

The Effects of Using a Task-Based Language Teaching Approach on the Speaking Skill of Thai EFL Learners

Brigette P. Beding¹ / Darinthorn Inthapthim²

^{1,2} Department of English, School of Liberal Arts, University of Phayao

Abstract

This study aimed to find out the effects of using the Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) approach on the speaking skill of Thai EFL learners at the University of Phayao, and to investigate the learners' perceptions on the use of TBLT in the classroom. A group of 36 first year students, majoring in English and Education, who enrolled in the university's English for Communication Course, were purposively chosen to participate in this study. Data were collected through pre-and post-speaking tests, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The quantitative data was analyzed with the use of a descriptive statistical tool and dependent t - test, and content analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data. The results showed that the participants had significantly improved their speaking performance after being exposed to TBLT, with a significant level of .01. Moreover, the results revealed that the respondents generally perceived the use of TBLT in the classroom positively. This study suggests that TBLT was not only effective in enhancing Thai EFL learner's speaking skill, but it could be beneficial for them, as EFL learners, despite a few challenges they encountered.

Keywords: Task - Based Language Teaching (TBLT), speaking skill, Thai EFL learners, perceptions

Introduction

Speaking skill is very important in language learning. It is also very important in our daily lives where we must employ speaking skills to, culturally and socially, carry out various tasks. According to Louma (2004), speaking skill is definitely important part of the EFL course. It is not sufficient just to know about grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, but also the ability to communicate appropriately and successfully using speech is indeed essential. Learning to speak a foreign language then, means that students must practice meaningful conversations in situations that are likely to be encountered in real life; especially in an EFL context, because learners lack the chance to be exposed regularly to this or to use English generally in their daily lives. According to Tabrizi (2011), it is necessary for students to experience how language is used as a tool for communication inside the classroom, in order to develop their competence, they need to use a foreign language easily and effectively in situations they encounter in the real world. It was observed that Thai EFL learners at the University of Phayao are still struggling with their English speaking skill. It often occurred, that when students were asked to give further information or explanation about a topic, during oral tests or discussion inside the classroom, or even during casual conversations, they struggled to express themselves. Meksopawannagul (2015) states that an acceptable reason why Thai students struggle with their English proficiency, and thus fail to achieve the standards required, is the fact that Thailand is a non-English speaking country, making it difficult for them to become proficient in the language. Additionally, Noom-ura (2013) points out that one of the causes of failures in teaching English in Thailand is the poor motivation level of students, something which seem also to apply to the participants of this study. Therefore, the researcher employed a TBLT approach, which encourages the use of

language through communicative real-world tasks where meaning is of primary importance. Learners have to work in pairs or groups to complete a task, giving them ample opportunities to express themselves freely using the target language in a less threatening environment. As Larsen-Freeman (2000) points out that interaction is thought to facilitate language acquisition as learners have to work harder to understand each other and thus express their own meanings. This will also likely increase a learner's motivation level, inspiring them to use the English language more often in a more relaxing classroom environment. This can boost their confidence and improve their English abilities, specially speaking skill. It is a general knowledge that motivation plays an important role in learning. It was also pointed by Dornyei (1994) that motivation is an important factor, which can increase a language learner's achievements.

The findings of this study will hopefully give valuable information on the benefits of using TBLT approach that promotes learner's speaking ability or other English skills. It can also give insights on how learners perceived the use of TBLT in an EFL classroom context. Moreover, it can serve as a basis for those who are interested in conducting a research similar to this topic.

Objectives of the Study

1. To find out the effects of using the TBLT on the speaking ability of Thai EFL learners.
2. To investigate the learners' perceptions of the use of a TBLT approach in the classroom.

Background of the Study

Richards describes the Task-Based Language Teaching approach (TBLT) as an “extension of Communicative Language Teaching” (CLT), (2006: 27). Willis (1996) states that TBLT is a reaction to the insufficiencies of the Presentation, Practice and Production (PPP) approach. Richards (2006) claims that the coming of the TBLT approach marked a moment of dominant change with regards to how languages were taught, and was therefore seen by experts and researchers as a more effective and better way to learn a language. The TBLT is a student-centered approach that provides a natural context for learners to use the target language through communicative tasks which focus on meaning rather than form. The aim of the tasks is to encourage learners (usually in small groups) to perform meaningful tasks that are authentic. This gives opportunities for learners to practice speaking the target language in the classroom. Although the teacher may present language prior to the task, learners are absolutely free to use whatever resources they have in order to complete the task. According to Willis (1996), students prepare for the task and report it, then they learn the language that occurs during the task cycle. Teacher’s role is to select and sequence task, prepare the learners for the task and conscious raising. Whereas, learners are participants, monitor, innovator and risk taker. The framework designed by Willis (1996) was adopted in this study. He stresses that for language learning to take place, there should be exposure, opportunities to use the language, motivation, and instruction. “Learners need chances to say what they think or feel and to experiment in a supportive atmosphere using language they have heard or seen without feeling threatened” (Willis, 1996: 7).

