

Using a Task-based Learning Approach on Oral English Communication Skills for Lower Secondary School Students

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Abstract

The purposes of this study were to investigate whether a task-based learning approach improves oral English communication skills of lower secondary school students, and to investigate teacher's reflections after using the task-based learning approach. In order to achieve the two purposes, a one-group pre-test post-test research design was used. In this study, the instructional instrument was the task-based learning approach lessons. The research instruments were an oral English communication test, video-recording observations, and researcher's journals. The findings revealed that students' oral English communication scores significantly increased after learning in the task-based learning classroom. The analysis of teacher's reflections found that the task-based learning approach increased students' independence, adjusting to task-based learning, providing students support, and perceptions about real world relevance.

Keywords: Task-based learning approach; oral English communication skills; teacher's reflections; lower secondary school students

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Introduction

With the development of globalization, the English language has become one of the most essential communicative tools to exchange information with others. Thus, the English language learning as an educational goal has played an important role in people's daily learning. English language learning has been a part of the Thai elementary school system for several years. Customizing English language learning and catering to the individual needs of students have been discussed in educational policies and teaching practice for quite some time.

In language teaching, there are a lot of teaching approaches made to foster speaking, but task-based learning approach has been rarely used in speaking teaching. The main advantages of the task-based learning are that language is used for a genuine purpose meaning that real communication should take place, and that at the stage where the learners are preparing their report for the whole class, they are forced to consider language form in general rather than concentrating on a single form (as in the presentation, practice, production model). The aim of the task-based learning is to integrate all four skills and to move from fluency to accuracy plus fluency. The range of tasks available (reading texts, listening texts, problem-solving, role-plays, questionnaires) offers a great deal of flexibility in this model and should lead to more motivating activities for the learners (Bowen, 2002)

Oral communication fulfills a number of general and discipline-specific pedagogical functions. Learning to speak is an important goal in itself, for it equips students with a set of skills they can use for the rest of their lives. Speaking is the mode of communication most often used to express opinions, make arguments, offer explanations, transmit information, and make impressions upon others. Students need to speak well in their personal lives, future workplaces, social interactions, and political endeavors. They will have meetings to attend, presentations to make, discussions and arguments to participate in, and groups to work with. If basic instruction and opportunities to practice speaking are available, students will position themselves to accomplish a wide range of goals and be useful members of their communities (Rahman, 2010)

In Thailand context, English is scarcely used out of classrooms since it is taught as a Foreign Language (EFL). Students do not need English to engage in day-to-day life functioning or to participate in society. From Daroon's (2001) own experience as a student and teacher of English in English classrooms, if asking the situation of teaching English in Thailand, it can be said that Thailand has low achievement in teaching English. Many different methods of teaching have been tried. When the results are unsatisfactory, the new method is replaced by another. Unsystematic trial and error seems to be used for the English language curriculum. However, it is essential in an EFL classroom to

create an atmosphere or learning processes, which can motivate the enthusiasm of learners.

Thai students spend twelve years studying English in primary and secondary schools, but the results are questionable. (Sripatum, 2013) When compared to people in neighboring countries, Thais' English proficiency is relatively low. The 2010 Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) showed that Thailand ranked 116th out of 163 countries. The international average score was 80 but the Thai average score was 75, which was a little higher than the average scores of Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Myanmar, but was trailing far behind other ASEAN countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore. On the 2011 report, the Thai average score was still the same, 75 (Test and Score Data Summary for TOEFL, 2011-2012). According to Wiriyaichitra (2003), English learning in Thailand is not very successful because most students lack opportunities to learn and practice English in the English environment. Students' tension, excitement, lack of confidence during taking a speaking in the class time constraint also are the problems in teaching and learning English (Ratanapinyowong, Poonon, & Honsa, 2007).

Research questions

The following research questions were used to guide this study:

1. What are the differences between oral English communication skills before and after using a task-based learning approach?
2. What are the teacher's reflections after using the task-based learning approach?

Purposes of the study

1. To investigate the achievement whether a task-based learning approach, improves oral English communication skills of lower secondary school students.
2. To examine teacher's reflections after using the task-based learning approach in teaching oral communication skills.

Limitations

The limitations of this research are the amount of the time, because of the eight lessons of oral English communication skills through the task-based learning approach. Only 26 participants from Grade 9 in Thailand were involved in this research. As a result, the outcome is not able to generalize or adequately represent all Grade 9 students in Thailand.

Scope of the study

1. Population and participants

1.1 The population was public small-sized lower-secondary school students in the eastern part of Thailand.

1.2 The participants were lower secondary school students (Grade 9) from a school located in the eastern part of Thailand. The participants were purposefully selected since the target school has only one class for Grade 9.

