The Effectiveness of the Task-Based Language Teaching Approach to Improve Students' Speaking Skills

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Abstract

This study examines the effectiveness of the Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) approach in improving students' speaking skills and students' perceptions towards integrating TBLT. The Sri Lankan English as a Second Language (ESL) learning-teaching context was chosen as the research context for this study and comprised a sample of stratified-randomly selected 60, Grade 10 students, at the Katharina Shirani Frauenfeld College in Moragoda, whose proficiency in English was at the elementary level. This sample was divided into two groups as a Control group and an Experimental group, in which, traditional teaching practices and TBLT treatment were applied respectively. Accordingly, data was collected using a pre-test and post-test design and additionally, an attitudinal questionnaire was given to the students to be filled. For data collection, a Mixed-Method Research paradigm was utilized. A Paired Samples T-test was used to determine the statistical significance of students' scores in the pre-test as compared to the post-test of both groups. Moreover, the thematic analysis was integrated to analyze the open-ended items in the questionnaire. The findings suggested that the mean scores of the post-test of the Experimental group have surpassed the mean scores of the Control group, indicating that the integration of TBLT was effective in improving the students' speaking ability as opposed to the traditional teaching practices utilized. The questionnaire analysis on the students' perceptions revealed that they were highly satisfied with the integration of the TBLT approach. It is recommended that ESL teaching practitioners can refer to the TBLT methodology in their classrooms since this has inspired students significantly in learning speaking skills.

1.   Introduction

Over the last few decades, English has become one of the most widely used languages that people around the world employ for purposes of international communication and cooperation. The English language has reached the status of a global language and is commonly characterized as a lingua franca (Sneddon, 2003). In today's modern world, the English language has become the backbone of every sphere. It has become the international language of communication, business, science, and information technology. English has gained increasing importance globally and in Sri Lanka in particular. Nevertheless, the crucial point of teaching and learning English is on how to learn English, and especially how to improve the students' English-speaking ability (Brown, 2001).

Teaching Speaking Skills in an ESL context

Kayi (2006) asserts that teaching speaking is an important component of second language learning and it contributes to the success of the learners during communication. Language teachers must pay adequate attention to the teaching of speaking. Graham-Mar (2004) claimed that the importance of teaching speaking skills stems from the fact that, human beings have been acquiring language through speaking and listening long before they began reading and writing. Our brains are well programmed to learn language through sound and speech. Brown and Yule (1983) believe that many language learners regard speaking skills as the criteria for knowing a language. They define fluency as the ability to communicate with others much more than the ability to read, write, or comprehend oral language. They regard speaking as the most important skill students acquire. Students assess their progress in terms of their accomplishments in spoken communication.

An accurate process of teaching- speaking requires teachers and students to get rid of the bondage of the conventional teaching models, actively cooperate with students and effectively improve students' English communicative skills. Accordingly, this study proposes using a procedure based on the use of tasks as the core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching namely the Task- Based Language Teaching (TBLT) to enhance the speaking skills of ESL learners. TBLT puts tasks at the center of the methodological focus. It views the learning process as a set of communicative tasks that are directly linked to the curricular goals they serve (Brown, 2001). Richards and Rodgers (2001) emphasize that the role of tasks has received further support from some researchers in second language acquisition who are interested in developing the pedagogical application of the second language acquisition theory (e.g., Long and Crookes, 1991).

TBLT in the ESL Learning-Teaching Context in Sri Lanka

According to Shashikala (2018), there is a great demand for the English language in Sri Lanka since knowing English means a chance to get a better job and the ability to lead a better life. In fact, it affects almost every aspect of the human lifestyle and possible future targets. At school level, learners often fail to achieve proficiency in English and as undergraduate students, they face the added challenge of learning academic English. Teaching language skills in the ESL learning-teaching classroom has always been the subject of long-term debate because there is always "an imbalance between the rigorous adherence to grammar structures and the application of such syntactic elements in authentic communication" (Shashikala, 2018, p. 933). Accordingly, the results of previous studies by Karunaratne (2003) and Perera (2001) suggest that there is a mismatch between the English teaching materials and the style of teaching as it is evident that most students in Sri Lanka can read and write in English, but they do not know how to speak.

