| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

How to Improve Speaking Skills for Undergraduates at Dong Nai Technology University

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| **ABSTRACT**

The ability to communicate in both written and spoken form is the main goal of learning English. Teachers need to provide students with opportunities to communicate in English so that they can become fluent speakers. Nonetheless, the majority of non-major students at Dong Nai Technology University are struggling with conversations due to brief and unnecessary pauses. While speaking ability among students must be developed, it has been seen that listening and speaking skills are not given enough attention in the practice of English teaching and learning. The current study seeks to increase non-major sophomores' oral English fluency. The teaching methodology employed in the study was task-based language teaching (TBLT) which encourages students to participate more in communicative activities and ensures that they will be able to grasp the target language. The researcher used different types of study devices to get the data, including tests, observations as well as questionnaires, to determine how task-based language instruction enhanced students' speaking abilities and what opinions students had towards the teaching method. By analysing data from test scores, observation notes, and questionnaires, it was concluded that there is a necessity for TBLT for the development of speaking fluency.

| **KEYWORDS**

Speaking ability, task based language teaching, communicative tasks, TBLT

| **ARTICLE INFORMATION**

1. Introduction

English teaching and learning mainly involve speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. Speaking skill is thought to be the most on-demand talent out of the four language skills (Cahyono & Widiati, 2016). This is because the majority of students are frequently judged on their success in speaking proficiency. However, teaching and learning speaking as a foreign language is inevitably fraught with difficulties as it deals with a variety of challenges, such as the ability to communicate in the context of sociocultural activities. Furthermore, developing speaking ability always requires collaboration with at least one other speaker. (Mei & Ahmadi, 2017)

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) was the solution to the aforementioned speaking issues in order to improve the students' speaking abilities. According to Huang (2015), TBLT is a style of instruction that emphasizes language as a tool for communication rather than a subject to be studied or controlled. It is obvious that learners must experience how language is used as a tool for communication inside it in order to build the proficiency they need to use a foreign language effortlessly and effectively in the types of settings they encounter outside of the classroom. The most obvious way to organize instruction along these lines is through communicative tasks. Engaging students in actual language use in the classroom is the most effective way to teach a language. This is accomplished through creating assignments, conversations, challenges, games, and other activities that compel students to utilize the language independently (Ho, 2014).

2. Literature Review
In the light of TBLT, students can move from their first language to the target language by using their conversational skills, which gives them the ability to work together (Long, 2014). In other words, the methodology is heavily stressed in task-based pedagogy. The task-based language education approach consists of an integrated set of stages that incorporates the specification of both what and how. Making choices concerning what tasks students will do and how they perform tasks is a part of designing the task-based approach. In a task-based approach, students cooperate, participate, and communicate while carrying out the work. Students must acquire the ability to study cooperatively if they are to collaborate effectively. (Long, 2014)

This is how a teaching methodology, task-based language teaching, in particular, might be used to address students' speaking problems. It is because TBLT is to determine the position of students during the teaching progress. If the learners are content with the teaching strategy being used, they will actively participate in classroom activities themselves. Also, the teacher can use task-based language learning to encourage ongoing communication and interaction among students throughout spoken learning activities. (Ho, 2104).

For these above factors, the researcher developed the idea of conducting a study at Dong Nai Technology University to examine the effectiveness of task-based language teaching in enhancing students' speaking abilities. The goals of the study are that students are able to show competence in their communication skills by completing communicative tasks created to provide them with the opportunity to engage in meaningful communication with their classmates. Students then perform in a way that satisfies the criteria by which their speaking performance is evaluated. Also, the researcher is capable of designing and applying efficient, communicative tasks. The researcher can also discover more about how students feel about task based language learning.

Research Question: How does TBLT improve students' English speaking competence?

Sub-questions
1. How are communicative tasks integrated into speaking lessons?
2. What are students' attitudes towards English learning with TBLT?

3. Methodology
3.1 Participants
Thirty-eight non major sophomores of Dong Nai Technology University participated in this study; they were classified as pre-intermediate achievers. The age of the participants was between 18-20 years. There were thirty male students and eight female students. The students were found to have problems with speaking skills, and they have learnt English in high school. They do not have much chance to use English. Only in the classroom is where they can learn and use the English language.

