

Using Task- Based Approach to Improve the 9th Graders' Speaking Skills at a Secondary School in Ho Chi Minh City

Bao Ngoc Pham Nguyen^{1,*}, Anh Truong Van²

1 Department of Education & Training in Phu Nhuan District, Vietnam

2 Sai Gon University, Vietnam

**Corresponding author. Email:ngocpnb.0106@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT

The goal of this research is to assess the effectiveness of the task-based approach on speaking ability as well as the students' perceptions towards its implementation. The researcher employed an action study design in grade nine classes at Viet Anh Lower Secondary School, with the help of five teachers functioning as examiners and observers. This research employed an integrated mixed-methods approach, gathering quantitative data via a speaking test and qualitative data through an interview, an observation checklist, and a questionnaire. The study's results suggested that a task-based approach had a major influence on students' speaking skills. Additionally, throughout speaking classes, students displayed enhanced excitement, curiosity, confidence, inventiveness, and collaborative learning skills. The study's findings support the use of a task-based approach in the teaching of English as a foreign language.

Keywords: *action research, qualitative, quantitative, speaking skill, task-based approach*

1. INTRODUCTION

At the moment, Vietnamese citizens do not have the same opportunities to practice or utilize English that residents of other Southeast Asian nations such as Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines do. Although kids are required to acquire English in elementary school, their ability to utilize the language is not highly valued. While Vietnamese students have historically valued grammatical patterns, the bulk of them have not spoken or communicated in English since elementary school. Numerous studies suggest that Vietnamese students are taught grammar more than oral communication and are more concerned with passing the exam than with communicating in everyday English.

Vietnamese students, unsurprisingly, excel in grammar and vocabulary, which benefits them greatly. However, due to a lack of speaking experience, they are unable to converse in English. The majority of pupils understand the meaning of English words but are unable to speak or recall how to pronounce them. And their fear of communication is a significant impediment to enhancing

kids' speaking abilities. When it comes to English education in Vietnam, elementary school has more hours dedicated to speaking than secondary and high school. They have allotted time for secondary pupils to study and practice grammar. As a result, exercise helps kids develop strong reading and vocabulary skills but does not help them enhance their speaking abilities.

Thus, English instruction in secondary school should be more balanced between grammar and speaking in order to let students develop all of their talents properly. To foster a climate conducive to student growth in speaking abilities, instructors should allow students to practice and construct lessons independently with the assistance of the teacher. It may help students develop and broaden their capabilities, as well as inspire them to learn English.

For the reasons stated before, we have chosen to conduct research on "Using a task-based learning strategy to enhance the speaking abilities of ninth-grade students at a secondary school in Ho Chi Minh City." We hope that

this study might provide a tiny proposal for secondary school English instructors.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Task-based learning provides an alternate approach to second language problems for language instructors and students. The instructor does not predetermine the language to be studied in a task-based session. The session is structured around the accomplishment of a particular goal, and the language learned is dictated by what occurs when pupils complete it. Willis (1996) [1] identified three fundamental stages: pre-task, task cycles, and language focus.

These stages are considered advantageous because they include both meaning and structure into conversational responsibilities. On the other hand, Nunan (2004) [2] is premised on three macrofunctions: ideational or referential function, interpersonal function, and textual function. Nunan's method helps students to practice their grammatical structure while maintaining an emphasis on grammar and form. Nunan (2004) [2] categorizes task-based learning into six stages: schema creation, contextualized controlled practice, realistic receptive skills work, a focus on form, free practice, and the communicative task.

Long (1992) [3] stressed the importance of form, which encompasses meaning, structure, and communication environment. Long's [3] model is separated into the following phases to emphasis on form: Conducts requirements analysis in order to determine target tasks. Classification of tasks into goal task categories; formulation of pedagogical responsibilities Sequencing in order to develop a task-based syllabus, implementation using the most appropriate approach and pedagogy, assessment through task-based, criterion-referenced performance examinations, and program evaluation.

