Fostering Undergraduate Students' Speaking Skills through Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching

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Abstract

Recent research has highlighted a grave concern of undergraduate English language teachers in Indian colleges. Despite studying English in school for several years, students often exhibit ineffective English language skills, particularly the oral skills. These students hesitate while expressing their opinions, making presentations, taking part in discussions, etc. This paper emphasizes the effectiveness of task-based language learning and teaching (TBLLT) in developing spoken English skills in academic settings through two sample task-based activities.

Introduction: Importance of Developing College Students' Oral Skills in English

English language in India serves as "a global language in a multilingual country" (NCERT, 2005, p.38). Proficiency in English is important since it the language of information, employment, upward social mobility and career growth (Agnihotri & Khanna, 1997; Sheorey, 2006). In an academic context, proficiency in spoken English is important for expressing opinions, participating in class discussions, making presentations and appearing in oral exams. English communication skills are increasingly the prerequisite for business employment and career advancement (Wardrope, 2002; Rausch, Elmuti, Minnis, & Abebe, 2005; Tuleja & Greenhalgh, 2008).

Teachers find that even though college students have studied English for several years they are inadequately skilled in listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Kaushik, 2018). Recent reports and surveys show that there is a perceptible lack of good English communication skills in today's graduates (Aring, 2012; Aspiring Minds, 2013; Wheebox, 2019). Teacher-centred teaching is a major reason for a shaky foundation in the English language since it deprives students of the opportunity to speak in the classroom. As students prefer to converse in their native languages outside the classroom, the use of oral English becomes limited. Therefore, it is important to involve students in activities that promote communicative competence in the classroom, and this is where task-based learning and teaching could prove useful.

Why Adopt Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching (TBLLT)?

The term "task" refers to an outcome-based activity that involves learners in meaning-focused language used to enhance communicative competence for real-world interaction. According to Prabhu (1987), a task "is an activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process" (p.24). Nunan (1989) elaborates that a task "must have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right" (p.10). According to Ellis (2003),a task comprises a work plan with a focus on the meaning and any of the four language skills or a combination of them; and a specific communicative outcome that engages learners in authentic language use and involves employing cognitive processes. A TBLLT approach aims at creating a natural context for learners to practice their communication skills in the target language.

Several studies on TBLLT have shown that when learners are given opportunities to express and share their opinions, their oral skills improved (Thompson & Millington, 2012; Munirah & Muhsin, 2015; Sarıçoban & Karakurt, 2016; Safitri, Rafli, & Dewanti, 2020). However, practitioners have also critiqued TBLLT (Van den Branden, 2016). The concerns are around tensions between meaning-focused tasks and

form-focused prescribed tests; problems in implementing TBLLT in large classrooms; increased use of L1 by learners during task-based work; and so on. While these concerns need to be addressed in implementing TBLLT, it is significant to remember that TBLLT comprises of many dimensions that "can be adapted to take into account the needs of teachers and learners in different instructional contexts" (Ellis, Skehan, Li, Shintani, & Lambert, 2019, p.xiv).

Sample Task-Based Activities

The paper shows two sample tasks designed by the author (Kaushik, 2018). These have been designed as "task-as-work plans" (Breen, 1989, as cited in Ellis, 2003, p. 5). Discussing the transaction of tasks and how they affect students' oral proficiency are beyond the purview of this paper. Although TBLLT practitioners have proposed different task frameworks, these sample tasks follow the three-stage structure of pre-task, during the task and post-task (Ellis 2003). The following tasks are similarly modelled.

Sample Task 1
What's Your Take? Generating Perspectives
Introduction: This is a "pedagogic task" (Nunan, 1989) aimed at developing learners' everyday communicative competence in expressing their opinion, assimilating different viewpoints and making a formal presentation in academic settings.

Figure 1
Example of a Painting
(From Pradarshini Brochure 2016, Raghuvansham School of Modern Art)
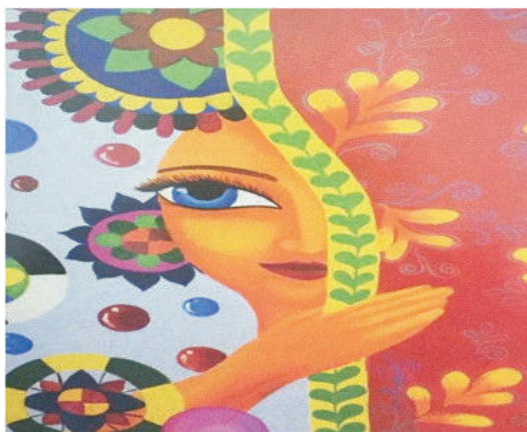
Materials required: One A4 Size Paintings or photos (Example: Figure 1)and a handout of the evaluation grid (Table 1) for each group.

Nature of activity: Group work

Pre-task: Brainstorm what the term "perspective" means and how perspectives differ.
Introduce the learners to the painting for which they are required to offer their insights on it.

Table 1
An Evaluation Grid for Evaluating a Presentation

Rating	Content (Ideas and opinions)	Body Language (Posture, Eye contact, gestures)	Audibility	Pronunciation	Grammatical errors	Participation of every member
1 (Basic level)						
2						
3						
4						
5 (High Proficienty level)						
Total						

(Scale of 1 to 5, where 1 represents basic competency and 5 represents high proficiency).