3.2 Methods
There are two basic ways of conducting research: qualitative and quantitative. To assess and generate numerical data, quantitative research is used. Additionally, it gauges how often observations are made (Hoe et al., 2012). Two cycles of the study were conducted from February to March 2023. Each cycle had four steps: planning, implementing, observing, and reflecting. The purpose of utilizing a task-based approach to language teaching was to observe the student's progress in speaking. While observation sheets were utilized to gather information on the students' engagement in the teaching and learning process, tests were employed to evaluate the students' speaking abilities. In any case, qualitative research is used to gain a deeper knowledge of human actions and feelings (Hoe et al., 2012) and to record the interactions between researchers and participants, whose voices may be heard in written form. This aids in illuminating the significance of certain numerical results. The purpose of the research questions is to learn more about how students react to TBLT, specifically their perceptions and development of it. The best strategy would then undoubtedly be to conduct qualitative research, which employs a questionnaire in order to gain a deeper understanding of participants' attitudes towards TBLT. (Appendix)

3.3 Design and Procedures
TBLT requires the teacher to follow a three-stage lesson that includes a pre-task, task-cycle, and language focus (Willis's Task-based learning framework, 1996, as cited in Mudra, 2016). During the pre-task phase, the teacher and students create a vocabulary list related to the main task's theme and get ready for it. Task, planning, and reporting are all parts of the task cycle. Along with their classmates, students complete the tasks, and they then prepare a report. Language focus involves students first analyzing a particular language form or forms that have proven difficult for them and then practicing the previously examined language structures. The classroom practice is altered through TBLT. In particular, students no longer simply absorb information passively; instead, they now actively learn the language.

3.4 Communicative tasks

Four communicative tasks were designed during the experiment. Notwithstanding some variations in task design, all of the tasks required students to fulfil information gaps and learn cooperatively. Students cannot complete the tasks without communicating with their peers to exchange information, negotiate meaning, and share experiences. (Ho, 2014)

The first task is about sharing and comparing personal experiences. Students work in groups talking about their busiest day and then decide whose day is the busiest one. Students need to negotiate to complete the task.

The second task is about comparing and solving problems. Students work in groups talking about given problems in flashcards. The problems discussed are suitable and not too challenging. Students, in turn, give their own solutions and then decide who gives the best advice. Students need to utilize their life experience and negotiation skills to complete the task.

The third task is about guessing. Students are shown short videos of different situations which are yet to reveal the ending. They work in groups trying to guess what will happen next in each situation. Students need to use imagination skills.

The last task is about ordering and matching. Students are given a story presented in a series of five pictures. They work in groups and put the pictures in the correct order. After that, they need to match sentence halves for a proper description of pictures. Students need to discuss with teammates to complete the task. (SofyAna, 2015).

4. Data Collection and Data Analysis

Various methods were used to gather the data, starting with (1) an oral pre-test given before applying TBLT. The IELTS speaking scoring rubric was used to evaluate students' speaking skills, (2) questionnaires were sent to all participants; (3) post-tests were administered to all participants after applying TBLT; and (4) class observations were recorded.

The researcher sent the questionnaires directly to the students in the final week of the experiment (after completing all the communicative tasks) in order to find out their actual attitudes towards learning to speak with TBLT. At the same time, the researcher also analyzed test scores achieved before and after applying TBLT and observation notes conducted during lessons to examine the effectiveness of the method. After the students answered, the questionnaires were collected and analyzed.
Data in this research were analyzed by using tables and charts to present the relevant output.

5. Findings

The research information was gathered through careful observations, which were then confirmed by the outcomes of speaking tests. During the first week of the course, the students took the pre-test. The speaking components from the IELTS speaking scoring rubric, including task response, coherence and fluency, lexical resources, grammatical range and accuracy, as well as pronunciation, were used to assess students' speaking abilities (Ulster University, 2018). It took the participants about fifteen minutes to complete the test. The pre- test's purpose was to determine the students' level of speaking proficiency before applying TBLT.

5.1 Pre-test mean scores

Table 1. Pre-test results						
Speaking components	Task Response	Coherence and Fluency	Lexical Resource	Grammatical Range and Accuracy	Pronunciation	Total
Mean score in the pre-test	4	3	3	4	4	3.5

Based on the data in Table 1 above, it can be said that students' scores were at a very basic level. This means that all aspects of speaking evaluation needed more training.

