questions, the researchers utilized several instruments including a pretest, a posttest, a questionnaire, and lesson plans. The pretest and posttest, both comprising three tasks (interview, extended turn, and general conversation), were designed to assess EFL learners' oral performance. A questionnaire was employed to investigate the

participants' attitudes towards the use of Task-Based Speaking Activities (TBSA). Additionally, thirteen lesson plans, based on Willis's task framework, were administered to the experimental group as treatment, while the control group underwent instruction through communicative activities in the PPP model.

2.2.1 Speaking tests

The speaking tests utilized a scale assessment rubric aligned with the B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, with criteria including pronunciation achievement, grammar and vocabulary achievement, discourse management, and interactive communication.

To ensure scoring validity, another teacher teaching the same English course at the university was involved in rating the participants' oral performance. The pre-test and post-test scores of both groups were analyzed to determine the impact of TBSA on EFL learners' oral proficiency. The mean scores of these tests indicated the extent of improvement in the participants' oral skills following the intervention. A Pair sample t-Test was employed to assess the significance of the study by comparing the scores of the two tests.

2.2.2 Lesson plans

The experimental group of EFL students received thirteen treatment lessons, each lasting 50 minutes, which incorporated task-based speaking activities. These lessons were meticulously designed following the framework of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) outlined by Willis, encompassing three stages: pre-task, task cycle, and language focus.

The speaking lessons incorporated all six task types: listing, sorting, comparing, problem-solving, sharing personal experiences, and creative tasks.

2.2.3 Questionnaire

After the post-test, a questionnaire was given to 30 EFL learners from the experimental group. This questionnaire was designed based on the tasks utilized in the study and comprised a total of 34 items, including 33 closed-ended questions and one open-ended question. The first 33 items were scaled questions using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from (1) = SD (Strongly Disagree) to (5) = SA (Strongly Agree). These questions aimed to assess the EFL learners' attitudes towards Task-Based Speaking Activities (TBSA). The questionnaire was divided into three clusters: the first 17 items addressed affective attitudes, the next 9 items focused on cognitive attitudes, and the final 7 items investigated behavioral attitudes. Descriptive Statistics Test was employed to analyze the questionnaire data, aiming to understand the participants' beliefs regarding the impact of TBSA on EFL learners' oral performance.

2.3 Research design

This study employed a mixed-method approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods to evaluate the impact of Task-Based Speaking Activities (TBSA) on the oral performance of EFL students. A questionnaire was utilized to investigate the EFL learners' attitudes towards the implementation of TBSA in enhancing oral performance.

Both the experimental and control groups underwent the same pre-test at the beginning of the course and the same post-test at the conclusion of the course. Throughout the thirteen-week duration of the study, participants in the experimental group engaged in speaking lessons structured around task-based activities, while those in the control group received instruction in communicative methods.

3. Results

In this section, the results were presented of the current study on the effects of task-based speaking activities (TBSA) on EFL learners' oral performance. The presentation is divided into two main subsections: results from the tests and results from the questionnaire.

3.1 Results of oral performance

The Descriptive Statistics Test and the Paired Sample t-Test were used to compare the mean scores of the EFL learners' oral performance within the control group and the experimental group before and after the study. The data are

summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 Results of oral performance

| Group | | Mean | N | SD | MD | t | Sig. |
|--------------|-----------|------|----|------|------|-------|------|
| Control | Pre-test | 4.07 | 28 | 0.82 | 1.91 | 13.52 | .00 |
| | Post-test | 6.05 | 28 | 0.76 | | | |
| Experimental | Pre-test | 4.05 | 30 | 1.33 | 3.49 | 18.73 | .00 |
| | Post-test | 7.68 | 30 | 0.62 | | | |

Data presented in Table 1 reveal an improvement in the oral performance of EFL students across both participant groups before and after the intervention. Initially, the mean scores of the pretest for both the control group (M=4.07, SD=0.82) and the experimental group (M=4.05, SD=1.33) were below the average on the ten-point scale, indicating relatively equivalent speaking abilities in both groups.

