THE IMPACTS OF TASK-BASED LANGUAGE LEARNING ON ACCURACY OF EFL LEARNERS' SPEAKING PERFORMANCES[i]

Pham Dinh Quoc[1ii],
Nguyen Thi Thuy Trang[2],
Chau Vinh Thanh[3]
Center for Training Graduate Outcome Standards
and Human Resources Development,
Nam Can Tho University,
Can Tho City, Vietnam

Abstract:

Task-based language learning has been proved to be effective on improving learners' skills, especially speaking skills; however, studies of this approach on English as a foreign language (EFL) students at English language centers in Can Tho city, Vietnam, are still limited. Task-based lessons are developed in several English course books used by those centers, but students' speaking skills are observed to be far from satisfactory. This research was carried out so as to investigate leaners' accuracy improvement under the influence of task-based approach. It was also aimed at finding out some challenges faced by participants while doing the assigned tasks. The study was conducted on 60 EFL students of a selected English language center in Can Tho City. They were equally divided into two groups: the experimental and the control group. Research instruments included a speaking test used a pre-test and post-test. Quantitative data was analyzed by the SPSS. The results showed that the speaking accuracy of students in experimental group was significantly improved, while the control group students made a limited progress.

Keywords: accurately speaking, task-based language learning, speaking performances, Can Tho City

1. Introduction

Task-based approach has attracted the interest of linguistic experts in terms of its positive impacts on leaners' communicative skills. In fact, it is mostly believed to be effective in speaking accuracy improvement (Prabhu, 1987; Willis, 1996). Moreover, according to

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[ii] Correspondence: email alexfreemanlx@gmail.com

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Willis (1996) if the teachers can design appropriate tasks for leaners to participate in, the students will be more confident to express what they think based on the language instructed.

Many studies have been done to investigate the effects of Task-based language learning on speaking accuracy of students in Western countries, but few researches aimed at this impact on Vietnamese students. Regardless of the fact that some studies mentioned this aspect with Vietnamese participants, they could not generalize the speaking proficiency of these learners under the effects of task-based language learning. In fact, the focus on this aspect in the setting of English language centers in Vietnam is still not noticed. Therefore, there is a strong need to determine the effects of this learning approach on students' speaking accuracy at English language centers

Therefore, it is anticipated that task-based approach applied in the study could effectively bring certain benefits on speaking accuracy improvement. Regardless of the fact that most of the course books used in classes of the center containing not only task-based designs, but also the meaningful tasks, learners generally do not speak accurately as needed.

1.1. Research question
This paper would cover this question:
- What are the effects of task- based language learning on EFL students' speaking accuracy?

2. Literature review

2.1. Speaking accuracy
Speaking accuracy is one of the most significant standards to assess EFL learners' communicative competence. Skehan (1998) identified three aspects of speaking: accuracy, fluency, and complexity.

Brown (2001) considered accuracy and fluency as two important goals to accomplish in communicative language learning in which accuracy may be one of the initial requirements in communicative purpose.

2.2. Task-based approach
Shehaded (2005) believed that language learners mostly studying with the focus on grammar did not gain target language competence. Actually, language classrooms are generally organized under the control of grammar and lexicon. However, treating language as a meaning system leads to more effective production. Ellis (2000) talked about tasks in terms of psycholinguistic perspective. Learners are likely to acquire language effectively under the influence of task theoretically

2.3. The definitions of tasks

According to Ellis (2000), task is a device leading learners to experience the process of cycling information playing a significant role to acquire language effectively. When doing tasks, learners can spontaneously know how to apply the language in authentic situations.

Also, Ellis (2006) denied tasks as tools that could release learners from burdens of grammatical structures.

2.4. The procedure of task-based approach

A. The pre-task phase

Skehan (1996) emphasized that the tasks could enhance learners 'language acquisition when most of the requirements of structures are appropriately eradicated. Also, the burdens from linguistic requirements are dramatically lightened because of the limitations of correction.

B. The task cycle

Learners are assigned some tasks to work in pairs or groups with the little interference of the teacher and they are able to perform their ideas freely (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). In some cases, the pre task stage is started by some pictures given to pairs of students so that they can work together to find the differences and similarities between two pictures. Teachers should play the role of an advisor to help them recognize the advantages of communicating in the target language.

C. Post-task

Post-task is the stage that needs the reflection of language form, so there is a series of activities that could be applied.

2.5. Task types

Ellis (2003) suggested the task classification in which the representative tasks were introduced unfocused tasks. When unfocused tasks are assigned in class, students are given a total free space to express what they think on certain themes without basing on any forms obligated by the teacher.