The researcher then used the results of the pretest to analyze weaknesses in the students' speaking ability and developed task-based language approach to address such problems. Based on these findings, it was concluded to move to the next cycle.

The next cycle held the teaching of speaking in the light of TBLT. There are three main phases that make up task-based teaching components. At the pre-task stage, the teacher prepared learners to perform communicative tasks by providing them with relevant vocabulary, grammar and guidelines on how to complete tasks. At the task-cycle stage, the teacher gave the students tasks which

were done through group work. Communicative activities such as information gaps and story retelling were employed. The teacher offered tips on how to prepare for presentations by addressing speaking components. The students then reported the tasks in front of the whole class, and afterwards, they discussed or exchanged opinions and feedback. At the language focus stage, extended practice and linguistic analysis were the two main objectives. Language analysis describes the process by which students evaluate the language used to complete the task. The additional practice required students to continue utilizing language while performing similar tasks (Wahidin, 2016). The task-based language teaching was successfully carried out over the course of four meetings. By the end of this cycle, the researcher administered a speaking posttest in order to gauge any advancement made following the adoption of the task-based language teaching methodology.

5.2 Post-test mean scores

Table 2. Post-test results						
Speaking components	Task Response	Coherence and Fluency	Lexical Resource	Grammatical Range and Accuracy	Pronunciation	Total
Mean score in the post-test	5	5	4	4	4	4.5

The mean post-test results showed a dramatic change in the pre-test mean score (3.5 overall). This difference indicated an increase in the ability of students' English speaking. The mean score of the post-test (4.5 overall) can be categorized at the pre-intermediate level. All the criteria in the speaking rubric were relatively improved.

5.3 Observational notes
The researcher used a three-scale of frequency to rate students' participation in TBLT classrooms as well as assess their learning outcomes.

Table 3. Students' participation level and learning outcomes in TBLT Lessons

Classroom activities	Ratings					
Students' engagement in lessons	Often		Sometimes		Seldom	
	Freq.	percentage	Freq.	percentage	Freq.	percentage
1. Students participate in group discussions.	32	84%	6	16%	0	0%
2. Students pay attention to the teacher.	36	95%	2	5%	0	0%
Students' learning outcomes						
1. Students try to use the target language when doing tasks	25	66%	10	26%	3	8%
2. Students perform the target language at the report stage	28	73%	8	21%	2	6%
	20	52%	15	40%	3	8%

3. Students speak fluently at the report stage.						
Others						
1. Students use their mother tongue during the lessons.	25	66%	8	21%	5	13%
2. Students use technology for non-educational purposes.	3	8%	10	26%	25	66%

The results in Table 3 indicated that there is a significant number of students who were frequently involved in TBLT lessons (more than 80%). Also, the percentage of students whose speaking abilities were found to improve through using English during the learning process was surprisingly high. It can be attributed to the effect of the proposed Task-based language teaching strategies. However, a large number of students (66%) used their mother tongue when doing the tasks raised a concern for the researcher.

5.4 Questionnaire data
The information gathered from the questionnaires demonstrates the suitability of using TBLT to enhance students' speaking abilities through communicative tasks. Pre-task, task-cycle, and language focus are the three stages of TBLT that are represented by the order in which the data are given.

5.5 Pre-task

Pre-task is necessary
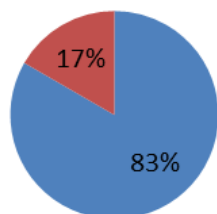
■ agree ■ disagree ■ neutral ■ strongly agree

17%
17%
41%
25%
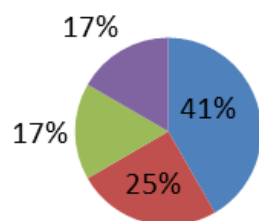
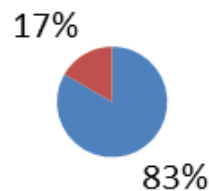## Pre-task provides relevant speaking material

■ agree

100%
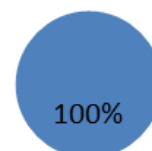
teacher's instructions are understandable

■ agree ■ disagree

17%
83%

pre-task is enjoyable

■ agree ■ neutral

17%
83%

At this stage, 83% of the students said that they enjoyed the pre-task because of the interesting topics. Particularly, it was claimed that the activity of guessing what would happen next in short videos was both "interesting" and "thrilling". Nearly half of the students (41%) and 17% strongly agreed that the pre-task was necessary and enjoyable because the questions at this stage were

fundamental and mostly "yes or no". Yet, because the inputs, such as photos and movies, were "difficult to interpret" and "too brief to pick up the ideas," 25% of the students held the contrasting idea. In addition, 17% of respondents were still unsure about how simple the pre-task was because "sometimes I understand, but sometimes not really."