Stages of Task-Based Language Teaching

According to the framework designed by Willis (1996), TBLT approach consist of three stages. These are necessary to achieve optimum conditions for language learning. This approach also considers task as a principal component. In the pre-task phase, the teacher introduces and explores the topic with the class, prepares learners in a way that encourages acquisition of the language. The teacher also ensures that students understand the task instructions. Learners may watch video clips or hear a recording of others doing a similar task; they can also read part of a text as a lead in to a task. The second stage is the task phase which has three sub-stages, namely: (a) task, (b) planning, and (c) report. For the task, learners take the opportunity to use whatever they know about the target language, while working in pairs or small groups to achieve the goal of the task. At the same time that learners are practicing the use of language skills the teacher monitors and encourages all attempts at communication but does not correct them. In the planning stage students prepare to report to the whole class about how they did the task, what they decided or discovered. Since the report stage is public, students will naturally want to be accurate, so they may consult their dictionary or the teacher for language advice. Moreover, learners rehearse and need time to organize their presentations. The Report stage concludes the task phase, where learners tell the class about their findings or the outcome of the task they did. The teacher acts as a chairperson, and then may give comments on the content of the reports. In the post- task phase, it provides opportunities for learners to reflect on the task they did and to draw their attention to language forms or phrases, particularly with regards to problematic forms that occurred during the task cycle. The teacher may conduct practice activities that

are focused on new words and phrases or based on features of the language learning that have already occurred in previous texts and transcripts studied.

Previous Studies

Several previously conducted research projects have been documented to support the value of TBLT approach in language teaching and learning. Below is a summary of the findings of some scholars who embedded the TBLT approach into their teaching strategies. Ariyatanet (2018) conducted a study using TBLT approach which aimed at developing the English narrative writing skill of secondary school students through picture description tasks. The study also explored the students' opinions towards learning English through the use of picture-story description tasks. It was found out that students could improve their writing skill through this approach. Additionally, this study revealed that students had positive views on the use of picture-description task as a way to develop their writing skill at a high level. Kaikaew and Lornklang (2015) investigated the effects of teaching English through task-based learning focusing on Thai culture on the students' writing ability and to explore students' opinion on the use of TBLT. This was participated by 10th grade students. The results showed that the students' writing performance significantly improved after learning through TBLT. The students' task performing abilities were also at a good level. And the students had positive opinion regarding the use of TBLT as a way to learn English focusing on Thai culture. Sae-ong (2010) carried out a research which was participated by 10th grade students which aimed to develop the speaking ability of students. The research explored (1) the impacts of the TBLT on learners' speaking ability, (2) the usefulness of group-work incorporating in the TBLT, and (3) learners' perceptions of oral skill improvement after learning through

the TBLT. The findings showed that learners' English speaking ability significantly improved at .05 level after learning through a task-based learning approach. There was also an increase on the learners' average attainment of group work incorporating teaching by task-based learning approach. The findings revealed also that learners had positive perceptions of the improvement in English speaking abilities after learning through TBLT. Hasan (2014) investigated the effects of a task-based language learning program, in teaching EFL, on the oral performance of secondary students. The results showed that learners significantly improved their speaking skill after learning through TBLT. TBLT has important contributions to EFL learners in improving their speaking skill. Learners were given chances to use the English language contextually and explore it through situational activities. Students were encouraged to use language creatively when doing tasks. TBLT helped students practice.

English in an anxiety free classroom. Hadi (2013) investigated Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of the use of TBLT. The results of the study showed that learners had positive perceptions about its usage. They perceived that TBLT encourages learners' academic progress. It improves learners' interaction skills. It encourages learners' to have more motivation, and it creates a collaborative learning experience. He also added that tasks do not just give variety to the language teaching methodology but also make the classroom much more fun and interesting.