During the task:
1. Make groups of 4-5 students each. Two groups have to select the same painting. Hence, if there are 8 groups in the class then 4 paintings/photos are required.
2. Distribute the evaluation grid to each group (Table 1).
3. Ask the group members to reflect on the painting and to share their opinions.
4. The two groups who have selected the same painting share their views with the class, so that other students can notice contrary viewpoints, an extension of the same idea, repetition, etc. Encourage the students to be creative while expressing their opinions; they can include statements, stories, personal anecdotes, contemporary examples, and so on. Every group member speaks at least 2-3 sentences each. Familiarize students with the dynamics of group presentation—agreeing or disagreeing with another participant, adding a point, contradicting or repeating to emphasize, etc.

5. While a group is making the presentation, encourage other groups to make notes about the presentation and subsequently rate the presentation on the evaluation grid. The grid has to be completed before the next presentation begins.
6. This task can be accomplished in a time-bound manner, where each stage of task-work is assigned a time limit.

Post task:
1. After the group presentation, ask the students to reflect on their experience of sharing their views, arriving at similar or contrary opinions, presenting creatively, etc.
2. Invite one evaluation feedback per presentation. Encourage students to share how they have rated the presentations, offer positive feedback and suggest improvements.

Options:
1. The tasks can either be time bound or run over a few classes.
2. If required, provide students with a list of connectors (illustratively,

additionally, and, moreover, in addition to, besides, furthermore, but, too, although, besides, as well as, nevertheless and so on).

3. Alternatively, you could provide a list of phrases such as:
   - I think this painting/picture describes a . . ..
   - My friend mentioned that this painting is . . . but I have a different opinion.
   - Another way of looking at the painting is . . ..
   - I would like to draw your attention to . . ..

Sample Task 2
Get Interview-Ready: Role Playing in Different Situations
Introduction: This is a "real-world task" (Nunan, 1989) aimed at developing learners' communicative competence in taking and giving interviews.

Materials required: Any cartoon strip related to interviews (as Figure 2), a laptop with speakers, some interview-based roleplay cue cards (Table 2).

Nature of Activity: Pair-work

Pre task:
Use a cartoon strip related to the interview to start a discussion. Invite students to share personal experiences of their interviews. Brainstorm about different types of interviews (formal, semi-formal, informal); various formats (telephone, face-to-face, one-on-one/panel) and their purpose (discussion, selection, evaluation, persuasion, etc.)

Figure 2
Example of an Interview Comic Strip.

1. After the discussion, play a short audio clip of 4 to 5 minutes on an interview (excerpt from David Rubenstein Show: Microsoft CEO, Satya Nadella's interview – Youtube).
2. Ask the students to discuss the following with their partners:
   - Interview Etiquette: The way the interviewer begins and concludes an interview. Is it appropriate and polite?
   - Questions: What are the types of questions asked? Can you think of some other questions?
   - Framing of questions: How are the questions framed? Can you suggest other ways of asking questions?
   - Qualities of the interviewee: Observe the way the interviewee answers the questions. Can you describe some qualities of the interviewee (manner of speaking, volume, speed, word stress, pauses, content, body language)?
3. Invite the student-pairs to discuss their views with the class.
4. Prepare for Mock interview. Ask the learners to incorporate the do's and the don'ts of an interview as they role-play in the next stage.

During the task:
1. Ask the students to choose a situation for role-playing for which you have prepared cue cards (Table 2). Some interview situations could be: A placement interview with a company, an interview for "The Best Student Award" scholarship, an interview with the principal on the golden jubilee year of the college to be published in the college magazine

(Try to provide situations that students can identify with and feel comfortable while role-playing, rather than abstract, futuristic workplace situations)

Table 2
Cue Cards for an Interview for "The Best Student of B.Com (Honours) Award"

Cue Card for the Interviewer(s)	Cue Card for Students
Smile and welcome the candidate	Seek permission to enter, greet the interviewer(s) and wait to be offered a seat to sit down
Ask the candidate to summarize their achievements.	Briefly recount your achievements mentioning only the most important ones.
What are the reasons for selecting this candidate over others?	Mention some of your positive qualities. You could talk about your extraordinary achievements or consistent good academic record, etc.
What are the other accomplishments that support this candidate's case?	Mention any position that you have served. This includes sports, dance, office-bearer of some society, etc.
Wind up the interview by thanking the candidate and inform them that the results will be announced on . . . . (mention the date).	Answer questions politely and honestly and thank the interviewer before recording
General tips: Be welcoming, do not ask personal questions, do not embarrass or insult any candidate.	General tips: Be conscious of your body language and paralanguage; keep smiling; maintain eye contact; be honest, do not bluff; carry supporting documents; etc.

2. Distribute the cue cards to every student pair, but encourage them to role-play without its help.
3. Give some preparation time.
4. Invite the student-pairs to role play in front of the class.

Conclusion

In the contemporary scenario where English occupies a significant position as a global link language and is widely used for communication and dissemination of disciplinary knowledge, undergraduate students must have effective English communication skills. TBLLT facilitates students' English speaking skills by engaging them in authentic tasks that provide a natural context for target language use. The paper shows two sample tasks to develop student's oral communication skills.

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