

Students' Experience of Using Task-based Approach in Oral Learning at a Public University in China

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Abstract: Task-Based Approach (TBA) is an unconventional language teaching method where learners acquire language skills indirectly by engaging in meaningful tasks. TBA has attracted significant attention from Second Language Acquisition researchers and educators for over four decades, particularly in the context of enhancing reading and writing skills. However, there has been a notable lack of research on TBA that delves into the practical application and theoretical underpinnings related to listening and speaking skills. This study aims to identify students' experience of using TBA as a method in oral learning using a qualitative method. The instrument is an interview protocol includes seven questions. The semi-structured delivered to six random selected students after teaching oral English for 8 weeks. The data were analyzed using Nvivo and the results indicated a useful and beneficial experience of students' toward TBA and gave several significant suggestions for future study.

Keywords: Task-based Approach, experience, oral learning, qualitative study, College English Teaching

1. Introduction

Over the decades, China has witnessed several significant transformations in College English Teaching (Luan, 2014). The first revolution occurred between the 1950s and 1980s when the country's focus was primarily on nation-building, resulting in a scarcity of professional foreign language teachers. During this period, English teaching was underdeveloped due to the government's emphasis on rural development and encouraging citizens to work in rural areas (Tian & Liu, 2019).

The Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) approach differs significantly from the conventional Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) method in language teaching. The PPP method heavily relies on coursebooks, often depriving learners of meaningful activities to practice and express themselves in English classes. While some consider PPP to be somewhat outdated, it remains widely used for teaching oral skills in a second language (Davies, 2006).

In the field of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in China, there are two main streams represented by the traditional method and TBLT (Farzana, 2022). On the one hand, in TBLT, task design plays a pivotal role, followed by clear teacher instructions and well-organized activities. This approach aims to activate students' existing knowledge and progressively improve their fluency in speaking the target language (Liu, 2014). On the other hand, in traditional oral teaching classes, teachers often struggle to shift from the role of "language interpreters" and "class holders" to that of facilitators and helpers. These classrooms tend to be teacher-centered, with limited opportunities for students to practice oral communication. There is a growing call in China and worldwide to transition from teacher-centered to student-centered teaching approaches in second language education. This shift is a significant focus in the field of second language teaching and learning. This study was designed to answer the following research question:

1.1 Research Question

How do students describe their experience in using Task-based Approach in oral learning ?

This study aims to investigate the impact of Task-based Approach (TBA) on students' experience toward TBA using a qualitative method. In summary, this research holds significance in examining how TBA influences the experience in learning oral English of undergraduate students majoring in fields other than English.

2. Literature Review

This section provides an overview of oral teaching and learning within the context of College English Courses. This includes discuss-

ing the current situation, challenges, and expectations related to English instruction and learning. It includes a literature review of Task-Based Approach (TBA) and the foundational theories underpinning TBA, i.e., Constructivist Theory and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory. It also encompasses a systematic study on TBA conducted both in China and internationally, thereby summarizing relevant research in this field.

2.1 Situations, Challenges and Expectations of English Teaching and Learning

In China, there is a significant problem of communicative incompetence among English learners. This issue is characterized by a noticeable gap between their formal language proficiency and their practical conversational skills. Anecdotal evidence from English teachers underscores this problem, as students frequently find it challenging to participate in real-life English conversations despite years of English language education (Zhang, 2017). For example, students often express feelings of nervousness and difficulty finding words when engaging in conversations with native English speakers, indicating a deficiency in their confidence and fluency in spoken English communication. Li (2012) has identified a problem among English learners, particularly in China, which revolves around the neglect of thinking skills in oral English education. Even though some students have acquired pronunciation, intonation, and fluency in everyday conversations, they struggle when discussing more profound or intricate topics. This challenge primarily arises from a lack of in-depth English language knowledge and underdeveloped critical thinking abilities. The conventional approach to oral English instruction, commonly known as Presentation, Practice, Production (PPP), is primarily responsible for this issue. This method prioritizes rote imitation and pattern drills, often sidelining creativity and critical thinking (Hu, 1993). While lower-level substitution-based conversations dominate practice sessions, activities that have the potential to nurture students' analytical and innovative abilities, such as discussions, speeches, and debates, are frequently overlooked. Huang (2016) and Sun (2006) have argued that meaningful communication in a second language requires not only conveying thoughts and information but also emotions, an aspect often neglected in second language teaching.

Students, particularly undergraduates, have reported difficulties in oral English education, especially when attempting to apply their language skills in real-world situations beyond the classroom. Feedback from college English instructors indicates that students' proficiency in spoken communication significantly lags behind their reading, writing, and listening abilities (Hu, 1993). Additionally, as someone who teaches at the college level, the author has personally observed a reduction in speaking and listening class hours as many universities have cut back on compulsory College English instruction. Undoubtedly, these issues necessitate comprehensive management to improve the quality of English instruction, particularly in oral communication classes.

