



Improving Students' Speaking Skills through Task-Based Learning: An Action Research at the English Department

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Abstract

This study aims to improve students' speaking skills at the Department of English. Based on interviews carried out to get initial data on the students' speaking skills, it was shown that the students had problems in speaking due to inadequate knowledge of the language which in turn made the students felt unconfident to speak. The students were not familiar with various speaking activities facilitating them to speak. They read text to convey ideas and a lack of strategies when speaking. To help the students, task-based learning was adapted through an action research in one-semester courses. Fifteen students in the third semester participated in this study. The data were taken from the results of the pre-test to post-test, interview, and observation. The findings reveal that the use of task-based learning helps the students improve their speaking skills of three indicators assessed: accuracy, vocabulary, and comprehension. The students manage to complete the tasks by conducting various activities through three phases of learning: the pre-task, task-cycle, and form focus. They succeed in improving their speaking skills and gaining their confidence. The students can evaluate their learning in pairs and group works.

Keywords: *Students' Speaking skills; Task-based learning; Speaking*

Introduction

Speaking is perceived as the most prominent skills compared to three other language skills: reading, listening, and writing. People can be called as 'the speaker of language' when they speak the language as if they included all other kinds of knowing (Ur, 2012: 117). They use their linguistics knowledge and their background knowledge to convey ideas, to negotiate meaning, and to explore thought. They very skillfully employ words and arrange them into appropriate sentences to create interesting talks. As Bygate (2009) says that when we speak we have to not only know the knowledge of vocabulary and grammar but also to produce and adapt them to the circumstances. Once the speaker masters the knowledge and skill to use them, he or she will rapidly make decisions, implement them smoothly, and adjust their conversation in a spontaneous interaction. However, to gain the knowledge and use them in speaking is not always easy for EFL and ESL students. Most students find it difficult to express grammatically correct sentences due to the significant differences in the grammar of the native language of the students and that of the EFL (Manurung, 2015). The students have limited chances to experience speaking activities in class and

to practice speaking outside the school (Castañeda, 2019; Essien, 2016). Consequently, the students always have problems when speaking.

Hamouda (2012) from Qassim University Saudi Arabia conducted a study related to problems faced by students in speaking. The findings revealed that many students in EFL classrooms feeling reluctant to respond to their teacher due to many factors such as low English proficiency, fear of speaking in front of others, negative evaluation, shyness, lack of confidence and preparation, and fear of making mistakes. Similarly, EFL students feeling unwilling to speak English in Indonesia experience the same factors and cultural matter affects their learning. The students tend to speak Bahasa Indonesia when they are learning English in class. They turn to be "unquestioning minds" in interaction as they believe that a teacher never makes mistakes (Marcellino, 2008). The cultural tendency of Indonesian in which people enjoy living in harmony creates the students' minds and attitudes when learning (Suryanto, 2015). The students do not show great initiative in learning as they prefer to do what their teacher asks them to.

The unchallenging process of learning affects students' performance in speaking. During the interview to gather the first data of the students' speaking skills for this study, the students mention that they are always assigned a task of group presentation that they prepare it at home. They read texts to inform ideas when speaking in class. They do not use strategie when speaking. The students are not familiar with various speaking activities facilitating them to speak spontaneously. They feel ashamed as their friends will laugh at them when speaking. Their pre-test results show that the students' speaking skills is considered low. The accuracy is the lowest followed by vocabulary and comprehension. The students need to be helped to improve their speaking skills, therefore the researcher decides to use task-based learning.

Task-based learning emphasizes the learning on the use of tasks both in planning teaching and classroom teaching (Richards, 2006; 30). The learning is focused on the negotiation of meaning, the use of target language for authentic and meaningful communication (Richards, 2006). Negotiation of meaning is aimed to resolve communication problems (Suzuki, 2018). Task-based learning accommodates the students to learn the use of form and communication (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011; 193). The form-focused work is functioned as the enabling skills since it is designed to develop skills and knowledge that will ultimately facilitate the process of authentic communication (Nunan, 2004: 22). The enabling skills are in two kinds: language exercises and communicative activities. The students are hoped to not only understand the language functions but also to use them (Branden, 2006; 6). The students are intended to improve linguistic accuracy in their speech although there are no communication problems between them (Suzuki, 2018). Since the concept of task-based learning is learning by doing, the students are expected to experience the language by completing the tasks.

