

“Task-based Language Teaching: Its Implementation to Improve Speaking Skills of Rural School Students- A Case Study”

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ABSTRACT: Task-based language teaching has become very popular in the last decade. The main purpose of this study is to investigate the effect of the task-based instruction on the development of speaking skills of rural students in a rural school. Twenty three (23) students from grade VI to VIII from **Swarnandhra International School** were selected randomly as sample. The objective of the study was to investigate if Task-Based Program on the overall **speaking skills** of the rural students is positive. To carry out the intended study, a story was selected for the oral task. The goal set behind the task was to teach Reflexive Pronouns. Two oral tests were used in this study as a pre-test and a post-test. Material for task-based program was designed and implemented after the pre-test. After teaching, a Post-test was administered. Simple statistics were adopted to find out the mean for the results. The findings show that TBLT is an effective approach to develop speaking skills of rural students.

Keywords: Tasks, task-based approach, task-based program.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Tareq Mitib Murad (2009), affirms that TBLT is a rewarding technique for the Palestinian teachers and students as it augments students' fluency and accuracy as well as their attitude towards English. According to Gong Yafu & Luo Shaoxi (2003), a language can be acquired by its learners only if they are provided with ample opportunities to expose themselves to plenty of language input and output and its authentic utilization. This is feasible only with task-based language teaching approach as in task-based language teaching variety of tasks are adapted and to accomplish the tasks, students need to apply the language which they have learnt previously. They can also use their existing language skills to communicate with each other. Task-based language teaching can also motivate the learners to the maximum. According to Ellis (2003, 2004), the use of tasks will not only develop the speaking and writing skills of the students but also give them a clear and purposeful context for the learning of grammar. Therefore considering the importance of Task-based instruction, the present study aims at investigating the effects of task-based instruction on the development of oral skills of rural students.

II. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Tareq Mitib Murad (2009), conducted a study with Palestinian students at the secondary school level in Jordan. The findings of his study show that task-based language teaching technique develops speaking skills and social interaction. **Wang Cheng-jun. (2006)** conducted a study in China and used communicative tasks to find out the results for his study. His findings state that students could express themselves with fluency and accuracy and task based approach is indeed a better approach than a traditional/conventional one.

2.1. Tasks

Richards, Platt, J., and Weber, H. (1986) believe that, a task in a pedagogical perspective is an activity or action which is done as the result of processing or understanding language (i.e. as a response). According to Nunan (1989), a task involves primary focus on meaning. A task has some kind of gap. The participants select the linguistic resources needed for the completion of the task.

2.2. Components Of A 'Task: There are mainly six components of a task. Nunan (1989) describes them as (i) Input (ii) Goals (iii) Activities (iv) Setting (v) Teacher's role and (vi) Student's role.

2.3. Task-Based Language Teaching

According to Jane Willis (1996), there are three stages in the process of Task-based language teaching. The first stage is ‘pre-task’. At this stage the topic of the task is introduced. The second stage is ‘Task-cycle’ which is also known as ‘while task’. At this stage, task planning and thereafter a report is made. The third stage is ‘language focus’. At this stage focus is on the ‘language form’. At this point task-based language teaching methodology is different from other traditional methodologies.

Pre-task Phase: Pre-task has three options and they are: (i) Motivational (ii) Focus on cognitive demands (iii) Focus on linguistic demands. The topic and task are introduced in this phase. At this step the teacher is the guide.

Task Cycle: The second stage in the process of task-based language teaching is ‘task-cycle. The main objective of task-cycle is to provide students an opportunity to perform the task by using the target language and produce language spontaneously with their previous knowledge and achieve the set goal. Students work in groups. They first plan and thereafter report to the class either in spoken or written form.

Post- task Phase: In this phase tasks are repeated. Much attention is paid to the form. Studies show that repetition of activities is beneficial to the learners. According to the findings of the researchers, if activities are repeated, students improve in a number of ways. They produce more. Their fluency increases. They also use prepositions correctly and confidently. Their complexity increases.