When learners are able to develop effective forms during a conversation, they may enhance their grammar and speaking. However, Willis's teaching approach is used in many nations to teach English since it provides learners with more opportunities to practice speaking than other methods. Willis (1996) [1] characterizes Task-Based learning as "a type of PPP turned upside down."

The lesson is divided into phases. Task-based learning consists of three components: Pre-tasks, Task-Cycle (Task, Planning, and Report), and Language Focus.

The teacher, in his or her capacity as researcher, will design a teaching-learning activity to address the issues identified during the preceding teaching-learning process. Students' difficulties were often related to their fear of making errors, unwillingness to participate, and inaccurate pronunciation, which made it difficult for them to communicate effectively. They also struggled with fixing their grammar while speaking. Teachers will prepare materials prior to entering the classroom to explore those issues, including a full lesson plan, an audio recorder, an observation sheet, field notes, a student score sheet, and an interview sheet. Teachers are responsible for the following tasks: pre-task, task, planning, reporting, and language focus.

The term "task-based learning" refers to a technique of teaching a second language that is based on the most current research results in the field. TBL typically involves the student in planning and executing the activities, which increases their motivation to learn. A task-based classroom environment provides children with more opportunities to exhibit their thinking via their actions. Additionally, teachers might be more responsive to the needs of their pupils. TBL enables students to apply classroom knowledge to real-world circumstances. This hands-on lesson teaches kids the importance of grammar and new vocabulary in terms of finishing their thoughts when speaking.

Students will develop specific abilities via task-based learning, including the ability to ask questions, negotiate meaning, and, most significantly, collaborate in groups. Because they may develop their ability to notice various ideas and approaches to problem solving, as well as their ability to watch how their peers think and make choices. Because this is not just a linguistic talent; it is also a life skill that assists pupils in developing themselves in real life. It assists pupils in not only learning their language but also in developing their confidence and problem-solving abilities. TBL enables learners to offer their own ideas, assess those of others, and develop their ability to reflect on others.

Students may develop their abilities via task-based learning activities by gaining knowledge in "information activities" - when they get assignments and work in groups. Following that are "reasoning exercises," during which pupils may communicate their thoughts to their teams. Finally, there is "Opinion-forming activities." Students must communicate their ideas and debate them in groups in order to find the most appropriate one.

According to Gardener Murphy (1968) [4], "the word 'learning' encompasses any alteration of behavior to conform to environmental conditions," and every learner may benefit from their present surroundings. Regardless of whether the learning environment improves, students may grow and expand their knowledge via diligent effort.

Also, Flohr and Paesler (2010, p.10) [5] agreed, "Speaking is the most significant skill to develop when learning a foreign language. The goal of learning a foreign language is to become a fluent speaker by focusing on communication activities and expressive abilities." It is questioned whether teaching and learning speaking skills deserve as much, if not more, attention than the others.

It was clear in Vietnam that students did not place a high value on speaking ability, despite the fact that it is an important aspect of the language acquisition process. While we concentrate solely on grammar in order to pass the exam, the value of speaking skills is diminished. Teachers may aid children in developing their speaking confidence by providing brief replies, recognizing scripts, and use language to discuss language. Additionally, individuals may utilize language to assist themselves in increasing their comprehension of the language and their confidence in its usage. These techniques may aid pupils in applying their English expertise.

3. METHODS

The research is intended to answer the two following questions:

- (i) What effects do task-based learning activities have on the students' speaking skills?
- (ii) What are the students' attitudes towards learning speaking skills through a task-based learning activities?

The purpose of this study is to use action research to aid in the treatment of learners' speaking difficulties via task-based learning activities.

Following the lectures, learners will be surveyed to ascertain their views toward task-based learning. This study included both qualitative and quantitative research techniques. This is a frequent strategy that contributes to the evaluation's improvement by ensuring that the strengths of one sort of data outweigh the limits of another. A quantitative research method

is one that emphasizes the collection of numerical data and its generalization across groups of individuals. On the other hand, a qualitative approach is one that is based on descriptive data and avoids the use of statistical processes.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The purpose of the study, as described, was to improve the English-speaking skills of Viet Anh Secondary School students through the use of a task-based approach in teaching speaking. Through the data collected, the researcher revealed the students' attitudes towards the task-based approach and examined the effectiveness of the task-based approach applied to teaching in English speaking.