The findings of the previous studies proved that TBLT is effective in developing EFL learners' speaking skill or other skills. It has significant contributions to EFL learners in the successful achievement of the language. There had been many researches using the TBLT approach with the aim of promoting students' speaking skill in EFL context, but very few were conducted in Thai context.

Most of the previous studies conducted in Thailand focused on the development of writing skills. The lack of previous researches focusing on the use of TBLT to promote students' speaking skill using different kinds of communicative tasks and the different population has led the researcher to conduct this study. The findings of this study may not be new, but it can give more insights particularly on the positive impacts of using TBLT to Thai EFL classrooms that promotes learners' speaking ability.

Research Methodology

This is a mixed method research which involves the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data in order to find out the impact of TBLT on the student's oral performance and investigate their views on the use of TBLT in the classroom. Participants of this study were 36 freshmen majoring in English and Education who were enrolled in the university's course: English for Communication were purposively chosen. This course focuses on the practice of oral communication on various topics that are likely to be encountered in real life situations integrating correct pronunciation and use of appropriate vocabulary that are necessary for communication in daily life. Therefore, this course is suitable for employing this approach. Three TBLT lesson plans were made based on the three topics selected from the student's book (English file, Pre-intermediate level, Oxford). These were validated by 3 experts in applied linguistics including the three instruments used for collecting data. This project commenced on March 19 and ended on April 26, 2018.

Instruments for Data Collection

There were three instruments used in this study; speaking test, questionnaire and semi-structured interview. First is the speaking test, students were asked to take a pre-and post-speaking test individually before and after the use of TBLT. It was divided into two parts which were adapted from the style of IELTS speaking task, particularly parts 1 and 2. In part 1, students were asked to talk about 1 of the familiar topics; (family, free time, hometown, studies, and mobile phone). In part 2, students were asked to pick 1 of the topic cards (related to student's experiences) and were expected to talk about it according to what was written on the card. The examiner can ask 1 or 2 follow up questions after the student has finished talking. The speaking test lasted for 1 hour and 30 minutes, while the post speaking test lasted for 2 hours. Their answers were recorded and was later rated by two other English teachers, using the rubrics for assessing speaking tests adapted from Mukminatien (2000). It includes grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency and interactive communication with a rating scale of 1 to 5; where 1 – very poor, 2 – poor, 3 – average, 4 – good and 5 – very good. The next instrument is a questionnaire which was used to investigate the Thai EFL learners' perceptions on the use of TBLT in the classroom. This was given to the students after the implementation of the three task-based lessons in the classroom. The questionnaire consisted of 8 Likert-type items which was partly adapted and modified from Nunan's (2004 as cited in Xhaferi & Xhaferi, 2013) checklist for evaluating communicative tasks. There were more than 8 items, but the others were about teacher's perceptions, and attitudes about the use of TBLT which is not covered in this study. Learners were asked to answer each question using a 5 point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, where 5 – strongly agree, 4 – agree, 3 – undecided, 2 – disagree and 1 – strongly disagree.

Lastly, the semi-structured interview which is closely allied to the questionnaire was made in order to gain further information about the students' views on the use of TBLT approach and could also be used to support the results of the questionnaire and the speaking test. All of the 36 students were interviewed which begins with the main question: *What are the effects can TBLT have in the classroom?* Then 2 follow-up questions were asked. The interview was done in English and since students needed to prepare in order to gain a substantial response to the questions, interview questions were given prior to the actual time of interview. To encourage students to honestly and freely express their ideas; the confidentiality of the data was emphasized, no names were recorded. The interview was audio-recorded for the content analysis.

Data Analysis

The speaking test was analyzed using the dependent t-test and the effect size was also computed. Next, the questionnaire was analyzed through the use of a descriptive statistical tool to show the mean and standard deviation. Finally, content analysis was used for the interview which involved transcribing, coding and categorizing.

Results

Part 1: The effects of TBLT on the speaking ability of Thai EFL learners

Table 1

Results of t-test comparing the participants' performances on the pre-and post-speaking tests

	N	\bar{x}	SD
Pre-speaking test	36	15.42	2.93
Post-speaking test	36	16.99	2.33

From table 1, we can see that the mean score achieved by the participants from the post- speaking test is higher ($\bar{x} = 16.99$, $SD = 2.33$) than the mean score achieved by participants on the pre-test ($\bar{x} = 15.42$, $SD = 2.93$). The result of the data analysis indicates that there was an improvement to the students' speaking performance level after they were exposed to a TBLT approach.