2. Variables

2.1 Independent variable was the task-based learning approach (Willis, 1996), consisting of three phases: pre-task, task cycle, and language focus.

2.2 Dependent variable was oral English communication skills achievement.

Literature Review

The importance of oral English communication skills

According to the Ontario Curriculum for Language, Grades 1-8 (2006), oral communication skills are fundamental to the development of literacy and essential for thinking and learning. Through talk, students not only communicate information but also explore and come to understand ideas and concepts; identify and solve problems; organize their experience and knowledge; and express and clarify their thoughts, feelings, and opinions. Listening and speaking skills are essential for social interaction at home, at school, and in the community.

There are three parts to oral communication that are important for students to learn and are crucial in the development of their skills. They are: *Listening* – Students need to listen to their teachers, other students, and oral versions of texts. This is to allow them to find meaning in texts and vocal strategies, respond appropriately when involved in a conversation, understand and interpret the content of texts or point-of-view, and demonstrate critical thought. *Speaking* – Students need to be able to interact with others, using appropriate language, clarity, and strategies that emphasize or help express meaning and emotions. *Reflecting* – Students need to recognize their strengths and weaknesses when preparing for and

participating in communication activities, and reflect on how they can improve. By teaching oral communication skills, the students should learn: to listen, understand and respond to students and teachers in class/group discussions about texts, concepts, and points of view; to develop the skills to interact and behave appropriately while communicating with others; to be able to communicate clearly using a wide range of vocabulary that is appropriate for the setting and interlocutors; to be able to identify and communicate various meanings of words through tone, speed, and pitch.

Fostering oral English communication skills through task-based learning

Flood (2003) notes that though communication skills and functions of language can be developed within any subject matter area, it is also necessary to have an explicitly defined curriculum for teaching speaking and listening skills and to focus on that specifically at certain times each day. He says that research has shown that emphasis should be on how to use language effectively in a variety of contexts, learning about language, and notes an interest in the phonological structure – learning the sounds of language to distinguish words when you hear them and connect them to appropriate meanings. In addition, he notes how theorists of “oracy” (the skills related to communication, or the teaching of communication) believe that all teachers are seen as language teachers and that students in elementary and secondary schools should be involved in settings and circumstances

across the curriculum that regularly require them to actively learn by talking.

Therefore, teachers should approach teaching oral communication skills in all their lessons. Teachers at the elementary level should prepare a lesson that focuses on the basic skills that are necessary for proper communication, so that children can build on these skills and use them throughout the rest of their educational experience and into adulthood. For students at the intermediate level, English teachers should try to incorporate some kind of communication activity while analyzing literature in which students can express their opinions and feelings about certain topics in class/group discussions, presentations, etc. This will help the teachers monitor what skills the student has and his/her progress in using these communication skills.

Background of Task-Based Learning

Recently, the popularity of Task-Based Learning (TBL) has made many researchers, teachers, and methodologists to evaluate the effectiveness of this approach. Although the task-based learning has been used for many years, its popularity has recently increased. One of the main reasons for this attention is the desire of educators to promote real communication or the exchange of meanings rather than forms. Another reason for such interest is the fact that practitioners advocate better language learning when students are not focused only on linguistic forms. Researchers believe there is less anxiety and learning is more effective if language form *per se* is not the priority. If task-based instruction

takes place, language learning will be more meaningful and natural. The task is currently considered to be the most effective means of promoting second language acquisition (SLA) in the classroom. According to Richards and Rodgers (2004), engaging learners in task work provides a better context for the activation of learning processes. These authors say the negotiation of meaning in TBL provides the input and output necessary for language acquisition. Ellis (2003) refers to this situation when he says that task-based learning and teaching call for classroom participants to forget they are in the classroom, a teaching-learning setting, and imagine themselves in a more communicatively effective environment where negotiation of meaning is taking place. The reason would seem obvious: the goal of language teaching is or should be the enabling of students to express personal meanings. Certain researchers such as Long (1983) underscore the fact that a task needs to include negotiation of meaning in order to effectively propel language acquisition forward. So, it is argued, we should provide our learners with meaningful tasks, which include plenty of opportunities for the negotiation of meaning.