All the information and data were collected via speaking pre-test and post-test, interviews, observation sheets and questionnaires. These provide answers to the two research questions, the quantitative data were analyzed by t-test and descriptive statistics and the qualitative data were analyzed by the analysis method adapted from Rod Ellis (2003) [6]. The collected data will be shown in the tables and figures.

To evaluate the students' speaking capability prior to the implementation, a pre-test was carried out on the 9th Grade students at Viet Anh secondary school. At the end of the course, the students took a post-test, of which the results would be compared to that of the pre-test to find out the effects of the treatment applied to the group of the participants.

Figure 1 and Table 1 show the participants' scores and descriptive statistics of pre-test and post-test. Overall, there are significant differences between the two tests in terms of absolute scores as well as minimum, maximum, and mean scores.

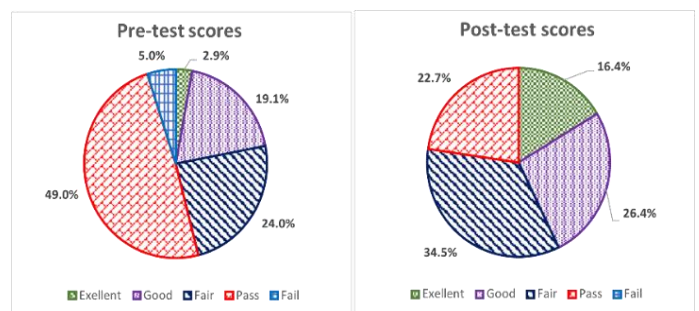


Figure 1 Classification of test results in pre-test and post-test

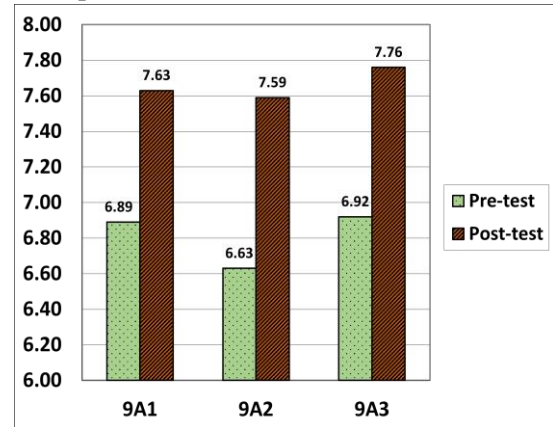
The statistics from Figure 1 above show that students' speaking performance was rather poor. Nearly half of the students (about 49 %) got below-fair scores. There are seven students who got below-average scores (about 5%). Although the highest score in the pre-test was noticeable, standing at 9.5, only three students. Besides, the mean of the group's pre-test was just above 6.81. The most frequently occurring score was from 5.00 to 6.75, with fifty students. These data records also illustrate that there was a large improvement in the scores after taking action.

English speaking tests are designed to measure students' specific improvements during the implementation of a task-based approach in teaching speaking skills; thus, the researcher developed a pre-test and a post-test to accomplish that aim. A pre-test was conducted prior to the action research project, and a post-test was carried out after the experiment. The framework of both tests was based on the IELTS test format, which consists of three parts: introduction, topic and question-answers, as mentioned in the collecting instrument section.

Used as a pre-test, it is aimed at collecting the initial data on the spoken- English ability of the learners; meanwhile, the post-test identified any possible improvement and differences in learners' achievement.

The scores were assessed by two raters and based on the frame of Harris's [7] oral English rating scale and adapted from IELTS Speaking Band Descriptors - Published Version in terms of four categories: Fluency and Coherence, Vocabulary, Grammar, and Pronunciation. Statistically, the scores of 110 students were also calculated. Figure 2 below shows the significant differences in mean scores between pre-test and post-test and then indicates how task-based approach helped students improve their speaking skills.

