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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Role of Task-Based Language Teaching in Developing English Speaking Skills among B2-Level University Students

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Abstract. Speaking is a key component of English language learning, especially for university students who need to communicate effectively in academic and professional environments. However, even students with a sufficient knowledge of English may experience difficulties expressing complex ideas, participating in discussions, and maintaining fluent conversations. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) offers an approach that places meaningful communication at the center of learning. This article examines the role of TBLT in developing speaking skills among B2 level university students through a review of relevant literature. It explores the characteristics of these learners, identifies the speaking skills that require further development, and discusses how task-based activities can support fluency, accuracy, interaction, and communicative confidence. The article also considers challenges associated with using TBLT in university classrooms, including differences in learner participation, limited classroom time, and the need for appropriate feedback. It argues that TBLT can provide valuable opportunities for speaking development when tasks are relevant to students' needs and supported by purposeful instruction and assessment.

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Introduction

English speaking skills have become increasingly important in higher education because university students are expected to communicate their ideas clearly in different academic and professional situations. These situations may include participating in seminars, giving presentations, discussing research findings, working on group projects, and communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds. Although students may study English grammar and vocabulary for several years, their ability to use the language effectively in real conversations does not always develop at the same pace.

This problem is related to the majority of B2 level university students. According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), B2 learners can improve their language fluency and spontaneity which makes regular communication possible without language barriers. Nevertheless, reaching this level does not mean that every learner can communicate confidently in every situation. Students may still struggle to interact quickly, organize complex ideas while speaking, or use appropriate language during unfamiliar situations.

One possible reason for these difficulties is that language instruction may give considerable attention to grammatical rules, vocabulary exercises, and written assignments without providing sufficient opportunities for speaking. Consequently, students may still face difficulties while using language ability.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) offers a possible solution to this problem. Rather than organizing lessons primarily around individual grammatical structures, TBLT uses meaningful tasks as a central part of the learning process. Students may use the exact language to achieve their goals, such as solving a problem, reaching an agreement, planning an event, or discussing a social issue.

Research reviews suggest that task-based instruction can support the development of speaking performance, although its effectiveness depends on how tasks are designed and implemented (Sang & Nguyen, 2023).

Who to teach?

When selecting an appropriate teaching approach, identifying students' ability in learning language is important. This article focuses on B2 level university students who study English as a foreign language. At this level, students generally have basic grammatical knowledge and enough topic vocabulary to discuss familiar and some abstract topics. They can explain their opinions, understand complex texts, and participate in conversations with a reasonable degree of fluency (Council of Europe, 2020).

Nevertheless, students at the same level may differ in their learning needs from each other. Some may communicate confidently in informal conversations but face difficulties during presentations. Others may have extensive knowledge of grammar but struggle when responding to unexpected questions. Therefore, teachers should avoid considering that all B2 learners have the same strengths and weaknesses. Instead, their needs can be identified through classroom observation, short speaking assessments, learner questionnaires, and discussions about their learning goals.

What to teach?

When teaching B2-level university students, the main objective should be to develop their ability to communicate effectively rather than focusing only on grammatical correctness. Although grammar and vocabulary remain important, students also need to organize ideas, maintain conversations, and respond appropriately to other speakers. The proposed instruction targets three connected aspects of speaking: fluency, linguistic accuracy, and interactional competence. Fluency involves expressing ideas coherently without hesitation, while accuracy concerns the appropriate use of grammar and vocabulary. Interactional competence includes turn-taking, asking follow-up questions, clarifying information, and negotiating agreement. These skills can be developed through tasks that require students to exchange information and make decisions together. For example, a group discussion about improving university facilities requires learners to explain preferences, compare alternatives, and support their suggestions with reasons.

How to teach through TBLT?

Task-Based Language Teaching provides a framework for developing the speaking skills identified above. A central characteristic of TBLT is that learners use language to achieve communicative goals in real-life situations such as problem solving rather than simply demonstrating their knowledge of particular grammatical structures and lexical resources. Long (2016) discusses the theoretical principles of TBLT and addresses important questions concerning its implementation.

For practical classroom use, Willis's (1996) framework offers a useful sequence consisting of three main stages: the pre-task, the task cycle, and language focus. These stages can be adapted to the needs of B2 level university students. During the pre-task stage, the teacher introduces the topic, activates students' background knowledge, and provides useful vocabulary or expressions. For example, before a discussion about online education, students might review phrases for expressing agreement, disagreeing politely, and supporting opinions. The teacher also explains the task's objective and gives students time to prepare their ideas. During the task-performance stage, students work in pairs or small groups to complete a communicative activity. They might compare different approaches to university education and agree on three recommendations for improving students' learning journey. The teacher monitors their progress, encourages participation, and provides help when needed. Finally, during the post-task and language-focus stage, students present their conclusions and reflect on their performance and can also review their performances to correct them if needed. The teacher provides feedback and addresses grammatical, lexical, or pronunciation mistakes.

An example of a task-based speaking activity

Pre-communicative exercises

Exercise A: Gap filling

Words: because, agree, opinion, however, should

1. In my _____, university students need more study spaces.
2. I _____ with your suggestion.
3. Students _____ have more opportunities to practise speaking.
4. I support this idea _____ it would help students.
5. The library is useful. _____, it closes too early.

Exercise B: Sentence transformation

Rewrite the sentences using the expressions in brackets.

1. I think the university needs a bigger library. (In my opinion...)
2. Your idea is good, but it is expensive. (Although...)
3. We can improve university life by providing more study spaces. (One way to...)

Expected outcome: Students practise useful vocabulary, grammar, and expressions before using them in a real-life conversation.

Communicative exercises

Activity's aim is developing fluency, interaction, and the ability to express opinions.

Instructions:

1. Divide students into groups of four.
2. Give each group the following situation:

Your university wants to improve student life, but it has a limited budget. Your group must choose the three most important improvements.

3. Students discuss these options:

- Building a larger library
- Providing free university transport
- Creating more comfortable classrooms
- Offering free online learning resources
- Opening an affordable student cafe

4. Students explain their opinions, ask questions, disagree politely, and negotiate.
5. Each group agrees on three improvements and explains its choices to the class.

Useful expressions:

- “I believe we should choose this option because...”
- “What do you think about...?”
- “I understand your point, but...”
- “Could we consider another option?”
- “I agree with you because...”

Expected outcome: Students use English to exchange ideas, solve a problem, and reach a shared decision rather than simply practising.

Post-communicative exercises

Activity: Presenting solutions

Instructions:

1. After completing the group discussion, each group prepares a short presentation about its three chosen improvements.

2. Students explain why the improvements are necessary and how they would benefit university students.

3. Each group presents its ideas to the class without reading a complete prepared script.

4. The teacher provides feedback on fluency, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and coherence.

Expected outcome: Students apply the language they have practised to produce their own responses and communicate ideas more independently.

Conclusion

Task-Based Language Teaching can play an important role in developing English speaking skills among B2 level university students by providing meaningful opportunities to communicate, exchange information, solve problems, and express complex ideas. These activities can support the development of fluency, accuracy, interactional competence, and confidence in expressing their ideas in English.

However, effective implementation requires more than introducing group discussions or communicative activities into lessons. Teachers need to identify learners' needs, select tasks with clear outcomes, provide appropriate preparation, monitor participation, and offer feedback. Ultimately, the value of TBLT lies in connecting language learning with purposeful communication. When tasks are carefully designed and aligned with learners' needs, they can help university students move beyond knowing English towards using it more effectively in academic, social, and professional situations.

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