With the introduction and expansion of the Communicative Language Teaching approach (CLT) for second language teaching in the 1980s, English language teachers started using learning materials based on the new approach (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Therefore, the government of Sri Lanka gradually adopted this approach and published the necessary textbooks which are more communicative in nature (Karunaratne, 2003). Consequently, the Educational Publications Department provided teaching and learning materials for all school grades consisting of a pupil's book, workbook, and a teacher's instructional manual including tasks covering all four skills of the language (Ministry of Education Sri Lanka, 2008). Irrespective of the contributions made by relevant authorities, it is evident that most students in Sri Lanka are unwilling to use English in spoken domains and therefore they lack the opportunities of improving their speaking skills.

Problem statement

Speaking in ESL contexts has occupied a unique position throughout much of the history of language teaching. It has begun to emerge as a branch of teaching, learning, and testing in its own right only in the last two decades, but rarely is the focus on the production of spoken discourse (Carter and Nunan, 2001). Due to the difficulty of studying speaking, many studies have been conducted to investigate the effect of TBLT on developing the reading and writing ability of the learners (e.g., Skehan, 1998; Foster and Skehan, 1996; Willis, 1996; among others), whereas only a few have examined the effect of this approach on the speaking skills of ESL learners in general and with Sri Lankan -ESL learners in particular.

The purpose of the study

The objective of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of the TBLT approach in improving students' speaking skills and students' perception towards integrating TBLT to improve speaking skills. The final results of this study will provide answers to the following research questions:

     I.   How effective is Task-Based Language Teaching in improving students' speaking skills?

    II.   What are students' perceptions towards integrating TBLT?

2.   Literature Review

TBLT: An Extension of CLT

The history of TBLT dates back to the 1980s as it emerged out of the Communicational Language Teaching project in India by Prabhu (1987). The rationale behind its origination is the lack of performance in the target language production and other limitations of the traditional language teaching methodologies. Accordingly, the process of language learning and teaching has passed through many phases and undergone many changes over the past few decades. In fact, at the initial stage, the field of TESL was dominated by traditional grammar-based approaches. Subsequently, as a reaction to these conventional teaching methods, a newer approach, known as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was introduced (Richards, 2006).

TBLT is considered to be the most productive of these innovations in which the features of CLT can be found. As Nunan (2004, p. 10) illustrates, "CLT is a broad, philosophical approach to the language curriculum that draws on theory and research in linguistics, anthropology, sociology, and psychology" whereas, "Task-based language teaching represents a realization of this philosophy at the levels of syllabus design and methodology."

TBLT as an approach

TBLT is unique and has been an interesting area for many researchers as a language teaching model since "in task-based language teaching, syllabus content and instructional processes are selected with reference to the communicative tasks which learners will need to engage in outside the classroom" (Nunan, 1991, p. 279). Therefore, this method incorporates processes that are believed to best facilitate language learning in the classroom. In fact, many L2 researchers like Fotos and Ellis (1991), Newton (1995), and Wesche & Skehan (2002) have raised their interest and support for TBLT as a suitable instructional method for second language learning and teaching since it promotes real-life like communication.

Tasks in the TBLT approach

A central phenomenon of this approach is that the tasks have a resemblance to real-life situations and therefore, promote meaningful authentic communication among learners. Prabhu (1987: 24), one of the first methodologists who developed an interest in TBLT, considers a task as "an activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process."   According to Prabhu, the TBLT method enables students to practice the language since it requires students' full engagement in a language task, rather than just learning for its own sake.

Rod Ellis differentiates tasks from classroom exercises and as he states, tasks have nonlinguistic outcomes whereas exercises produce linguistic ones. (2003: 30). As Ellis (1994, p. 595) explains, a task is "…some kind of activity designed to engage the learner in using language communicatively or reflectively in order to arrive at an outcome other than that of learning a specified feature of the L2." According to Willis (1996, p. 23), with TBLT, students will be completing tasks involving "real-life" situations which prepare them for authentic communication outside of the classroom.

Therefore, he asserts creative tasks as listing, ordering, sorting, comparing, problem-solving, and sharing experiences are those that can be considered as potential tasks.

Nunan (2004) differentiates the task classification as pedagogical tasks and real-life tasks. Pedagogical tasks refer to the communicative activities performed in the classroom to achieve an outcome and the basic purpose of pedagogical tasks is considered as a rehearsal for communicative engagement in an actual context. This refers to real-life interactive communication outside the classroom: for example, reserving an air ticket, facing job interviews, and making new friends.

Speaking ability

For most people, the ability to speak a language is the most basic means of human communication (Celce & Murcia, 2007). Harmer (2007) asserts that fluent speakers are those who can pronounce phonemes correctly, use appropriate stress and intonation patterns, and speak in connected speech.