Figure 2. A comparison of mean scores on pre-test and post-test



The average post-test results ($M = 7.66$) of the two raters are, as can be seen in figure 2 above, considerably higher than the pre-test raters ($M = 6.81$). This demonstrates that after participating in the task-based learning, the students have made considerable improvements in learning speaking skills.

The results of the post-test also showed that implementing a task-based approach in speaking class activities clearly helps students develop their speaking skills, including pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. However, it can be seen that a few students did not really make progress; meanwhile, most students improved their speaking skills dramatically. The findings of the study are consistent with those of Srikrai (2008) [8], who found that the speaking skills of students were improved through task-based activities.

After several weeks of implementing a task-based approach in teaching and learning, the students made significant progress in speaking skills through the post-test. To explain their improvement, the researcher would like to collect more data on the personal evaluation of students as well as their attitudes towards learning speaking with a task-based approach. Hence 110 students were given the task-based approach survey questionnaire.

There are two sections in this version of the questionnaire: the first section is to examine whether they like the task-based approach in learning speaking skills, while the second part helps students assess their improvements by themselves.

Using a five-point Liker scale, the following items were scored: Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Neutral

(3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (2). (1). (2006) (Singh). According to him, a Likert scale is composed of four or more items that represent related issues and are aggregated into a single composite score/variable.

To offer a clear explanation for each item, the number of students in each item and the mean for collecting things for the whole phenomena are displayed. Table 1 displays the score interpretation of the questionnaire data.

Table 1. The questionnaire result's scoring criteria

Criteria	Score	Meaning
Very high	4.51 – 5.00	The <i>very high</i> rate indicates that the majority of respondents strongly agree with the statement.
High	3.76 – 4.50	The <i>high</i> rate indicates that the majority of respondents agree with the statement.
Fair	3.36 – 3.75	The rate of <i>fair</i> indicates that the majority of respondents are unsure about the statement.
Low	2.51 – 3.35	The <i>low</i> rate indicates that the majority of respondents disagree with the statement
Poor	0.00 – 2.50	The <i>poor</i> rate indicates that the majority of respondents disagree with the statement.

Based on the findings of the questionnaire analysis, the interpretation of the questionnaire in Table 1 is derived using the Likert Scale (Singh, 2006) [9]. The high score rate shows that the great majority of responders strongly agree with the statements in the closed questionnaire. In addition to this, a high score rate

shows that the majority of respondents agree with the statements. The low and poor scores imply that the respondents do not agree with the assertions and strongly disagree with them. As a result, the higher the score is, the more people who agree with the assertions in the closed questionnaire.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of senior high school students' feelings about TBLT

Items	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Criteria
I am interested in working on tasks in a group.	2.00	5.00	4.1429	High
I am interested in the topics of tasks.	3.00	5.00	3.7714	High

I am interested in performing a task in a real- life situation.	3.00	5.00	4.2000	High
I am interested in showing my tasks in front of the class and receiving feedback from the teacher and other students.	2.00	5.00	4.0571	High
Task-based activities are important in this curriculum.	3.00	5.00	4.0286	High

Table 2 shows that most students appreciate these activities with regard to the feelings of students about task-based activities. Specifically, the finding indicated that the students in the study liked these task-based activities most because they are close to real-life situations (M=4.20). It was followed by students' interest in working on tasks in a group (M=4.14). Another factor that students are interested in the task-based approach is because they like to show their tasks in front of the class and receive feedback from the teacher and other students (M=4.06). Similarly, most of the respondents agreed that task-based activities are important in this curriculum (M=4.03). However, students did not highly appreciate the topics of tasks (M=3.77).

