

EFL SPEAKING STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the value of task-based language teaching in English as a foreign language (EFL) speaking classes from the perspective of forty intermediate level students studying in a technical Saudi Arabian college, who had been extensively exposed to this type of teaching. Several research hypotheses were formulated on the basis of a comprehensive literature review of scholarship on speaking and task-based language teaching and then tested in this research context. The study uses quantitative data derived from anonymous, semi-structured questionnaires distributed to students. The results of this study show that the majority of respondents appear to hold an overwhelmingly positive attitude regarding the employment of task-based language teaching in their speaking courses.

Keywords: Task-based language teaching, EFL, English, Speaking, attitude, Saudi Arabia.

1. Introduction:

Task-based language teaching refers to teaching a foreign language that seeks to engage students in interactionally authentic language use by having them perform a series of tasks. It aims to both enable learners to acquire new linguistic knowledge and to proceduralize their existing knowledge. The use of tasks in language pedagogy has a long history, particularly in the communicative approach to language teaching. In fact, in the late 1970s and 1980s, these tasks were often called communicative activities (Crookes, 1986; Alshumaimeri, 2010). The term communicative activities has been gradually replaced by tasks (Bygate et al., 2001).

In the field of English as a second (foreign) classes the use of tasks has gained a greater importance around the world, (Van den Branden, 2006). This use has proven its usefulness when used in different courses and skills (Bygate, 2001; Ellis, 2009; Skehan, 1998; Tavakoli & Foster, 2008). Furthermore, when it comes to teach speaking skill tasks have proven their usefulness as well and

many researchers (Prabhu, 1984) Nunan, 2005); (Bygate, 2001); and (Branden, 2006) have confirmed this assumption.

Pedagogical tasks are defined as: " Bounded classroom activities in which learners use language communicatively to achieve an outcome, with the overall purpose of learning language" (Bygate, 1999a: 186). By "bounded" is meant that the activities have a starting point, which is the input, and an end which is the outcome. The "outcome" can be interpreted as the purpose of the task, which is using the language communicatively. It can also be interpreted as the goal of the task, in terms of either task completion or promoting learners' language (Alshumaimeri, 2010).

The use of pedagogical tasks when learning to speak a second language suits the complexity of the different variables that this type of learning has to deal with, such as different activities and materials, evaluation, feedback, etc., tasks have a positive impact on these variables (Jeon, and Hahn, 2006). It implies that tasks provide learners with natural sources of meaningful and useful materials, ideal situations for communicative activity, and supportive feedback allowing for much greater opportunities for language use (ibid). Specifically, in Saudi Arabia where learners are most of the time limited in their accessibility to use the target language on a daily basis, it is first of all necessary for language learners to be provided with real opportunities to be exposed to language use in the classroom.

2. Literature Review:

The use of tasks to teach language skills in second language courses has always been successful; (Chaudrun, 1988) for example found that using tasks in English courses have improved the speaking and listening skills of his primary students. (Alshumaimeri, 2003) reported that tasks have motivated his elementary-level students. The last result agrees with what has been revealed in (Ben Maad, 2012) study; who found out that tasks have a positive impact on the motivation of

college-level students who participated in his study. Moreover, (Al Nashsh, 2006) revealed that tasks have improved the writing skills of his secondary-level students. Furthermore, (Fotos and Ellis, 1991) mentioned that using tasks with his Japanese secondary-level students have improved their grammar.

The use of tasks to teach speaking has also been researched in many studies as well. (Lochana and Deb, 2006), have recreated textbook being taught in India into meaningful tasks; their research revealed that using tasks have improved the speaking skill of their students and the participant reported that tasks made them more motivated and their attitude toward studying English have been promoted as well. Moreover, (Murad, 2009) found out that the task based language teaching program that he recommended enhanced significantly the speaking skill of secondary-level Palestinian students and it positively affected their attitudes towards English. Additionally, (Uraivan, 2010) reported that the English speaking ability of Mattayom Suksa 4 learners has improved after using tasks for one semester. More recently, (Arslanyilmaz,2012) in his study that aimed to investigate the relationship of language proficiency to language production and negotiation of meaning that non-native speakers produced in an online task-based language learning environment. He found out that intermediate-level NNSs get involved in more negotiation of meaning than advanced-level NNSs, and advanced-level NNSs produced more accurate spoken language than intermediate-level NNSs. Those studies and a lot more have convinced language institutes around the world to use tasks with their students in order to reach effective and quick results (Breen, 1987), and since the current educational curricula in Saudi Arabia have not developed speaking as expected (Al-Seghayer, 2010), (Alshumaimeri, 2010), (alhomaidan, 2013), (alhomaidan, 2014); it is very important to try other ways to teach this

important skill, and since tasks have proven their reliability around the world there is nothing that prevent using them in the college of technologies.