Huang (2021) argued that the approach to teaching college-level oral English should prioritize student engagement and learning rather than solely focusing on test results. While Chinese scholars have expressed strong support for student-centered teaching concepts in recent decades, translating these principles into practice, particularly in oral instruction, has proven to be challenging. Huang (2016) emphasized the need for greater emphasis on implementing student-centered approaches in future college oral English teaching.

3. Theoretical foundation

The theoretical foundation of this study includes Constructivist Theory and Second Language Acquisition Theory, i.e. Input Theory and Affective Filter Theory.

The Socio-constructivist theory, initially introduced by Vygotsky in 1978, places a strong emphasis on the use of the target language in a social context. It incorporates concepts like "scaffolding" and the "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD). The ZPD emphasizes that optimal learning occurs when teachers and learners interact dynamically. In this framework, the primary role of the teacher is to provide structured questions, explanations, or encourage collaborative peer support, allowing learners to progress just beyond their current level and reach their maximum potential.

Additionally, Input Theory is another underpin theory of this study. Input plays a crucial role in the process of learning a foreign language. It involves determining what to input and how to input it, considering the perspective of the learning process (Swain, 1995). The Input Hypothesis offers several recommendations for Task-Based Approach (TBA) and is integrated into task-oriented lessons. Overall, it empha-

sizes the importance of ensuring that all input is comprehensible (Krashen, 1985).

Additionally, the Affective Filter hypothesis, proposed by Krashen in 1985, suggests that in the process of acquiring a second language, there can be a psychological barrier known as the “affective filter”. This filter can hinder language learners from fully utilizing the comprehensible input they receive for language acquisition. Several emotional factors, including motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety, are linked to second language acquisition (Krashen, 1985, p.15). However, when the affective filter is low, learners are motivated, confident, actively engaged in activities, and can acquire new language information more effectively. Krashen (1985) argued that when learners focus on the meaning of their expression, they temporarily forget about their limited language proficiency, thus lowering their affective filter. The TBA encourages students to concentrate on information exchange and negotiating meaning. Completing tasks in group settings can help reduce the fear of making mistakes in public or losing face. In line with the affective filter theory, students can acquire the target language more effectively through these approaches.

3.1 Systematic Studies on TBA

This section provides an overview of various aspects related to Task-Based Approach (TBA). It covers the fundamental concepts, utilization of tasks, and the application of TBA. Specifically, it delves into the nature of tasks, encompassing their definitions, components, types, and characteristics.

3.2 Definition of Tasks

In general terms, a task can be described as a deliberate and structured activity carried out by learners with the aim of achieving specific objectives or results (Nunan, 1989). These activities consist of a series of process-oriented steps that prioritize conveying meaning rather than strict adherence to linguistic form, guiding students towards a predefined endpoint (Breen, 1987). Tasks come in various levels of complexity and can encompass exercises, discussions, or collaborative group work, all intended to support language development (Ur, 1996). Teachers meticulously design these tasks to encourage communication and interaction among learners, ultimately resulting in enhanced language proficiency and outcomes (Willis, 1996).

3.3 Components of Task

Candlin (1987, p.23) outlined that tasks encompass various components, including roles, input, setting, outcome, monitoring, and action. Roles define the interactions and relationships between participants and instructors involved in a task. Input refers to the information or data provided to learners for their task. Setting pertains to the specific classroom context and conditions in which the task takes place. Monitoring involves the guidance and supervision provided by teachers during the task’s execution. Outcome and feedback relate to the objectives and evaluation criteria associated with the task. Action pertains to the tangible progress and practical steps taken by students during the task.

Schwartz (1985), and Brown (1985) illustrated the components of tasks in Figure 1.