Willis (1996), in her book "A Framework for Task-Based Learning", outlines a third model for organizing lessons. While this is not a radical departure from Test-Teach-Test approach (TTT), it does present a model that is based on sound theoretical foundations and one which takes account of the need for authentic communication. The TBL is typically based on

three stages. The first of these is the pre-task stage, during which the teacher introduces and defines the topic and the learners engage in activities that either help them to recall words and phrases that will be useful during the performance of the main task or to learn new words and phrases that are essential to the task. This stage is followed by what Willis calls the “task cycle”. Here the learners perform the task (typically a reading or listening exercise or a problem-solving exercise) in pairs or small groups. They then prepare a report for the whole class on how they did the task and what conclusions they reached. Finally, they present their findings to the class in spoken or written form. The final stage is the language focus stage, during which specific language features from the task are highlighted and worked on. Feedback on the learners’ performance at the reporting stage may also be appropriate at this point.

The main advantages of TBL are that language is used for a genuine purpose meaning that real communication should take place, and that at the stage where the learners are preparing their report for the whole class, they are forced

to consider language form in general rather than concentrating on a single form (as in the presentation, practice, and production approach (PPP) model). Whereas the aim of the PPP model is to lead from accuracy to fluency, the aim of TBL is to integrate all four skills and to move from fluency to accuracy plus fluency. The range of tasks available (reading texts, listening texts, problem-solving, role-plays, questionnaires, etc) offers a great deal of flexibility in this model and should lead to more motivating activities for the learners.

Research Method

Research Design

According to Hatch and Farhady (1982), a one-group pre-test post-test design was an inquiry to measure the gains that the participants have made rather than looking at how well everyone does at the end. There was somewhat more structure and a single selected group under observation with a careful measurement being done before applying the experimental treatment and then measuring after. Table 3.1 summarizes the design of this study.

Table 3.1 One group Pre-test, Post-test Design

One Group Design	Pre-test	Treatment	Post-test
	T1	X	T2

Since the research was investigated in Thailand where students study in a class together, the practical situation did not allow the researcher to separate a normal class into a control group and an experimental group. As a result, the whole class participants were the only experiment group in the research. In order to assess the effects of the task-based learning on oral English

communication skills, pre-test, post-test, and teacher’s reflections were used to analyze the results.

Data Collection

The procedure of one-group design lasted five weeks, 100 minutes for each topic for instructions. Since the task-based learning is a different teaching method, the researcher did not collect the data in the first two topics because the researcher wanted to help students familiarize with the approach and the researcher.

Before the third topic teaching, there was an oral English communication skill pre-test administered to students to assess their

oral English communication skills. After that, there were a six-topic teaching procedure for experimenting using the task-based learning approach. The teaching plan was written according to the curriculum of grade 9 student’s textbook, and the framework of task-based learning of Jane Willis (1996). All of the six weeks classes were video-recorded, which was under the permission from the school and students. Researcher’s journal came from the video-recording observation. To analyze the video, the researcher kept writing journals. After teaching progress, there was a post-test implemented at the end of the instruction. Table 3.2 summarizes the scope and sequence of the instruction.

Table 3.2 Scope and Sequence of Lesson Plan

Lesson	Topic	Type of Task	Research Instrument
1	Greeting and Introducing oneself	Listing	No data collection (To familiarize students with a task-based learning)
2	Travel	Sharing personal experiences	No data collection (To familiarize students with a task-based learning)
Pre-test			Pre-test
3	Shopping	Listing	Researcher’s journal & Observation
4	Restaurant	Comparing	Researcher’s journal & Observation
5	Movie and Cinema	Ordering and sorting	Researcher’s journal & Observation
6	Telephone and Appointment	Sharing personal experiences	Researcher’s journal & Observation
7	Asking for directions	Problem solving	Researcher’s journal & Observation
8	Hotel	Creative tasks	Researcher’s journal & Observation
Post-test			Post-test

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, a statistical computer program was used to answer the following research questions.

RQ 1: What are the difference between oral English communication skills before and after using a task-based learning approach?

To answer this question, students' scores on oral English communication skills tests were calculated. Dependent t-test was performed to determine the significance of the difference between two scores of two oral performance tests. Video-recording observation and researcher's journals were also analyzed to support the differences of using a task-based learning approach on oral English communication skills in details.

RQ 2: What are the teacher's reflections from the task-based learning approach?

To answer this question, the results of researcher's journal and video-recording observation were coded, categorized, and concluded to support the evidence of students' reflection from a task-based learning approach in details. Themes emerged from this analysis.

Findings

Research Question 1

To answer the first research question "What are the differences between oral English communication skills before and after using a task-based learning approach?" pre-test and post-test data, researcher's journal data, and video-recorded observation data were used to answer this question.

Dependent t-test Result

In order to examine the difference of pre-test and post-test results, descriptive statistics was calculated. Table 4.1 is the descriptive statistics of the scores of pre-test and post-test.

