

Using task –based learning to enhance English speaking skill for the first year students at School of Foreign Languages – Thai Nguyen University

*Nguyễn Thị Nhung**

**ThS. Trường Ngoại ngữ - Đại học Thái Nguyên*

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Abstract: *This paper shows using task –based learning to improve English speaking skill for the first year students at School of Foreign languages – Thai Nguyen University. The author used pre-test and post – test and observation. The participants in the research were 30 students of School of Foreign Languages. Research results show the effects of task-based learning on students’ speaking performance.*

Keywords: *Task- based learning; speaking skill; students; English*

1. Introduction

In recent years, teaching and learning English have been developed and become a compulsory subject in all schools and universities for many years, and now it plays an extremely vital role in the school curriculum. Therefore, learning English has become not only an essential demand among schools but also of the whole Viet Nam society. Learning English, like other languages, consists of four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. And the speaking skill is the most important language skill, being one of the productive activities in the daily life, because it is the main skill needed to carry out a conversation. Specifically, the mastery of speaking English is a priority for students in schools and universities. Therefore, it is essential that English teachers provide a rich environment where meaningful communication takes place. Learning and teaching English in Vietnam presently emphasizes the communicative approach, including listening, speaking, reading and writing (Ministry of Education and Training, 2018), especially the significance and value of speaking English in education and society.

The English teacher implemented the conventional method in teaching such as grammar translation, audio lingual and direct method in which she tended to directly ask them to create or memorize the conversations without giving enough time to practise together and join speaking activities. Moreover, lots of students still have some lexical, grammatical, and pronunciation problems in speaking skills, such as lack of ideas, poor vocabulary, incorrect pronunciation. Furthermore, students lack

motivation in speaking because teachers only give the monotonous topic to the students so most of them were unwilling to show their speaking ability and the lecturer only asked certain active students to speak. Besides, the students had few opportunities to speak due to the limited time. As a result, only a few students who had good ability in speaking were chosen to present oral performance. In addition, students are not confident to speak because they have limited chances to speak English in their real life situation.

2. Content

2.1. Review literature on Task-based learning (TBL)

**Definition of tasks and characteristics of Task-based learning*

Prabhu (1987) defines a task as an activity which requires learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allows teachers to control and regulate that process. Ellis (2003) defines “tasks” as activities that are primarily focused on meaning whereas exercises that are primarily focused on form. Task is defined by Skehan (1998) as an activity in which meaning is of the utmost importance; there is some communicative problem to solve; there is a relationship to real-world activities; and task completion has some priority, and the assessment of task is in terms of outcome. Willis (1996) states that “a task is an activity where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome.

**Types of tasks*

In this study, Prah’s information-gap activity is

adapted to improve students' speaking skill and to overcome the problem they face in learning to speak. The reason why the researcher applied information-gap activity in teaching speaking is that it is suitable to the students' level and the content of the textbook. Furthermore, information-gap is an excellent way for students to make speaking tasks communicative because they could interact with each other in pairs to ask and answer questions about available information whereas reasoning-gap activity or opinion-gap demands higher level to complete the tasks, which causes really obstacles for learners at pre-intermediate levels.

2.2. The study

**Participants*

The participants of the study were 30 students from group 8 – K44 at school of foreign languages, Thai Nguyen province, Vietnam. To those students, English is a compulsory subject at school. Moreover, such students have learnt English since they were in high schools ; however, they had bad ability in speaking.

**Data collection instruments, procedures*

By using tests, the researcher could discover the improvement of students' speaking ability before and after the intervention. Moreover, they could help the researcher answer the questions about the improvement of the students' speaking skill.

For the tests, the scores from the pre-test and post-test were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 2.0. The mean scores and the standard deviations of the test were calculated and compared; the statistical differences of the findings were verified by paired sample t-test in order to find out whether the students performed better in the post-test after the use of TBL, and to find out whether there were of any significant differences in the findings.

2.3. Findings and discussion

**Results of the pre-test and post-test*

As mentioned in section 3.4.2, the pre-test and post-test were used before and after the intervention in order to examine the effects of TBL on students' speaking performance. The data from the pre-test and post-test were computed, analyzed and reported in the following subsections.