Table 2

Results of t-test, showing the participants' mean score difference from the pre-and post-speaking test

	N	\bar{x}	SD	t-value	df	sig.
Pre- test / Post - test	36	-1.57	1.64	-5.72	35	.000

Note: *significance level of .01

According to table 2, it is shown that there is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores on the pre-and post-speaking test, as indicated by the repeated measures t-test with $t(35) = -5.72$, $p = .01$. Additionally, the computed effect size was large ($d=.94$), based on Cohen's conventions (1988). By investigating

tables 1 and 2, the results revealed that through TBLT, the participants of this study have significantly improved their oral performance after being exposed to the TBLT approach. This indicates that TBLT is significantly effective in improving Thai EFL learners' speaking skill. This result gives us a definitive answer to the first research question based on the first research objective.

Part 2: The Learners' perceptions of the use of TBLT approach in the classroom

Table 3 shows the results of the questionnaire items, specifying the results of the learners' responses in terms of the average mean and standard deviation. The closer the results come to a mean level of 5, the more the respondents agreed with the statements.

Table 3

Students' perceptions of the use of the TBLT approach in the classroom

Questionnaire items	N	\bar{x}	SD
1. TBLT helps learners prepare for real world communication.	36	4.05	.62
2. TBLT provides opportunities for learners to practice and use the target language in meaningful conversations.	36	4.05	.58
3. TBLT activates a learners' needs and interests	36	4.05	.47
4. TBLT provides interesting and fun tasks for learning the target language.	36	3.97	.60

Table 3 (cont.)

Questionnaire items	N	\bar{x}	SD
5. TBLT provides tasks that help learners develop not only speaking abilities but also listening and vocabulary skills.	36	3.97	.55
6. TBLT encourages learners to have more motivation when speaking the target language.	36	3.91	.60
7. TBLT provides a relaxed atmosphere to promote use of the target language.	36	3.86	.63
8. TBLT provides tasks that challenge learners to use the target language creatively.	36	3.88	.62

It is evident from table 3 that the majority of respondents agreed with the items regarding the positive views students may have on the use of a TBLT approach. It is also clear that nobody strongly disagreed with any of the statements in the questionnaire (\bar{x} ranges from 3.86 to 4.05). From the data presented in table 3, this indicates that Thai EFL learners who participated in this study have positive views about the practice of TBLT in the classroom. Furthermore, the results of the interview demonstrates the positive views of the participants on the use of TBLT. They talked about the positive effects of the TBLT approach, to them as EFL learners. Although, they commented that TBLT was a challenge for them, it could be seen as positive because it made them work harder to complete the tasks assigned to them, encouraging them to become independent English language learners. It also

helped them to overcome their fears of speaking English. The effects students described with regards to the use of TBLT approach are presented below.

Table 4

Results of the interview regarding the effects of TBLT in the classroom

All (36)	Majority (27-33)	Some (7-15)	Few (2)
-TBLT increases learning motivation.	- It is a challenge for EFL learners. - It encourages students to be more active in speaking English.	- It helps in developing students' speaking skill. - It helps learners build/improve confidence in speaking English. - It can create a relaxing classroom environment.	-It encourages cooperative learning.
	- It provides opportunities for learners to use English orally.	- It provides activities that are helpful in real life situations.	

From the table, it shows the positive responses of learners on what are the effects can TBLT have in the classroom. It can be seen that all of the respondents described how the TBLT approach inspired them to become more interested in learning English. The majority of the learners also expressed that the use of TBLT in the classroom is a challenge for them because some believed that the approach gave them more responsibility than usual when taking part in the learning process. Some remarked that the speaking tasks were rather difficult for them, but still tried to work

hard because they wanted to improve their English skills. The chart also shows that majority of the students believed that through TBLT they were encouraged to become more active in using English in the classroom. Some mentioned other positive effects of the TBLT approach as shown in the chart that promotes learners' speaking skill and makes learning more fun and relaxing. They also recognized that the tasks they did are helpful in real life situations. Few have expressed that with TBLT they can learn as a team. Below are some of the students' responses as to what effects can TBLT have in the classroom. (Student = S)

S1: "Uhhh, for me, it makes the students enjoy and interested during the class."

S29: "Ok, for me I think everyone can show and create new ideas and have more confident [confidence] in the activity. I was so excited and always active in this class."

