

Improving Speaking Skills of Linguistic Faculty Students through Task-based Instruction at Uzbekistan State World Languages University

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at to improve speaking skills through task-based approach of linguistic faculty students of Uzbekistan State World Languages University. This study was classroom action research and the subjects were 20 students of a linguistic faculty. The techniques for collecting data were observation, task and documentation. The instruments used for data collection were speaking assessment criterion, a list of students, topic-specific written reviews and speaking performance. The result of the study showed that task-based approach could improve speaking skills of teacher-learners at Uzbekistan State World Languages university if implemented correctly.

Keywords:

Speaking Skills, Task-Based Approach, Speaking Mastery, Competent User, Modest User, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Communicative Competence

Literature Review

In traditional language settings, language instructors mainly focus on the language itself rather than the way how it is used during communication. The teachers mainly aim at teaching particular units of vocabulary and grammar in the language and require students the mastery of what is taught. However, Lightbown and Spada (1999) stated that through task-based instruction, teachers prioritize active interaction and language use contrary to language itself. Implementing task-based approach may be a hurdle for teachers who must follow the curriculum by an administrative board in language institutions. Littlewood (2004) argued that “the task-based approach has achieved something of the new orthodoxy”.

Task-based learning emphasizes the role of the tasks in language learning and the right kind of tasks is contributing factor to language

development. Naturally, instructors and teachers make use of different tasks in their classes, but the best way to create interactional language classroom is to design tasks specially for students. This methodology was first suggested by N.Prabhu in Bangladore. According to Prabhu, students excel at language learning more easily when they focus on the task that they are completing rather than language practice.

According to Ellis (2003), “instructional tasks” are an integral part of language learning process. Task-based instruction is considered an alternative language teaching methodology in which functional language use is aimed for (Brumfit, 1984; Ellis, 2003; Willis, 1996). The term “task” as a key concept of task-based instruction can be interpreted in different way. Task can be understood as daily activity such as doing chores or doing gardening. It became formalized in vocational training in 1950s and

began to be used widely in school education in 1970s (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Major breakthroughs in programming task-based instruction for language classrooms were done in the 1980's and 1990's (Skehan, 1998).

In second language learning. A task is perceived as an activity that is centralized around meaning which students undertake while trying to reach a specific goal to complete the task (Bygate, Skehan & Swain, 2001; Nunan, 1989; Skehan, 1996).

According to Nunan (1989), the task should encourage students to reach "meaningful use" of the language through completion of it. Lee (2000) stated that teachers provide "a purpose" for students through tasks to use the target language. Lee further stated that in this purposeful process, students are not taught to use language forms. Contrastingly, they are encouraged to build meaningful communication in their target language under the guidance of their teachers. But teachers do not provide an immediate correction for their mistakes. Instead, they take a role of a facilitator and controller in language learning process.

According to Skehan (1996) the tasks being designed by teacher should be related to a real world in order to promote purposefulness. For instance, a certain task cannot be equally effective for two language settings probably because of opportunities available. To illustrate, a task that is designed to compare "suggestion and/or complaints" by a customer in a hotel can work out differently for Karshi State University students and Uzbekistan State World Languages University students even though both of them are situated in Uzbekistan. The obvious reason may lie in the fact that the hotels in the regions where these two universities are located absorbs different types of visitors one serving for only locals and the other for foreigners. In this case, the reliability of the task to trigger natural use of the target language to have meaningful communication may fail.

Nunan (1989) claimed that the tasks also should be pedagogically suitable in addition to their relation to a real context.

Nunan (2006) also stated that a right task requires to activate students' grammar

knowledge and urge them to use the knowledge to understand, to express, to exchange information and tasks should be meaningful from beginning to end aiming at engaging students outside the language classroom. According to Lightbown and Spada (2006), tasks may be in different complexity levels ranging from writing a newspaper article to simply making a hotel reservation.

Willis (1996) suggests 6 different types of tasks for TBI instruction. They are as follows:

1. Listing tasks: For example, students make a list of necessary items for a holiday preparation.
2. Sorting and ordering: Students may complete the task in sub-groups choosing the most important items for an ideal holiday and less important thing that may be excluded.
3. Comparing: Students make comparison between the facilities range by two different hotels.
4. Problem-solving: Students read about a problem of a freshman student abroad and present a solution to the problem.
5. Sharing personal experience: Students debate moral values in their community.
6. Creative tasks: Students offer plans for scheduling a university meeting.