Surprisingly, all of the students concurred that the pre-task had given them the vocabulary and grammar points they needed for the subject, and they also praised the teacher's method of brainstorming words with the class. The teacher was described as "both an exploiter and a supplier."

83% of the students thought the teacher's instructions for the main task were understandable. The directions were "brief" and "clear." They "know what to do to finish the mission." However, 17% of them were still in disagreement at the time. The lecture was described as being "fast", and the students were "not ready" when asked for explanations.

Although most students have good opinions about the pre-task, there are still some that are ambivalent. Pre-tasks typically give students feedback and pique their attention, which can encourage them to engage in the main task.

5.6 Task cycle
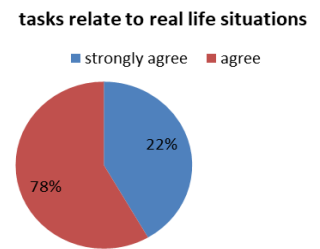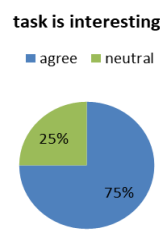
About half of the students (41%) and even 17% of them strongly agreed that it was simple to complete activities. Other students claimed that the tasks were "not tough" or even "easy" because they "knew the vocabulary" and could easily follow the directions when the teacher "repeated quite a lot." Due to the tasks' "challenge," 25% of the students disapproved. Particularly, the second task, which asked them to offer solutions, is regarded as "a little bit difficult." "I couldn't figure out how to get over those obstacles myself," other students claimed. In addition, 17% of students had neutral viewpoints. The task was described as "often easy, but sometimes not."

The tasks were enjoyable, according to three-fourths of the students. The activities were described as "funny" and "difficult, but that's why I like them more," respectively. Particularly "interesting" was the third task because "I can use my imagination freely", and it made them "more opinionated." In addition, a quarter of students were still unsure of their feelings about the assignments.

Students reported that they had a lot to say because the issue was "close to me" concerning "everyday activities" and "friendship and family concerns", in addition to 78% of them agreeing that assignments tied them to real-life circumstances and 22% strongly agreeing.
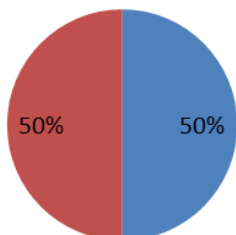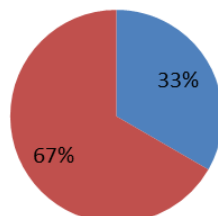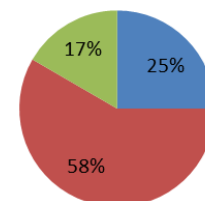
58% of the students agreed with the statement that tasks gave them opportunities to use English, and 25% strongly agreed. Tasks in particular "placed me in a specific setting," "allowed me to share my experiences," and teacher "always go around reminding us not to speak Vietnamese," Only a small percentage of students (17%), however, were unsure because "sometimes I don't know what to say."

Likewise, 67% strongly believed that tasks brought them "together," in addition to the 33% of students who concurred. There were opinions of "cooperative" but "dependent" tasks. It took them "a little longer" to exchange thoughts because some students move more slowly than others.

For this section, there were roughly equal numbers of students who agreed and disagreed with the amount of time allotted to them prior to the report stage. Slower students often "take longer to complete tasks," thus they had to "hurry" their planning.

students feel confident

■ agree ■ disagree

50% 50%
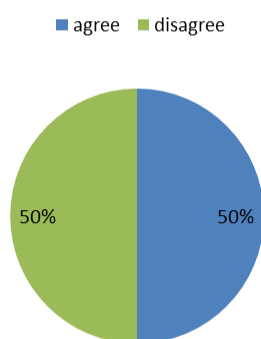
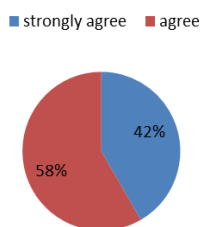**students are content with teacher's feedbacks**