- Pedagogic tasks: Pedagogic tasks do not need to reflect the real-world activities, but follow psycholinguistic effects in second language acquisition. These tasks can be rehearsal and activations task. Rehearsal task is known as role-play activity in which students are required to play roles, such as doctors, patients, customers, salespersons in order to do conversations that are appropriate to their roles. When doing activation tasks learners have to exchange information in term of conversation, such as picture description or information gap.
- Real world tasks: These are tasks coming from real world situations closely relating what students experience daily. Due to the high frequency daily activities, they are probably called tasks.

- Focused task: According to Ellis (2003), focused tasks are considered to be activities raising consciousness in which they focus on the particular language features, for example, students could be asked to classify the form of verb plus-"*ing*" appearing in the reading

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design
This experimental study contained a pre-test and a post test.
The research implementation lasted within fourteen weeks when the researcher instructed English lessons to sixty EFL students attending level B course at an English language center. These students had different academic backgrounds, but shared a lack of speaking accuracy. Therefore, the participants were grouped into two. Thirty students were in experimental group and the control group had the other thirty ones. The grouping process was conducted randomly. The researcher used the course book, American English File, which was used by the center for both groups. Still, while applying redesigned sequence with the TBLL format for the experimental group, the researcher mostly focused on the grammatical accuracy in the control group's grammar exercises and speaking activities. It was anticipated that participants in the experimental group could improve not only their speaking accuracy, but also their confidence which could contribute to their speaking accuracy under the influence of TBLL.

3.2. Participants
3.2.1. Teachers
The researcher was in charge of instructing lessons to both experimental and the control group.

3.2.2. Participants
Sixty students participating in the experimental research had finished level A course at the chosen center. Participants followed different learning programs such as finance and banking, law, physics, business administration, foreign trade, medicine, pharmacy, etc. at Can Tho University, other higher education institutions and high schools in Can Tho city. The chosen English center agreed to place the experimental group into class LEVEL B GROUP 1 and control group into LEVEL B GROUP 2. The researcher was the main teacher of the two classes. Because of the significant need to ensure the paralleled progress of classes and task-based language learning applications, the researcher carefully prepared the lessons for these two classes as well as collected periodical data. The table presents background information of the two groups.

Table 3.1: Background information of the two groups

Group	Number of students	Gender	Years of study
Control	30	6 Males, 24 Females	7 Years
Experimental	30	7 Males, 23 Females	7 Years

3.3. Material

The material used in this research was *American English File* issued by one of the most prestigious publishing houses in the world, Oxford University Press. Additionally, this course book was designed to match B1 level according to international standard. In effect, the chosen center had been applying American English File in not only the researchers' classes but also the other classes at them same level. The participants in both experimental and control group were instructed from Unit 1 to Unit 4 during twelve-week period. It was the obligatory to redesign the syllabus applied in control class due to the fact that American English File mostly contains the lessons designed in TBLL sequence. The experimental students, on the other hand, generally experienced the original TBLL sequence from this course book.

3.4. Research instruments

There were two main instruments used to answer the research questions: (1) sample IELTs speaking tests (pre-test and post-test), (2) a list of interview questions. The pre-test taken from IELTs speaking sample tests focused on the participants speaking accuracy before experiencing TBLL. The progress made by the participants according to the mentioned criteria after TBLL and control classes as well were evaluated by a post speaking test which was another IELTs speaking test from the same source of material.

3.4.1. The pre-and post-test

In order to feasibly measure the participants' accuracy in terms of speaking skills before attending TBLL classes and after these classes two IELTs sample speaking tests were from Cambridge Practice tests for IELTs from Cambridge University Press. This publishing house was indeed claimed to be well-known and reliable in English speaking communities. The two samples conducted as Pre-test and Post-test were official speaking tests issued by Cambridge ESOL in the previous months. The highly qualified tests would result in a fact that the assessment for the students in both groups was commonly accurate. At Pre-test stage the Official Speaking assessment criteria was illustrated to the participants with remarkable focus on accuracy, innovation and critical thinking items in both English as well as Vietnamese so that they could not only comprehend the evaluating scale, but also draw a self-assessment.