However, unexpected results may happen in TBI. Skehan (1996) claimed that TBI instruction may not give expected results if implemented inappropriately. "Especially, it is likely to create pressure for instant communication rather than interlanguage change and growth".

TBI may possibly develop students' creativity, but it may be less effective when it is implemented where exposure to target language is rather limited. Furthermore, TBI instruction may not be as fruitful as expected mainly because learners, whose native language is Uzbek, are not able to use the language right due to lack of real language environment.

METHODS

The subjects of the study

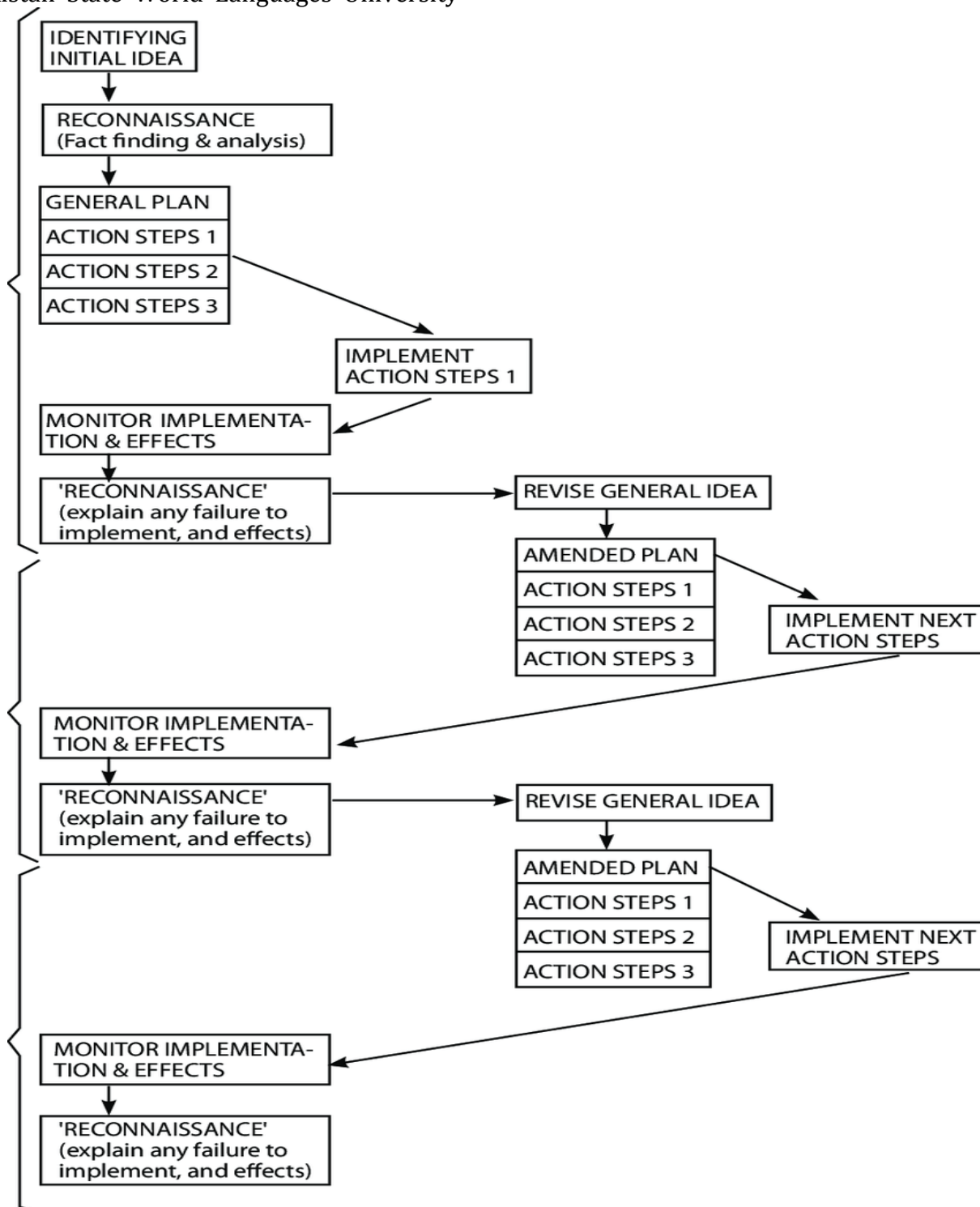
The researcher decided to use quasi-experimental method selecting the participants with whom the researcher is in the same class. Overall, 20 students in Foreign Language and Literature Department were chosen. The research puts the question whether task-based instruction promote students' speaking skills or

