Implementing Task-Based Learning to Improve English Listening and Speaking Abilities of First-Year Undergraduate Students

By

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Abstract

The objectives of this study were to 1) assess the impact of task-based learning on first-year undergraduate students' English listening ability and 2) assess the impact of task-based learning on first-year undergraduate students' English-speaking ability. Thirty first-year undergraduate students from the Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology participated in the study. The subject group engaged in task-based learning throughout the first semester of the 2021 academic year. Lesson plans, a pre-post English speaking test, a pre-post English listening test, and a teaching log were used to gather data. The data were statistically examined using the mean, standard deviation, and t-test for dependent samples. According to the study's findings, task-based learning improved first-year undergraduate students' English listening skills in a statistically different way from before the trial. 05 level. The participants had significantly higher mean scores on the post-test ($\bar{X}$ = 8.63) than the pre-test ($\bar{X}$ = 3.50) and the English-speaking ability of first-year undergraduate students through task-based learning after the experiment showed statistically significant difference at the .05 level. The participants had significantly higher mean scores on the post-test ($\bar{X}$=10.63) than the pre-test ($\bar{X}$= 6.83).

Keywords: Task-Based Learning, English Listening and Speaking Abilities, First-Year Undergraduate Students

Introduction

English is now considered a global language. The English language, especially in the age of globalization, is not just a language but also a tool for overcoming many employment difficulties (Lee, 2019). Improvements in the communicative needs of people all over the world have meant that the degree of significance associated with English language learning has increased considerably than previously expected. Several sectors of the country have witnessed this particular development including education, social services, and the financial sectors. A prerequisite to learning a foreign language should be considered extensively in this country to be able to achieve comparably sufficient communicative abilities to interact with all people in different situations as it is commonly used in all aspects such as finance, work, study, education and any other societal related fields. Therefore, it is essential that Thai students learn the English language to effectively communicate in any situation. The English language has been taught at a basic level for twelve years of the students' academic years. The Thai education system has provided guidelines and policies for a considerable number of years, but, despite that and students learning English for twelve years, Thai students still lack the ability to effectively

communicate in basic English.

The contributory factors regarding this are linked to the environments of the classroom which do not give students the opportunity to practice their speaking and listening skills. Their subsequent lack of confidence means they cannot adapt classroom learning to the needs of the real world. According to Kaikaew and Lornklang (2015) claimed that there is a distinct lack of stimulating learning in association with activities that are creative. Additionally, there is an overreliance on the Thai language by teachers in the English classroom environment with the balance of related activities focusing too strongly on reading and grammar rather than speaking and listening.

Moreover, a study performed by Meksopawannagul (2015) found that inadequacies in the communicative ability of foreign language students have been witnessed in studies measuring skill levels in communicating, studying technology, and performing research. Moreover, it was found that there were problems, in terms of communication, as students did not have the confidence to become vocal in the classroom environment. There is a need for the students to be given the opportunity to practice language learning in a way that focuses more on language meaning than on language form, undertaken in small groups. The possible method that meets this purpose is Task-Based learning (Nunan, 2004). Task-based learning consists of three steps, namely; pre-task, task-cycle, and language focus (Nunan 2004). Firstly, the teacher passes on the instructions of the task and gives guidance to the students as well as highlighting the relevant vocabulary that is required - this is the pre-task phase. The second phase sees emphasis on the students as they work in teams to solve problems and make preparations to give a presentation to the class. The teacher's role in this phase is to monitor, again, give guidance and also pass on positive feedback - this is the task-cycle phase. Finally, both teacher and students work in conjunction to optimize error correction and study the language usage - this is the language focus phase. During the entirety of the three phases, the students make use of language that is conducive to what is used in everyday life.