3.4.2. Speaking test
3.4.2.1. Designing the speaking test

The speaking test was taken from the IELTs sample tests by the researcher in order to assess the participants' speaking accuracy and evaluate accuracy development

Before applying officially both tests in classes, they were seriously examined by a prestigious TESOL expert so that the content, format and the Vietnamese illustrations were quality satisfied. Additionally, a formal discussion between the expert and researcher was made in the process of sample test selection so as to ensure the appropriate difficulty level. And then, twenty students from another class at the chosen English language center to participate in the tests and the pilot result was alpha = ,76 which was an acceptable degree of reliability due to the following reasons the pre-speaking test was originated from **Cambridge Practice Tests for IELTS 9** issued by Cambridge University Press.

To begin with, because of the aim at assessing speaking accuracy of the participants, the research had to conduct an oral test originated from reliable source. Actually, IELTs speaking tests were internationally agreed to be the precise instrument to assess EFL students' speaking accuracy. As a result, an IELTs sample was established into the pre- speaking test so that there was the significant match in test structures and the difficulty level.

Secondly, Cambridge Practice Tests for IELTS 9 was published by Cambridge University Press which was indeed one of the most prestigious publishers in the world. Moreover, in fact, this is the collection of the official IELTS speaking tests previously. This fact would result that it would give the researcher convenience to conduct the test and ensure not only the scientific structure, but the number of questions as well.

Thirdly, questions in both part one and two of the test authentically matched the participants' accustomed topics and English competence as well.

The pre-speaking test procedure was conducted within two parts that were Part I (introduction), Part 2 (small talk).

A. Part 1: Introduction

This part of Pre speaking test followed exactly the same time limit, three minutes, of official IELTs test. Due to the significant familiarity of the introduction tasks the students were intensively assessed their accuracy in answering the questions. Firstly, each student was asked to do self- introduction. Secondly, they had to choose one of some given topics that were close to their lives. The topics could be about their family, school/ work, free time activities/ hobbies and so on. The topic in this sample test was about games. The participants were asked the following questions: What games are popular in your country? [Why?], do you play any games? [Why/Why not?], How do people learn to play games in your country? Do you think it's important for people to play games? [Why/Why not?]

B. Part 2: Small talk

This part of the test was organized to test the participants' speaking accuracy, coherence, idea development. However, only accuracy was far more noted and analyzed. Each student ought to prepare within one minute and speak in around two minutes after choosing randomly one of five topics. An example of the given topics was describing a street or a market which the test-taker were interested in. Moreover, He or she was

expected to arrange ideas to answer the street/market location, what were sold there and give explanation on why he/she enjoyed visiting there.

3.4.2.2. Scoring the speaking test

The scoring scale applied for pre and post-tests was taken from band score of IELTs assessment criteria with the focus on accuracy. Besides, the criteria were carefully checked by the researcher and the TESOL expert in order to gain the consistence between students' level and the test requirement, reliability as well as validity. All of items tested according to IELTs speaking assessment criteria followed exactly the original form with the scores fluctuating from zero to nine. The researcher examined each participant in a separate sheet. The final outputs were analyzed by SPSS.

3.5. Data collection and task-based lessons procedures

The period of fourteen weeks (28 class meetings) was spent to experiment task-based lessons in experimental class, grammar focused lessons for control groups and collect the significant data. The researcher illustrated the effectiveness of TBLL on speaking accuracy based on previous studies as well as IELTs speaking assessment criteria with the focus on speaking accuracy, and implemented Pre- speaking test in the first week. From week two to week thirteen experimental group studied lessons having task-based design.

Table 3.2: Data collection and task-based lessons procedures

Time	Research activities	Groups
Week 1	Pre-test	Control and experimental groups
Weeks 2-5	Conducting Task-based language lessons	Experimental group
Week 6	Continue applying Task-based approach	Experimental group
Weeks 7-13	Continue applying Task-based approach	Experimental group
Week 14	Post-test	Control and experimental groups

3.5.1. Data collection procedures

It was generally accepted that all of the participants in both control and experimental groups shared similar language background. Therefore, the data collection procedure was started immediately by speaking accuracy illustration and pre speaking test.

a. The first stage: Speaking accuracy illustration and pre speaking test. In effect, there was a remarkable need to help students understand the importance of English-speaking accuracy, positive impact of TBLL on it and the how task-based lessons were cycled. Therefore, the researcher spent thirty minutes in the first meeting conveying necessary aspects. Firstly, the researcher orally performed two different speaking styles that were accurate speaking and non- accurate speaking. Secondly, the participants were supplied

the IELTs speaking assessment band score with descriptions and each description were carefully explained in English and Vietnamese. Thirdly, the first lesson of American English File course book was performed so that the participants could generally comprehend task-based language learning designs.

