



## The Significance of Task- Based Instruction in the Improvement of Learners' Speaking Skills

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### Abstract

*Experience in language teaching learning has showed that involvement of the learners in the learning process yields the best results. There cannot be a better way to involve learners than by devising activities which can be carried out in the classroom. Hence, assuming that Task-Based Instruction can be an effective way to teach a second language, the researchers studied the extent of effectiveness, the attitude of the teacher and the attitude of the students towards Task Based Instruction. The results showed a positive attitude of the teacher and the students. In TBI using language for communication is more important than correct use of language. Engaging the students in communicative tasks is the main principle. TBI provides students with an opportunity to use the target language and keeps them engaged in activities. The class sessions become useful, meaningful and interesting.*

**Keywords:** *Task based, communicative tasks, activities, communication skills, attitudes;*

### Introduction

The purpose of language classrooms is to provide support for language learning and to try and involve learners in the learning process. According to Ellis [1], language instruction holds a central place in the learning environment. The kind of task assigned by the instructor directly affects the learner's performance. Hence the tasks in the curriculum are designed in such a way that they foster language learning and enable the learners to communicate fluently and effectively [1; 2]. There are different ways of creating language learning contexts and Task Based Instruction (TBI) provides opportunities to employ a range of meaningful and effective activities to promote communicative language in the classroom.

### The Significance of the Problem

A number of students admit that they lack communicative competence necessary in their subject-wise departmental courses even after completing the intensive English programme in the preparatory courses. There are two possible reasons for this. Either the students do not practice speaking enough in their classes or they do not get opportunities to use the language they have learnt.

TBI is not a novel idea in ESL classrooms; yet there have been few attempts to apply it in EFL speaking classrooms at the university level. Hence, it can act as an additional tool to improve the speaking skill of students at university level. At the local level, the study may contribute to the re-thinking and re-design of speaking courses in the curriculum renewal process at Kerbala University and, in turn, encourage a more thorough examination of task-based instruction in all language areas.

### Section Two: A Theoretical Background

Speaking is regarded as a critical skill in learning a second or foreign language by most language learners, and their success in learning a language is measured in terms of their accomplishment in oral communication [3; 4]. In spite of this, speaking was not given much importance in the past. In the past, the focus was on the development of vocabulary, language structure and rote memorization of sentence patterns, [5]. However, with increasing research in language learning, teaching grammar for grammar's sake was discouraged and replaced by communicative competence in foreign language. People travelled for the purpose of business and establishing personal relationships through European languages.

Although this approach favoured the spoken language, the emphasis was mostly on the use of accurate pronunciation and structures while speaking in the target language [5]. The aim was to enable students to gain mastery in communicating orally in the target language accurately and with native pronunciation. The structural use of language continued to play an important part. The inadequacy of these methods led to the emergence of Communicative language Teaching (CLT) in the 1960s.



Unlike the other methods, the goal of CLT was comprehensible pronunciation rather than native like pronunciation. CLT gave equal importance to the functional as well as the structural nature of language [6; 3]. In CLT, meaningful and communicative activities are used to provide learners with the ability to use authentic language. As in CLT, language is viewed as a tool for communication. The aim of TBI too is to communicate in the target language. The time factor is the distinctive feature in these different approaches.

TBI tends to focus on a short duration. The tasks assigned can be completed in a single classroom session. In TBI tasks are the chief tools that promote interaction and use of language. Tasks are at the core of language learning curriculum in communicative approaches including TBI. Tasks are not just a framework for practising language forms and functions. Tasks promote the role of speaking in negotiating meaning and collaborative problem solving. The tasks aim at encouraging learners to use authentic language in real life situations in order to achieve definite outcomes [7; 1].

When tasks are used as instructional tools, they possess certain distinctive features. Tasks involve conveying meaning through language. They have a definite work plan and they are related to the real world. The specially designed tasks involve cognitive processing and have well-defined communicative outcomes. (Kumaravadivelu, cited [1]; 7).

Skehan [8] suggests that it is necessary to set proper goals for TBI, the three main goals being accuracy, fluency and complexity. To achieve fluency, learners are given an opportunity to use the target language in real life situations without interruptions. According to Skehan [8] pausing, hesitation, redundancy, rephrasing and use of lexical items are key components in achieving language fluency. But, occasionally learners have difficulty achieving spoken fluency. An adequate level of fluency is necessary to be accepted as a member of an interaction (Larsen-Freeman & Long; Level, cited in [8]; Schmidt, cited in Canale, [9]).