Language focus/Attention to Form: In the framework of task-based language teaching methodology, analysis activities are given more importance. For language focus, Rod Ellis (2002: 30-31) outlines five teaching activities to develop grammatical knowledge of a problematic feature. These five activities are:

(i) Listening to Comprehend (ii) Listening to notice (iii) Understanding the grammar point (iv) Checking and (v) Trying it. Ellis’ five steps approach was adopted to carry out the present study.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Sample for the study

Twenty three (23) students were selected randomly as sample. The students were selected from grade VI to VIII from **Swarnandhra International School**, located at Chinnamamidipalli, a very small village in West Godavari District in Andhra Pradesh.

3.2. Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to explore if oral skills of rural students (of grade VI, VII, and VIII) are enhanced by applying Task-based instruction.

3.3. The Research Question:

Is there a significant effect of the Task-based Program (TBP) on the overall speaking skills of the students of grade VI to VIII?

3.4. Objectives of the study

The following are the objectives of the study.

- 1.To investigate if Task-Based Program on the overall speaking skills of the rural students studying in grade VI,VII&VIII is positive.
- 2.To find out if Task-based approach improves their fluency and accuracy in the given context.

3.5. Instruments

To carry out the intended study, an authentic material was employed for oral task (story telling). A story was selected for the oral task. Two oral tests were used in this study as the pre-test and post-test. The selected story is as follows.

I’VE JUST JUMPED OFF THE EMPIRE STATE BUILDING

John Helms, a young artist found himself all alone in New York city at Christmas time. He had no money and was so depressed that he decided to kill **himself**. Helms, aged 26, took a lift to the top of the Empire State Building. For a few moments he looked over the safety fence, then he said a short prayer before throwing **himself** off. A short time later he awoke to find **himself** on a ledge on the 85th floor, blown there by strong winds. He took a look at the cars crawling along Fifth avenue about 300 meters below and decided not to commit suicide after all. He knocked on the window, which was opened by Bill Stockman who had been hard at work in his office. ‘I couldn’t believe my eyes’, said Bill. ‘You don’t see a lot of guys coming in through the window of the 85th floor’. ‘I poured **myself** a stiff drink and one for him too...’ So the story had a happy ending. When the story was reported on the radio, hundreds of families called Helms to offer him a home for the holidays, so he was able to enjoy Christmas after all.

3.6. A Pre-test before implementing task based program: The teacher reads the story to the students and asks them to say the story in their own language. They were also told a pre-test would be conducted and that they should tell the story for which marks would be awarded to them. A Pre-test was conducted to all 23 students. While administering the pre-test, the students were instructed to take 2 minutes time. A few students took 2 minutes and a few others only 1 minute to express themselves. The test was conducted for 20 marks with four (4) parameters: Comprehension, Vocabulary, Fluency, and Accuracy. Marks were awarded to the students. After the pre - test was conducted, Task-based program started.

3.7. Design of the Program

The lesson for a newspaper clip ‘I’ve just jumped off the Empire State Building’ was prepared. Altogether seven steps were followed.

Step 1: At the outset the learners were told that the task was based on a true story which was reported in *The Guardian* newspaper a few years ago.

Step 2: At the second step the learners were given the topic ‘I’ve just jumped off the Empire State Building’. The teacher asked the students how it was possible that someone who had jumped off the Empire State Building would still be alive to talk about it. Some possibilities: He might have abseiled on a rope/ He might have landed on something soft/ He might have had a parachute/ there might have been something to catch him near the top. The use of the modal ‘might have’ is difficult. The students may have trouble with it. The teacher just repeated their contribution rephrasing it correctly. They were told that they could use ‘perhaps’ or ‘maybe’: Perhaps/Maybe he had a parachute.

Step 3: At the third step, the teacher gave them the phrases from the original matter: “decide not to commit suicide; knocked on the window; depressed; took a lift; a ledge on the 85th floor; 300 metres below; hard at work in his office; I poured myself a stiff drink; opened by Bill Stockman; safety fence; a television station” and explained that all those phrases were in the story, but not in this order. Then they were asked what they thought happened in the story. The teacher did not tell them if their guesses were right or wrong. The best thing was for them to work in pairs or groups and discuss their ideas. This would give them a lot of speaking practice.