The Pre-speaking test was conducted in two days which were two first meetings of experimental group and control group. The objectiveness of the tests was gained by the scoring of three examiners that were the researcher and two invited teachers. Two examiners took turn to assess the speaking accuracy and their accurate reaction through different stages of answering questions. Actually, their speaking was mainly noticed on the accuracy. Each examinee spent around seven minutes handling part one and two interchangeably conducted by two examiners. The scoring process was all based on the IELTs speaking assessment standard internationally used by IELTs Australia and British Councils.

b. The second stage: Teaching task-based lessons. The original task-based lessons in the course book and additional tasks from the second week to the thirteenth week. In addition to this, the difficulties of the participants experiencing tasks at the first time was recorded in order to combine with the anticipated cultural challenges in the interview.

c. The final stage: Post speaking test. The post speaking test was administered in the fourteenth week with the participation of sixty students from both experimental and control groups. In effect, two days were spent to organize the same test for each group. The testing procedure and format were identical to the Pre speaking test. Regardless of the fact that the test' difficulty level, format and procedure were identical to the pre speaking test, the post- introduction questions as well as part two were noticeably different. Furthermore, instead of far more attention to speaking accuracy, the focus was equally spotted on not only accuracy, but creativeness in language use also. SPSS was implemented to analyze the authentic data gathered for the test.

4. Results

4.1. Participants' speaking accuracy before and after the study
The pre-test and post-test are conducted at the beginning as well as the end of the twelve intervention weeks. The testers seriously based on the IELTs speaking assessment standard with the focus on the accuracy and coherence. The scores of the speaking test were ranged from 0 to 9 points. Only speaking accuracy was assessed and analyzed at the beginning and the end of the research in order to answer the research question. SPSS software was used so that the collected data could be accurately analyzed.

4.1.1. Participants' speaking accuracy (within two groups)
At both pre intervention and post intervention the participants had to participate in tests that were taken from the IELTs speaking official tests. The accuracy of students from control and experimental group as well were formally performed in these tests.

In order to identify changes of two learners' speaking accuracy, the General Linear Model tests were carried out. Firstly, the results of control group's pre and posttest were collected and analyzed. As being shown in P (.017), it is confident to claim that the pre-mean score and post- mean score are different. Secondly, the Descriptive Statistics test was conducted so as to identify mean scores of each test. These mean scores are performed in table 4.1a.

Table 4.1a: Mean difference of speaking accuracy within control group

Group	Test	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Control	Pre-	30	2.00	4.00	2.80	.61
	Post-	30	1.50	4.00	3.02	.74

The result showed the difference of Pretest and Posttest (M pre = 2.80; SD = 0.61, M post = 3.02; SD = 0.74) (F = 6.44, DF = 1, P = .017). Mean accuracy of posttest was slightly higher than mean accuracy of pretest. It can be concluded that after twelve weeks of intervention the speaking accuracy of control group was not highly improved.

Subsequently, the General Linear Model test was conducted to clarify the difference of mean accuracy of experimental group's pretest and posttest (.000) leads to a conclusion that it was one hundred percent confident that the experimental group's accuracy was different at pretest and posttest. And then, the results of mean accuracy at pre-test and post-test were given by Descriptive Statistics test.

Table 4.1b: Mean difference of speaking accuracy within experimental group

Group	Test	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Experimental	Pre-	30	2.00	4.00	2.90	.44
	Post-	30	3.00	5.00	4.18	.66

The mean accuracy of pretest was different from Posttest mean accuracy (M pre = 2.90; SD = 0.44, M post = 4.18; SD = 0.66), (f = 182.722, df = 1, p = .000). It is seen that Mean post-test is dramatically higher than mean pretest. After the study the speaking accuracy of experimental group was remarkably increased.

4.1.2. Comparison of two groups' speaking accuracy

Table 4.2 illustrates the remarkable difference between experimental group's mean accuracy and control group's mean.