Davies & Pearse (2000) state, "...in conversations, many things are happening at once. For example, understanding what the other is saying, saying what we want to when we have the opportunity to speak, be prepared for unpredictable changes in topic, and thinking of something to say when there is long silent period". Correspondingly, speaking can be identified as a productive skill (Willis, 2007). Moreover, Littlewood (1998) asserts,

"Speakers of a language can use all the appropriate language to convey their ideas clearly and use structure and vocabulary correctly. They can speak consistently without pauses or hesitation, consistently communicate all ideas without difficulty, pronounce sounds clearly and correctly, use varied and correct vocabulary, consistently use correct grammatical structures, and use gestures appropriately".

Methods of improving speaking skills

Celce & Murcia (2001) assert that generally, children are holistic learners who need to use language for authentic communication in the classroom. This means that students should speak something about which they are interested in. Therefore, teachers should use a variety of activities.

In addition to activities, the learner should be treated appropriately for their age and interest. In the Sri Lankan context, many textbooks focus on speech which provides many drills, exercises, and dialogues for oral practice, yet learners still fail to effectively develop their speaking skills in English as a Second Language (ESL) context. Consequently, Pattison (1989) notes that activities should be created based on communication in real life.   Gower, Phillips & Walters (2005) suggest that the teacher can improve the learner's speaking ability by providing them with every opportunity to speak in the classroom, helping them to realize their need for language, and encouraging their confidence by giving positive feedback.

Related studies: TBLT to improve speaking ability

Numerous ideas about TBLT have emerged over the past two decades and this section unfolds such studies conducted to investigate the effectiveness of the TBLT approach in improving the students' speaking ability. Although many studies have produced evidence in support of this approach, it has been challenged as well. These investigations might be relevant for the present research since they cover a wide range of aspects that can be beneficial for the current study.

Prabhu's Bangalore Project (1979-1984) can be regarded as the oldest attempt which established the idea of getting learners to acquire English through tasks. He practiced communicative tasks with students over a period of five years and the findings indicated that TBLT might present a promising model and an alternative method to the existing approaches for ESL teaching.

J. Willis & D. Willis (1996/2007) are strong advocates of TBLT, and the model presented by them is perhaps the most advocated in literature. They too emphasize a methodology for using tasks to enable authentic communication while focusing on meaning and not on producing specific

language structures. Drawing on data collected for nearly ten years, they discuss the problems perceived by L2 teachers when implementing TBLT around the world. According to them, "the most important change that we can make simply involves reordering textbook activities" (Willis & Willis, 2007, p. 209).

Swan (2005) challenges the elevated status attributed to TBLT. According to him, this method fails to fulfill the claims it has made, and therefore, "the exclusive advocacy of TBI reflects a perennial and damaging pattern of ideological swings in language teaching theory and practice." As he claims, many teaching practitioners seem unwilling to adopt this approach since TBLT seems to view grammar as unnecessary for beginners. This method is also doubted for its claim that "traditional" approaches have failed to promote language acquisition.

Moreover, Bruton (2002) argues that studies that promote TBLT such as the one conducted by Kowal, and Swain don't show evidence of learners' oral development in the classroom. It is also claimed that limited evidence is found about using tasks as central units to resolve the question of language correctness in learners' oral communication. He insists that learners will benefit from a balance between "teacher-fronted and non-teacher-fronted activities," rather than by starting with exclusively communicative-based tasks.

3. Methodology

Research approach: The present study adopts a mixed-method approach including both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect and analyze the data. The researcher primarily focused on collecting data quantitatively in the first phase via the implementation of a pre-test and post-test. In order to support and validate the quantitative data, the researcher collected quantitative and qualitative data in the second phase of the data collection process by seeking both close-ended and open-ended answers to the questionnaires. Accordingly, the present study was framed within the explanatory sequential design, where "the researcher first; collects and analyzes the quantitative (numeric) data and the qualitative (text) data are collected and analyzed second in the sequence and help to explain or elaborate on the quantitative results obtained in the first phase" (Clark, 2011).

Research context and participants: The Sri Lankan ESL learning-teaching context was chosen as the research context for this study. The study integrated 60 students studying in Grade 10 at the Katharina Shirani Frauenfeld College in Moragoda, Sri Lanka. This sample was selected based on stratified random sampling techniques, whereas the population is

selected from various subgroups 'strata', sharing common characteristics like age, gender, etc. (Prakash, 2013). Out of a population of 77 students, 60 students having the same level of language proficiency were selected as the sample.

