

THE IMPACTS OF TASK-BASED SPEAKING ACTIVITIES ON ENGLISH-MAJORED FRESHMEN'S ORAL PERFORMANCE AT BA RIA-VUNG TAU TEACHER TRAINING COLLEGE

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ABSTRACT

This action research was carried out with the aims to investigate (1) the factors causing difficulty for the English-majored freshmen's oral performance at BR-VT Teacher Training College; (2) the impacts of the TBSA¹ on the students' oral performance; and (3) the students' attitudes towards the TBSA. The research was carried out in 15 weeks over 23 students. The data collection instruments were pre-questionnaire, post-questionnaire, pre-test, post-test and observation note. The results of the pre-questionnaire showed that there were two factors that affected the students' oral communication. (1) They did not have chances for practicing speaking; and (2) they were not confident of oral communication as they were not equipped with enough vocabulary and speaking patterns. The results of the oral tests and post-questionnaire revealed that the students' oral performance in the post-test was higher than the one in the pre-test (fair scores compared with average ones). The students got the improvement in oral performance because (1) they spoke more fluently as they felt confident and had chances of practicing speaking with partners. (2) They took part in the conversations positively since they identified the topic discussion as well as they were equipped with the vocabulary and speaking patterns. The students also admitted that they liked the TBSA and wanted to use them frequently in learning speaking as (1) the TBSA were a good method for learning speaking; (2) they felt comfortable and confident in communication when practicing the TBSA; and (3) they achieved progress in learning speaking.

Based on the findings, a conclusion was stated that the TBSA could be used to develop the learners' oral performance.

Keywords: Task-based speaking activity, Oral performance.

¹ Task Based Speaking Activities

1. Introduction

English has come to Vietnam for a long time but it only gained an important role in the social context when the United States president Bill Clinton announced the formal normalization of diplomatic relations with Vietnam on July 11th, 1995. After the event, Vietnam has attracted lots of foreigners to Vietnam. Some of them are visitors and the others are businessmen (Le, 1999, & Do, 2006). In addition, more and more foreign companies and factories have been set up. They recruit staff members and workers who both have high technical knowledge and good English competence. Thus, English proficiency, especially the oral performance, is now considered as one of the vital requirements when applying for a job. Besides, the appearance of entertainments such as newspapers, magazines, music, movies and internet in English strike all kinds of people's interest (Do, 2006). In order to understand, absorb and exchange² in teaching and learning English (Le, 1999). In addition, Kim Lien (2006) and Do (2010) share the same ideas that Vietnamese teachers spend most of the time on teaching grammar and guiding learners to do grammar and vocabulary exercises. According to a result of a survey over 200 students at grade 12th in Ho Chi Minh City, 52,1% of students in the survey claims that their teachers sometimes teach them communicative skill and 44,4% of them declares that their teachers ignore teaching communicative skill in the classroom (Kim Lien, 2006). The focus on teaching vocabulary and grammar has created negative impacts on learners' learning. It exterminates students' initiative and activeness in developing their oral competency (Kim Lien, 2006; Do, 2010; & Truong, 2011). It forms a bad learning

information in English, people need to learn English.

Seeing the important role of English in the social context, the Ministry of Education and Training has launched an English program in education curriculum. According to this program, all students and learners, from primary school to post-graduate level, have to learn English because English is now considered as an important subject for their future use and the global integration (Le, 1999 & Do, 2006). Although the teaching and learning English have been developed widely and rapidly, the students' oral performance is not fully developed (Le, 1999; Do, 2006 & Tran, 2011). This part has described the background of the study. The next part is the statement of the problem.

2. Statement of the problem

There are factors that affect the quality of learners' oral communication. One of them is the use of GTM habit into students. Additionally, they easily forget what they have learnt because they learn by rote and memory based styles (Le, 1999). In brief, the use of the GMT cannot develop the learners' speaking skill. This reason draws the researcher's attention to carry out the research to better students' oral performance.

3. Literature review

3.1. Overview of the TBLT³ and TBSA

The TBLT is an approach that supplies a natural context of language use to learners through communicative tasks. The goal of the tasks is to stimulate real communications in the target language. In the TBLT, the learners prepare for the task, report the task and then they learn the language that arises naturally in the task

² Grammar Translation Method

³ Task Based Language Teaching

cycle (Willis, 1996). The TBSA are offspring of the TBLT. They are activities that are designed for students to practice speaking in the classroom.