Step 4: At the fourth step students were asked to tell their stories to the class. They were given some time to prepare their stories. The teacher went round and listened to them as they worked.

Step 5: At the fifth step one of them was asked to tell the story.

Step 6: At the sixth step the teacher asked the others if their stories were the same or different and if they were different, she asked them to say how their story was different.

Step 7: At the seventh step before the teacher displayed the story for them to read, she read the story out. The next step was to focus on language form and teach them the Reflexive Pronouns.

Language Focus - Reflexive Pronouns Identification:

At this stage the learners were asked to go through the story and pick out expressions with *-self*.

They picked out the expressions ‘found *himself* all alone’; ‘decided to kill *himself*’; ‘before throwing *himself* off’; ‘he awoke to find *himself* on a ledge’; ‘I poured *myself* a stiff drink’.

Analysis

In all the examples above the reflexive pronoun is ‘*himself*’. But ‘*himself*’ and its plural are unusual in the way they are formed. The other reflexives are: *-myself*, *-herself*, *-itself*, *-yourself*, *-ourselves*, *-yourselves*.

How are they formed? What about ‘*himself*’ and ‘*themselves*’?

Rule: ‘*himself*’ and ‘*themselves*’ are formed from the object pronoun *him/them* plus the reflexive *self/selves*.

The other reflexives are formed from the possessive: *my/her/your/its/our* plus the reflexive. Most transitive verbs, including verbs with prepositions, can be used with a reflexive pronoun. For example :

Moses said a short prayer before throwing *himself* off.

Look! You can see *yourself* in this mirror.

Betty locked *herself* in the bathroom.

Emmanuel was looking at *himself* in water.

They don’t look after *themselves* properly.

The verbs, blame - cut - dry - hurt - introduce - kill - teach are most commonly found with a reflexive: Sometimes the reflexive gives the verb an idiomatic meaning:

Example: He awoke and found *himself* on a ledge. (He realised that he was on a ledge.)

The students were given a box to complete sentences with the verbs in the right box.

It's dangerous. You have to ----- <i>yourself</i> . There's plenty of food in the kitchen. You can ----- <i>yourself</i> . I don't----- <i>myself</i> today. I've got a headache. He was looking forward to the party. He was going to----- <i>himself</i> . They are always mischievous. They don't know how to ----- <i>themselves</i> . It was such a silly mistake. So ridiculous. I could----- <i>myself</i> .	enjoy watch behave kick protect feel
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After learners had done this exercise, they were given a few minutes to study the sentences and then checked how many in the class could remember. Rules: Reflexives are less common in English than in some other European languages like French and Italian. With some verbs we only use the reflexive for emphasis, to show that something is unusual or unexpected.

Examples:

She's only two years old, but she can dress herself.

I had to help my son because he couldn't shave himself.

Sam is too weak to wash himself.

Reflexives are often used as an indirect object:

I poured myself a stiff drink.

She sent herself an email.

I bought myself a dress.

Practice exercise – vanishing words:

The learners were given the following sentence. The teacher asked one of them to read it out

John had the ability and so he decided to solve the problem himself.

The student read the sentence aloud. After the student read out the sentence, the teacher erased it from the black-board.

Then the teacher gave the same sentence with blanks and asked one of the learners to fill in the blanks .

(i). John - - - - - ability and so he decided to solve the problem - - - - - .

The teacher asked one of them to read it out.

The student read the sentences filling the blanks with suitable words and reflexive pronoun.

The teacher removed a few more words and asked one of the learners if he could still remember the sentence.

(ii). John - - - - - and - - he decided - - - - - the problem - - - - - .

The student read the sentences filling the blanks with suitable words and reflexive pronoun.

The teacher removed a few more words and asked one of the learners if he could still remember the sentence.

(iii). The teacher asked another learner to reconstruct the sentence and continued until all the words were removed:

John - - - - - and - - he decided - - - - - the problem - - - - - .

The student read the sentences filling the blanks with suitable words and reflexive pronoun.

The teacher removed all the words and asked one of the learners if he could still remember the sentence.

(iv). - - - - - .

