

The Use of Task-Based Approach to Improve Senior High School Students' Oral Communicative Skills

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Abstract: To design a task-based didactic strategy to teach English to senior high school students at Don Bosco High School in Esmeraldas, a descriptive qualitative investigation was carried out in the year 2020, with a population of 11 teachers. The deductive-inductive, hermeneutics methods and analysis and synthesis were used, with the application of a survey. The results revealed that most of the teachers present a lack of knowledge related to the use of task-based activities to teach and develop oral communication skills; although teachers do not have enough didactic materials to teach the mentioned skills at Don Bosco School in Esmeraldas. In addition, a great number of students present different difficulties when communicating orally in the English language. So, teachers have the necessity to use task-based didactic activities to teach oral communication skills. For that reason, there cannot be a better way to involve students than designing and imparting task-based didactic activities which can be carried out during the English class. Therefore, if the Task-Based Approach (TBA) can be an effective method to teach English oral communicative skills, the researcher investigated the effectiveness of this approach and designed a strategy with the main stages: pre-task, task-cycle, and task focus – post task.

Keywords: Communicative Task, Didactic Strategy, Oral Communication Skills, Task-Based Approach

Introduction

The English language has become the most spoken over the world. The importance of English cannot be ignored. Thus, English is considered and widely recognized as the universal language. People from different countries use it to establish a communication between them. In one hand, it is the mother tongue, the native language or it is adopted as the official language. On the other hand, people learn it as a second or foreign language.

Therefore, English is important; many countries have chosen it as a second language. In some countries, educative institutions declared English as a mandatory subject, even in countries where it is not the official one. In Ecuador, learning English as a foreign language is a requirement for the Ecuadorian Education Ministry. Therefore, students have to conclude the senior high school reaching a B1 level. To sum up, students in Ecuador have to put their efforts in learning English.

However, six years of basic education and six years of high school studying English, do not improve the students' English mastery. There is a wide range of methodologies for teaching the foreign language. One of them is the Task-Based Approach which involves students to practice the language with real-life situations. The aim of this approach is to give an advantage in the spoken language. It means, the emphasis is to get students communicate orally in the target language accurately.

Teaching English as a foreign language has a huge importance. Therefore, it has become one subject in the educative curriculum of Ecuador. Consequently, many theories, different methodologies, techniques and strategies are being used. These theories, methodologies, techniques, and strategies are used according to students' needs.

However, there is lack of knowledge about what is the most appropriate method to teach English in a meaningful manner. It would be convenient to explore if the Task-Based Approach could contribute to

solve the problematic described. Therefore, the main question of this investigation emerges: Can the Task-Based Approach improve senior high school students' English language communicative skill?

The general objective of this investigation was to design a Task-Based Didactic material to teach senior high school students' oral communicative skills at Don Bosco School in Esmeraldas. To achieve this general objective, this research proposed three specific objectives: To make a diagnosis of the students' difficulties in oral communication skills, to determine what strategies and materials English teachers use to teach oral communication skills, to diagnose teachers' perceptions about the need to have a didactic material based on tasks to teach oral communication skills, and to plan task-based didactic activities to teach oral communication skills.

Task-Based Language Learning

According to Guariento & Moreley cited by Abdelmajid (2017), the Task-Based Approach is one of the methods that exposes learners to real life input by basing the task on "authentic material" that "simulates" a real-life communication setting. Moreover, this approach focuses on students doing meaningful tasks improving their communicative competence using the target language. According to Willis cited by Waruni, H. (2018) applying the Task-Based Approach, students will be completing tasks involving "real-life" situations which prepare them for authentic communication outside of the classroom.

The Task-based approach gives students the opportunity to be engaged in using the language. In addition, the principal focus of classroom activity is the task considered an instrument to get the students involved in the language practice naturally. It is considered as relevant and authentic tasks. Students can solve problems, share information, and gather experience. For that reason, task activities, given to the students, are the opportunity to use language to achieve a specific outcome (Thanghun, K. 2012).