■ agree ■ disagree

25%

75%
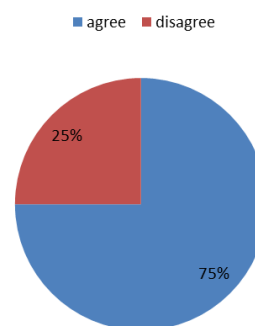
Again, there were two distinct student groups who agreed and disagreed about having confidence at the report stage. Groups that responded "yes" described themselves as "enthusiastic," "can't wait to present," and "so positive that group effort will be the greatest." Those who declined reported feeling "nervous," "afraid of making mistakes," and "afraid of being laughed at."
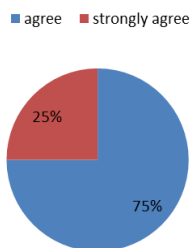
The teacher's feedback satisfied three-quarters of the students; the remaining students appeared to be "unhappy." Particularly, it was said that the teacher was "unfair" in selecting which group accomplished the duties the best, despite the fact that they "did their best."
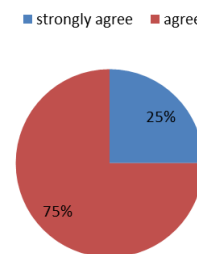
5.7 Language focus

teacher's explanation is understandable

■ strongly agree ■ agree

42%

58%

analysis is required

■ agree ■ strongly agree

25%

75%

practice is necessary

■ strongly agree ■ agree

25%

75%

Together with the 42% of students who responded positively and understood the teacher's explanation, 58% strongly concurred. When asked how they felt so confident in their responses, students cited their teachers' "clear" instructions and "step-by-step" approach as contributing factors.

75% of students felt that it was important to evaluate grammatical points, with 25% strongly agreeing. They claimed to be "acquainted with analysis" and to have "greater security from the analysis."

As can be seen from the data, 75% of the students strongly agreed that practice was extremely important. Students responded when questioned that "practice reinforces their fluency."

6. Discussion
According to the results of the speaking tests, students' speaking abilities have significantly improved. The researcher next looked at elements that affected those improvements by using the observation along with questionnaire data.

The use of TBLT as a method of teaching speaking was proved to have positively enforced the students to achieve a stronger communicative competence, as the students found it easier throughout the step by step of speaking tasks. (Zhou, 2016).
The fascinating topics of conversation provided were another component that contributed to the task-based language teaching's success in improving students' speaking abilities. (SofyAna, 2015)

Interaction among students was last but not least seen to change students' viewpoints about how they learn to speak English. It is no longer a fact that students learn to speak through repeating or playing roles in meaningless dialogues. Instead, they need communicative tasks designed to enable them to participate in meaningful and real-life conversations.

7. Conclusion and Suggestion
The researcher has undergone a great transformation as a result of using TBLT to teach English speaking to university students. Through TBLT, students at Dong Nai Technology University have seen not only an improvement in their speaking abilities but also a more positive attitude towards learning English in the 2022–2023 academic year.
Results show that communicative tasks used in the experiment aroused students' enthusiasm and increased oral communication in the classroom, which was the aim of the study. This study demonstrates that it is worthwhile to continue experimenting with TBLT in classrooms and making use of tasks' strengths to motivate students throughout language learning activities. (Pietri, 2015).

Although it was very difficult to define before, the definitions of high-quality teachers as well as teaching methods have been clearly clarified. Teaching is found successful only when teachers and students can reach each other. In other words, the teacher must be aware of each student's skills and particular learning preferences. Using teaching resources is crucial to ensure that students have access to the necessary learning materials. If not, there will be interruptions for the students, and the teacher won't be able to reach them.

The teachers must be concerned with the students' feelings and attitudes about other facets of life in addition to their academic progress. In order for students to be able to reach the teachers, it is occasionally necessary for the teachers to divulge their identification. This will improve the rapport between the teachers and the students.

In conclusion, the study has given the researcher a lot to think about. The most crucial issue is the change in mind, which leads to a change in behaviors. This means that the researcher would never again tolerate passive behavior from the students in speaking classes.

Last but not least, educators should keep in mind that making the proper choices at critical moments is the key to good management. Thus, reluctance is not permitted when changing the way that teaching is done.

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