3. Research questions:

1. How do the participants of our study feel about the usefulness of task-based language teaching?
2. Do the students participating in our study think that task-based language teaching has led their L2 speaking proficiency?

4. Methodology:

4.1.Participants:

Participants in this study were 40 full-time students registered in the university year 2016. The participants were enrolled in their first year of a two-year program offered by Arrass college of technology, Saudi Arabia (a yearly intake of approximately 500 students). Their age ranged from 19 to 22 years. The mean length of time they studied English was 6 years. As native speakers of Arabic, they learned their English exclusively in a classroom environment, thus having little opportunity to use English for communicative purposes outside the classroom setting.

5. Arrass College of Technology:

Arrass College of Technology is a technical college in Saudi Arabia. It was established in 2002 as the second college of technology in Alqassim region. Its first objectives and priorities to graduate the qualified technical cadres scientifically and practically to work in technical areas those contribute directly in building the national economy. Additionally, due to the importance of English language in the technical sciences programs, and because of the increased English language courses in diploma programs, the college has established a general studies department to supervise the English language-training curricula and other curricula. It also aims to contribute in

raising the competency of college's trainers in this field through training courses and computer programs and other educational services. The department has adopted a readymade English language programs prepared by the Technical and Vocational Training Corporation (TVTC). These programs adopt the old fashioned (ppp) techniques to teach English, and none of the programs use pedagogical tasks when introducing the speaking skill or any other language skills.

6. Instrument and procedures:

6.1.The Pedagogical Tasks:

In designing the 12 tasks, I tried to relate them closely to the textbook's units, topics, themes, structure, functions and notions. The tasks would be considered supplementary material to the syllabus. Tasks ideas have been extracted from tasks in literature (Bygate, 1987, 1999;) (Anderson & Lynch, 1988); (Ur, 1981, 1988); (Willis, 1996); (Potten and Donaghue, 2000); and (Riggenbach & Samuda, 2000) and adopted them to suit the current environment by modifying the content and changing the rubrics, task procedures and task demands.

The tasks were arranged in sequence according to units, topics and themes, in order to link with the sequence of the targeted syllabus. Each task was accompanied by a detailed lesson plan to be used as a guide by participating teacher. Each lesson plan provides a task description in terms of title, timing, objectives, language targeted, and task summary. A task breakdown is given in terms of input, task, and output. In addition, a practical guide to presenting the task is presented in terms of pre-task, task, and post-task activities, with suggested timing for each stage, and suggested manner of classroom interaction.

6.2.The Questionnaire:

The method of data gathering chosen for this study is the semi-structured questionnaire. The students' feedback was based on Likert scale continuum from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" ranging from 1 to 5. The feedback was obtained in order to find out research participants' opinion about three subcategories. The first section concentrates on finding general information about the students participating in the study. The second section of the questionnaire, was aimed at discovering the attitudes of the students to the materials used when adopting this method of teaching and how they felt after they experienced it. The third part of the questionnaire was employed to discover their points of view regarding the way their teacher acted when employing tasks in the teaching process.

6.3.Procedures:

Before handing students the questionnaires, the researcher explained to them the importance of the study they were participating in and they were assured that there were no right or wrong answers and their responses would not affect their grades. The questionnaire papers, which had been translated into Arabic (the participants' mother tongue) to avoid any misunderstanding or lack of clarity, were distributed to the students, who were given time to discuss any unclear points with the researcher. The students took the questionnaires home with them, and they were requested to complete them and bring them back the following school day.

7. Results and Discussion:

7.1.The usefulness of TBLT:

Students provided feedback to express their views about TBLT treatment and to determine answer of the first research question "How do the participants of our study feel about the usefulness of task-based language teaching?" in the present study.