not. In order to provide validity of the research, the researcher implemented a few techniques within task-based instruction that require direct exposure to language practice in a real context.

The venue of the research

The research has been undertaken at Uzbekistan State World Languages University

including linguistic faculty students as participants. The procedure lasted three weeks covering the last three weeks of March, 2022. This research employed Classroom Action Research using Action research spiral suggested by Elliot 1991.



According to this spiral, the researcher identified the general idea discovering lack of

proficiency in speaking skills of students. In this stage, the researcher explored opportunities to

conduct her research as well as other constraints that may hinder the process such as unwillingness to participate in the research by participants. Moreover, occasional absence of some participants might be another hurdle to achieve reliability of the research as the research was taking place in classrooms through an overt observation. Then, the researcher carried out reconnaissance according to which she found facts and analyzed them. After the first cycle did not achieve its aim, the researcher revised the plan and made amendment to research steps and modified some techniques and methods before reflecting the final results. The researcher then evaluated the whole process (techniques, methods, procedure, conduction, participation, the classroom environment, the constraints, the opportunities) and reflected it before moving into another stage making slight modifications to action research stages. The researcher, in this stage, rethought and re-planned the next actions to be taken so that she could achieve the research purpose. Having revised the general plan of the research, the researcher took the second action research step and monitored the way it went together with some actions such as discussing, analyzing and evaluating the whole process. Before carrying out the third cycle, the researcher thoroughly analyzed drawbacks and weaknesses of the process and developed a plan for removing constraints for research success.

Data collection tools

As the researcher studies at linguistics faculty, it was decided to choose the students of this faculty as quasi-experimental method since the researcher was aware of the level of students' speaking abilities while taking courses in the same classes with them. The research was undertaken in the second semester of academic year 2021-2022 in the last three weeks of March including linguistic faculty students at Uzbekistan State World Languages University. The subjects of the study 1-st year MA students comprising 20 students out of whom 4 were male participants.

The Classroom Action Research (CAR) used four steps in each of the 3 cycles. Even though the suggested spiral was not directly divided into two cycles, the nature of the process required to

conduct it in two cycles as it is shown in figure 1.1. Initially, the researcher discovered the existing problem at the institution and generated the research plans suggesting two research questions that were presented above. Each cycle was performed in one meeting. Firstly, in planning step, the researcher made arrangement of learning tools and research instruments that would be used in the procedure. Secondly, in implementing action research step the researcher used research instruments before stimulating, collecting, verifying and processing data and making evaluation at the end. In the last step of each cycle, the researcher made generalization about failing points and success of the steps taken in the cycles. Reflection, rethinking, re-planning the results of the first cycle became a basis for improvement in the next cycle. The researcher also worked in collaboration with other student-teacher in order to mark the students' recorded performance to check inter-rater reliability of marking criterion used by two different graders.

Data collecting instrument in the study used observation and a rating scale of speaking skills of performance on a specific task. Data obtained in this study were analyzed qualitatively.

The criteria that determined the success of action research was when the students could achieve scores in their speaking skills more than 6.5 according to International English Language testing system or moving from a level of "conversant" to a "proficient" level. Here, it should be noted that "proficient" does not mean achieving native-like excellence for participants in their speaking skills, but refers to ability to use the language less easily and at a less-advanced level than a native. Task-based approach would meet the goal of the action in the research if the students scored more than 6.5. A change in the speaking skills of participants using task-based approach could be seen from the observation data on their much better speaking skills.

The reason why the researcher conducted the study lies in the fact that most of the MA students at UzSWLU have still problems with their speaking skills or have not reached proficiency in their speaking. Foreign-like

accent occur in their pronunciation a lot. Through conducting this study, the researcher aimed at finding whether task-based instruction of Communicative Language Teaching helps to improve speaking skills of EFL learners.