Moreover, the Task-Based Approach is categorized in three phases: pre-task, while-task, and post-task. The pre-task prepares students to develop the task; the teacher presents the activity and guides students. Besides, the teacher explores the topic with the class, helps students to understand instructions. The While Task is when pupils carry out the activity. The activities can be worked in pairs or in groups while the teacher monitors the class. Then, the reports are prepared, this could be in front of the class orally or written form. Another way to present, the groups or pairs can interchange their written reports and compare results. Finally, The Post Task occurs when the learner focuses on the foreign language that they have used while performing the tasks (Mohammed & Hassan (N.D.)).

Furthermore, there are some tasks that teachers can apply. The most principal are jigsaw, problem-solving, decision making, information gap and opinion exchange tasks. From these activities, teachers can choose, adequate, create or modify taking into consideration students' level and needs. Thus, the activities are students centered. It means, students play a more active and independent role in the English class (Alves de Magalhães, C. 2016).

Advantages for Using TBA in the English Language Classroom

According to UKessays (2018), using the TBA in the English language classroom presents some advantages:

- In addition, learning using tasks provide students an active and participative environment which increases students' motivation toward the English language process.
- Students work in pairs or groups; this permits students produce meaningful interactions on a given topic.
- Using the three stages of the TBA, students rely on previous language, knowledge and experience. It means, students explore previous and new language features.

- TBA introduces the use of authentic materials in the classroom. Besides, learners focus not only on language but also on personal experiences.
- Learners can interact with another pair or group in different real-life situations. It means, their knowledge related with spontaneous interactions will increase.

Disadvantages for Using TBA in the English Language Classroom

UKEssays (2018) argued that using the TBA in the English language classroom presents some disadvantages, among them:

- It emphasizes too much on tasks and communicating that the language is not sometimes used in the correct form.
- It may occur fossilization if it is not executed correctly. Therefore, it can produce barriers for the learner progress.
- The task provides by the teacher does not fulfill the different types of learners. The tasks do not realize the different talents, learning styles and learners' motivation that teachers may face in a classroom.

The Speaking Skill

To learn a second language, scholars are expected to use the English language in various situations, in and out of their classrooms and with local and native people (Roe, B. et al. 2008). That is why, they must develop four skills: listening, writing, reading, and speaking. It is essential to develop these skills to communicate appropriately using the foreign language. However, it is noticed that pupils cannot apply the speaking skills in real-life communicative situations.

According to Yang, Y. (2014), the speaking skill is one of the assessing criteria taken into consideration in some of the international language tests, for instance: TOEFL, IELTS, and others. For that reason, it is a proficiency requirement to teach students to become fluently. Thus, it is a goal to maintain the communication effectively.

One of the principal objectives of using TBA is to develop the speaking skill. Tawil, H. (2018) stated, improving the speaking skill is the most beneficial effect of applying the TBA. This skill is defined as the production of auditory signal as a verbal response in a listener. Besides, improving the speaking skills means that students must produce speech sounds and patterns with the appropriate intonation and rhythm of the foreign language.

Antecedents

Santos, V. (2018) did an investigation entitled "How does task-based learning foster the development of speaking skills in the young learner classroom?" The main aim of this investigation was to understand and implement task-based learning. The study concluded that the teacher should consider some criteria to create speaking activities for young learners. The suggested criteria were level of freedom of the task, the role of pretending in a child's world, the fun nature of the task and the adequate level of challenge to engage learners and meet their proficiency levels.

Tawil, H. (2018) did an investigation concerning: "task-based and situated language learning and its impact on language teaching". This study was carried out in the United States of America. It connects and explains the specific impact of the Task-Based Approach. Moreover, this research explores the benefits for using this method.

Lee, A. & Preedeekul, A. (2017), published an article entitled “Using a Task-Based Approach and drama to improve communicative competence for students at Pibulsongkram Rajabhat university”. This study was done in Thailand with the aim of this research was to investigate the combination of the Task-Based Approach and drama and its effects on students’ communicative competence. In this investigation, students learned drama using the TBA framework. The results were significantly positive, students’ communicative competence increased.

Adendorff, E. (2014), investigated “A Task-Based Approach to improve the communicative skills of university students learning Afrikaans as an additional language. This study was done in South Africa. This paper reports the attitudes and perceptions of students through questionnaires and interviews. It reveals that using the Task-Based Approach activities contributed to the students’ communicative skills in the target language.

