THE IMPACT OF TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING FOR B1 –B2 LEVEL EFL LEARNERS' SPEAKING FLUENCY

Madrimova Sevinchoy

sevinchmadrimova461@gmail.com

Abstract

Many EFL learners know a lot of grammar and vocabulary, but they still cannot speak smoothly. They stop often, search for words and give very short answers. This article looks at how Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) can help learners , especially intermediate level students,become more fluent speakers. First, it explains what speaking fluency is and what a "task" means in TBLT. Then it discusses why tasks can increase fluency, using Nunan (2004) as the main book and four research studies (Skehan, 1996; Foster & Skehan, 1996; Albino, 2017; Zúñiga et al., 2023). After that, the article describes the teaching techniques of a task cycle, gives a sample lesson, and suggests simple ways to measure fluency. It also mentions some problems teachers may face. The main idea is that learners speak more fluently when they use English to reach a real goal, not only to repeat sentences.

Keywords: task-based language teaching, speaking fluency, EFL learners, task cycle, planning time, oral communication

1. Introduction

Every English teacher knows this situation. A student gets a high mark on a grammar test, but when the teacher asks a simple question like "What did you do yesterday?", the student is silent for ten seconds and then answers with three words. The student has knowledge, but the knowledge does not come out as speech.

One reason is that many lessons give learners very little time to speak. The teacher explains a rule, students do exercises, and speaking practice is often only repeating a dialogue. In this kind of lesson, learners practise the form of the language, but they do not practise using it to communicate.

Task-Based Language Teaching offers a different idea. In TBLT, the lesson is built around tasks. Learners work in pairs or groups to solve a problem, make a plan or share information, and they use English to do it. Nunan (2004) says that this approach strengthens, among other things, learning to communicate through interaction in the target language and linking classroom learning with language use outside the classroom .

The aim of this article is to answer two questions:

1. What is speaking fluency and why is it difficult for EFL learners?

2. How can TBLT help learners to speak more fluently?

3.Specifically,this paper focuses on ***intermediate-level learners*** *(b1 and b2 level students) struggle with spontaneous speech production and fluency.*

This is a theoretical and practical article. I did not do my own experiment, so I use the results of other researchers to support the ideas.

2**. What Is Speaking Fluency**?

In simple words, fluency means speaking smoothly and continuing to speak without too many long stops. A fluent speaker does not need to be perfect. He or she can have small mistakes but can still express ideas at a normal speed.

Zúñiga, Mayorga and Ruiz (2023) describe the fluency problems of their learners in three points: a high number of pauses, a low speech rate and short speech length. These three things are easy to see in a classroom. We can listen to how often a student stops, how many words he or she says in a minute, and how long the answer is.

Skehan (1996) discusses three goals for task-based instruction: accuracy, complexity and fluency. This is important because it shows that fluency is not the only goal. A good speaker must also be accurate and use different structures. But for many learners in EFL classes, fluency is the weakest part, because they are afraid of making mistakes and they rarely speak English outside the lesson.

3. **What Is Task-Based Language Teaching?**

Different authors define "task" in slightly different ways, so it is useful to look at them. Nunan (2004) first separates two kinds of tasks. Real-world (target) tasks are things people do outside the classroom, and pedagogical tasks are the ones that happen in class (p. 1). Examples of real-world tasks are filling in a form or making a hotel reservation. Nunan notes that such tasks usually have a non-language result, for example you get a room or a book .

Skehan (1998, as cited in Nunan, 2004, p. 3) gives five characteristics of a task. Meaning is the most important thing, learners do not just repeat someone else's meaning, the task is connected to real-world activities, finishing the task has priority, and the task is judged by its outcome. Ellis (2003, as cited in Nunan, 2004, p. 3) also says that in a task the learners must pay main attention to meaning and use their own language resources.

Nunan gives his own definition too. For him, a pedagogical task is a piece of classroom work in which learners understand, produce or interact in the target language, and they focus on meaning, not on form. A task should also feel complete, with a beginning, a middle and an end .

An important difference between a task and a grammar exercise is that learners can choose from many language structures to complete a task, because the forms are not decided in advance.

4**. Why Can TBLT Develop Speaking Fluency?**

There are several reasons, and I will explain them one by one.

First, meaning comes first. When students must convince a partner or solve a problem, they think about what to say, not only about how to say it. This is close to real communication, and it reduces the habit of stopping to check every grammar rule. This idea comes from the task characteristics that Skehan listed (as cited in Nunan, 2004, p. 3).

Second, learners speak a lot. Nunan (2004) writes about the idea that learners learn to communicate by communicating, which means that the way of learning and the goal become the same thing (p. 8). He also links TBLT with experiential learning, or "learning by doing", where learners take part actively in small groups (p. 12). In a normal lesson one student speaks while the others listen, but in pair and group tasks everybody talks at the same time. So the total speaking time of each student becomes much longer.

Third, tasks give a real reason to speak. According to Nunan (2004), tasks give classroom activity a purpose that is bigger than practising the language for its own sake . When there is a reason, students are more willing to continue speaking.

