

The Effect of Task-Based Language Teaching on Students' Oral English Improvement: A Case Study of Guangxi University of Foreign Languages

Wenqiang Yu*

School of European-American Languages & Culture, Guangxi University of Foreign Languages, Nanning, China

645651700@qq.com

**Corresponding author*

Abstract: *According to domestic and international researches, teachers have shown good results in improving students' oral skills by using task-based language teaching (TBLT) in the English class. Rather than being monotonous and repetitive, this approach is more flexible. Teachers develop tasks that are tailored to learners' needs and act as a 'scaffolding' to help students, allowing them to discuss problems in small groups and motivating them to learn. The research subject includes 31 Senior English majors at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages. Observation, questionnaires, and interviews are adopted as research methods to explore the following two questions: (1) How do teachers implement TBLT in oral class? (2) What is the status of students' oral English before and after conducting TBLT? To address the above questions, Firstly, the author mainly observed how the teacher implemented the task-based teaching method in the oral class. Secondly, a questionnaire was used to find out the current situation of students' speaking before the semester and the changes after implementing TBLT. Then, interviews were conducted to understand the students' feelings and perceptions of the changes in their speaking. Finally, the findings of the study were analysed, and recommendations were made in this regard. The results of the study show that under the mode of TBLT, teachers act as mediators, organizers and designers and no longer "manipulate" in the whole teaching process. Teachers help students learn to learn and make them participate in real activities to fully fire the students with enthusiasm. The students' speaking has changed after the task-based teaching method, especially in the areas of vocabulary use, idiomatic expressions, fluency, and completeness, and then the difficulties encountered by the teachers in the process of teaching task-based speaking class have been solved by slowly working with the students.*

Keywords: *Task-based Language Teaching; Oral English Teaching; Oral English Ability*

1. Introduction

Language is a tool that people use to communicate, and oral communication is an important and common form of communication. However, in China, speaking is often not given the attention it deserves because of the way the CEE(College Entrance Examination)is set up, with an emphasis on reading and writing rather than listening and speaking. This results in students not having enough confidence in their spoken English and being afraid of making mistakes. In such contexts, speaking instruction should not be monotonous and repetitive, but more flexible and needs to motivate students to learn. It is therefore important that teachers choose an innovative and effective teaching method to improve their students' English-speaking skills. So far, many teachers have achieved good results in teaching English as a foreign language through TBLT.

The purpose of this thesis was to examine how teachers use TBLT in the oral English class. More importantly, this study also observed and identified problems from the students' perspectives and explored the effects of TBLT on university students' English speaking skill, thereby providing teachers with sound suggestions for further teaching design, so that they could design more student-friendly TBLT-based teaching methods in the future.

The significance of this thesis was to identify the importance and function of TBLT in the oral English teaching. The use of TBLT helped to increase students' interest in learning English. This is because the teacher can set tasks in advance according to the needs of the learners and acts as a 'scaffolding' to help

students in the classroom, allowing them to explore independently or work in small groups to solve problems, with the teacher eventually evaluating their performance and encouraging them to progress to the next level. The application of TBLT in the class transforms the class from teacher-centered to student-centered, improving students' speaking skills and increasing their motivation to learn.

2. Literature Review

Different scholars have different views on the TBLT. Brown (1994) has the following statement about TBLT: "TBLT puts the task at the center of the focus of teaching method. The learning process is directly related to the purpose of the course, and these are considered to contribute to the purpose of the course. Its purpose goes beyond language practice for language."

Tian Wenbo (2018) believes that before implementing classroom teaching tasks, teachers must propose reasonable learning topics based on the specific content of the course and the actual level of students. Moreover, Jia Zhigao (2005) believes that teachers must put learning topics in front of students. In this way, students can clearly define their learning goals in advance and develop independent learning activity plans. After assigning learning topics to students, teachers should guide students correctly, organize students to conduct tasks actively and orderly, effectively complete the topics, and learn the corresponding knowledge. At the end of the task, the teacher helps students to prepare tasks, collection, empirical results, reports, feedback, specific information, and the actual situation of the feedback. It is also necessary to make a scientific evaluation based on the students' performance.