Waruni, H. (2018), investigated “Exploring Task-Based Approach to teach oral communication skills in English” in the University of Sri Jayewardenepura in Colombo – Sri Lanka. The findings report stated that students feel more motivated with TBA lessons. Moreover, applying this approach inspired students better in learning oral communication skills compared with the other conventional teaching methods.

Method

This research was held in Esmeraldas, Ecuador where English is taught as a foreign language in the different educational institutions, for instance: schools, high schools, and universities. English is a mandatory subject in the curriculum of public or private educational institution. Consequently, students must develop their skills in the use of this foreign language.

The population consisted of teachers from Don Bosco High school located in Esmeraldas. The sample was 11 English teachers from senior class. The following hypothesis was formulated: If the Task-Based Approach is used in the English language teaching learning process the students’ oral communicative skills will improve.

This research was focused on the use of TBA to develop students’ oral communication skills. It was a descriptive, qualitative, and quantitative investigation in which the deductive, inductive and the hermeneutic methods were used. The technique was a survey, which consisted of a questionnaire of five questions that permitted the fulfilment of the objectives

The data were processed automatically through Google forms, they were interpreted, summarized, and explained through statistical graphics that were elaborated through the Microsoft Excel program. To summarize, the results obtained permitted the author to design a Task-Based Didactic material to teach senior high school students’ oral communicative skills.

Results

In relation to the different difficulties that students present in their oral communication skills, (figure 1), the results revealed there are some aspects in which students present difficulties to communicate orally: English in conversation 73%, Explaining and giving opinions 64 %, Understanding oral messages and carrying out oral presentations 54.5%. This shows the variety of aspects in which students present some problems and need to improve to communicate orally.

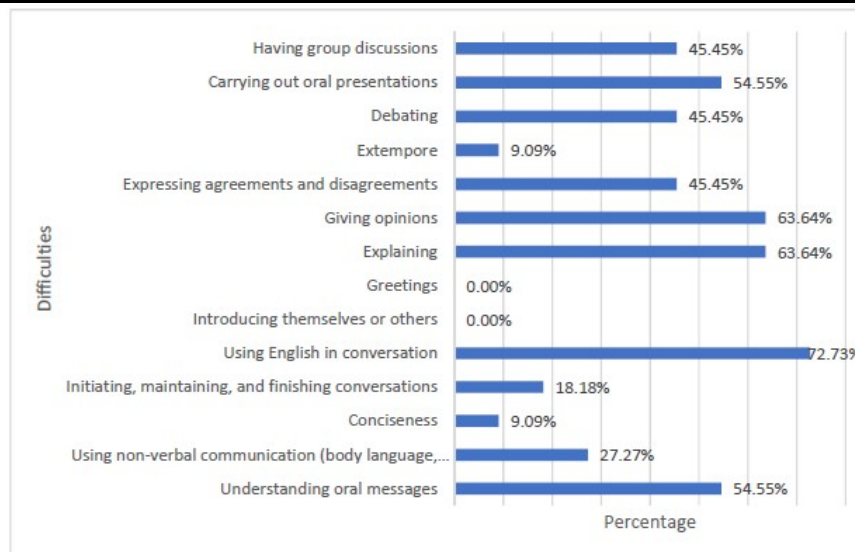


Figure 1: Aspects in which students' difficulties to communicate orally in English.

Source: Survey applied to English teachers at Don Bosco School in Esmeraldas

Referring to the strategies that teachers use to teach oral communication, (figure 2), most teachers agreed that group work and pair work are the common activities applied in the classroom. Moreover, it has been noticed that teachers have the knowledge of some activities, such as: communicative activities, role-plays, and listening to videos. However, it has been shown that some teachers do not know the importance of task-based activities to develop students' communicative skills.