There are a number of advantages associated with task-based learning when compared with alternative teaching methods. According to Long (2015), using everyday language in a natural way encourages students to relax more, which allows for greater absorption of the target language. The feelings of stress and worry, when confronted with grammar and form, are negated with this technique as students can relax and communicate naturally as part of the task completion process. My own experiences of teaching English listening and speaking at Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology (TNI) with undergraduate students have borne out a degree of ineffectiveness as, generally speaking, the students can't communicate adequately in English. The problem is that teachers use 'rote' learning methods where students simply copy the information given to them, without any thought initiated. Instructions also don't have any relevance to situations encountered in real life. Additionally, rather than concentrating on activities that promote listening and speaking, teachers tend to rely on grammatical rules and structure. These reasons, coupled with the essential nature of English in a learning and teaching setting, mean that the researcher believes that task-based learning activities are of interest in developing skills in English speaking and listening.

Literature Review

The review is presented in three parts: the theories related to listening skills, speaking skills and task-based learning,

Listening Skills

Listening is critical to the success of English language learning. The ability to listen effectively and efficiently contributes to the success of both students and teachers. Furthermore, it is widely believed that professional success in the digital globalized world of the twenty-first century necessitates excellent English communication, which surely necessitates proficiency in both speaking and listening abilities. As a result, listening entails not just hearing but also comprehending the language. We learn to listen in our first language (mother tongue) through an unnoticed process, so we are oblivious to the complexities of the learning process. Bano (2017) cited that listening was frequently labeled as a reception talent rather than a production skill like speaking, making it appear to be a passive skill. However, as Admadi (2016) pointed out that listening comprehension is a difficult skill to master. Rather than being a reception act, it entails the creation of a message from phonic material. To conclude, the skills of listening comprehension should be discussed under two sections. Firstly, sound processing allows the listener to distinguish word utterances and phrases, as well as language-related qualities including intonation, pitch, and tone. Secondly, the process by which the listener organizes the speech he or she has heard into meaningful chunks, to understand what speakers are going to say by identifying linguistic data, and to remember knowledge and be able to retrieve it later by grouping meaning and details.

Speaking Skills

Speaking is productive or active skill because learners need to apply the skill to correctly produce language through sounds. This skill could be improved by understanding volume and tone, voice modulation, pronunciation. Speaking ability aids in ensuring that the listener does not misunderstand. Ariyanti (2016) mentioned that interactive, partially interactive, and non-interactive speaking situations are the three types of scenarios. Face-to-face dialogue, which is two-way communication, is included in interactive. When recording a speech for a radio broadcast, it might be partially interactive, such as a speech to an audience, or it can be non-interactive, such as when recording a speech for a radio broadcast. In order to be understood, students must be able to appropriately employ words and pronounce the language's distinguishing sounds. Students have to use the language appropriate for the situation and the relationship with their partner. They also have to use correct form of the word and put the words in the correct order. They also have to produce stressed, unstressed words and intonation. Students must maintain the dialogue and take turns asking and responding to their companion (Al-Sobhi and Preece, 2018). Furthermore, Khagjaninejad (2016) stated that speaking skill should not be taught separately, it should be integrated with other skills. To conclude, teachers should be well-versed in the right and precise use of content, vocabulary, sounds, and grammatical structures. As a result, learning can be organized in

such a way that learners can practice speaking skills in accordance with their level and potential, and the results are actually effective.

Task -based learning

Nunan (2004) proposed three stages of tasks: pre-task, task cycle, and linguistic concentration. The subject is covered in the pre-task phase. Students work in pairs or small groups to complete the activity during the task cycle stage. The final step of TBL is language concentration, when students must analyze the structure of the language and use the language they have learned. Because Nunan's framework is a highly well-liked model, it was used in this investigation. Numerous researchers used Nunan's framework in their TBL research investigations. The teaching of languages is laid out in Nunan's framework. Students are exposed to the target language and utilize it to convey meaning. Numerous investigations in the same field have been carried out.