Upon analyzing the post-intervention results in Table 1, it is evident that there was a notable enhancement in oral performance among EFL learners in the control group. The mean score for oral performance post-study (M=6.05, SD=0.76) exhibited a significant increase compared to the pre-study score (M=4.07, SD=0.82), with a statistically significant mean difference (MD=-1.98, t=-13.52, sig.=.00). These findings suggest a considerable improvement in the oral proficiency of participants in the control group over the 13-week period. Similarly, the oral performance of EFL learners in the experimental group demonstrated significant improvement following the intervention. The mean score post-study (M=7.68, SD=0.62) substantially exceeded the pre-study score (M=4.05, SD=1.33), with a statistically significant mean difference (MD=-3.63, t=-18.73, sig.=.00). These results indicate a remarkable enhancement in oral proficiency among participants in the experimental group after the 13-week intervention.

An Independence Samples t-Test was conducted to compare the mean scores between the two groups to examine the effectiveness of task-based speaking activities. Table 2 below summarizes the further results.

Table 2 Oral performance between the CG and the EG before and after the treatment

| Tests | Group | N | Mean | SD | Mean Difference | t | Sig. |
|-----------|-------|----|------|------|-----------------|------|------|
| Pre-test | CG | 28 | 4.07 | 0.82 | 0.03 | 0.08 | 0.92 |
| | EG | 30 | 4.05 | 1.33 | | | |
| Post-test | CG | 28 | 6.05 | 0.76 | 1.61 | 8.70 | 0.00 |
| | EG | 30 | 7.68 | 0.62 | | | |

As can be seen in table 2, before the treatment, the mean score of the experimental group (M =4.05; SD =1.33) and the one of the control group (M = 4.07; SD =0.82) is found rather equivalent. When being compared, it can be seen that there is no difference in the mean scores between both groups (t=0.08, sig.=0.93 > 0.05). In other words, the initial speaking competence of both groups participated in the study was found no statistically difference before the treatment.

In contrast, the mean score of the experimental group (M=7.68; SD=0.62) is noticeably higher than that of the control group (M=6.05; SD=0.76) after the treatment with the significant difference (t=8.70, sig.=0.00 < 0.05). It highlighted the significant achievement in oral performance of EFL learners in the experimental group compared to EFL learners in the control group after the study.

3.2 Results of oral performance between four subscales

The data presented in Figure 1 indicate that prior to the treatment, the average scores of EFL students in both groups were similar across all four evaluation subscales. This suggests that there was no significant disparity in the ability of students from both groups to perform each four aspect of EFL.

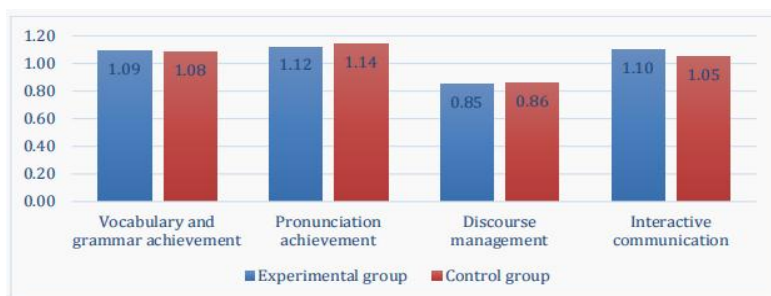


Figure 1 Mean scores on four subscales between CG and EG before the treatment

As shown in figure 1, there was a noticeable increase in the average scores of the four elements between the two groups, i.e., the experimental group exhibited significantly enhanced mean scores across all four elements: (1) Vocabulary and grammar achievement, (2) Pronunciation achievement, (3) Discourse management, and (4) Interactive communication, compared to the control group. These findings demonstrate that EFL learners in the experimental group attained a higher level of oral performance post-treatment. Notably, Interactive communication experienced the greatest improvement ($M=2.13$; $M=1.63$), followed by Vocabulary and grammar achievement ($M=2.05$; $M=1.61$). Therefore, it can be inferred that all the subscales of EFL learners in the experimental group displayed improvement after the intervention.