According to Zheng Liuqing (2018), considering the differences in students' English ability, teachers should develop multilevel teaching plans according to the actual situation of students. A variety of aids are used to promote variety in task design and to avoid the tendency to formalize activities as much as possible. Interviews, purchases, dialogues, and contracts can be used to facilitate the application of English by students and to further understand the actual situation of students and adjust the teaching plan in a targeted manner.

When carrying out oral English teaching activities, Tian Yang (2016) believes that teachers should follow the principles of active participation, interest, innovation and assessment.

Pang ya (2019) believes that TBLT closes the gap between real life and English class. TBLT achieves the purpose of communication by letting students take part in the real scene to finish the oral task.

Zhou Lan (2008) analyzed the problems of college students' oral English and studied the relevant countermeasures. After the investigation and analysis of data, she found that college students have several characteristics. For example, lack of active participation in oral English learning and sense of security, novel and diversified methods and low overall satisfaction with teaching. Combined with theoretical research and practical teaching, this paper applies inquiry-based teaching mode into oral English teaching and creatively reveals inquiry-based oral English teaching mode.

Kuang Jun (2010) believes that oral expression is an external, intuitive and indispensable aspect of foreign language proficiency. Choosing effective methods to improve students' oral English ability is a problem that teachers always pay attention to. He pointed out that it is necessary to stimulate interest in oral English teaching. Secondly, teachers are students' mentors so it is recommended to develop the role of teachers and help students improve their oral English. In addition, he believes that solid basic skills, good English environment and social and cultural knowledge are significant elements to improve students' oral skills.

3. Methodology

This research aimed to explore how teachers could improve students' oral English ability through task-based oral teaching. As a result, this thesis mainly intended to address the following two main problems:

- (1) How do teachers implement TBLT in oral class?
- (2) What is the status of students' oral English before and after conducting TBLT?

The subjects of this research were the 31 students of Class 1, Grade 20, from Guangxi University of Foreign Languages. They ranged in age from 19 to 20, including 28 girls and 3 boys. They had not attended any oral courses except the oral courses in their sophomore year.

The observations lasted for approximately three months, from September 16 to December 11, 2021. The author of this study used a follow-up research method to observe this class once a week. The author first observed the teacher's and students' preparation before the class, and then observed the teacher's and students' performance during the execution of the task, as well as the students' changes in their oral skills after completing the task. All observations were recorded in detail in the text.

After three months of observation, a Chinese questionnaire was distributed to 31 students in this class. Finally, 31 valid questionnaires were collected. The questionnaire data was then processed.

The interviews were conducted on 20 December 2021. The author interviewed three students from this class, and the interviewees were willing to visit their dormitories for one-on-one interviews and recordings. To facilitate communication, the author interviewed the interviewees in Chinese and then converted the interview material into English.

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Data Analysis of the Observation

After three months of classroom observation, the teacher divided the task into three steps when they conducted the task-based language teaching: pre-task activities, while-task activities and post-task activities.

During the step of pre-task activities, the teacher first led in the task's topics and the forms of leading in the task's topics were various. There were mainly three forms of leading in the task's topics: conventional task, practical task, interesting task. Conventional tasks mainly focused on the small things that students are interested in; for example, taking about students' hobby, interesting things of life and so on. Practical task were close to the real situation and required students to experience the real situation, such as debate competition. Interesting task included English interaction games, presentation, telling English story and role play and so on. Secondly, the teacher presented new knowledge by providing relevant background information to activate students' potential knowledge after leading in the task's topic. Teacher let students learn new knowledge in the interaction by asking or discussing. During this step, students acquired knowledge points and key sentence, which made preparations for the following task. Thirdly, the teacher designed the task according the teaching objectives and the tasks should be operable, interesting and authentic.