Fourth, the results of research support these ideas. Albino (2017) studied ninth-grade EFL learners at a high school in Luanda and found that after TBLT the learners improved their fluency. They spoke faster, made fewer grammar mistakes, made their sentences longer and developed their interactional language. The learners also said that they felt encouraged to speak, believed they could use English and learned more vocabulary. In a study with twenty university learners in Colombia, Zúñiga et al. (2023) used ten fluency-based tasks. All the learners had a positive opinion about the method, and they said it helped them to pause less, to speak at a better pace and to continue speaking even when they made small mistakes. Foster and Skehan (1996) compared three task types (personal information exchange, narrative and decision-making) under three conditions (no planning, short planning and detailed planning). They found a strong effect of planning time on fluency, and also a clear effect on complexity.

I should say that these studies are small, and Zúñiga et al. is based on learners' opinions and rubrics. So the results show a positive direction, but they cannot prove that TBLT works for every class.

5. *Techniques Used in a Task-Based Speaking Lesson*

A TBLT speaking lesson usually has several stages. Below I describe the techniques that are most useful for fluency.

1. Pre-task. The teacher introduces the topic and gives learners some useful words. Learners can also watch a short example of a similar task. The aim is to make the topic familiar so that students do not stop because they have no ideas.

2. Planning time. Before speaking, learners get a few minutes to think and make notes. Foster and Skehan (1996) found that planning has a strong positive effect on fluency, so this step is very important. Students should write only key words, not full sentences, so that they speak and do not read.

3. The speaking task in pairs or groups. The task must have a clear goal. Three types can be used, which are the same types studied by Foster and Skehan (1996): exchanging personal information, telling a story (narrative) and making a decision together. For example, a decision-making task is choosing the best place for a class trip.

4. Report stage. Some pairs or groups tell the class what they decided. This gives a second, more public speaking chance, and the teacher can see how fluent the students are.

5. Feedback and language focus. After the speaking, the teacher chooses a few common mistakes and works on them. This is useful because the focus on form has an accepted place in the communicative classroom, and the old idea that learners only need meaning has been challenged (Nunan, 2004, p. 9). It is also better for fluency, because the teacher does not interrupt students during the task.

6**. Sample Lesson (80 Minutes, Intermediate Level**)

Topic: Planning a one-day class trip.

Pre-task (15 minutes). The teacher shows pictures of three possible places and asks learners what they know about them. The class collects useful phrases, for example "I think we should...", "What about...?", "The problem is...".

Planning (10 minutes). Each student works alone and writes down key words about the place he or she prefers: price, distance, activities.

Task (20 minutes). In groups of four, students must agree on one place, one date and a budget. The teacher walks around, listens and does not correct. Everyone must speak at least three times.

Report (15 minutes). Each group presents its decision in one minute and says why.

Feedback (15 minutes). The teacher writes five sentences with typical mistakes on the board, and students correct them together.

Final reflection (5 minutes). Students say what was easy and what was difficult when they spoke.

In this lesson, the students speak for most of the time and they have a real aim, which is to reach an agreement.

7. **How to Measure Fluency**

A teacher does not need special equipment to check fluency. Three simple measures can be taken from the fluency problems named by Zúñiga et al. (2023):

- Pauses: how many long stops (for example more than two seconds) a student makes in one minute.

- Speech rate: how many words the student says in one minute.

- Speech length: how many words or sentences the student says in one turn.

The teacher can record a short talk (one or two minutes) at the beginning and at the end of the course and compare the results. Students can also fill in a short questionnaire about their feelings, as in the study of Zúñiga et al. (2023).

8. Possible Problems

TBLT is not a perfect method, and teachers should know the difficulties.

One problem is that learners and teachers may see a task in different ways. Nunan (2004) reminds us that learners may look for grammar patterns in a meaning task, or look

for meaning in a grammar task (p. 15). Also, students who are used to traditional lessons may think that a speaking task is "not a real lesson" (p. 15).

Another problem is the gap between what schools say and what teachers do. Nunan (2004) suspects that some schools say they use TBLT, but in the classroom they continue with traditional practice, and he calls this "old wine in new bottles" (p. 14).

There are also practical problems. Classes can be big, so it is hard to listen to every group. Students may use their mother tongue when they work in groups. Weak learners may stay silent and let strong learners speak. To reduce these problems, the teacher can give every student a role, set a rule about using English, and choose tasks that are not too difficult.

9. Conclusion

Speaking fluency is difficult for *intermediate* EFL learners because they have too few chances to speak and they worry about mistakes. Task-Based Language Teaching gives them more speaking time, a clear purpose and a focus on meaning. The book of Nunan (2004) explains that tasks are about using language to reach an outcome, and the studies of Foster and Skehan (1996), Albino (2017) and Zúñiga et al. (2023) show positive effects on fluency, especially when learners get planning time. At the same time, TBLT needs careful task design and attention to accuracy. Teachers should combine speaking tasks with short feedback on language. Future studies can use larger groups and measure the results with recordings, so that the effect of TBLT on fluency can be seen more clearly.

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