3.2. The impacts of the TBLT on the students' oral performance

Finding the TBLT as an interesting method, Farahani (2009) investigated “The Effects of Task-Based Techniques, Gender, and Different Levels of Language Proficiency on Speaking Development”. The purposes of the study were to investigate (1) the effects of TBLT on male and female learners; (2) the speaking proficiency differences between male and female learners; (3) the degree of progression differences between intermediate and advanced English learners of the same gender under task-based approach.

Ismail and Meryem (2009) carried out a study to explore “the effects of task-based group activities on students' collaborative behaviors in EFL speaking classes.” The aims of the research were (1) to investigate different influences of task-based activities and topic-based activities on students and (2) to explore the potential effects on promoting collaboration among students.

In order to investigate the impacts of ‘role-play’ on learners' oral performance, Aliakbari and Jamalvandi (2010) conducted a research to find out “The Impact of 'Role Play' on Fostering EFL Learners' Speaking Ability.” The aim of the research was to find out if the TBLT-oriented role-play makes any different changes in the students' oral performance in the experimental and control groups. The following part represents the studies which only investigated the students' attitudes towards the TBLT.

The studies above prove that the

experimental group performed better than those of the control group on the final speaking post-test. Task-based activities involved more frequent use of collaborative behaviors than topic-based activities and they enhanced a collaborative learning experience. However, they exposed gaps in carrying out the research such as they did not (1) apply fully the six tasks suggested by Willis (1996); (2) focus on investigating the impacts of activating background knowledge; (3) investigate the learners' attitudes towards the TBLT; (4) explore the class atmosphere in the speaking time; and (5) do experiment on the English-major freshmen.

3.3. The students' attitudes towards the TBLT

One of the factors that causes learners difficulty in improving their oral performance is learning in a large group. Rocha (2005) carried out the study “Promoting Oral Interaction in Large Groups Through Task-Based Learning” at Isabel II School in Columbia in nine months. The purposes of the research were to investigate (1) the effect of the task-based learning on students' oral interaction and (2) how teachers handle interactions in a large group.

In order to find out an effective teaching method to enhance learners' oral skill, Humanez and Arias (2009) implemented the research “Enhancing Oral Interaction in English as a Foreign Language Through Task-Based Learning Activities” in a school in Columbia for three months. The purpose of the research was to develop learners' speaking skill through TBLT approach.

Awang and Pendidikan (2011) used a research to explore the “Perception of

Electrical Engineering UTM³ Students on Task-Based Speaking Activity (TBSA) in Fostering Students' Communication in English". The aims of the research were to find out (1) whether TBSA promoted students' communication in English language classroom; (2) what type of TBSA encouraged students to communicate in English.

The results points out that the task-based learning was an appropriate method employed to improve oral interaction in large groups. The students' role changed from being interrogated to the interrogator. They were able to ask for help to overcome the difficulties being faced and finally to express the ideas, comments about the question. TBSA improved students' communication in English by giving them opportunities to practice the language in classes. The tasks reactivated their knowledge of English vocabulary and structures. The studies exposed gaps such as: the researchers did not (1) investigate the impacts of activating background knowledge; (2) measure the oral skill before and after the treatment; (3) explore class atmosphere in speaking time; (4) experiment on the English-major freshmen; (5) fully apply the six tasks released by Willis (1996). The last part will expose the results of the researches investigating the impacts of TBLT on the students' oral performance and attitudes towards the TBLT.

3.4. The impacts of the TBLT on the students' oral performance and students' attitudes towards the TBLT

Seeing the students got troubles with oral communication, Tseng (2006) conducted a research "The Effect of Task-Based Instruction on Primary School EFL Students" in Changhua-Taiwan in two months. The objectives of the research

were to investigate (1) whether the students who learnt with TBLT performed four skills better than students who learnt with traditional teacher-led method; (2) what the primary school students' perceptions on TBLT were; (3) what factors influenced the implementation of TBLT at primary school.

To investigate the effect of the TBLT on learners' oral interaction, Murad (2009) conducted a study "The Effect of a TBLT Program on Developing the Speaking Skill of Palestinian Secondary Students and Their Attitudes towards English." The purposes of the study were to investigate (1) the statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the both tests and (2) the students' attitudes towards English due to the interaction between the teaching procedure and subjects' gender.

Following previous studies of investigating the effect of the TBLT on the learners' oral performance, Uraivan (2010) conducted a research "The Use of Task-Based Learning and Group-Work Incorporating to Develop English Speaking Ability" in a school in Thailand in two months. The research explored (1) the impacts of the TBLT on learners' speaking ability; (2) the usefulness of group-work incorporating in the TBLT; (3) learners' perceptions of oral skill improvement after learning through the TBLT.