The post-test scores of the students' speaking competence after the teacher applied TBL. In general,

the students whose speaking marks ranging from 5.5 to 6.5 (average scores) account for nearly half of the students (50%) whereas the number of students who got poor scores fell to 10%. Moreover, the number of participants who got good marks of the tests increased significantly, accounting for 33.3% of the total number. In addition, it is also worth pointing out that four students were classified as excellent speakers, with 6.7% in scores while nobody got very poor marks.

The result of the posttest shows that in the posttest the students outperformed themselves with higher mean scores. The average score of the pretest was only 5.3125 while the average score of the posttest was 6.7250. It reveals that the positive improvement of the students' speaking competence would be reflected clearly through the scores they got. In other words, the use of task-based activities (TBL) seems to be effective in the sense that it helped the students learn speaking better.

In some lesson, seven of fourteen criteria were assessed as good points, such as clear and specific objectives for the lesson, an interesting context, the teacher's highlighting of useful words and phrases in the introduction in an effective way, the students' pair or group work, the teacher's monitoring, encouragement guidance, students' report to the whole class in an effective way, the teacher's feedback on students' presentation. However, there were several limitations in this speaking lesson, such as, suitable materials of the lesson, students' limited time for speaking practice, the teacher's unclear instructions. The fourth drawback was that the students did not have a chance to present their task to the class, or compare results. One more weak point was that the teacher forgot to ask students to examine and discuss specific features in the conversation to identify specific language features of the speech. Additionally, In the lessons applied TBL, beside the seven good points which were like in the first lesson, four weak points in the first lesson were improved. Firstly, the materials used in this lesson were useful and suitable to the objectives of the lesson. Secondly, students were provided with opportunities to present their task to the class, or exchange their reports, and compare results. This enhanced the students' speaking and motivated them to speak English. Thirdly, the teacher's instructions were

clear enough for students to follow. Lastly, the teacher set appropriate time limit for the activities according to the objectives of the lesson.

Thanks to the feedback from the collaborator, task based activities in the third speaking lesson were adapted effectively to attract more learners' attention and to motivate them to involve in speaking activities. It was surprisingly that none of the criteria in the observation checklists needed to be improved. This might be concluded that TBL applied in teaching speaking lessons had some good effects.

To sum up, the findings from the observation supported the answer for the first research question that clear steps of TBL process enhanced and motivated students to speak English because learning through task-based encouraged students to have a purpose for speaking. Moreover, tasks helped them experience and remember new language easily. As a result, they felt confident to speak English because they could use the learnt vocabulary and structures in authentic communication.

**Recommendations*

Firstly, students should be encouraged to practice speaking in real life situations which will take advantages of task-based activities more effectively. Secondly, task-based activities should be used frequently in the speaking lessons to encourage students to communicate with each other. Secondly, teachers need to create more activities and well prepare lesson plans to encourage students to communicate in class. On this basis, the teachers should think about how to introduce new language items, what questions or which activities they will ask their students to elicit the new words from the topic and give the students clear instructions on what they will do at each stage of the task. The time allocation for each task should be planned appropriately for each stage, and students should be controlled carefully. If the time for the task is too long, students will feel bored or tired. If the students do not have enough time to complete the speaking task, they will not get any sense of satisfaction.

3. Conclusion

The study was a small action research about the effectiveness of TBL on improving the speaking performance of the first year students at school of foreign languages. The results from the pre-test, post-test and questionnaires, observation indicated

that there was a considerable improvement in the learner' speaking skill by applying task-based learning. First, the better results at the post-test compared to those at the pre-test proved remarkable improvement in the students' speaking skill. Second, the results collected from the speaking assessment of the pre-test, post-test and observation showed that after learning seven lessons implemented task-based activities, the students' speaking criteria, such as grammar vocabulary, discourse management, pronunciation, and interactive communication were improved significantly. For instance, most students could express their ideas clearly and easily because they used structures as well as vocabulary appropriately for the topic. The students took part in the speaking tasks actively because of their better pronunciation and clear intonation. As a result, the students knew how to interact well with their partner and keep the conversation going. Third, the results collected from the questionnaires showed that task-based activities made students more interested, relaxed, motivated and confident when speaking English. In summary, from the findings of the research, it can be concluded that task-based learning could help improve students' speaking skill significantly.

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