The English-speaking learners in Mathayomsuksa 2 were evaluated by Yooyong (2008), and three lesson plans, a pre-and post-speaking exam, and a teacher observation form served as the instruments. Through task-based learning, Sae-Ong (2010) examined the English-speaking skills of Mathayomsuksa 4 students. Seven lesson plans, a pre-/post speaking exam, a teacher observation form, a learners' self-evaluation form, and a group work assessment were used. A study was undertaken by Khienwong (2017) to determine the efficacy of task-based learning in improving students' speaking abilities in grade 10. The instruments employed were checklists for TBL activities and pre/post-speaking tests. As mentioned earlier, the outcomes of the research showed noticeably improved English language speaking skills following participation in task-based learning activities. In order to improve students' listening skills through task-based instruction, Ruenyoot (2011) looked into the English listening of Prathomsuksa 3 pupils. The tools employed were four task-based learning lesson plans, a lesson plan observation form, a pre-and post-test on English for speaking and listening, a task evaluation form, and learning diaries. As a result, the findings showed that, following the post-test, the experimental group's students' scores were higher at the.01 significant level.

The use of task-based learning, according to prior research studies, improved speaking and listening abilities. The participants in the earlier study stated above were from various grade levels. However, university students are rarely the main target of research studies on task-based learning in Thailand. University students were selected as study participants concerning this topic. The literature evaluation also revealed that there needed to be more research on task-based learning in English language training that incorporates listening and speaking skills. Because speaking and listening are two abilities typically thought to be challenging to acquire, they were the focus of the study.

Research Objectives

The study aimed to achieve the following objectives:

1   Examining the impact of task-based learning on first-year undergraduate students' listening ability in English.

2   To examine the effectiveness of task-based learning on English speaking ability of first-year undergraduate students.

Conceptual Framework

The independent variable

| Task-based learning |

→ The dependent variable

| English listening ability |

→ | English speaking ability |
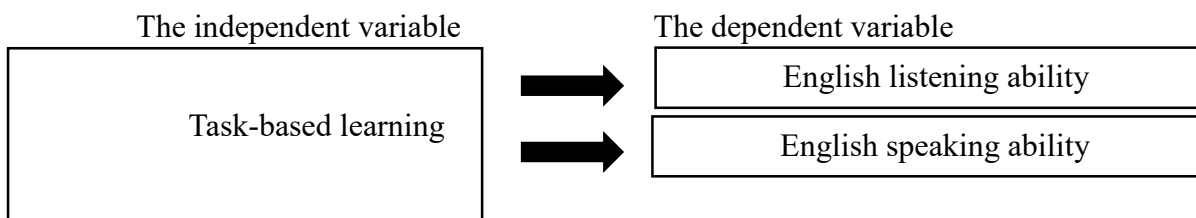
Research hypothesis

1.   First-year undergraduate students who studied English listening with the task-based learning had significantly higher scores on the posttest than the pretest significantly at the .05 level.
2.   First-year undergraduate students who studied English speaking with the task-based learning had significantly higher scores on the posttest than the pretest significantly at the .05 level.

Research Methodology

Research Participants

The research participants were a class of first-year students at Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology, a private university in Bangkok. Thirty first-year students from various faculties at TNI who took an English Foundation Course in the first semester of the 2021 academic year made up the sample. The TNI English Proficiency Test score of less than 40 is required for this course. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, the frequencies and proportions of the subject's gender and faculties are presented:

Table 1 Frequency and percentage of the subjects' gender

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	12	40.00
Female	18	60.00
Total	30	100

Table 2 Frequency and percentage of the subjects' faculties

Faculties	Frequency	Percentage
Business Administration	8	26.66
Engineering	11	36.67
IT	11	36.67
Total	30	100.00

Based on Table 1 and 2, the participants of the current study comprised 12 males and 18 females, studying in three faculties including Business Administration (8%), Engineering (11%), and IT (11%).