The findings showed that the TBLT was proved to be effective on high achievers in all four skills and low achievers in speaking skill. The students in the experimental group were more confident and positive in speaking than the ones in control group. They took part in the conversations actively. Their fluency and accuracy were also enhanced. In contrast, the studies in this part disclose gaps as they did not explore (1) the impacts of activating prior knowledge; (2) the class

³ UTM-Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

atmosphere in the speaking time; (3) and the students taking part in the research were not English-major freshmen.

3.5. Implications for the present study

The research above revealed four research gaps. Based on these gaps, the researcher wants to carry out a research over English-major freshmen to investigate:

(1) What are the factors that cause difficulty for the English-majored freshmen's oral performance at BR-VT Teacher Training College?

(2) To what extent do the TBSA impact on the students' oral performance?

(3) What attitudes do the students express towards the TBSA?

4. Methodology

4.1. Pedagogical setting

The research was carried out in fifteen weeks from September 29th, 2011 to January 5th, 2012 at Ba Ria-Vung Tau Teacher Training College. The total staff member of the college in the school year 2011-2012 included 132 members. Of them, there were 91 teachers, 41 office workers. The total number students of six faculties were 1771. The total English-major students were 170. Of the 170 students, there were 53 freshmen, 54 sophomores and 63 juniors.

4.2. Participants

The participants in the research consisted of the teacher/researcher and twenty three English-major freshmen. The teacher/researcher directly carried out all actions and lesson plans in the classroom. At the time the research was carried out, there were two English-majored classes with the total number of 53 students. The 15D1 was randomly chosen for the

research. There were 2 males and 24 females in this class.

4.3. Training procedure

This action research was carried out in 15 weeks in four stages. The first stage was to identify the factors causing difficulty for the English-major freshmen's oral performance. At the first meeting, the teacher/researcher and students introduced and exchanged personal information including email and phone numbers to each other then the teacher/researcher conducted the first lesson as a traditional way. He did not use any teaching devices and omit the warm-up.

At the second meeting, firstly, the teacher/researcher introduced the action research he was going to do with them. He mentioned the purpose of the action research, what the teacher and students had to do to make the research successful. Secondly, he also referred to the two questionnaires and two speaking tests that would be applied in the research. He also confirmed that the results of the questionnaires and the oral tests were only used for the research. They were not counted to the results in their learning curriculum as well as were kept secret. Thirdly, he carried out the TBSA lesson that had been prepared before. At the end of the lesson, the teacher/researcher asked them to make a comparison between the two lessons they had just learnt. He stressed that similar tasks would be applied throughout the course.

At the third meeting, the TBSA lesson was continuously applied. At the end of the lesson, the teacher/researcher delivered the pre-questionnaire to them and guided them how to answer the questions and expressed their ideas on the pre-questionnaire. After the factors causing the students difficulties with oral communication were identified, the

teacher/researcher cooperated with the students to take actions to treat the problems. The next part will describe the second stage, the process of planning and taking actions.

The second stage was to plan and take actions. The aim of the second step was to collect and analyze data and the last stage reflected the findings. It consisted of 9 meetings. Based on the factors causing the students difficulties with oral communication and students' recommendations, the actions were taken as follows. (1) The researcher designed handouts and power points which containing pictures, cued words and phrased, English songs, games and clear instructions. They were prepared and delivered to students before each session so they had language materials to interact with friends as well as increased their confidence. (2) The lessons were composed in TBSA which had three phases pre, while and post. (3) When finding any students got difficulties from the lesson, the teacher immediately interfered to help them. He always encouraged them to use English as much as possible in exchanging information. (4) At the end of the lesson, the students were asked to write an essay of the topic as homework. This helped them systematize and review what they had learnt in the class.

Besides the activities inside and outside the classroom above, the teacher/researcher also took observation note of the class in each session to evaluate and adjust the teaching procedure. The results of treatment were described in the post-questionnaire and the post-test which will be presented in the third stage, collecting and analyzing data.

The third stage consisted of 3 meetings. It was the last stage that the teacher/researcher worked with the

students in the classroom. Before implementing the post-test and sending the post-questionnaire to the students, the teacher/researcher explained how to do the test and answer the post-questionnaire carefully again. After the data of the oral test and questionnaire were collected, they were analyzed to find out differences between the results of the two oral tests and two questionnaires. This part describes the research training procedure with four stages. The next part will describe how the data are collected.