Table (1) shows that there was no strong disagreement with any items in this section. Other results which were drawn are as follows. Regarding strong agreement, item one “The teacher and students were enthusiastic” captured 78.56% of the positive responses, item two “task-based learning help learners enjoy learning English” 71.42%, item three “The content of the class suits my level” 83.71%, item four “Learners like and want to learn by using task-based learning” 78.56%, item five “Class was more collaborative and interactive” 64.28%, item six “A task involves a primary focus on meaning” 57.14%, item seven “All students participated actively” 57.14%, item eight “A task has a clearly defined outcome” 57.14%, item nine “ It is helpful to discuss topics in a group” 78.56%, item ten “ task-based learning is based on the student-centered instructional approach” 78.56%, item eleven “Class environment was friendly“ 85.71, item twelve “task-based learning activates learners' needs and interests” 76.56%, item thirteen “Learning was student oriented” 42.86%, item fourteen “task-based learning provides a relaxed atmosphere to promote target language use” 42.86%, item fifteen “Teacher moved forward in step with class” 85.71%, item sixteen “task-based learning materials given are meaningful and purposeful based on the real-world context” 78.56%, item seventeen “Learning was more interesting than my earlier schooling” 71.42%, item eighteen “task-based learning pursues the development of integrated skills in the classroom” 71.42%, and item nineteen “task-based learning puts much psychological burden on the teacher as a facilitator” 71.42%.

Category	Item	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Disagree Strongly
		P	P	P	P	P
Student	1. (8) The teacher and students were enthusiastic	(42.85%)	(35.71%)	(21.43%)	-	-
	2. Learners like and want to learn by using task-based learning	(35.71%)	(42.85%)	(7.14%)	(7.14%)	-
	3. All students participated actively					-

		(7.14%)	(50%)	(28.57%)	(14.29%)		
Teacher	4. It is helpful to discuss topics in a group	(35.71%)	(42.85%)	(14.29%)	-	(7.14%)	
	5.task-based learning activates learners' needs and interests	(35.71%)	(42.85%)	-	(7.14%)	(14.29%)	
	6. task-based learning is based on the student-centered instructional approach	(35.71%)	(42.85%)	(7.14%)	(7.14%)	(7.14%)	
	7. task-based learning help learners enjoy learning English	(42.85%)	(28.57%)	(28.57%)	-	-	
	8. (1) The teacher and students were enthusiastic	(42.85%)	(35.71%)	(21.43%)	-	-	
	9. Teacher moved forward in step with class	(35.71%)	(50%)	(7.14%)	-	(7.14%)	
	10.task-based learning puts much psychological burden on the teacher as a facilitator.	(42.85%)	(28.57%)	(14.29%)	(7.14%)	(7.14%)	
	Material	11. The content of the class suits my level	(35.71%)	(50%)	(7.14%)	(7.14%)	-
		12. Class was more collaborative and interactive	(21.43%)	(42.85%)	(21.43%)	(14.29%)	-
		13. A task involves a primary focus on meaning	(21.43%)	(35.71%)	(14.29%)	(14.29%)	-
14. A task has a clearly defined outcome		(7.14%)	(50%)	(28.57%)	(7.14%)	(7.14%)	
15. Class environment was friendly		(35.71%)	(50%)	(7.14%)	-	(7.14%)	
16. task-based learning provides a relaxed atmosphere to promote target language use.		(14.29%)	(28.57%)	(35.71%)	(7.14%)	(14.29%)	
17. task-based learning materials given are meaningful and purposeful based on the real-world context		(35.71%)	(42.85%)	(14.29%)	-	(7.14%)	
18. Learning was more interesting than my earlier schooling		(42.85%)	(28.57%)	(21.43%)	(7.14%)	-	
19. task-based learning pursues the development of integrated skills in the classroom		(42.85%)	(28.57%)	(21.43%)	-	(7.14%)	
		(30.83%)	(39.47%)	(17.67%)	(6.02%)	(4.89%)	
Total		70.30%		17.67	10.91%		