In order to assign them to the same level, a placement test (speaking test) was conducted, and according to their performance, the students were categorized under the scheme given in the teachers' guide. Among them, the level that represented the majority of students was considered as the 'strata' and they were integrated into the current study upon the school principal's permission and formal consent. In order to obtain valid results, the sample was divided into two groups: namely as the control group and the experimental group. Each group consisted of 30 students.

Research Instruments: The current study integrated two particular instruments; speaking tests and questionnaires in order to achieve the purpose of the study as to obtain valid results to be presented.

Speaking tests: For the purpose of investigating the first phase of the study, the pre-test and post-test scores were required to be analyzed. Three speaking tests covering three topics were designed and developed by the researcher, and they included oral questions and evaluation rubrics. The oral questions were formulated under three topics: career, personality, and sports. Accordingly, the participants' performances were evaluated by two ESL teachers separately after each session and the average score of both markings was adopted to assess the participants' speaking ability before and after the implementation of the TBLT program in order to detect the effectiveness of the TBLT on the participants' speaking ability. The participants' performances were evaluated according to an evaluation scheme presented by the Ministry of Education, mentioning that "Teachers are expected to use these guidelines to assess and train students to engage in accurate communication. Further, the schools can start assessing oral skills at the term-end examinations based on the guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education from 2015 onwards" (Teachers' guide, 2014, P.28-29). Accordingly, the evaluation rubrics for the speaking test were adopted from the English Teachers' guide of Grade 10 which is validated by a panel of experts in the field to suit the ESL speaking assessment context.

The Attitudinal Questionnaire: The questionnaire was designed to examine the participants' attitudes and perceptions towards integrating the TBLT approach in terms of improving their speaking ability. This questionnaire consisted of 15 closed-ended and one open-ended item. The 15 close-ended items were designed in the form of a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree" with values 1-5 assigned to each alternative. The questionnaire was developed under two dimensions: attitudes towards the tasks integrated (items 1-7) and perceptions towards achievements via TBLT (items 8-15). The open-ended item covered

participants' attitudes towards the strengths and weaknesses of the TBLT approach in their perspectives.

Data Collection Procedure: For the purposes of collecting data to answer the first research question, tests and scores were used. Relevantly, as the first phase of the data collection, the pre-tests were held and the participants from both groups were tested on the above-mentioned three topics orally. In test-1(career), the participants were given a situation where they had to pretend to be the applicants and to make a call to seek information about the job role and the walk-in interviews. In test-2 (personalities), the participants were given a picture of a famous person and were asked to describe him/her using adjectives. Thus, in test 3(sports), the participants were given a speech to be delivered on "The sport I like the most in Olympics". Accordingly, their oral performances were evaluated out of 10.

The second phase of the data collection required several teaching sessions to be conducted. Accordingly, the teaching sessions were supported by a series of planned lessons. These lessons were designed with the integration of various tasks to match the objective of this study. Accordingly, with the agreement of the supervisor and the two teachers, three units that were to be covered (unit 10-Personality, unit 11-The right career, unit 14-Sport) were selected from their textbook. After which, three lesson plans, each covering 80 minutes were developed focusing on each group; experimental and control (see appendix 2). Considering the reliability and the validity of the study, the researcher neither engaged in planning nor teaching the lessons. After explaining the objectives of the study, the researcher provided the teacher of the experimental group with TBLT guidelines, and the material required. Accordingly, the lessons plan, to target the experimental group was designed following the tasks of TBLT presented by Willis (1996) whereas the lessons for the control group were designed following the conventional teaching practices. Merely the teaching sessions for two groups were conducted by two teachers. After implementing the teaching for a period of two weeks, the students were required to be tested orally under the three units. Accordingly, the post-tests were conducted in the form that the pre-tests were held.

The process of collecting data to answer the second research question included seeking responses to the attitudinal questionnaire. Following the teaching sessions of the experimental group, the 30 participants were given a questionnaire to be answered. As previously mentioned, 16 participants were required to respond to 16 items under three dimensions: participants' attitudes towards the tasks integrated, perceptions towards achievements via TBLT, and participants' attitudes towards the strengths and weaknesses of the TBLT approach in their perspectives. The researcher provided the participants with L1 translation when required. The entire process of data collection lasted for three to four weeks.

Data Analysis Procedure: The data collected in the above manner, was analyzed question-wise. In order to find out the statistical significances in the scores of pre-tests and post-tests related to the first research question, the researcher integrated a Paired Samples T-test through SPSS. Accordingly, the effectiveness of TBLT to improve the students' speaking ability was investigated quantitatively.