4.4. Data collection

The data in the research consisted of two kinds. The first one was the quantitative data that were taken from the two oral tests. The second one was the qualitative and quantitative data that were withdrawn from the two questionnaires. The pre-test was conducted at the second meeting after the teacher/researcher and the participants had acquainted to one another. The pre-questionnaire was carried out at the third meeting after the pre-test. At the meeting 13th and 14th, the post-test and post-questionnaire were done to get data for analyzing. When the data from the two oral tests and questionnaires were collected, they were analyzed as follows.

5. Findings and discussion

Based on the purpose of the research, the two kinds of data were analyzed in term of the research questions. The answer to the first research question was addressed as follows.

5.1. Research question 1: What were the factors that cause difficulty for the English-major freshmen's oral performance at BR-VT Teacher Training College?

In order to respond to this research question, the qualitative data from the pre-questionnaire were analyzed in the form of

the frequency and percentage of choices to find out factors that caused difficulty for the students' oral performance. Table 1

presents the factors that caused students' difficulties in oral performance.

Table 1. Factors causing the students difficulties in oral performance

Question 1a. Are there any factors that cause you difficulties in learning speaking?		
Options	F	%
a. Yes	23	100%
b. No	0	0%
Question 1b. What are they?		
Options	F	%
a. rarely having chances of speaking	3	13%
b. being weak of grammar	7	30.4%
c. being afraid of making errors	9	39.1%
d. being not confident	13	56.5%
e. having not enough vocabulary	14	60.9%

Although the students recognized the important role of the speaking skill, they pointed out five factors that affected to their oral communication. (1) They did not have chances for practicing speaking; (2) they were not confident of oral communication; (3) they were afraid of making oral mistakes; they were not (4) equipped enough vocabulary and (5) grammar for communication. The next part refers to the second research question.

5.2. Research question 2: To what extent did the TBSA impact on the students' oral performance?

In order to respond to this research

question, data obtained from two oral tests and two questionnaires were analyzed. After the test scores were collected, they were put in the comparison of the correlation, central tendency and dispersion. The results indicate that the scores in the pre-test were average while the ones in the post-test were fair. In order to make sure the difference between the two means was significant or not, the *Paired Samples t-test* was run to check the *Equality of Means* between the two sets of scores. Table 2 below shows the results of the Paired Samples t-test.

Table 2. The paired samples t-test on the pre and post-tests

Group Statistics					
	Type	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
test	pre	22	5.136	1.2042	.2567
	post	22	6.709	.9616	.2050

Paired Samples Test									
		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Pre-test – Post-test	-1.5727	.8037	.1713	-1.9291	-1.2164	-9.179	21	.000

Table 2 reveals that the results of the pre- and post-test was significantly different (Sig. (2-tailed) = .00). This indicates that the TBSA had great impact on the students' oral performance. In other words, the students' oral performance in the post-test was higher than that in the pre-test. The results in the post-questionnaire disclosed the reasons why the students' oral performance was enhanced after the training.

The data from two questionnaires were compared and analyzed in terms of means, SD, frequencies, and percentages to identify the impacts of the TBSA on the students' oral performance. The results revealed that the students got an improvement in the speaking skills because the TBSA helped the students (1) recall the old vocabulary and learn new vocabulary, speaking patterns and pronunciation; (2)

focus on the lessons and identify the lesson topics easily; (3) activate their brainstorming in the topics; (4) use the vocabulary in context correctly; (5) understand the vocabulary functions and speaking contexts; (6) develop their creation and thinking; (7) create chances of speaking for them; (8) identify the similarities and differences of problems in the topic discussion easily. Additionally, the students (9) could apply their knowledge to communicating.

The above factors proved that the TBSA had impacts on the students' oral performance. The first one was that they spoke more fluently as they felt confident and had chances of practicing speaking with partners. The second one was that they took part in the conversations positively since they identified the topic discussion as well as they were equipped

the vocabulary and speaking patterns. The results are illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3. The impacts of the TBSA on students' oral performance

Question 6a. How are your speaking difficulties improved after the treatment?	M = 3.78	SD = .671
Question 6b. What progress have you achieved after the treatment?		
Options	F	%
a. speaking more fluently	4	17.4%
b. taking part in speaking positively	10	43.5%
c. speaking more than before	17	73.9%
d. being more confident	19	82.6%

These findings were confirmed by other researchers such as: The students' stress and anxiety were reduced and their confidence and participation in speaking were increased Murad (2009); The TBSA improved students' communication in English by giving them opportunities to practice the language in classes and reactivated their knowledge of English vocabulary and structures (Awang & Pendidikan, 2011).