The proponents of tasks-based learning mention types of tasks carried out during the learning process. Richards (2006) says that pedagogical tasks and real-world tasks facilitate the students to experience the language. Pedagogical tasks, for example information gaps, aim at the use of strategic interaction and the element of language (Nunan, 2004 in Khoshshima & Tasuj, 2014). Meanwhile real-world task, for example, a role-play of an interview, reflects the use of language beyond the classroom. Pedagogical tasks are not designed for the students to practice performing the tasks but to activate the students' speaking skills (Nunan, 2004). Willis and Willis (2007) suggest seven task types: ordering, sorting, matching, comparing, project and creative tasks, sharing personal experience, problem-solving, and listing. J. Willis (1996) says that task is a goal-oriented activity in which the students use language to achieve a real outcome. They use whatever target language resources they have in order to solve a problem, do a puzzle, play a game, or share and compare experiences.

Nunan (2004;35-37) provides principles in implementing task-based learning. They are (1) scaffolding in which lessons and materials should provide supporting the learning takes place and the

students are not expected to produce language that they have not learned yet, (2) task dependency, that is within a lesson, one task should grow out of, and build upon, the ones that have gone before, (3) recycling language maximizes opportunities for learning and activates the 'organic' learning, (4). active learning, learners learn best by actively using the language they are learning, (5) integration, learners should be taught in ways that make clear the relationships between linguistic form, communicative function and semantic meaning, (6) learners should be encouraged to move from reproductive to creative language use, (7) reflection, learners should be given opportunities to reflect on what they have learned and how well they are doing.

Researches have shown the benefits of employing task-based learning to improve the students' speaking skills. The findings of a study conducted by Namaziandost, Hashemifardnia, & Shafiee (2019) reveal that the students can speak fluently after completing opinion-gap, reasoning-gap, and information-gap activities through task-based learning compared to traditional learning. Similarly, Albino (2017) finds that the students can increase their speaking skills particularly in the aspect of grammar after their teacher uses recast and prompt strategies during the task cycle. The focus of form carried out through task repetition facilitates the students to acquire their grammar knowledge from the simple to the complex forms since they receive feedback during the phase of learning (Van de Guchte, Braaksma, Rijlaarsdam, & Bimmel, 2016). The more frequent the students participate in different tasks, the better they evaluate their performance (Meng & Cheng, 2010). However, teaching instruction should be given more attention in EFL classes in the light of using task-based (Elsheikh Hago Elmahdi, 2016). The lecturer can adapt the tasks purposed by the proponents of tasks-based and create activities to facilitate the students complete the tasks.

Considering all problems that make the students are not easy to speak, the researcher is intended to conduct a study to improve students' speaking skills at the English Department of Pamulang University. The researcher adapts task-based learning as a model of learning in class and adopts an action research method (CAR) with three cycles. CAR focuses on the common issue or the existence of problems in the classroom (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). The question for this research is Can the students of an English Department at Pamulang University, Indonesia improve their speaking skills by implementing task-based learning?

Improving Speaking Skills

To be able to speak foreign languages, the students should not only understand the knowledge of the language but also have the skills to use the knowledge (Bygate, 2009). The linguistic knowledge encompasses structure, meaning, and use through four types of knowledge: phonological, grammatical, lexical, and discourse (Burn, 2016). The students need to develop their speech function skills and interaction management skills (Goh, 2007). To employ all the knowledge and skills in speaking, the students need to be trained with various communication activities such as turn-taking, information-gap, role play, simulation, storytelling, and drama.

One of how a speaker of a foreign language needs to know how to negotiate control of a conversation is through the business of handling turn-taking (Bygate, 2009). It is a rule that manage conversation how participant change when the turn given (Armansyah, Asbah, & Fauzi Bafadal, 2018). The students can ask a simple question and give a minimal response. The students can even only ask a simple question "and you?" (Harmer, 2007). The minimal responses are usually predictable, often idiomatic phrases that participants use to indicate understanding, agreement, doubt, and other responses to what another speaker is saying (Marriam Bashir; Muhammad Azeem; Ashiq Hussain Dogar, 2016). The students can focus on what the other participant is saying, without having to simultaneously plan a response. However, it is possible for the students to construct simple sentences, to use the target expression and vocabulary they

need when speaking. This speaking activity can be well managed under the number of students in class and their learning objective. Turn-taking management is one of the specific aspects of the co-construction of interaction (Galaczi, 2014).