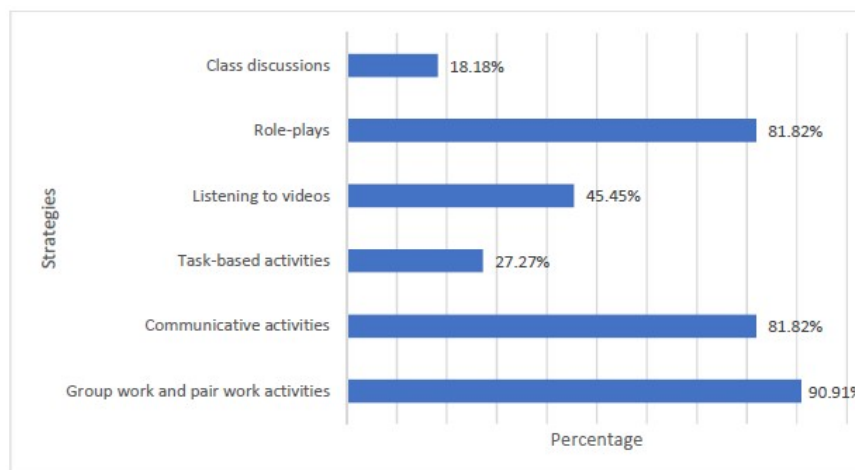


Figure 2: Strategies to teach oral communication to students

Source: Survey applied to English teachers at Don Bosco School in Esmeraldas.

When analyzing the types of didactic materials used to teach oral communication, (figure 3), the 45% of teachers stated that they use extra didactic materials with complementary activities and the 55% of teachers use the textbook. It revealed that it is necessary to have extra materials to develop communicative skills. It means, the book does not contain enough speaking activities. Therefore, it is essential to possess one.

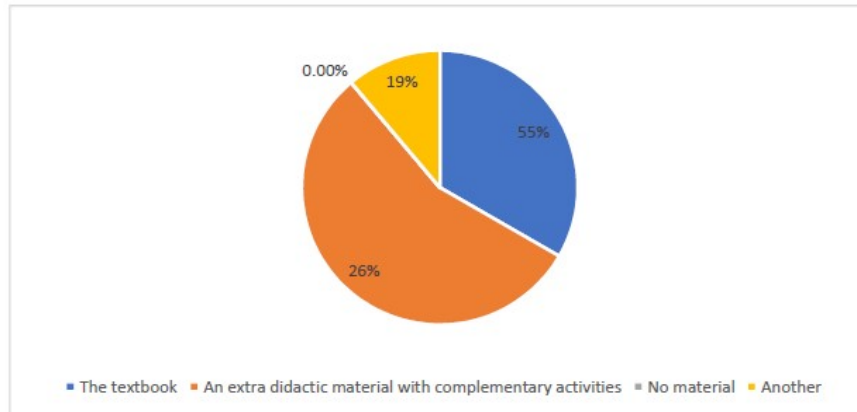


Figure 3: Didactic material to teach oral communication in class

Source: Survey applied to English teachers at Don Bosco School in Esmeraldas.

After diagnosing the situations, the students have in their oral communication skills, and the necessity that teachers have of a didactic material based on the Task-Based Approach, the author decided to design some steps to teach oral skills and the orientations of what activities to include in each of them.

Table 1

A Task-Based Didactic Material to Teach Students' Oral Communication Skills	
GENERAL OBJECTIVE	To Improve Students' Oral Communicative Skills Through the Application of a Task-Based Didactic Material
PRE-TASK Objective: To activate the students' schema for talking Schema refers to how students perceive the world and the things around them. It implies activating the students' prior knowledge of the content to help him or her comprehend a concept. According to Roe, Smith, and Burns (2008), "Schemata are a person's organized clusters of concepts related to objects, places, actions, or events. Each schema represents a person's knowledge about a particular concept and the interrelationships among the known pieces of information" (p. 212).	Teacher's Activities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The teacher introduces topic, activities to activate the existing vocabulary or introduce the new vocabulary, gives examples of task completion and gives instructions on how to complete the task. Examples of activities that may activate students' schema: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brainstorming Picture description Video Discussion about a topic Questions and answers about a topic Role-plays The teacher plays the role of director, guide and facilitator of the activity. Students' Activities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The students may work individually, in pairs or groups.
TASK-CYCLE Objective: To carry out, plan and report the task.	Students' Activities: The students complete a task in pairs or groups using the language resources that they have as the teacher monitors and offers encouragement. Planning Students prepare a short oral or written report to tell the class what happened during their task. Then the learners practice what they are going to say in their groups. Meanwhile, the teacher is available for the students to ask for advice to clear up any language questions they may have.