Research Instruments

Data was collected with the following instruments:

The Task-based lesson plans

The study on task-based learning, listening and speaking, and the course syllabus regarding purpose, content, grammar structure, phrases, and word list were reviewed to create the task-based lesson plans. Smart Choice 2, a published textbook with numerous talks from real-world settings, was the textbook used in class. The task model is based on Nunan (2004) and includes the terms "pre-task," "task-cycle," and "linguistic emphasis" for the various task phases.

English Listening and Speaking Test

The English Listening and Speaking Test was created following the guidelines established by the College of General Education and Languages (CGEL) and the university's English department's curriculum for the tertiary level of the Thai educational system. There were two sections of the test. The first section contained 15 multiple-choice questions from the listening test. Part two of the interview consisted of fifteen questions. Each test had a fifteen-point total score. The Cambridge English: Understanding Results Guide served as the source for the speaking evaluation rate (2014). Fluency, grammar, vocabulary, topic, and pronunciation were evaluated. Later, the two tests above were directed to three experts to verify the correctness of the language prior to use and both got the overall value index of item objective congruence (IOC) at the rate of 1.00.

Speaking Assessment Criteria

The Cambridge English Speaking Assessment Criteria were used to grade the speaking portion of the English Listening and Speaking Test. Understanding Results Guide (2014). Fluency, grammar, vocabulary, content, and pronunciation were evaluated.

Teaching log

The main items and results observed by the researcher were written in a quite informal way. The duration in which qualitative data was observed and recorded was eight weeks in total. Data was accumulated using a teaching log as the main way to record additional data from findings.

Data Collection Procedure

The 10-week trial was carried out in stages. Two similar lessons made up the four hours of education each week. In the first week, a two-hour introductory session covered the study's goals, student roles, evaluation, and procedure. A two-hour pre-test made up the entirety of the second lesson. Then, lessons were held from the second lesson of week two to the first lesson of week ten. The final lesson of week ten was when the two-hour post-test was held. Consequently, 34 hours were spent instructing students in person.

Data Analysis

The hypotheses of this research were tested. The test for the first hypothesis was done to discover the effectiveness of task-based learning in improving the English listening skills of the students. Based on language use in effective communication, the hypothesis was examined. The mean scores for English listening ability were calculated

for the pre-and post-test results. Based on the total number of bases in the dependent sample, the t-test was used to determine significance. In order to determine whether or not the mean test scores for the pre-and post-tests were significantly different, the data analysis steps involved calculating each student's mean and standard deviation. The second posed the question of whether task-based learning was associated with increased speaking ability. A speaking assessment was undertaken and the students' scores totaled and changed to an average score. The mean scores were analyzed to see if they differed significantly from pre-test to post-test. A record was kept after every lesson in the teaching log for research findings.

Results of the Study

Each objective is discussed in relation to the results of the study.

1. An approach based on task-based learning significantly improved learners' English listening abilities at the .05 level.
2. A task-based learning approach significantly improved learners' English-speaking ability at the .05 level.

The post-lesson learning log revealed that learners showed high levels of motivation, cooperation, and attention and were also were solely responsible for the material handed into the teacher. The variation of activities during lessons ensured that English speaking practice and enjoyment were optimized.

Table 3 The English Listening Test: A Comparison of Mean Scores on Pre-test and Post-test

English Listening ability	N	Full Score	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	t	p
Pre-test	30	15	3.50	2.515	21.977*	.000
Post-test	30	15	8.63	1.810		

* $p < .05$

From the data in table 3, it was found that the English listening ability of the first-year students was significantly higher after task-based learning at the .05 level. The participants had significantly higher mean scores on the post-test ($\bar{X} = 8.63$) than the pre-test ($\bar{X} = 3.50$).

Table 4 An analysis of the mean scores of the pre-test and post-test on English Speaking

English Speaking Ability	N	Full Score	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	t	p
Pre-test	30	15	6.83	2.291	13.714*	.000
Post-test	30	15	10.63	2.173		

* $p < .05$

A comparison of Table 4 revealed that first-year students' English-speaking ability increased significantly after the .05 level task-based learning. The participants had significantly

higher mean scores on the post-test ($\overline{X}=10.63$) than the pre-test ($\overline{X}=6.83$).