During the step of while-task activities, teacher first let students finish the task in pair or group and students were provided independent room to discuss and interact ideas with each other. Secondly, the students of each group made sure the ideas, form of presentation and the final presenter. Thirdly, the presenter of each group presented their task' results.

During the step of post-task activities, teacher first summarized and analyzed the performance of students. At the same time teacher also chose other two types of feedback: revising your own work and peer editing. Students' oral English ability and accuracy were improved through teacher's feedback. Students also learnt to reflect on the problems that arise in the process of completing tasks.

4.2. Data Analysis of the Questionnaire

In one month, a total of 31 questionnaires were collected, and then the collected questionnaire data were analyzed quantitatively.

Questions 1 to 4 were about students' self-evaluation of their spoken English before the oral English class this semester. The data information in the first question showed that most students believed that their oral English was not good. Up to 87.10% of students were unable to communicate in complete sentences. Only 3.23% of students could communicate with others fluently in English. 6.45% of students only carried on simple conversations. Even 3.23% of students were unable to communicate with others completely. The data information in the second question showed that 77% of students could not basically master the sentence structure of oral expression before the oral English class this semester. Completely mastering the sentence structure of oral expression even accounted for 0%. Basically mastering the sentence structure of oral expression only accounted for 13%. 9.68% of students could not master the sentence structure of oral expression. The data information in the third question showed that 74.19% of students could not basically express their own ideas freely and accurately before the oral English class this semester. 22.58% of could basically express their own ideas freely and accurately. No students could

express their own ideas freely and accurately before the oral English class this semester. The data information in the fourth question showed that up to 77.42% of students completely used simple vocabulary to simplify complex things in your oral expression before the oral English class this semester. No students could use complex sentences to express. The data information in these four questions showed that students' self-evaluation of their spoken English was high and the students' oral English level was not good, even some students could not use English to communicate before having the oral English lesson.

Table 1: Students' self-evaluation of their spoken English

Q1: What is your degree of oral English before the oral English class this semester?				
Options	Communicate fluently in English	Only carry on simple conversations	Unable to communicate in complete sentences	Completely unable to communicate
Proportion	3.23%	6.45%	87.10%	3.23%
Q2: Can you master the sentence structure of oral expression before the oral English class this semester?				
Options	Completely mastered	Basically mastered	Basically not mastered	Not mastered at all
Proportion	0%	13%	77%	9.68%
Q3: Can you express your own ideas fluently and accurately before the oral English class this semester?				
Options	Completely expressed	Basically expressed	Basically not expressed	Not expressed at all
Proportion	0%	22.58%	74.19%	3.23%
Q4: Can you use simple vocabulary to simplify complex things in your oral expression before the oral English class this semester?				
Options	Completely used	Basically used	Basically not used	Not used at all
Proportion	77.42%	12.90%	9.68%	0%

Table 2: Students' evaluation of task-based teaching

Q5: Which one is your evaluation of your oral English learning after this semester's oral English class?				
Options	Very dissatisfied	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Dissatisfied
Proportion	0%	16.13%	80.65%	3.23%
Q6: Is task-based teaching helpful to your oral English's improvement?				
Options	Not at all	Basically	Helpfully	Very helpfully
Proportion	3.23%	25.81%	70.97%	0%

Questions 5 to 6 were about students' evaluation of task-based teaching. The data information in the fifth question showed up to 80.65% of students were satisfied with the task-based teaching. Only 3.23%

of students were not satisfied with the task-based teaching. Even 16.13% of students were very satisfied with the task-based teaching. After accepting three mouths' oral English class, students also expressed their attitude towards the task-based teaching. The data information in the sixth question showed 70.97% of students thought that task-based teaching were helpful to their oral English improvement. 25.81% of students think task-based teaching were basically helpful to their oral English improvement. Even 3.23% of students thought that task-based teaching was not helpful to their oral English improvement at all. No one thought that task-based teaching was very helpful. The two questions' data information showed that most students' attitude towards task-based teaching was positive and task-based teaching was helpful to improve their oral English ability.