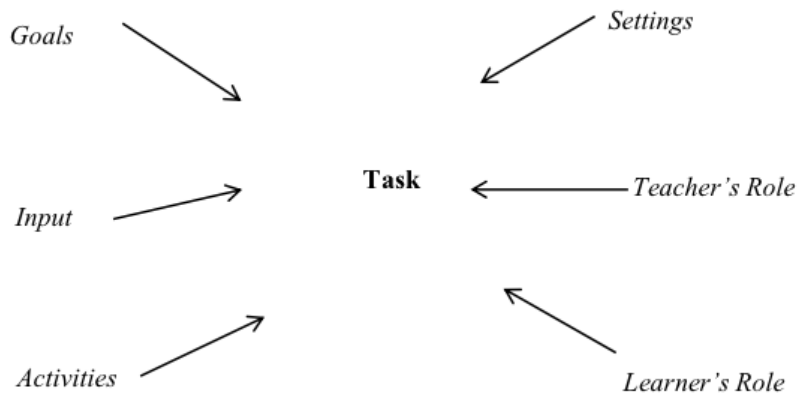


Figure 1 Components of Task

3.4 Types of Task

Nunan (1989) defines tasks as activities that mirror “real-life” situations and must serve a genuine purpose, extending beyond typical classroom exercises. While some task activities might not be everyday occurrences outside the classroom, learners are expected to approach them with seriousness and dedication. Additionally, Nunan (2001) classifies tasks into two categories: activation tasks and rehearsal tasks. Activation tasks encompass classroom activities that promote learner cooperation and meaningful interactions, moving beyond mere responses to language acquisition. On the other hand, rehearsal tasks involve learners practicing and getting ready for genuine interactions and communication beyond the classroom setting.

Willis (1996) outlines six distinct task types, which encompass activities such as making comparisons, arranging and categorizing, making lists, sharing personal experiences, problem-solving, and engaging in creative tasks. To provide further detail, jigsaw tasks involve learners piecing together various fragments of information to create a comprehensive whole. Information gap tasks necessitate that one student or group possesses specific information while another student or group has complementary information. Problem-solving tasks present students with a problem along with a set of information, requiring them to work towards finding a solution. Decision-making tasks challenge students with a problem that offers multiple potential solutions.

In conclusion, this section provides an overview of oral teaching and learning in College English Courses, addressing current challenges, expectations, and reviewing the Task-Based Approach (TBA) along with its underlying theories, such as Constructivist Theory and Second Language Acquisition Theory.

4. Methodology

The research method of this study follows a qualitative method. A semi-structured interview was conducted to identify students’ experience towards Task-based Approach. The interview protocol was self-designed based on previous study and this research needs. It contains seven questions and conducted online through ZOOM software.

The sample of this study are six interviewees who were random selected from 30 students. They have been exposed to TBA for 8 weeks. To ensure the validity and reliability of the interview protocol, peers review and expert check was conducted before implementation. The transcription was sent back to six interviewees and asked the correctness of final transcription. The qualitative data were generated and analyzed through Nvivo (11.0) using thematic and coding analysis. The ethical consideration went to both party of interviewer and interviewees. The interviewees were named anonymous from I1 (interviewee 1) to I6 (interviewee 6). The data were used for research purpose only and have been kept strictly by the researcher.

5. Results

This section provides the findings of this study, i.e. a beneficial and rewarding experience of Task-based Approach. This section meanwhile displays the outcomes of semi-structured interview.

According to the frequency of word occurrence, students’ experience of TBA is overall positive. Table 1 outlined their general experience through the learning process of TBA.

Table 1 Themes and Sub-themes of Semi-structured Interview

Themes	Sub-category	Frequency of occurrences
Useful in Enhancing Beneficial for Learning Speaking	useful for speaking	23
	express more sentences	31
	improve grammar	16
Experience of Encountering Speaking Barriers	fear of making mistakes	32
	teacher pressure	25
	peer laughter	10
Helpful in Improving Confidence	improving confidence level	13
	more confidence in speaking in public	26

5.1 Useful in Enhancing Beneficial for Learning Speaking

The results of the semi-structured interviews conducted in this study revealed a unanimous agreement among the interviewees, who represented different levels of speaking proficiency, regarding the favorable impact of tasks on their overall speaking abilities. The interviewees consistently emphasized that tasks played a crucial role in improving their speaking skills and supporting their language learning. They credited their enhanced communication skills to regular practice and active participation in various task-related activities.

Responses were stated as: “tasks are useful to me, I like most activities and I think they are very helpful to me”(I1), “tasks are very useful and helpful to me ”(I2), “the tasks are very useful, very useful and helpful” (I3), “tasks are useful and helpful in improving speaking competence”(I4), “tasks help me on speaking ability” (I5), “I think the tasks are very useful”(I6).

Participants emphasized the vital role of tasks in enhancing their speaking skills. In summary, the uniform positive feedback regarding tasks from these interviewees reaffirms the effectiveness of task-based language teaching in nurturing speaking proficiency and highlights its significance in language education environments.

5.2 Experience of Encountering Speaking Barriers

Students' experiences in doing tasks revealed several barriers in speaking, namely, fear of making mistakes, teacher pressure and peer laughter. The fear of making mistakes of interviewees were demonstrated briefly as following:

“Yes, I am. I think it is very embarrassing. I am afraid my classmates and teachers laugh at me (I2)”. “Yes, I am. I am afraid of making mistakes (I3)”. “Yes, I am. Because, I don't want to make people laugh at me and I hope I can do a good job (I6)”.

Among six interviewees, there were five students answered: “Yes, I am afraid of making mistakes because I worried about teacher...”. One high-score student answered: “ a little bit afraid”. Besides, among the other five students who referred “ Yes ” to this interview question, all of them illustrated the responses of teacher pressure, which caused students' intense fear.