S36: "Back then I didn't dare to speak English, but now I've found this method it helps me doing it well without any concern about grammar. I enjoyed learning with it because it can [be] used in my life every single day."

Examining the two data sets from table 3 and 4, it can be clearly illustrated that Thai EFL learners have expressed positive views on the TBLT practice in the classroom. It can be seen also that the results of the interview could support most of the items stated in the questionnaire which most of the students have agreed on with regards to how they perceived the use of TBLT. This illustrates a substantial and definitive response to the second research question.

Discussion

Part 1: The effects of a TBLT approach on the speaking skill of Thai EFL learners

It was found out that a TBLT approach had significantly affected Thai EFL learners' oral performance. As shown in the result of the t-test analysis and the value of Cohen's d, learners have strongly and significantly improved their oral performance levels after being exposed to the TBLT approach. Thai EFL learners of this study were encouraged to use the target language to communicate with their friends, negotiate meaning to understand each other, in order to complete the tasks assigned to them, in a supportive and anxiety free environment. As a result, learners were more inspired and interested in doing the tasks, making them progress in their speaking skill. As Larsen-Freeman (2002) points out that interaction is believed to assist language acquisition as learners have to work hard to understand each other and thus express their own meaning. Harmer (1992) also states that the full process, from passive listening to understanding, and from active thinking to speaking, needs to be thoroughly exercised; this, he says, can only be achieved through real human interactions.

This findings conforms to the results of the study conducted by Hasan (2014). The findings from this study showed that TBLT can make an important contribution in improving the EFL learners' speaking skill. It encouraged students the use of English and gave them opportunities to practice using English that are authentic, in an anxiety free environment. Similarly, Sae-ong (2010) found out that Thai secondary students have shown significant improvement in their speaking ability after learning through task-based instruction.

Part 2: The perceptions of Thai EFL learners on the use of TBLT in the classroom

The findings of this study revealed that Thai EFL learners had positive perceptions on the use of TBLT in the classroom. They recognized that TBLT was helpful for them in learning English in several ways, despite a few challenges they encountered. Although the findings of this study reveal that Thai EFL learners' perceptions on the use of TBLT were weighted on the positive side, they also described how TBLT was at times a great challenge for them, which may sound negative but is in fact seen as positive based on the comments of the students from the interview. Students learning a language, like the ones in this study, can have a very passive attitude about learning the English language. However, TBLT approach changed the way they learn English, and has the potential to increase a learner's motivation level, so that other positive attitudes in learning can come about. As Dornyei (1994) states, that motivation is important factor that can increase language learner's success.

The findings of this present study are consistent with the findings of Hadi (2013). He found that Iranian EFL learners had positive views on the practice of TBLT in the classroom. Learners seemed to be willing to adapt themselves to what was, for them, a new language learning approach. He stated that the tasks don not just offer variety to the language teaching methodology, but also make the classroom much more fun and interesting. They can produce a lively atmosphere in the classroom, which gives teacher the chance to do language instruction more creatively, and that through this approach EFL learners can benefit from it. Correspondingly, Areyatanet (2018), Kaikaew and Lornklang (2015), and Sae-ong (2010) found out that Thai secondary students had positive views on the use of TBLT

in the classroom, despite the differences on the kinds of task and the focus of the task they designed for the learners.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher recommends that English teachers should adapt and use certain kinds of task- based activities to help in motivating EFL learners to be more involved in interactions when using the target language in the classroom, which can improve their speaking skill. Knowing learners' perceptions is important because it can help teachers design and improve modules, so that they are more suitable for Thai EFL learners. This would contribute to the successful implementation of the TBLT approach.

For further study, the researcher has the following suggestions:

1. There was very limited time for the implementation of the approach in this current study, it is suggested that a longer time be used for this approach, because this may yield different findings or may verify the results of this present study.

2. This study only presents the effects of TBLT on the speaking skill of learners, it would be sensible also to do further research on its effects on the other English language skills.

3. This study has investigated the perceptions of Thai EFL learners on the use of a TBLT approach, it would also be a good idea to do further research on the perceptions of Thai English teachers on the use of a TBLT approach as a way to teach the English language.

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Author

Mrs. Brigitte P. Beding

Department of English, School of Liberal Arts, University of Phayao

19 M. 2 Maeka, Amphur Muang Phayao Phayao 56000

Tel.: 08-5109-0575

Email: brigittepasking@yahoo.com