Table 4.2: Participants' speaking accuracy within two groups

Group	Test	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Control	Pre-	30	2.00	4.00	2.80	.61
	Post-	30	1.50	4.00	3.02	.73
Experimental	Pre-	30	2.00	4.00	2.90	.44
	Post-	30	3.00	5.00	4.18	.66

As can be seen in Table 4.2 the speaking accuracy of participants in control and experimental group was approximately matched (control M = 2.80, experimental M = 2.90) before the intervention. Nevertheless, after twelve weeks of task-based classes, the mean score performing speaking accuracy of experimental group's students made a remarkable surge at 4.18. Meanwhile, control group's mean score only slightly increased at 3.02. Figure 4.1 below presents the up-trend of both experimental and control group.
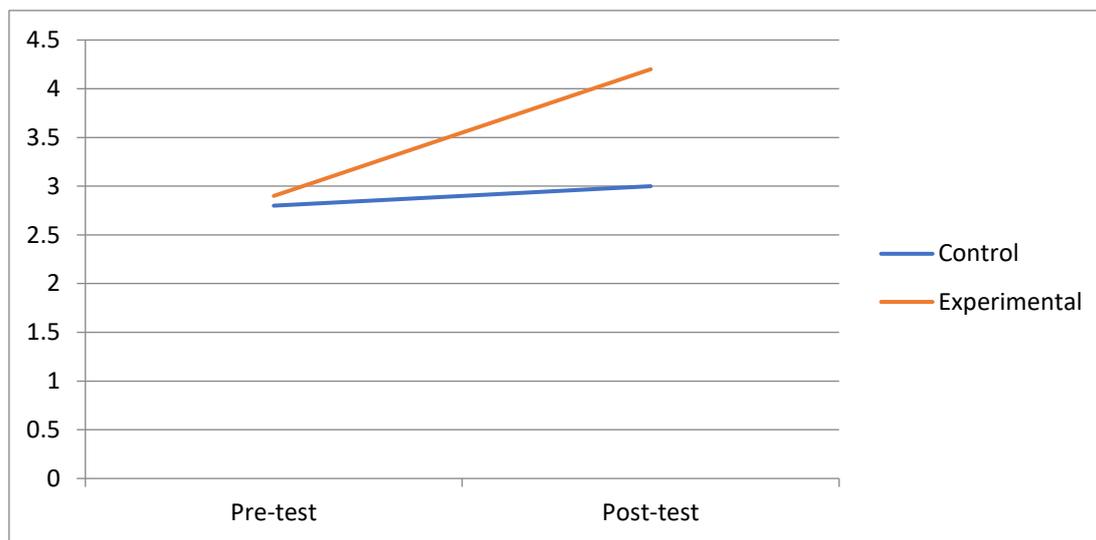

Figure 4.1: Summary of participant mean accuracy before and after the study

It can be clearly seen from the Figure 4.1 that there was a significant difference in accuracy mean score of pretest and posttest given to both control as well as experimental group. Two groups' speaking accuracy actually performed a noticeably small gap (control group M = 2.80; experimental group M = 2.90) at pre speaking test. This result was quite reasonable due to the fact that participants from both groups experienced nearly similar language competence and the experimental participants had not participated in any lessons designed under task-based purposes. While the post test showed a surged trend in both groups' accuracy mean score, it could not be denied that post test result of control group (M = 3.02) was far lower than experimental one's (M = 4.18).

In conclusion, the speaking accuracy of experimental group increased after twelve weeks. The control group speaking results did not illustrate a clear difference between pre-test and post-test. Meanwhile, the mean score of experimental group speaking accuracy dramatically increased after study. This fact leads to a consideration task-based lessons were able to enhance effectively speaking accuracy of students.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

Both authors strongly agreed on the publication of this paper and there was no contention or rivalry during finishing the work. In other words, the authors declare no conflicts of interests in this article. Both authors are fully and equally responsible for the benefits and harms after this article is published. The authors, moreover, declare that the material presented by us in this paper is our original work, and does not contain any materials taken from other copyrighted sources. Wherever such materials have been included, they have been clearly indented or/and identified by quotation marks and due and proper acknowledgments given by citing the source at appropriate places.

About the Authors
Mr. Pham Dinh QUOC, Nam Can Tho University (NCTU), Vietnam, is currently a lecturer in English Studies, Department of English language. He is currently Vice head of Department of English language. His main research interests are English language teaching, interpretation and translation. He can be contacted at alexfreemanlx@gmail.com.
Ms. Nguyen Thi Thuy TRANG, Nam Can Tho University (NCTU), Vietnam, is a lecturer of English Department. She is in charge of translation theory classes. She is keen on translation techniques, advanced English teaching methods as well as Buddhist's lessons. She can be contacted at ntttrang29@gmail.com.
Mr. Chau Vinh THANH is an English lecturer at Center for Training Graduate Outcome Standards and Human Resources Development of Nam Can Tho University (NCTU). He had held his master's degree in Theory and English teaching at Can Tho University, Vietnam. His main research interests are English learning and teaching, curriculum design, teaching methods, autonomous learning and teacher change. He can be reached at chauvinhthanh87@gmail.com.

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