Table 3: Students' improvements in their oral English

Q7: Can you express your fluently after accepting this semester's oral English class?				
Options	Not at all	Completely	Basically	Basically not
Proportion	0%	25.81%	70.97%	3.23%
Q8: Which factors are the most obvious improvement of your oral English after accepting the task-based teaching in the oral English class this semester?				
Options	Pronunciation	Intonation	Fluency	All
Proportion	27.31%	23.52%	31.74%	17.43%
Q9: Did your critical thinking ability improve after accepting the task-based teaching in the oral English class this semester?				
Options	Not at all	Basically	Completely	Slightly
Proportion	0%	68.97%	3.23%	27.8%

Questions 7 to 9 were about students' improvements in their oral English. The data information in the seventh question showed up to 70.97% of students could basically express their ideas freely after accepting this semester's oral English class. No students could not express ideas freely at all after accepting this semester's oral English class. Even 25.81% of students could express their ideas freely after accepting this semester's oral English class. The data information in the eighth question showed the factors that they improved obviously in their oral English after accepting the task-based teaching in the oral English class this semester. The improvements of students' oral English in pronunciation, intonation and fluency were similar and they respectively accounted for 27.31%, 23.52% and 31.74%. 17.43% of students' oral English improved in all aspects. As for question 9, the data information showed 68.97% of students' critical thinking ability improved basically after accepting the task-based teaching in the oral English class this semester. 27.8% of students' critical thinking ability improved slightly after accepting the task-based teaching in the oral English class this semester. 3.23% of students thought that their critical thinking ability improved completely. These three questions' data information showed that students' oral English ability had improved in many aspects, especially in their oral expression, critical thinking, pronunciation, intonation and fluency.

Questions 10 to 12 were about the difficulties that students encountered in their learning of oral English. The tenth question was about the factors that influence your attendance in oral English task. The data information showed that most students thought language foundation was the biggest factor, which accounted for 67.45%. Most students didn't think personal subjective factors, such as learning attitude, personality factors, learning motivation were the key factors that influenced your attendance in oral English task, so the percent that they accounted was low. They were respectively 9.68%, 5.67% and 17.2%. Question 11 was about the biggest difficulty in your oral English learning. Most students thought their language ability was poor, so the options that non-standard pronunciation, poor grammar and poor vocabulary were the main choices. The percent of these three options was also similar and they were respectively 33.5%, 28.37% and 24.21%. Only 13.92% of students chose courage deficiency as the biggest difficulty in their oral English learning. Question 12 was about the main reason that restricted your oral English expression. The percent of lack of accumulation, lack of learning environment and lack of oral exercise were similar and they were respectively 32.67%, 23.45% and 38.13%. Only 5.75% of

students chose the lack of learning enthusiasm, which showed students' subjective factor was positive. Objective factors and poor language ability were the main reasons that restricted their oral English expression.

Table 4: Difficulties that students encountered in their learning of oral English

Q10: Which factor influences your engagement in oral English task?				
Options	Learning attitude	Language foundation	Personality factors	Learning motivation
Proportion	9.68%	67.45%	5.67%	17.2%
Q11: What are the biggest difficulty in your oral English learning?				
Options	courage deficiency	Non-standard pronunciation	Poor grammar	Poor vocabulary
Proportion	13.92%	33.5%	28.37%	24.21%
Q12: What are the main reason that restricts your oral English expression?				
Options	Lack of learning enthusiasm	Lack of accumulation	Lack of learning environment	Lack of oral exercise
Proportion	5.75%	32.67%	23.45%	38.13%

4.3. Data Analysis of the Interview

After observing the class for three months, three students were selected for interviews to discuss the following questions: students' preparation before the task, students' views on TBLT, and the impact of TBLT on students' oral learning. Here are the answers to three questions. The original text of the interview is in Chinese. The following is a translation of the main idea of the interview.