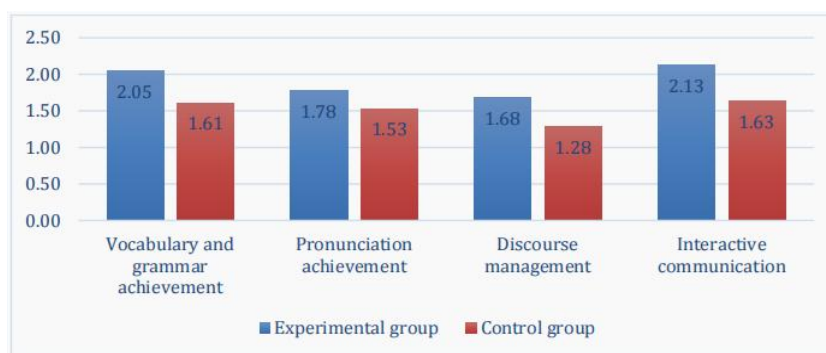


Figure 2 Comparison of four specific subscales between CG and EG after the treatment

Overall, the analysis of the mean scores for the four specific elements in the pre-test and post-test indicates a notable enhancement in oral performance in both groups. Particularly noteworthy is the substantial progress made by EFL students in the experimental group, compared to the comparatively modest improvement observed among those in the control group.

3.3 Results of EFL learners' attitude towards TBSA

The questionnaire was designed to investigate the attitudes of EFL students regarding the implementation of task-based speaking activities (TBSA) for improving speaking skills. With a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.769, indicating strong internal consistency, the questionnaire comprised 33 items. The researcher administered the questionnaire to all thirty EFL students in the experimental group, then collected and analyzed their responses regarding their attitude towards the use of task-based speaking activities. The students' attitudes towards the impact of task-based speaking activities on their oral performance were categorized into three main clusters: (1) affective, (2) cognitive, and (3) behavioral aspects. Table 3 presents the calculated mean scores for each group.

Table 3 Mean Score of Three Dimensions

| Dimension | N | Mean | SD |
|------------|----|------|-----|
| Affective | 30 | 3.97 | .20 |
| Cognitive | 30 | 3.85 | .04 |
| Behavioral | 30 | 3.83 | .36 |
| Overall | 30 | 3.88 | .35 |

According to the findings in Table 3, the average score for participants' attitudes towards the utilization of task-based speaking activities was 3.88 on the five-point Likert scale. These results suggest that EFL learners recognize the efficacy of task-based speaking activities in bolstering their oral proficiency. Crucially, the responses from EFL learners further validate that task-based speaking activities have played a role in enhancing their speaking skills.

Generally, the majority of EFL students hold positive perspectives regarding task-based speaking activities (TBSA), acknowledging their effectiveness in improving speaking skills.

4. Discussions

The findings of the present study revealed statistically significant differences in EFL learners' oral performance both within and between the control and experimental groups. Within each group, EFL learners' oral proficiency across four specific features--vocabulary and grammar achievement, pronunciation, discourse management, and interactive communication. All subscales features showed improvement after the treatment compared to pre-treatment levels. Additionally, following the intervention, the experimental group exhibited greater progress in all four features compared to the control group. Particularly noteworthy were the substantial improvements observed in interactive communication, vocabulary and grammar achievement within the experimental group. These results indicate a significant enhancement in oral proficiency among EFL learners in the experimental group following the treatment.

In addition, the findings of the study revealed that the majority of learners in the study acknowledged the significance of task-based speaking activities, expressing agreement that TBSA lessons were engaging. The learners also noted increased opportunities to speak English and improvements in their presentation skills following the experiment.

In conclusion, it is evident that task-based speaking activities effectively supported EFL learners in improving their oral performance. The results from the questionnaire further reinforce this conclusion, revealing that the majority of EFL learners held a positive attitude towards the use of task-based speaking activities to enhance their speaking ability. They expressed satisfaction with the use of TBSA in their speaking lessons. Following the intervention, EFL learners demonstrated an enhanced understanding of the importance of task-based speaking activities and reported increased confidence when speaking English in front of the class. Additionally, they expressed interest in exchanging ideas and collaborating with others during speaking tasks. After engaging in TBSA practice, they were able to produce more complex language structures, expand their vocabulary, and reduce errors in pronunciation.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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