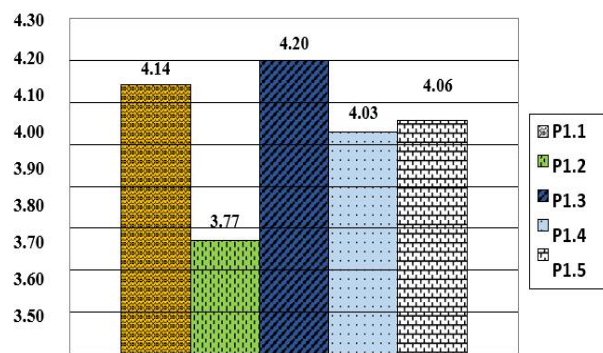


Figure 3. Mean score of senior high school students' feelings about TBLT

Most students generally acknowledged that task experiences helped them improve their speaking skills, language skills, and other life skills. Data on the evaluation by students of the benefits of task-based activities can be found as below:

Table 3. Students' evaluation of their achievement on speaking skills

Items	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Criteria
My pronunciation is getting better. I paid more attention to the word stress when speaking.	3.00	5.00	4.06	High
I can make a longer speech and communicate with friends in some daily topics.	2.00	5.00	3.97	High
I produce less pauses and pay more attention to the grammar accuracy when speaking.	2.00	5.00	3.86	High

I can recall known words, learn more new words and use them more appropriately.	3.00	5.00	4.14	High
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Table 3 presents the results of the questionnaire, which reveal that the high category applies to all items. The number of respondents who responded to the point of agreement in the questionnaire was used to calculate the score. The questionnaire's items are all in the "high" category. 3.76 to 4.50 is the high category. The high rate indicates that the majority of those polled agree with the statement. As a result, it is clear that students have profited from the use of a task-based approach in the development of speaking abilities. Specifically, the highest score (M=4.14) for recalling known words, learning new words, and using them

more appropriately. Students could then improve their pronunciation and pay more attention to word stress (M=4.06). In addition, students also revealed their improvement in speaking longer and communicating with friends on some daily topics (M=3.97) and making fewer pauses and paying more attention to grammar accuracy when speaking (M=3.86). These findings support the premise that the best opportunity for students to improve their speaking skills, including fluency and coherence, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. (Levine, 2004, as cited in Fragoulis, 2009) [10], can be provided by a task-based approach

Table 4. Students' self-evaluation on their achievement on their other English skills

Items	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Criteria
The task-based approach helped me enhance my other English skills (reading, listening, and writing).	3.00	5.00	4.20	High

According to the survey results, the students believed that their other language skills had improved as well (M=4.20). Table 4 depicts students' perspectives on skill development. The majority of them said that using a task-based approach allowed them to improve their reading, writing, and listening abilities.

This is understandable for the following reasons. Students stated that searching for material from many sources improved their reading, listening, and vocabulary knowledge at the time of their presentation since they had to read, listen and compare a lot of information prior to deciding what was appropriate for their work. When they prepared their PowerPoint slides or wrote scripts for their presentation, their writing was also improved.

This part has provided a detailed analysis of data collected from the questionnaire and tests. The findings revealed that the task-based approach assisted students in improving their speaking skills. Furthermore, almost all students had good feelings about using a task-based approach.

5. CONCLUSION

Using task-based activities prove effective for the students to learn English, especially speaking skill. Task-based activities can be enhanced through different methods, among which speaking skill application appears to be one of the best. The students can highly motivate themselves to make every effort during speaking lessons.

The students should also strive to practice speaking skills more in actual situations whenever they have opportunities, given that it is quite valuable for their speaking improvement. The researcher would suggest that the students should train themselves as much speaking as possible, not only inside but also outside the classroom.

Teaching speaking is important in foreign language classrooms since it is one of the key indicators of the success of teaching a language. Therefore, instructors of English at the schools should hold accountable for promoting the students' English skills, especially speaking ability. The outcome of this research can act as a good foundation for teachers to mingle various ways to upgrade their teaching ability.

Teachers can use the task-based method in their speaking lesson and utilize this technique as an effective tool for the betterment of their expositions. Apart from other techniques, they are recommended to regularly put the students in real speaking situations so that they could be familiar with the conversation in life. Teachers can also use the findings of this study as helpful material to improve their English teaching methods.

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