In addition, the use of teaching aids activated the students' background knowledge, supplied them vocabulary and increased their confidence before taking part in speaking. These findings were discovered in the previous research studies such as: the creative, colorful pictures and familiar topics increased students' vocabulary and motivate them to understand the topic (Rocha, 2005 &

Murad, 2009). Additionally, Pre-task activities were valuable in connecting previous background knowledge to the lesson content and gave learners a chance to speak longer and in a sustained way Uraivan (2010). The following part will discuss the answer to the third research question.

5.3. Research question 3: What attitudes do the students express towards the TBSA?

The answer to the last research question was taken from the quantitative and qualitative data withdrawn from the post-questionnaire. They were analyzed in terms of mean, SD, frequency and percentage to find out the students' attitudes towards the TBSA. Table 4 summarizes the students' attitudes towards the TBSA after training.

Table 4. The students' attitudes towards the TBSA

Question 1a. How often do you like to practice the TBSA in learning speaking?	M = 4.57	SD = .507
Question 1b. Why?		
Reasons	F	%
a. having no ideas	1	4.3%
b. needing for working	1	4.3%
c. using more English	1	4.3%
d. a good subject	2	8.7%
e. understanding the lesson	3	13%
f. being useful activities for learning speaking	4	17.4%
g. being more comfortable and confident	9	39.1%
h. having progress in speaking	14	60.9%

The results showed that the students expressed their like of the TBSA in learning speaking because (1) the TBSA were a good method for learning speaking; (2) they felt comfortable and confident in communication when practicing the TBSA; and (3) they achieved progress in learning speaking. These reasons above correspond to previous researchers: The TBLT was an appropriate method to improve learners' oral interaction (Rocha, 2005; Humanez & Arias, 2009; & Uraiwan, 2010). The TBLT provided a relaxed atmosphere to promote target language use (Uraiwan, 2010). The students' attitudes were changed from dislike to like learning English as their stress and anxiety were reduced and their confidence and participation in speaking were increased (Murad, 2009). The students were confident to say what they wanted and they used strategies such as: body language, single words, non-structured sentences or requests to ask the teacher or classmates help them (Humanez

& Arias, 2009).

Furthermore, the TBSA made a good impact on the students' feeling of the class atmosphere. Their feelings changed from boring to exciting when they learnt with the teacher/researcher. They released four reasons to explain why they liked the class atmosphere. The first one was that the class atmosphere motivated them to study; the second one was that the teacher/researcher was very friendly with them; the third one was that they understood the lesson and the last one was that they communicated with their friends positively. This part discusses the students' attitudes towards the TBSA. The next part is the conclusions, implications and recommendations.

6. Conclusion, implications and recommendations

The purposes of this thesis were to investigate (1) the factors causing difficulty for the English-major freshmen's oral performance; (2) the impacts of the TBSA on the students' oral performance;

and (3) the students' attitudes towards the TBSA. The results were represented as follows.

Firstly, the results revealed two factors that affected to their oral communication. (1) They did not have chances for practicing speaking; and (2) they were not confident of oral communication as they were not equipped enough vocabulary and speaking patterns.

Secondly, the students' oral performance in the post-test was higher than the one in the pre-test. The students got the improvement in oral performance such as (1) they spoke more fluently as they felt confident and has chances of practicing speaking with partners. (2) They took part in the conversations positively since they identified the topic discussion as well as they were equipped the vocabulary and speaking patterns. Besides, the students expressed their like of the TBSA.

Thirdly, the students admitted that they liked the TBSA and wanted to use them frequently in learning speaking as (1) the TBSA were a good method for learning speaking; (2) they felt comfortable and

confident in communication when practicing the TBSA; and (3) they achieved progress in learning speaking. Based on the results, the teacher/researcher decided to continue apply the TBSA in teaching speaking.

The findings in the present research were not new because they had been discovered by Murad (2009), Awang and Pendidikan (2011), Rocha (2005), Murad (2009), Uraiwan (2010), Humanez and Arias (2009). They admitted the effects of the TBLT as well as TBSA on the learners' oral performance. However, the findings were valuable for teachers at the BR-VT Teacher Training College as well as teachers in other schools and universities in teaching speaking.

Although the present study showed the impacts of the TBSA on the students' oral performance, it also exposed gaps as (1) the research was conducted in small scale of 26 participants. (2) The duration for the research was not long. It only lasted three months. (3) The samples were English major freshmen.

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