Table 4.1 Descriptive Statistics of the Scores of Pre-test and Post-test Scores

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Pre-test	26	20.00	53.25	35.48	8.57
Post-test	26	37.00	77.50	61.61	12.47

As shown in Table 4.1, the mean of post-test score (\bar{X} = 61.61, SD = 12.47) is higher than the mean of pre-test score (\bar{X} = 35.48, SD = 8.57). In order to examine whether this score increase is statistically significant, dependent t-test was employed. Table 4.2 presents the results of dependent t-test.

Table 4.2 Dependent t-test of Pre-test and Post-test

	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-tail)
Pre-tes - Post-test	-26.12	8.56	-15.57	25	.000

With regards to the results of the statistical comparison, the post-test score of the participants was statistically significant higher than the pre-test result ($p < .01$). Therefore, the results revealed that there is an increase in post-test after implementing the task-based learning approach to examine its effects on teaching oral English communication skills. Furthermore, the analysis of researcher' journals and video-recorded observation presented to explain in details.

Researcher's Journals

From researcher's journals, the findings also confirmed that the majority of students felt happy with the oral activities. Those who have a positive attitude toward this task-based learning approach show some awkwardness toward presentations that they did accept to the way to learn oral English, and stand in front of the class to practice, as positive attitude; share and exchange information; work in pairs or groups; be afraid to giving an oral report; automatically complete tasks

1. Positive attitude

In general, the participants expressed a positive attitude toward engaging in the task-based activities during the experimental periods.

2. Share and exchange information

The part of task-based activities the participants liked best was that they could share and exchange information with their partners, and doing interactive tasks and creative role-playing were also interested them.

3. Work in pairs or groups

The participants preferred working with partners rather than individually, and they enjoyed the feeling of self-fulfillment when completing the task.

4. Be afraid to giving an oral report

The participants disliked the most about task-based activities was individual work, and the task of giving an oral report also frightened them.

5. Automatically complete the tasks

With the classes moving progressively, the participants became automatically complete each tasks, and became more active to practice their conversations in front of the class.

Video-recorded Observation

From the perception of teacher-student interaction in the classroom, there were two major findings regarding Grade 9 students who engaged in task-based learning approach on oral English communicative activities based on the recorded data of the classroom observation.

First, when the researcher explained some tasks or procedures that students were not familiar with, the researcher had to rely on the Thai teacher's translation. In addition, students also used plenty of first language during discussion with their partners or asked their Thai teacher for help, and they tended to focus on finding ways to complete the task, not on using and practice the target language.

Second, only using task-based activities in the class period was impossible. Some language drills and other type of activities or exercises provided by the teacher during the process of

new language acquisition were crucial for the students' reinforcement of learning.

Besides the teacher-student interaction in the classroom, according to the recorded data of classroom observations during the experimental period, three features were deduced from the extracts of the tasks: one regarded classroom atmosphere that (1) working in pairs or groups gave the students opportunities to learn from each other and boosted their willingness to speak out. The other two regarded the analysis of participants' discourse during the tasks that (2) the participants tended to use lots of model particles and discourse makers, such as *mm, ah, okay, and, so, just*, etc.; and (3) the majority of mistakes and errors that the participants made in their oral communicative production were *subject-verb agreement* and *tense*.

Therefore, combined the statistically significant difference between the pre-test and post test, with the details of researcher's journals, there are differences between using a task-based learning approach on oral English communication skills of lower secondary school students.

Research Question 2

To answer the second research question, "*What are the teacher's reflections after using the task-based learning approach?*", researcher's journal data results, and video-recorded observation data results were used to analyze the data of teacher's reflections. In terms of the second research question, which asked how the teacher and students reacted to

the task-based learning approach, analysis of the data revealed that their impressions centered on two themes: (a) the advantages of the task-based learning approach (b) the disadvantages of the task-based learning approach. The following sections present the findings related to each theme.

The Advantages of the Task-based Learning Approach

1. Free of language control

The students were free of language control rather than practicing one pre-selected item. The students had a much more varied exposure to language. It was enjoyable and motivating. Students felt free to use the language without any boundaries. This was more motivating for the students because they felt the need to use the language to complete the task with is leading them to the end of the lesson. This was a varied activity for them.

2. Students' involvement to lessons

Because the more students involve in the classroom activities, the more they can learn. Their attention to lesson can be more than when they just listen to their teachers. Other than this, task-based learning approach provided students with wide variety of opportunities in the classroom. Students can interact with their peers and their students as well. In my opinion, this made them more involved in the lesson.