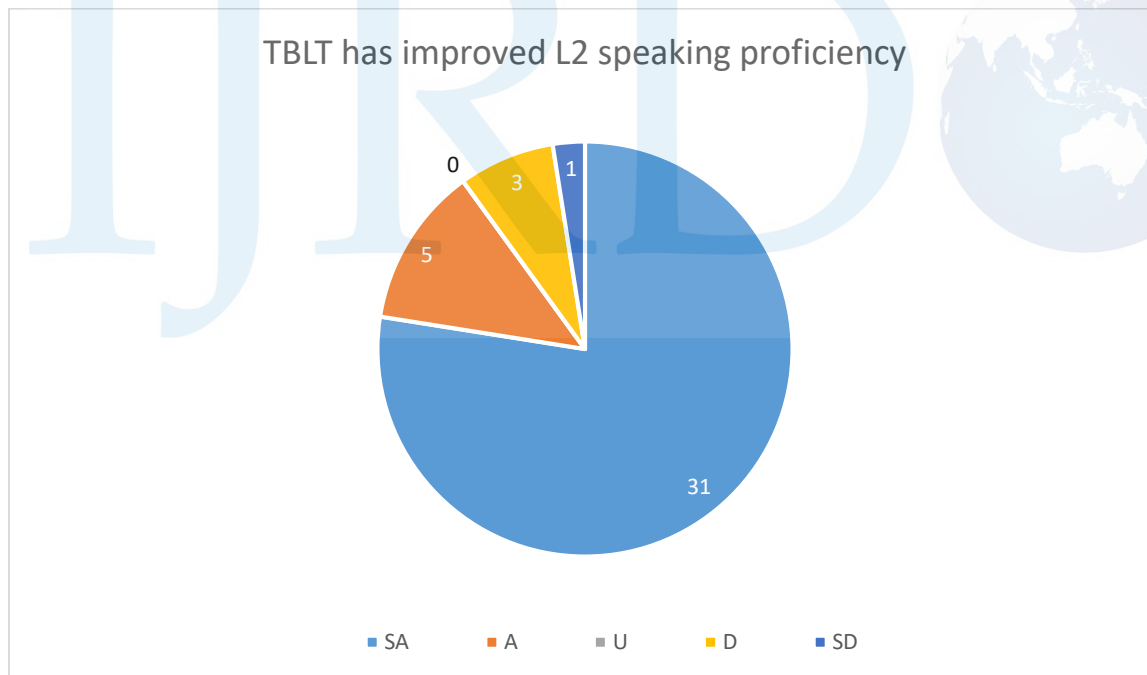
Table (1)

The total scores as can be seen in table (1) show that only (10.91%) of the participants think that that task-based language teaching is not useful. On the contrary the majority of the participants (70.30%) believe that task-based language teaching is useful and a great deal of them (30.83%) of them are strongly supportive of this notion. Such a result goes along with what have been mentioned in the literature such as (Prabhu, 1984) Nunan, 2005); (Bygate, 2001); and (Branden, 2006). They also agrees with results mentioned by (Lochana and Deb, 2006); (Murad, 2009);

(Uraiwan, 2010); and (Arslanyilmaz,2012) which suggest that tasks are very useful in English as a foreign language context.

7.2.TBLT and speaking proficiency:

The majority (90%) of students who participated in this study believe that task-based language teaching has improved their L2 speaking proficiency. This assumption can be inferred from the students' responses to the questionnaire item asking about their attitudes regarding the effect of task-based language teaching on improving their L2 speaking proficiency. Additionally, figure (1) shows that the majority (77.5%) of students were found to 'strongly agree' with this idea



SA= strongly agree; A= agree; U=neutral; D= disagree; SD= strongly disagree

Figure (1)

The high mean of (4.55) and low standard deviation of (1.01) in favor of this appeal table (2) gives further support to this claim. This positive attitude in favor of task-based language teaching

suggests an answer to the second research question asking students' points of views as to whether they think that task-based language teaching has played a role in improving their L2 speaking proficiency, support the claim made by (Lochana and Deb, 2006); (Murad, 2009); (Uraiwan, 2010) that employing task-based language teaching will lead to a general improvement in EFL students' L2 speaking proficiency

Task-based language teaching has improved my L2 speaking proficiency	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
	40	1.00	5.00	4.5500	1.01147

Table 2. task-based language teaching and L2 proficiency (students' mean and SD. scores)

8. Limitation of the Study:

The learners were not familiar with task-based learning, so at the first period, learners were concerned and worried whether task-based learning prepared them well to take the final exam. Moreover, the researcher was a temporary teacher. This had a positive effect in helping learners feel relaxed, yet at times were perhaps not taking the class very seriously. Other limitations are that the time given for the experiment was only three months, which is significant because research conducted by classroom teachers over longer periods of time may yield different findings.

9. Conclusion:

The aim of this study was to explore the attitudes of Arabic EFL students towards using task-based language teaching in English as a foreign language (EFL) speaking classes. The results showed that the majority of Saudi college-level ESL speaking students appreciate task-based language teaching. Only a few participants contradicted this overwhelmingly positive attitude, but as with any pedagogical practice, task-based language teaching takes patience and application from both students and teachers. Adopting some of the findings of this study, students' speaking abilities are

likely to get better. Seeing the improvement and benefiting from employing this method, will certainly result in a positive enhancement of their belief in the efficacy of this technique.

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