Information gap activity is based on the principle that there are gaps in real-life communication in which people do not share the same information (Goh, 2007). This activity can be carried out in the classroom to fulfill the need of the students to bridge the gaps in an interaction. The students use the language to exchange some information and to get the meaning across (Ismaili & Bajrami, 2016). A study to increase students' speaking fluency on Iranian EFL students conducted by Namaziandost et al. (2019) reveals that information-gap activity is more effective than opinion-gap and reasoning-gap activities. The three experimental groups outperformed the control group on the posttest.

Roleplay is a "complete range of communication technologies to develops language fluency, to promotes student interaction during the class, to increase students' motivation, and to share responsibilities between teacher-students" (Kusnierek in Rojas Rojas, 2018). The students act different characters and speak the language they learn. They plan the roles, choose the vocabularies, and the expression they need (Waffa, 2014 in Rojas & Villafuerte, 2018). The findings of a study conducted by Krebt (2017) show that there is a significant improvement in the speaking skill of the experimental group of students using role play. Dingli suggested a well-designed role play technique for the students to reflect and experience responsible learning (Dingli, Khalfey, & Leston-Bandeira, 2013).

Storytelling is not limited to entertainment but also used as an effective teaching tool in a language classroom (Mokhtar, Halim, & Kamarulzaman, 2011). The students can improve their speaking proficiency and motivation by using storytelling techniques (Sharma, 2018). The shy students can start to speak English in the classroom. The students will be able to experience meaningful learning in which they convey ideas, do some reflection on the dialogs used, work together in groups and construct new knowledge of what they have learned (Alterio, 2008).

Drama is one of the speaking activities that can be carried out in the classroom. Drama application significantly contributes to the emotional quality of the FL classroom. It helps to reduce speaking anxiety and promotes positive feelings toward the learning experience (Atas, 2015). Drama helps the students create authentic interaction in learning language (Sweeney, Preedeekul, & Kunyot, 2017). Drama contributes to the enhancement of the students' English language proficiency as it can integrate the four skills in addition to providing the platform for the students to actively use and practice the target language with each other (Nordin, Sharif, Fong, Mansor, & Zakaria, 2012).

Those speaking activities mentioned above can be carried out through task-based procedures. The students may choose and repeat some activities as the out come at the last phase.

Implementing Task-based Learning

The core of task-based learning is a learning experiment in which the students experience the language they have learned by completing tasks. The complete task-based implementation follows certain phases: pre-task, during the task, and language focus (D. Willis & Willis, 2007).

The first phase is the pre-task. This phase is for the lecturer to equip the students with the language they need. The major types of activities are consciousness-raising and teaching. The lecturer may introduce the topic and provide instruction on the task. The lecturer has class brainstorming the vocabulary that the students have learned and will be used for completing the task. The lecturer activates the students' linguistic resources to prepare them for the task cycle. It is important to remind the students

to speak only English from the beginning of the phase since it will become their habit which finally helps them to improve their speaking skills.

The second phase is task-cycle. The students enlarge their participation in the main task in groups and pairs. This phase allows the students to carry out the task in different ways. They may use a variety of communication strategies to complete the task, for example they use negotiation skills to understand the character of a picture (Thompson & Millington, 2012). The students use their existing linguistic skills to complete the task. They may prepare a report on their findings and share the report with the class. It is possible for the students to complete the tasks by carrying out other activities for example practicing dialogs, role-play, turn-taking and gap information in pairs and storytelling and drama in a group. They can exchange information and practice some interactional strategies through role-play and simulation. The students may do negotiation of meaning during turn-taking. The lecturer assists if necessary and comments on the task and the activities.

The task cycle is followed by language focus. The lecturer draws the students' attention to the correct use of English. The students should be reminded that accuracy and restructuring also have significance (Mohammadipour & Rashid, 2015). The lecturer provides feedback on form or word meaning from context and allows the students to repeat some speaking activities or to create a speaking performance as an output. The students may be given a chance to reflect on their learning by commenting on their findings of the task, repeated activities and the grammar error taking place during the task repetition. Therefore, the students will experience meaningful learning.

Methodology

Fifteen students are enrolled in this study. They are students of the English Department in their third semester in South Tangerang, Indonesia. The students participated for 12 weeks of the 15 weeks of semester. Based on the results of an interview and observations to get the first data, it showed that the students had problems in speaking due to inadequate language knowledge and lack of confidence. They had a small exposure to various speaking activities. Therefore, the researcher provided one topic for two meetings in class in which the students complete the tasks by using various speaking activities through task-based procedures.

In phase 1, the students were introduced topics and reminded of the language expression and vocabulary they needed to use to complete the tasks. They listened to a short dialog. The researcher participated as the lecturer in this study did some brainstorming.