Limitation of the study

This research study is limited to students majoring English at UzSWLU during the academic year 2021-2022 who were enrolled in the academic course “Research methods”. The researcher faced a number of challenges while conducting the study. First of all, selecting the subjects of the study became difficult as students were unwilling to participate in the study.

Results and Discussion

The researcher generated data related to the students’ problems in their speaking skills. While identifying the general idea of an existing problem at Uzbekistan State World Languages University, the researcher made observation of 8 classes of their course-mates. Initially, the researcher analyzed the participants performance on the four language skills and identified that speaking is creating a hurdle for them. Through an overt observation, the researcher compared their proficiency in the four skills. In order to overcome students’ unwillingness to be included as participants, their proficiency was checked in “English for specific purposes” as a pre-test. The table below shows the seesaw of four skills.

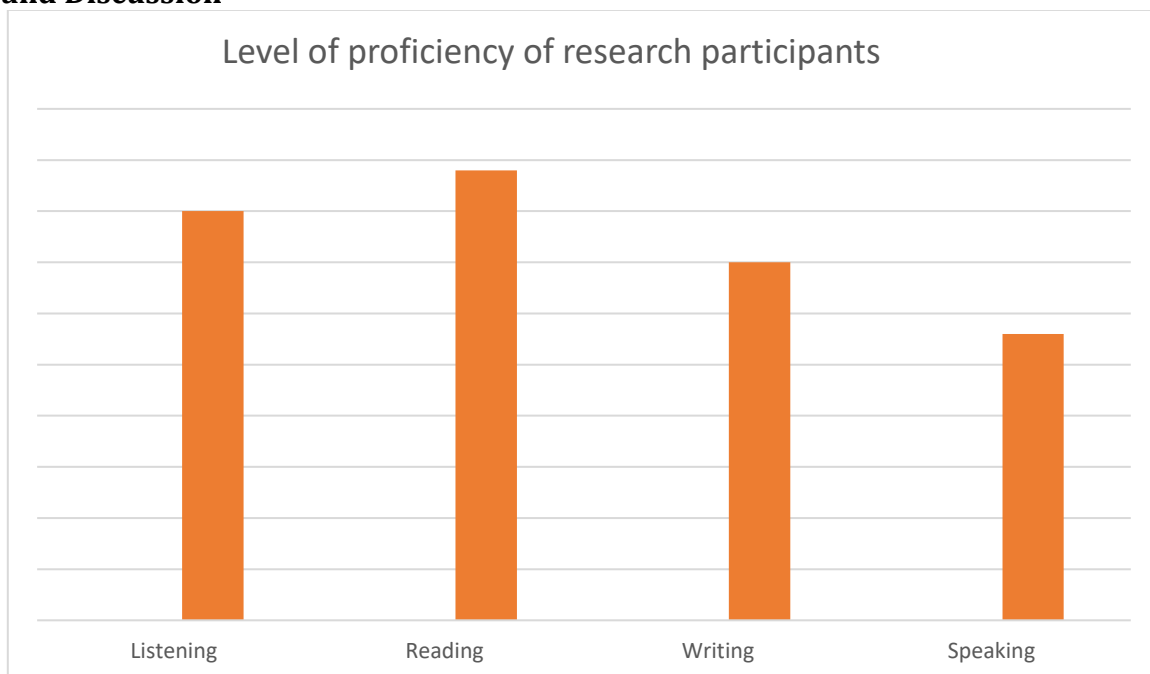


Figure 2. Level of proficiency of research participants.

The diagram shows that participants have excelled at reading with nearly native-like excellency in the skill. Though, writing is considered to be more difficult among learners, the diagram shows that participants acquired the skills at a less-advanced level than other skills.

An attempt made to fix the problem was task-based approach. This approach was used to improve the speaking skills of linguistic faculty students at Uzbekistan State World Languages University.

First Action Cycle Implementation

First action cycle was conducted in one meeting on 19th of March in 2022. The students were asked to take interviews with foreigners visiting the country and list the likes and dislikes of them according to their interview before they debate the topic in the class.