Additionally, evidence from the teacher log suggested that learners felt increased levels of excitement and motivation caused by the variation of challenging tasks posed by the teacher. For these new activities, students finished the tasks and were attentive for the entire duration. The listening techniques used during research varied from the teacher reading directions for the students, the teacher speaking freely about a task and also recorded materials. The results saw that a significant improvement in both listening and speaking abilities were noted by the teacher.

Discussion

The study's goal was to ascertain if task-based learning successfully enhanced the first-year students' English speaking and listening skills at the Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology. The findings showed that task-based learning classes greatly enhanced the participants' speaking and listening skills. Additionally, they increased their confidence during the experiment. This was consistent with the research undertaken by Hasan (2014) concluded that learners had the ability to give priority in the order of the task in hand with the result of an increase in the complex nature of performance. The researcher's goal is to ensure that students benefit from his or her work, activities like miming and drawing, and assistance with sentence structure and vocabulary, the research of Hasan was drawn upon by integrating a pre-task element. The tasks were supported by clear guidance and step-by-step instructions. The learners had the chance to immerse themselves in English throughout the pre-task phase fully.

The report-phase was the part of the task-phase that produced the best results. Students swapped the roles of speaker and listener in asking questions to one another. The completion of each activity during task-based learning was dependent upon the need for learners use the kind of English used in real-life situations to effectively complete each task.   An example of this was when the learners were tasked with doing a presentation where they would talk about their reasons for their dream jobs. During those instances when the learners found difficulty with the correct vocabulary they would then use art or body language to communicate with the audience. As Rodriguez-Bonces and Rodriguez-Bonces (2010) determined that a creditable task is able to achieve different variables such as; a certain level of challenges; an opportunity to optimally experience language and also to maximize the activation of this language. Thus, the researcher chose topics that students were personally interested in, thus motivating them to exchange information.

The teacher-student relationship is also of significant importance as it develops the progress of the student in the task-based learning environment. According to researchers, learning has a greater value if language form is not intrinsically the main feature as this reduces the anxiety levels of learners (Viriya, 2018). A productive environment in the classroom where the teacher is both trusted and respected can nurture a naturally pleasant learning scenario in which to focus on task-based learning. The researcher maintained the same persona from the beginning of the study. This persona built a solid bond and trust with learners which were achieved by smiling and assuring them that it was perfectly fine to make mistakes in the class. An additional feature the researcher used was to emphasize to the students that they should not strive for the language for perfection, but instead should concentrate on the meaning they wanted to convey. Hardi (2013) was used as the basis for this research. Hardi (2013) saw the role of the teacher's involvement in task-based learning as one of facilitating and leading the use of real language, monitoring pair,

and group work, encouraging students to involve themselves and be motivated when engaging in tasks and to offer feedback and expertise in English when the students so desire. Consequently, students obtained higher scores after instructions.

Furthermore, topics with direct relevance to the everyday lives of students were used. These included their dream job, family, neighborhoods and birthday. Subsequently, learners were motivated by their curiosity of their friends' material and a desire to inform their peers about their lives. As Promruang (2012) states "the subject matter of task-based learning is both of interest and is relatable to the students".

The study concluded that task-based learning successfully enhanced students' speaking and listening skills. With the task-based learning environment and lesson structure, learners were free to express themselves and used real-world language than would often be the case. Task-based learning classes were successful partly because the teacher encouraged students with a grin and a warm demeanor. Once the trust of the students was given to the teacher the learners were able to communicate more comfortably. Learners were interested by the subjects tackled in task-based learning and they were also given plenty of chances to practice their listening and speaking skills. Generally, all of this points out that task-based learning is an effective model in helping learners improve their listening and speaking skills.

Further study recommendations

1   Research with other skills such as writing and reading
2   Research in other language learning such as Thai, Japanese and French

Acknowledgements

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