In phase 2, the students sat in pairs and groups. They started speaking through various activities from practicing simple dialogues, turn-taking, gap information, interview, discussion, and short role-play at the first until the eighth meeting or in cycle one and two. The students carried out storytelling, simulation, and drama at the last four meetings or in cycle three.

In phase 3, the students reported their activities and were given feedback on form. They evaluated their learning and repeated some speaking activities using appropriate grammar, and vocabulary.

To maximize the results of students' speaking improvement, the researcher adopts a classroom action research (CAR) through three cycles. Each cycle consists of four steps namely planning, action, observation, and reflection (Kemmis and Mc Taggart; 1988 in Burns, 2009).

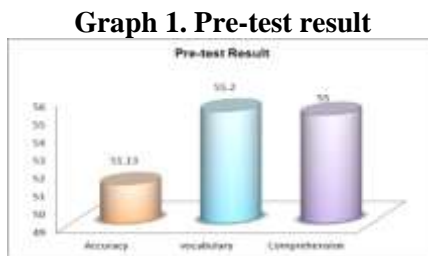
The data consist of quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data were taken from the results of the pre-test to the post-test. The variable measured for each test are there speaking components: grammar, vocabulary, and comprehension. The data were analyzed using SPSS into descriptive statistics.

The qualitative data is the semi-structured interview to obtain students' comments on the implementation of task-based learning at the end of learning.

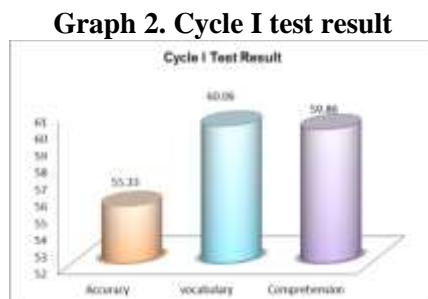
Findings

Students' Speaking Skills Improvement

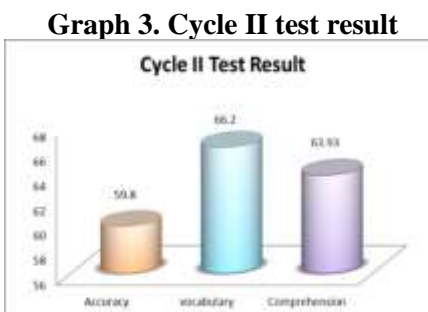
Fifteen samples or students participate in this study. They were given a pre-test to post-test. The students were also evaluated at the end of cycles one, two, and three to identify their speaking development on accuracy, vocabulary and comprehension. The students' speaking skills improvement can be seen on graph 1, 2, 3, and 4 below.



The graph of the pre-test result shows that students' speaking skills is considered low. Each indicator is in the range of 51-55. The accuracy is the lowest compared to other indicators.



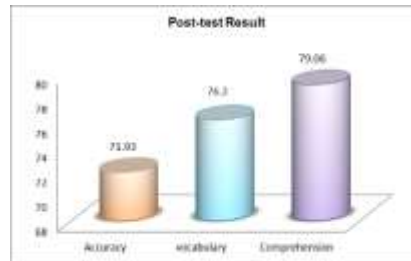
The mean score of the indicators of speaking skills in cycle 1 shows that there is a slight improvement from the mean score in pre-test results. The mean score of vocabulary is 60.06 while comprehension is 59.86 which means the difference only 0.2 points. Meanwhile, the accuracy is still the lowest mean score or 55.33.



Graph 3 above shows that students' speaking score increases in cycle 2. The indicators of speaking: vocabulary and comprehension are in adequate level (61-70) with the highest mean score is 66.2 for

vocabulary. Accuracy is still the lowest mean score among other indicators, even though it increases 4.47 points compared to cycle I but it is still at a poor level (50-61). The mean score of vocabulary has improved 6.4 while comprehension 4.07 compared to the mean score in cycle 1.

Graph 4. Cycle 3 / post test result



The graph 4 above shows that the mean score of indicators of speaking is in the range of 71-80 in which they are considered as in a good level of speaking. The highest mean score is comprehension 79.06 followed by vocabulary 76.2, and accuracy 71.93.

Students' Response on Task-based Learning Use

Overall students respond that activities carried out through task-based learning help them to develop their speaking skills and enhance their confidence. They do not have to read text when conveying ideas anymore. The students understand that they should practice the activities more often outside the school. The students say that task-based learning provides chances to maintain and evaluate their learning. The following are comments from some students participating in this study.