Thus, to answer the second research question, the researcher analyzed the data of the attitudinal questionnaire using a mixed-method approach. To be specific, the researcher integrated descriptive statistical analysis of SPSS software to analyze the quantitative data of the Likert scale. Correspondingly, the analyzed data was presented through tables as the descriptive statistics help the researcher to simplify large amounts of data in a sensible way (Trochim, 2006). Thus, the thematic analysis was adopted to analyze the qualitative data obtained by the open-ended questions posed in the attitudinal questionnaire. Accordingly, the procedure of data analysis followed both the quantitative and qualitative approaches.

4. Data analysis: Analysis related to the first research question

The pre-tests and post-tests marks were entered into a data set of SPSS statistical software and were subjected to analysis.

Group Analysis: Pre-test and Post-test results of the Control Group

The following paragraph indicates the mean scores of the pre-test and post-test of the control group. Pair 1 illustrates the test results related to the topic; Career, while pair 2 refers to the results related to the topic; Personalities. Thus pair 3 represents the test results of the unit; Sports.

The mean score of the participants belongs to the control group in the pre-test, on the topic; career is 5.70 whereas the mean score of the post-test is 5.86. This depicts an improvement of the post-test results of the control group. Pair 2, which displays the results achieved by the Control group under the topic; personalities, manifests a mean score of 5.53 as pre-test results while a mean score of 6.13 as the post-test results. Accordingly, a difference of 0.6 between pre-test results and post-test results depicts a slight improvement of post-test results of the control group in comparison to the pre-test results. Thus pair 3, which summarizes the test results related to the topic; sports illustrate a higher mean score of 5.53 for the post-test whereas the mean score of the pretest is 5.20. Therefore, it is evident that the participants of the control group have scored better in post-tests than in pre-tests, even though the difference between the test scores is less. Accordingly, it could be assumed that the teaching sessions based on traditional teaching practices have aided students to improve their speaking ability to a certain extent.

Group Analysis: Pre-test and post-test results of the Experimental group

The following research results related to the within-group analysis, indicate the mean scores of pre-tests and post-test of the experimental group. As mentioned above, pair 1, 2 and 3 illustrates the test results related to the topics; career, personalities, and sports respectively.

The mean score of the participants belonging to the experimental group in the pre-test, on the topic; Career is 5.66 whereas the mean score of the post-test is 6.80. This depicts an improvement of the post-test results of the experimental group with a difference of 1.14 when compared to the pre-test. Pair 2, which displays the results achieved by the experimental group under the topic; Personalities, shows a mean score of 5.60 as a pre-test result and a mean score of 6.76 as the post-test result. Accordingly, a difference of 1.16 between pre-test results and post-test results depicts an improvement of post-test results of the experimental group in comparison to the pre-test results. Thus pair 3, which summarizes the test results related to the topic; Sports illustrates a higher mean score of 6.76 for the post-test whereas the mean score of the pretest is 5.33. Therefore, when comparing the mean values and post-tests, it is evident that the performance of the experimental group is in a way similar to the performance of the Control group, as both groups have scored higher in each post-test. Accordingly, with reference to the current findings, it could be assumed that irrespective of the teaching methodologies integrated, both groups have outperformed in the post-tests.

Yet, to answer the first research question "How effective is the TBLT approach in improving students' speaking ability?" an in-depth analysis of the findings is required. Accordingly, the paired differences of the mean values of pre-tests and post-tests and paired differences of the standard deviation of both the control group and the experimental group could be discussed as follows.

The first three pairs that describe the performance of the control group, depict mean differences as 0.16, 0.60, and 0.33 whereas mean differences of the experimental group are visible as 1.13, 1.16, and 1.43. These findings denote that even though the performances of both groups seemed to be in line with each other, there is a significant statistical difference between the two groups, as the experimental group has shown a greater improvement in their post-tests than the control group did. Accordingly, the integration of the TBLT approach is seen as an effective source of improving the speaking ability of the participants of the experimental group. This factor could further be evident after comparing the standard deviations of both the control and experimental group.

Paired sample T-test results

As the second mode of approaching the first research question, the researcher focused on analyzing the post-test results of the two groups. Accordingly, the research findings obtained via the paired sample T-test further indicate post-test results of both the control group and the experimental group after each unit (Career, Personalities, and Sports respectively).