Pica, Kanagy, and Falodun (1993, cited in [7]) state that tasks are categorized into the following groups: jigsaw, problem-solving, decision making, information gap and opinion exchange tasks. There are 3 phases in TBI – the pre-task phase wherein the learners are prepared for the tasks, during task phase when they actually carry out the task and post task phase when they focus on the language that they have used while performing the tasks.

### **Section Three: Methodology**

The participants are one English teacher working at Kerbala University, College of Education, Department of English (KUCEDE) and 45 students who belong to the first stage in this department. The data collection tools include one perception questionnaire, pre and post treatment oral tests and interviews. The perception questionnaire was used to measure perceptions of the experimental group students in response to the use of task-based instruction in their speaking classrooms. The data gathered from the perception questionnaires aimed to answer the second research question exploring students' perceptions of tasks used in the task-based treatment. The same questionnaire was also administered to the control group after three tasks parallel to the ones used in the study. In the pre- and post-test oral conversations the learners' oral language abilities were graded. The third tool was interviews.

During the treatment, the control group had their usual speaking courses. The experimental group did a variety of task types included in the researcher designed lesson plans. The task types included ordering items, elicitation, sorting, creative tasks, problem solving tasks and information gap filling.

### **Section Four: Data Analysis**

#### **Research Questions**

1. How far is TBI effective in Kerbala University, College of Education, Department of English in terms of improving students' speaking skills?
2. What are the students' perceptions regarding employment of task-based instruction in speaking classes at KUCEDE?
3. What are the attitudes of the teacher using TBI in her speaking class at KUCEDE?

This study was conducted with two groups of the first stage students in their speaking courses. The first group was the control group and the other was the experimental group. While the control group followed their existing syllabus, two out of eight hours of speaking classes were devoted to TBI in the experimental group. This section includes the findings about the effects of task-based instruction in developing first stage learners' speaking skills at KUCEDE and teacher's and students' perceptions of TBI. The data analysis will cover both qualitative and quantitative data collected.



### Quantitative data

Two separate sets of instruments were used for gathering quantitative data: oral tests administered to both groups before and after the treatment. The tests were designed by the researcher and the administration together. The questions in both tests were the same. The exam was conducted in pairs. One student selected a slip and read out aloud the role to be played by the partner. It was a role playing activity. Different situations were mentioned on the slips.

The students were given one minute to prepare a conversation as per the situation mentioned on the slip. As they played their roles, the supervisors observed and marked them on the basis of oral assessment rubric. The same procedure was repeated for different slips. If the supervisors came across a 10 or more points difference in the grades, they discussed and arrived at a consensus to a common grade. The perception questionnaires were distributed to the experimental group after completion of all the 11 tasks. Also, three questionnaires were distributed to the control group after three tasks from the current course book tasks which were similar to the tasks used in TBI treatment. The purpose was to compare the affective responses of both groups on these three tasks.

The data collected from the study were statistically analysed using the Statistical Packages for Social Sciences, 13.0 (SPSS). In measuring the quantitative data collected after the study, means and standard deviations of the pre- and post-treatment oral tests in the experimental and control groups were compared using t-tests. Also, the data from students' responses to the perception questionnaires was analysed quantitatively. Lastly, the interviews were analysed and interpreted qualitatively by the researcher.

It was observed by the teacher as per her expectation that students in the experimental group were more participative compared to the students in the control group. The former were active and motivated while the latter class was more teacher-centred than the former.

The students in the experimental group held similar views regarding the tasks. They enjoyed the participation and activity. They were happy and satisfied with the language learning that had occurred during the class. They realized that not only their speaking but also their listening activities had increased. Also, they reported that classes were so interesting and entertaining that they were unaware of the passage of time.

In the pre-interview, the teacher expected to be less active during the study than she was in the current speaking classes and that classes would be more learner-centred. She was also aware that the presentation of particular language functions would be different in the TBI treatment. Trials using new functions and structures take place first in TBI

### Section Five: Conclusion

This study investigated the effects of task-based instruction on the improvement of learners' speaking skills. Mean scores for the control group moved in a positive direction and mean scores for the experimental group also showed a positive trend in oral skill improvement. According to qualitative data analysis results, the experimental group admitted that the treatment was satisfied and thought that they benefited from it in the long term, although they did not make significant progress in the post-test when compared to the control group. The teacher's observation showed that the treatment helped learners participate and communicate with each other in the lesson more, and improve both their accuracy and fluency in speaking. These results imply that task-based instruction is considerably effective in improving students' speaking skills and could be viewed as an alternative teaching method that can be integrated with current methods for all students and, perhaps, used more extensively with those students who respond to TBI most positively.

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