"I was not confident to speak in front of the class before because my English was not good. I used to prepare and memorize a short speech or sentence to be presented for the next meeting in class. I enjoy the speaking activities we carry out in class. I was shy at the beginning but then I get used to doing the activities. I like drama and simulation the most. I like to learn step by step speaking using task-based. I should do more outside the class". [A]

"I was not happy to talk in class because my grammar was not good. After completing tasks and activities by using task-based learning in a group, now I know that grammar should not be memorized but we need to use it in dialogue. Of course I need steps to speak appropriately, and task-based learning is the answer". [B]

"I was frustrated about my vocabulary and grammar. To speak using grammar expressions made me nervous for the first time, but as we did together in groups, I felt relaxed. I like doing the speaking activities using task-based. However I still need to practice more" [C].

"I was afraid to make mistakes if I had to say things in English. I needed to see my notes first before speaking. I sometimes made mistakes in grammar and vocabulary, and I did not know what to do then. After I study in pairs and groups to complete the tasks I can speak now. I like turn-taking by throwing the ball and short role-play when speaking in class. I feel happy to do those activities. Task-based learning is ok, but I need more practice. "[D]

"I was worried if my friends asked me questions because I could not answer it on the spot. I was not sure about my answer. After I study English through task-based learning with my friends in pairs and groups, I feel sure to answer the questions cos my friends help me with the grammar and vocabulary. I like filling gap activities because I only need to give a short answer." [E]

Discussion

The improvement of students speaking skills takes place in each cycle during the action in class. The students seem to increase their confidence as they carry out the speaking activities step by step from practicing simple dialog until performing a mini drama at the end of the semester.

The students' test results in three cycles reveal that the students improve their speaking skills significantly. A slight improvement from the mean score in cycle 1 indicates that the students started speaking appropriately. The students were trained to be aware and to get used of applying appropriate grammar and vocabulary when speaking. They were encouraged to do language exercises and various speaking activities.

The students seemed struggling and not confident at the beginning, but then they enjoyed the turn-taking activity in pairs. The students learned to ask short questions and to give minimal responses without reading a note. One way to encourage students to begin to participate is to help them build up a stock of minimal responses that they can use in different types of exchanges (Marriam Bashir; Muhammad Azeem; Ashiq Hussain Dogar, 2016). The students then continued speaking using a short role-play in pairs and groups. The students seemed much confident to play different roles and topics in cycles 1 and 2. Variety of topics used for conducting role-play may help the students improve their vocabulary (Krebt, 2017).

The students carried out information gap activities in the second cycle. Information gap activity helps introverts to speak (Marashi & Naddim, 2019). The students started focusing on the negotiation of meaning. They were trying to develop their speaking using pictures and maps. The students showed their improvement in speaking. Their score in cycle 2 was better compared to cycle 1. However, accuracy was still the lowest mean score among other indicators. This indicated that it was not easy for the students to use appropriate grammar when speaking. Therefore, the researcher decided to provide the students with speaking activities that challenge the students to evaluate their speaking particularly on the use of grammar.

The students were assigned storytelling, simulation and mini-drama in the third cycle. They created the story, decided theme and script for the mini-drama in groups. The researcher assisted if necessary. The groups may give feedback to each other on the use of grammar. The students were aware of using appropriate grammar and vocabulary. The students seemed happy performing the activities. They did some improvisation when carrying out mini-drama. It shows that the students were confident enough to speak English in a real-life communication practice. The joy of the learning and the responsibility given to create storytelling and mini-drama performances motivate the students to enhance their speaking skills. The score of the students speaking skills in the third cycle shows significant improvement. The students manage to use task-based learning to increase their speaking skills and confidence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study aims to improve students' speaking skills through task-based learning. The results of the pre-test to post-test show development on students' scores after the use of task-based learning. A slight improvement was seen from the mean score in the pre-test results compared to the test in cycle 1. In cycle 2 students' speaking score increases. However, accuracy is still the lowest mean score among other indicators. Even though it increases 7 points compared to cycle 1, but it is still at a poor level (50-61). In cycle 3, the scores show the significant improvement of each indicator compared to the mean score in cycle 2.

The improvement of the students' scores indicates that students' speaking skills increase. This fact is supported by the students' response to the use of task-based learning. They said that undergoing tasks through various activities in pairs and group works facilitates them to speak better English. They can practice simple dialogues, turn-taking, gap information, interview, discussion, short role-play, simulation, and mini-drama. The most important is they can evaluate their learning. Various learning experiences motivate the students to improve their speaking skills in the future.

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