The mean value of the experimental group in post-test 1 on the topic; Career, tends to be 6.90 while the control group depicts a mean value of 5.86. Therefore, the mean value of the experimental group in post-test 1 is significantly higher than that of the control group. Thus the chance probability (sig.) of the posttests tends to be less than 5 percent (p< 0.5). Concerning the dispersion of the scores from the mean scores, the distance found in the experimental group was lower than that of the control group. This manifests that there is a consistency of the scores found in the experimental group (SD=1.32393), compared with that found in the Control group (SD=1.48298). Correspondently these findings denote that the participants in the experimental group performed better than the ones in the control group.

As presented in Table 6 (Paired Samples Statistics of the control group vs the experimental group on topic "Personalities"), the mean value of the experimental group in post-test 2 on the topic; Personalities, tends to be 7.26 while the control group depicts a mean value of 6.13. Therefore, the mean value of the experimental group in post-test2 is comparatively higher than that of the control group. Thus, the chance probability (sig.) of the post-tests tends to be less than 5 percent (p< 0.5). Concerning the dispersion of the scores from the mean scores, the distance found in the experimental group was lower than that of the control group. This manifests that there is a consistency of the scores found in the experimental group (SD=1.35655), compared with that found in the control group (SD=1.47937). Correspondently these findings denote that the participants in the experimental group have performed better than those in the control group. This further reflects that the treatment of the TBLT approach was effective in improving the speaking ability of the participants.

A further investigation on the effectiveness of the TBLT approach could be launched by analyzing the post-test results of the two groups related to the third topic; Sports. The mean value of the Experimental group in post-test 3 on the topic; Sports, tends to be 6.76 while the control group depicts a mean value of 5.53. Therefore, the mean value of the experimental group in post-test 3 is comparatively higher than that of the control group. Thus, the chance probability (sig.) of the posttests tends to be less than 5 percent (p< 0.5). Concerning the dispersion of the scores from the mean scores, the

distance found in the Experimental group was lower than that of the control group. This indicates that there is a consistency of the scores found in the experimental group (SD=1.16511), compared with that found in the control group (SD=1.35782).

Accordingly, these findings reveal that the participants in the experimental group have outperformed in the post-test. Since all three post-test results of the Experimental group have surpassed the results of the Control group, it is merely proof that the Task-Based Language Teaching approach is effective in improving students' speaking ability when compared to the traditional language teaching practices. This consistency can further be accepted by studying the paired difference between the mean values of the post-tests of the control group and the experimental group.

The paired difference of the mean values of the post-tests at the first stage tends to be 1.03 whereas, at the second stage, the paired difference of the mean values becomes 1.13. Thus, the paired difference of the mean values of the post-tests at the third stage increases up to 1.23. This gradual increment of the paired mean difference (1.03, 1.13, and 1.23) suggests that the larger the value will be, there is a drastic improvement of the performance. Therefore, this gradual increment of the results proves that the integration of different task types has supported the participants in terms of improving their speaking ability. Accordingly, the initial phase of the investigation has clearly answered the posed research question by proving that the TBLT approach effective in improving students' speaking ability.

Analysis related to the second research question

As mentioned previously, the second phase of the research investigated students' perceptions towards integrating TBLT to improve their speaking ability. Accordingly, the relevant data was obtained through a questionnaire that included both Likert scale items and open-ended items. After the treatment of TBLT to the experimental group, the participants were required to respond to the questionnaire items. Accordingly, the analysis related to students' perceptions was based on the responses obtained by each participant for the questionnaire items. Correspondently this section will describe the findings obtained via questionnaire analysis both statistically and thematically.

Analysis related to the Likert Scale item analysis

The first half of the questionnaire consisted of 15 close-ended items. These items were designed in the form of a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree" with values 1-5 assigned to each alternative. The questionnaire was developed under two dimensions: attitudes towards the tasks integrated (items 1-7) and perceptions towards

achievements via TBLT (items 8-15). The participants' responses were entered into a data set of SPSS statistical software and were subjected to analysis. Accordingly, this section will describe the results of the analysis with reference to the frequency and percentage of the responses.

The results for questionnaire items 1-7, which investigated participants' attitudes towards the tasks integrated during the treatment are discussed as follows.

The results related to the perceptions towards tasks denote that the majority (24) agreed to the fact that the tasks were interesting (80%) while 6 participants out of 30 have strongly agreed (20%). In relation to the fact that these tasks help students to be more authentic in the class, the majority (20) has agreed, 07 have strongly agreed while 03 have responded neutrally. Therefore, the valid percentage of the most frequent response is 66.7%. Shedding light on the fourth item; "I could finish all the tasks within the given time", the majority has either agreed or strongly agreed, while a few have disagreed. This indicates that several tasks have been time-consuming for some students and this fact could be generalized in terms of putting TBLT into practice. Another significant finding related to the questionnaire analysis is that; several students' potentials were not addressed accurately since a few of them disagreed with the fact that they were always clear about the theme of the tasks. Accordingly, these findings prompt relevant authorities including TBLT teachers and as well as practitioners to focus on comprehension checks continuously.