3. More tolerance to noise and indiscipline behaviors

In the task-based learning, young learners demands more tolerance to noise and indiscipline

behaviors than the traditional methods. This can also be challenging for the teachers sometimes, especially in crowded classes. One more point is that the TBL can be a very difficult method to use in teaching the speaking skill because it demands pair work and group work and again a chaos can occur at such a case, especially with young learners. As a result, the TBL can only be used in private schools as they have less population in classes and as their educational point of view is much more visionary.

The Disadvantages of the Task-based Learning Approach

1. Not be appropriate as the foundation of a class for beginning students

Task-based learning may not be appropriate as the foundation of a class for beginning students. The major disadvantage for beginning students is that the focus of task-based learning is on output, when beginning language learners often go through a silent period requiring massive amounts of comprehensible input. Some people claim that students are only exposed to certain forms of language, and are being neglected of others, such as discussion or debate. The time limitation, we can have trouble in controlling the students, while waiting them to complete their task. Also, at the initial levels, this task-based learning was not be helpful because students did not have the language to start and proceed the task necessary to complete the lesson.

2. The noise and indiscipline in the classroom

While students do their tasks, they need to interact with teacher and also students and for this reason it created noise and it was hard for teacher to accommodate discipline. And other than this, it was time consuming, too. It required teacher to tell the task, provide all students to understand and do it in an appropriate way. These all required a lot of time. For these reasons it is hard for teachers to make a task-based lesson but I think that if it can be done it is good way of teaching.

Discussions

The researcher's journals and video-recorded observation results are summarized and discussed as regarding research question 1, the teacher's reflections after using the task-based learning approach provided learners with opportunities to use the English language contextually, and to explore it through situational activities. Because task-based learning is student-centered, students were encouraged to use language creatively through the tasks they are asked to perform. Task-based learning helped students to practice English in an anxiety free classroom. Errors, while practicing the language, were considered natural as the focus was on fluency and message conveying. Therefore, students felt free to express their ideas without fear of being reprimanded for making mistakes. A close look to the task-based model, we find that, the traditional presentation, practice, production (PPP) lesson is reversed. Instead of having the teacher authoritatively manage

all the tasks of the lesson, students start with the task themselves. When they finish the task, the teacher draws their attention to the language used in the task, making corrections and modifications to the students' performance. Moreover, students found task-based learning challenging, fun and motivating. It provided the chance for shy and quieter students to express themselves in a more forthright way.

Discussions of Teacher's Reflection on Task-based Learning Approach

Based on the summaries of researcher's journal and video-recorded observation, the teacher's reflections on task-based learning approach could be categorized into three aspects: (1) the teacher as a selector of tasks: The teacher needed to select, adjust, and create appropriate in-class tasks and activities, and then the teacher needed to shape these tasks in keeping with students' language proficiency levels, needs, and interests. (2) The teacher as a trainer to prepare students for tasks: The teacher needed to train students at the stage of pre-task, such as to introduce topics, to describe task instructions, to demonstrate task process, and to help students to learn or recall useful words and phrases to make the task easy to complete. (3) The teacher as a facilitator: The teacher needed to use some form-focusing techniques, including pre-task activities, studying the given conversation, guiding exposure to similar tasks, and using selected material.

Recommendations

In light of the results of the research, the following recommendations are presented:

1. The content of the English textbook of the second year secondary should be reconsidered and task based learning activities should be included in teaching English as a foreign language at the secondary stage.
2. Oral English communication skills should be stressed in teaching English as a foreign language at the secondary stage. Teachers of English are thus required to prepare their students be able to use oral communication in the language classroom.
3. Teachers of English are required to improve their oral communication competencies.
4. Oral English communication skills should be included in the students' evaluation program. It is not enough to prepare the students for the summation written achievement tests as these tests cannot measure the very qualities proposed by the Ministry of Education as the goals of teaching English as a foreign language at the secondary stage.
5. Awareness of the importance of oral English communication should be recognized by the students and parents because teachers of English are thus between a rock and a hard place. If they try to follow the task-based instruction, then students and parents will complain, since for them any lesson content that is not covered by the exam questions is a waste of time, and is

depriving students of their opportunities to get high marks at the achievement test.

6. Although this study was on a small-scale basis, the findings might provide a condensation of the content areas of professional development programs that need to be organized in the future. Teachers see the necessity of teaching productive skills such as listening-speaking and writing over the teaching of reading and grammar and structure. The training courses that help improve teachers' English proficiency are also highly valued.

7. There should be future research conducted on number of hours of exposure necessary for Thai learners to become moderately proficient users of English. This may help advocate self-directed learning or help policy makers see the necessity to provide more time-allocation for English classes, hire more English native speakers, or support using English in teaching other subjects to increase students' English exposure.

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