Planning and Action

The researcher made a list of the students with speaking criterion to mark without warning the students that their performance was being evaluated in order not to trigger anxiety and hinder their performance. According to the task-based approach, the students were asked to

make a list of the likes and dislikes of foreign visitors. While students were debating, the researcher assessed their performances. The

table below shows the results of their performance.

Descriptive Statistics

	Speaking score
Valid	20
Missing	0
Mean	5.525
Std. Deviation	0.472
Minimum	4.500
Maximum	6.500

Figure 3.

However, the method failed to give expected results since their scores averaged around 5 and 5.5 which is contradictory to the research aim.

Second Cycle Action Implementation

Afterwards, the researcher made some amendments to the plan and decided to modify the type of exercises used in TBI. The researcher selected problem-solving to reach the research aim. The second cycle took place on 23rd of March, 2022. In this cycle, students were asked

to listen to problems of a freshman student studying abroad having conversations with them through online platforms before they are ready to discuss and suggest solutions during the classes. The students were encouraged to listen to recorded responses to improve their fluency and pronunciation by the researcher which was also another amendment to the action. The table below shows the results of their performances.

	Столбец1	Ряд 2	Ряд 3
Listening			4
Reading			4,4
Writing			3,5
Speaking			2,8

Figure 4. Distributional plots of speaking score.

The chart illustrates that the speaking score of the participants slightly improved as the most frequent score was 6.0 according to the speaking criteria of International English

Language Testing System (IELTS). On the other hand, 5 of them scored 6.5 which was the research aim.

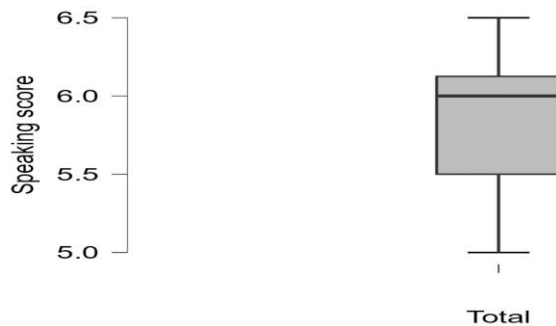


Figure 5. The mean of speaking score.

In the second cycle, the students' scores averaged around 6 showing 0.5 lower than the research aim.

Third Cycle Action Implementation

After successive failure in the second cycle, the researcher revised the plan again and carried out reconnaissance identifying factors that hinder to achieve the research aim. In the third cycle, the researcher decided to try "sorting" tasks within TBI. The participants were asked to gain access to Facebook and reading posts about the most important items and the least important items for an ideal holiday before they

discuss them in online meeting. Here, the researcher made addition to a set of techniques encouraging students to pay attention to word choice of commenters in the posts which was a new addition to the process. Through this technique, the researcher hoped the participants could improve vocabulary range in their speaking. The researcher organized an online meeting to evaluate participants' speaking performances in the last week of March, 2022. The table below shows the average scores of students.

Figure 6. Descriptive Statistics

	Speaking score
Valid	20
Missing	0
Mean	6.350
Std. Deviation	0.286
Minimum	5.500
Maximum	6.500

As it is crystal clear from the chart, the mean of the students' speaking performances stands at 6.350 which can be accepted as 6.5 in speaking examinations of IELTS. Even though the researcher found that TBI could facilitate acquiring speaking skills, she concluded that not all methods or techniques can be applicable for students. The researcher further believed that the teacher should take available opportunities

to apply TBI into consideration before deciding on the appropriate task types within TBI. However, TBI proved effective in developing speaking skills.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conducting this study has given valuable experience to the researcher for future investigations in this field. The researcher realized that teaching and learning environment

as well as real language atmosphere should be taken into consideration when researcher decides to conduct a study on speaking skills as it requires direct exposure to language use. In future studies, the researcher concluded to conduct a study in the same way. After 2 unsuccessful attempts, the researcher came up with an idea that combination of effective tasks within TBI can be effective in improving rather than applying one method exclusively. Therefore, it is suggested to make further investigations on this side of the issue. Conducting this research has drawn such implications that the teacher's task of choice cannot often be applicable for teaching and learning environment. Furthermore, it showed the importance of self-reflection before discovering the efficacious strategies into language classroom which used to be previously ignored by the researcher. The journey also formed a different understanding about action research in which attempts should be renewed until expected results are received. All in all, it has provided valuable experience for further studies in this field.

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