Interview Q1: What specific preparations have you made in the early stage when performing oral English tasks? Are these preparations helpful to your study of oral English?

Student A: First of all, I will learn the relevant topics of spoken English and the accumulation of vocabulary, learn its important sentence patterns, and make a topic with my partners to prepare the topic for practice.

Student B: Before doing the oral English task, I will look up the words and then read them by myself. In fact, I think the preparation work is like this. Then I think these preparations can help me adapt to the class faster, keep up with the pace of the teacher.

Student C: At the beginning of the oral task, I first looked up relevant materials for the oral task, and then looked up how to pronounce the word I did not understand, and then read it more accurately. I believe that these very helpful for me to learn spoken English.

Interview Q2: Has your oral English changed in any way after task-based language teaching?

Student A: Firstly, I used to be unable to communicate in complete sentences, but after the teacher's pre-class tasks, I accumulated a lot of useful oral expressions. Moreover, the teacher would use various ways to get the students to use these expressions in class. As a result, I can now express my ideas freely and fluently, which is an improvement.

Student B: I think the teacher motivates and energizes students in topics and tasks in the class. There were times when we could also decide for ourselves what topics we wanted to discuss, so that the students had more interest and many of them had something to say. In this context, I unknowingly mastered a lot of oral expressions and made a lot of progress.

Student C: In class, the teacher sometimes gives us role-playing tasks, and different roles will have different ways of expressing ourselves orally. So, I was thinking about this after class, such as which

specific expressions I should use in different situations, and this helped me to build my corpus to a great extent. More importantly, I feel more confident when performing these tasks in class and my voice is stronger and my pronunciation more accurate than before.

5. Conclusions

Based on the analysis of the data, three findings emerged from this thesis. In the observation section, it was found that there were two main ways in which teachers conducted task-based oral teaching: the first way was to release tasks that students could comprehend in class and to provide topics for students to choose for themselves to increase their motivation. The second way was to release the topic in a group. The group members would discuss with each other. The teacher would choose any group to participate in the discussion and scored them according to their performance. Compared with the traditional teaching method, TBLT can improve students' learning enthusiasm and participation. This student-centered teaching method have a great role in students' thinking ability and practical ability.

Secondly, in the questionnaire part, the survey found that before the task-based oral training in this semester, most students' oral English was at a stage where they can only communicate with simple sentences and it was difficult for them to express their ideas fluently. After three months of oral English class practice, most students agreed that their oral English has improved. Especially in the pronunciation and intonation, English critical thinking ability and can communicate smoothly. In addition, the author also found that the main factors hindering the improvement of students' oral English were students being afraid of speaking, lack of English environment and less exercise, etc.

Finally, in the interview part, the research showed that a large number of students have adapted to the TBLT and actively participated in it. In addition, the students all felt that their oral English has been greatly improved. They can chose effective words to express themselves with simple sentences and speak English louder and be more confident than ever before. More importantly, they felt that they had improvement in the aspects of their intonation and pronunciation through practice, and were more fluid and natural when they communicate or give a speech.

References

- [1] Skehan, P. (2003) *Task-based instruction. Language Teaching*, 36, 1-14.
- [2] Yalden, J. *Principles of course design for language teaching. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.*
- [3] Jia Zhigao. (2005) *Discussion on the Core Issues of Task-based Teaching Method. Curriculum, Teaching Material and Method*, 1, 51-55.
- [4] Kuang Jun. (2010) *Discussion on College Oral English Teaching. Education Space*, 7, 95.
- [5] Tian Wenbo. (2018) *The Application of Task-based Teaching Method in English Teaching. Course Education Research*, 30, 106.
- [6] Zheng Liuqing. (2018) *A Study on the Application of Task-based Approach in English Classroom. technology and development of Enterprise*, 1, 163-164.
- [7] Zhou Lan. (2008) *Present Situation and Countermeasures of Oral English Teaching in Chinese Colleges. Journal of Ningbo University*, 2, 118