Thus, with reference to the results on frequency and the percentage of students' preferences presented in the chart above, it is clearly shown that the majority of the population possesses a positive attitude towards the different types of tasks integrated during the treatment of the TBLT approach.

The results for questionnaire items 8-15, which investigated participants' perceptions towards the achievements via TBLT in improving speaking ability are discussed as follows.

With reference to the questionnaire item 8, 13 students have agreed to the fact that the tasks which were integrated have supported in terms of self-performance and progression of their own while 10 students have marked their opinions as neutral.

Accordingly, this showcases that several students were not able to realize any self-progression since a considerable count of students were not merely satisfied with the progression that has taken place. Yet, the majority has witnessed a self-progression in terms of speaking ability. Apart from this, these findings depict that, a majority of the students are at a satisfactory

level as they have merely rated all the items either with agree or strongly agree.

This could be clearly seen from the frequency levels and the percentages given in the table. Therefore, it is apparent that the second research question has been addressed through the attitudinal questionnaire.

Analysis related to the Open-Ended Questions

The latter part of the attitudinal questionnaire including an open-ended item was designed to support the second research question in terms of participants' attitudes towards the strengths and weaknesses of the TBLT approach in their perspectives. In order to obtain the relevant findings related to the topic, all the raw data was subject to a thematic analysis.

As mentioned above, the majority have answered that TBLT has helped them in improving their speaking ability in numerous aspects. Among many compliments, suggestions, and recommendations, the most common response: "now I like English very much" was fine enough for the researcher to assume that students' positive attitudes towards learning English have been influenced by the treatment of TBLT. Therefore, students' attitudes towards integrating TBLT to improve their speaking ability are proven to be positive, as witnessed through the Likert scale analysis and the content analysis.

5. Findings and conclusion

Findings related to the first research question

The analysis related to the first research question: How effective is the TBLT approach in improving students' speaking ability? was conducted in the following 3 phases:

- Group analysis of pre-tests and post-tests of the control group
- Group analysis of pre-tests and post-tests of the experimental group
- Paired sample T-test analysis between post-tests from the control group and the experimental group.

Accordingly, the findings noted at level 1, where all three post-tests of the control group have shown an improvement of their marks when compared to the pre-tests, suggest that even though the three topics; Career, Personalities, and Sports were taught using traditional teaching practices, the students have acquired the language skill to a considerable level. This could be generalized by the fact that students are more exposed to and

familiar with traditional teaching practices that were being conducted for years. Moving on to the second set of the findings related to the pre-tests and post-tests of the Experimental group, the same scenario as of the control group was seen, meaning that the post-test scores of the experimental group have surpassed those of pre-tests. Even though, the effectiveness of TBLT could not be finely and clearly announced as both groups have showcased an improvement in terms of the scores. Thus, for the purpose of answering the initially posed question accurately, the researcher referred to the findings obtained by the paired sample T-test. Accordingly, the comparison between the mean values of the post-tests of both groups has clearly addressed the research question by answering that TBLT is more effective in improving the speaking ability of students. Moreover, when referring to the flow of the test scores, a gradual increment of the post-test results in the experimental group has been depicted (1.03, 1.13, 1.23 respectively). These students' performance during the post-task proves the argument of Nunan (1991) that TBLT actively engages students in authentic interaction since its content has relevance to the real world.

The above findings could further be explained by the fact that the TBLT program emphasizes the fluency of the participants rather than the bits and pieces of the linguistic competence of the learners (Willis, 1996). In task-based learning, the tasks are central to the learning activity. The method is based on the belief that students can learn more effectively when their minds are focused on the task, rather than on the language they are using. Accordingly, as varied types of tasks were integrated for the treatment of the TBLT approach, students had less time to worry about the production of speech, since the knowledge was provided subconsciously.

As previously mentioned, the programme included various speaking activities, exercises, and instructions that focused on the process rather than the product. In addition, the activities were purposeful and the tasks emphasized communication and meaning. Correspondently the students also acquired speaking English by interacting communicatively and purposefully while being engaged in meaningful activities. Similar to Nunan (1989), it was the application of tasks with naturalistic language and real-life-like situations which increased students' interest in the lesson. They provided students with much meaningful language input and what they learned in the classroom could be of great help to solve certain problems in real life.