Students' experience of accepting TBA also revealed helpful in improving confidence.

5.3 Helpful in Improving Confidence

I1 said: “task is effective to improve my speaking confidence, before, I usually prepare presentation alone, I always worried I can not do a good job because of nervous and something else. Tasks are made up of groups, there are at least one in a group, I can work with others. TBA can improve my confidence because I can prepare 5-8 minutes, I can practice with my friends, when I speak, I don't feel that nervous”. I4 responded “Yes, I think TBA is helpful of gaining my confidence level, it helped me to be more confident to speak in English”.

I3 responded: “Yes, of course. I think tasks in TBA help to remove my fear of speaking in English. And I have become more willing to speaking in English in using tasks”. I2 said: “Yes, I think so. Tasks help to remove me fear. I like to do tasks, and I can do better in speaking in English using tasks”.

In summary, the qualitative findings corroborated the positive influence of Task-based Approach (TBA) and tasks on students' self-assurance when speaking English. The interactive and cooperative characteristics of TBA, along with peer support, played a role in reducing apprehension and public speaking anxiety. These results provided additional evidence supporting the effectiveness of TBA in cultivating students' speaking proficiency and bolstering their confidence in using the English language.

6. Discussion

The analysis of qualitative data revealed that students' experience with Task-based Approach (TBA) were useful, valuable, beneficial, and rewarding. The findings indicated that tasks proved to be effective in enhancing speaking skills, particularly in improving speaking abilities, enabling the expression of more complex sentences. Additionally, the research identified various obstacles to speaking performance, including the fear of making mistakes, teacher expectations, and peer reactions. Ultimately, the findings highlighted that tasks played a crucial role in boosting students' confidence, leading to increased confidence levels and the reduction of public speaking apprehension.

One potential explanation for the observed outcomes could be attributed to the integration of language skills. Task-based activities often incorporate various language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. This integration enables learners to recognize

the interrelationships among these skills and practice using them in a unified manner. Experiencing language in diverse contexts makes learners more versatile and skilled communicators. Furthermore, task-based activities offer learners opportunities for practical and meaningful language use in real-world scenarios. Engaging in communication tasks allows learners to apply the language in context, rendering it more relevant and applicable to their everyday lives. This contextualized practice supports learners in becoming more proficient in effectively conveying their ideas and messages in the language.

Another potential reason for this outcome could be the creation of a comfortable and conducive learning atmosphere. Task-based activities typically foster a positive learning environment for students. This favorable experience motivates learners to dedicate more time and effort to honing their communication skills. Additionally, task-based activities can lead to an increased generation of sentences during oral communication. The regular use of language in meaningful contexts contributes to the production of a greater number of sentences.

Additionally, this study found several barriers of speaking performance, such as, fear of making mistake, teacher pressure and peers laughter. There are several factors that could account for this observation. Firstly, students might be hesitant to engage in speaking tasks due to their fear of making errors. This fear stems from concerns about potential negative judgments from both their peers and the teacher. Making mistakes in a public setting can be embarrassing and can trigger feelings of inadequacy or incompetence. This anxiety related to the fear of being evaluated negatively can create a significant barrier to active participation in speaking activities, as students may view any mistake as a signal of failure or ineptitude. Secondly, the presence of the teacher adds to the pressure felt by students during speaking tasks. They may believe that their teachers' assessment of their performance carries substantial weight, leading to a fear of disappointing the teacher by making mistakes. Thirdly, the fear of being ridiculed by peers is closely linked to the dread of negative evaluation. The fear of being mocked can generate a strong sense of vulnerability and self-consciousness, causing students to hesitate when it comes to expressing themselves openly. Lastly, students with lower scores may have less self-esteem and confidence in their language skills compared to high-achieving students. Consequently, they may be more sensitive to their peers' opinions and judgments. The fear of being ridiculed for making errors or not performing well in front of others can further erode their already fragile confidence, resulting in heightened anxiety during speaking tasks.

7. Conclusion

The study emphasizes the need for EFL instructors to enhance their teaching methods, particularly in the realm of oral communication. It suggests that evaluating students based on their oral performance can offer a more comprehensive understanding of their communication abilities, going beyond just grammar and vocabulary. Specifically, the study highlights that Task-based Approach (TBA) can be a valuable approach to improve students' speaking performance. Therefore, language instructors should consider integrating task-based activities into their speaking lessons to enhance the effectiveness of teaching oral communication. The TBA allows teachers to observe students as they engage in tasks, such as negotiating meaning or expressing opinions, providing insights into their strengths and weaknesses in oral communication. This observation can enable instructors to offer targeted feedback, ultimately improving students' performance in this crucial skill area.

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