	<p>It moves from focus on meaning to focus on form, develops and enhances accuracy by using different focus activities (e.g., word analysis, semantic analysis, syntactic analysis)</p> <p>Report Students report back to the class orally or read the written report. The teacher selects the order of when students will present their reports and may give the students some quick feedback on the content. At this stage, the teacher may also play a recording of others doing the same task for the students to compare.</p> <p>Analysis The teacher then highlights relevant parts from the text of the recording for the students to analyze. They may ask students to notice interesting features within this text. The teacher can also highlight the language that the students used during the report phase for analysis.</p>
<p>TASK FOCUS / POST-TASK Objective: To practice activities to increase knowledge.</p>	<p>Students' Activities: The teachers will ask the students to do something with what they have learned during the previous activities. The activities can be varied, for instance: giving a presentation on a topic they want, present the results of an important topic, create a TV news report, and others.</p>

Source: Author's own elaboration

Discussion

Through this investigation, a Task-Based material to teach high school senior students' communicative skills at Don Bosco School in Esmeraldas was designed. To create this design, a diagnosis of students' difficulties in oral communication skills was made. Moreover, the strategies and materials that English teachers used to teach oral communication skills was determined, as well as the teachers' perceptions about the need to have a didactic material based on the Task-Based Approach.

Regarding the results of this research about the use of the Task-Based Approach to design a didactic strategy to improve oral communication skills, the results coincided with the ones obtained by Adendorff, E. (2014) in the fact, Task-Based activities are very more useful for improving students' communication skills. For instance, the study done by Lee, A. & Preedeekul, A. (2017) was significantly positive, students' communicative competence increased. Furthermore, students present some difficulties when developing their communicative competences. That is why the Task-Based Approach activities inspire students to better performance.

According to the investigation done by Tawil, H. (2018), language teachers have developed some techniques to impart communicative skills more effectively to their students. Therefore, the use of task-based activities is more useful than the traditional methods. Moreover, according to the investigation done by Adendorff, E. (2014) it is stated that Afrikaans students communicate and interact spontaneously using the foreign language. It reveals that using the Task-Based Approach activities contributed to the students' communicative skills in the target language. Therefore, applying this investigation, the researcher found that students enjoyed the task-based activities.

However, it has been noticed in this research that some teachers do not use task-based activities to develop students' communicative skills; they use group work and pair work, communicative activities, or role-plays. This strategy used to develop students' oral communicative skills can be applied taking into consideration the Task-Based Approach framework (Tawil, H. 2018).

It is important to mention that in this investigation there was a limitation in time. Furthermore, the effect of the pandemic had as a result the necessity to teach “online”. It means, teachers give virtual classes for 40 minutes - once a week. Therefore, students only receive essential content, grammar, and vocabulary. For that reason, it has been difficult to make the diagnosis or apply any kind of experiment. Nevertheless, this investigation concluded that task-based activities improved the communication skills of learners. Besides, teachers do not have enough material for improving communication skills. That is why, a set of activities are proposed for teachers to develop students’ communication skills.

Conclusions

In respect to the use of the strategies to teach oral communication skills, teachers use mostly group work and pair work activities or role-plays because according to them, it is the best strategy to be used in large classrooms. Regarding the most common strategy, teachers did not consider Task-Based activities to teach oral communication to their students.

Some of the most relevant aspects of the diagnosis made revealed that students presented difficulties, such as: using English in conversation, giving opinions, explaining, understanding oral messages, and carrying out presentations.

Despite of the fact that some didactic materials such as the student book, workbook and extra didactic material with complementary activities are applied to develop students’ oral communicative skills, teachers did not have a broad knowledge about Task-Based didactic materials to teach oral communicative skills. However, most of the teachers considered very useful for teaching oral communication to develop a didactic material with planned activities based on tasks.

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