Findings related to the second research question

The findings of the second research question which focused on investigating students' attitudes towards TBLT, were obtained by analyzing the data collected through an attitudinal questionnaire. Thus, with reference to the Likert scale analysis and the thematic analysis, the findings have proved that

students' attitudes towards the TBLT approach are positive. Accordingly, the correspondent findings will be subjected to the discussion as follows.

Based on the questionnaire, students believe that the tasks of the TBLT approach have encouraged them to improve their speaking ability. This finding was clearly justified through their statements as "these activities are interesting. They helped us to improve not only speaking, but we also learned new words too". Accordingly, TBLT signals to be effective not only in improving speaking but also in other language skills and aspects as writing, reading, grammar, and specific vocabulary.

Moreover, the students were satisfied with their achievements received after TBLT treatment. These include feeling activated to learn English and the ability to use the learned phrases in the conversations in daily life. The majority of the students liked to engage in group activities, which they think is the reason behind improving their self-confidence to engage in discussions in the target language. As Willis (1996) points out, well-designed tasks make learners participate in complete interactions and consequently, this increases students' motivation towards language learning. Similarly, this study reveals that the integration of tasks that are communicative in nature to teaching such skills has produced an effective outcome.

According to Ellis (2003), interactive activities as well as using authentic materials are considered essential in TBLT. Therefore, the references done by Ellis (2003) and Nunan (1996) on the TBLT approach, were taken into consideration by the researcher in order to design the three units. Therefore, the group works, pair works, games, authentic materials, visual aids such as flashcards, using the students' personal knowledge about the given task, and the presentation of oral reports about the topics of the tasks were integrated to enhance the students' speaking ability and to motivate them to speak in English. Therefore, this discussion on the findings depicts that TBLT as an approach is merely a "learner-centered approach", as described by Nunan (2004).

Limitations and Recommendations

On the basis of recent research findings, several deficiencies, as well as some strengths, were detected. Accordingly, these deficiencies will be discussed under research limitations, which will further assist future researchers. Thus, it is advisable to suggest the research strengths under recommendations, which will address the future researchers, ESL teachers, and relevant authorities.

With reference to the research conducted, the sample size has been considered as a limitation of the study. Since the researcher adopted

stratified random sampling as the technique of sampling and following this method, only 60 participants out of 77 were selected after facing a placement test in speaking. Another limitation was the time used for the entire data collecting process. The researcher could have allocated more time to conduct the three teaching sessions for both groups, which might have resulted in the research findings significantly. Therefore, the researcher asserts that the future researcher in the field would consider these limitations and relevant techniques will be applied accordingly.

Thus, it could be recommended that future researchers in the field conduct additional studies to examine the effect of TBLT on other skills or aspects as speaking, grammar, vocabulary, etc. of students in different schooling stages since the current study has concentrated only on grade 10 students' speaking improvement.

Moreover, with reference to the research findings, the researcher recommends that ESL and EFL teaching practitioners use the TBLT approach in their classroom, since this enhances students' speaking ability and will also be helpful in changing their attitudes towards English. The task-based teaching of oral communication skills requires much serious consideration before action. The researcher insists that the teacher should investigate carefully the current situation before applying it so that practical results can be achieved.

Curriculum designers are recommended to include TBLT in the English textbooks. Well-designed activities and tasks should be included in the teachers' and students' books. In line with curriculum designers, the teachers are recommended to use the manuals in an interesting and exciting manner so that the students are activated to learn English subconsciously. When referring to the current local syllabus, even though the textbooks are designed in a way where all the skills are covered, but in practice, the teachers may not make use of them. Therefore, it is the researcher's responsibility to remind the teachers to maintain an effective way of teaching methodology.

6. Conclusion

The current study that followed a mixed-method approach in the collection and as well as in the analysis has reflected the fact that TBLT is an effective way to teach students and to help them in improving their speaking ability. Thus TBLT was proven to be a learner-centered approach as all the students have provided their notions in support of TBLT. Moreover, it was evident that the more you are exposed to TBLT, the sooner you will improve your skills. Further, the findings of the study revealed students' inner thoughts about the application of the TBLT approach in terms of improving their speaking ability, which in a way is important to be aware of.

As discussed, the findings of this study showcase that TBLT improves students' oral social interaction. This result confirms that TBLT is one of the most appropriate teaching procedures that may help students to communicate accurately and fluently with other speakers of English.

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