The students were told to use that sentence because it contained several important grammar points:

- An Adverb clause of result with 'so'.
- Verb + to (decided + to)
- The reflexive pronoun: *himself*

3.8. A Post-test after implementing task based program: A post-test was conducted soon after the implementation of Task-based Approach. While administering the post-test, the students were instructed to take 20 minutes time. The post-test was also conducted for 20 marks with four (4) parameters: Pronunciation, Vocabulary, Fluency and Accuracy. Marks were awarded to the students.

IV. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

4. Statistical Analysis and results for objective – 1&2: Objective 1 is to investigate if Task-Based Program on the overall speaking skills of the rural students studying in grade VI, VII & VIII is positive.

The results are shown in the following Table - 1 and a graphical representation indicates clearly that the students' scores are greater in post-test.

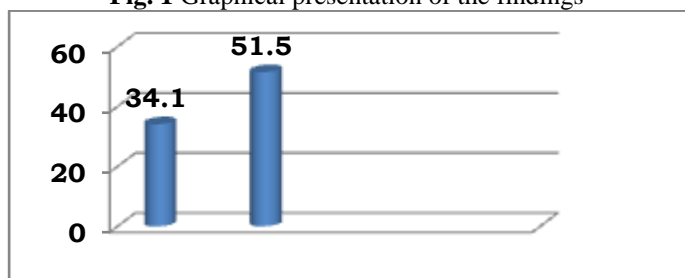
Table-1 below with both Pre – test and Post – test scores show that Students’ scores in their post – test is higher than that in their Pre – test.

Table- 1 Scores of 23 students in pre-test & Post-test

Sl.No.	Name	Grade	PRE-TEST					POST-TEST				
			Vocabulary	Comprehension	Fluency	Accuracy	Total-20 marks	Vocabulary	Comprehension	Fluency	Accuracy	Total-20 marks
1	P.Sai	VIII	1	1	2	0	4	3	3	2	2	10
2	S.Akhil Krishna Varma	VIII	2	3	3	2	10	3	3	3	3	12
3	J.L.V.Akshay	VIII	3	3	3	3	12	3	3	3	3	12
4	T.ChandraNitish V	VIII	2	2	3	2	9	2.5	2.5	3	2.5	10.5
5	N.SomaSekhar	VIII	2	2	2	2	8	2	2	2	2	8
6	K.Vinayak	VIII	3	3	3	2	11	3	3	3	2	11
7	P.Pavan Mani Kumar	VIII	1	1	1	1	4	2	2	2	2	8
8	M.Mahesh	VIII	1	1	1	1	4	2	2	2	2	8
9	G.Anand Kumar	VII	1	1	1	1	4	2	2	2	2	8
10	K.Yomima	VII	1	1	1	1	4	3	3	3	3	12
11	K.Sathwika	VII	1	1	1	1	4	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.5	10
12	K.chelsi	VII	1	1	1	1	4	2.5	2.5	2.5	2	9.5
13	K.BharathChowdhary	VII	1	1	2	1	5	3	3	3	3	12
14	K.Sai Mahesh	VII	2	2	2	1	7	3	3	3	2	11
15	N.Jagadeesh	VII	2	2	2	1	7	3	3	3	2	11
16	D.Surya Sai	VII	1	2	2	1	6	2	2	2	2	8
17	CH.Yaswanth	VI	2	2	2	1	7	2	2	2	2	8
18	M.Praveen Chandra	VI	2	2	2	1	7	2	3	3	2	10
19	U.S.D.V.Laxmi	VI	2	2	2	1	7	3	3	2	2	10
20	P.Anupama Sri	VI	2	2	2	1	7	3	3	2	2	10
21	B.Anusha Rani	VI	2	2	2	1	7	3	3	3	2	11
22	R.Nissi Rosalina	VI	3	3	3	3	12	4	4	4	4	16
23	K.Vineela	VI	2	2	2	1	7	3	3	3	2	11
	Total		40	42	45	30	158	61.5	62.5	60	53	237
	Mean Percentage		34.8	36.5	39.1	26.1	34.125	53.5	54.3	52.8	46.1	51.5

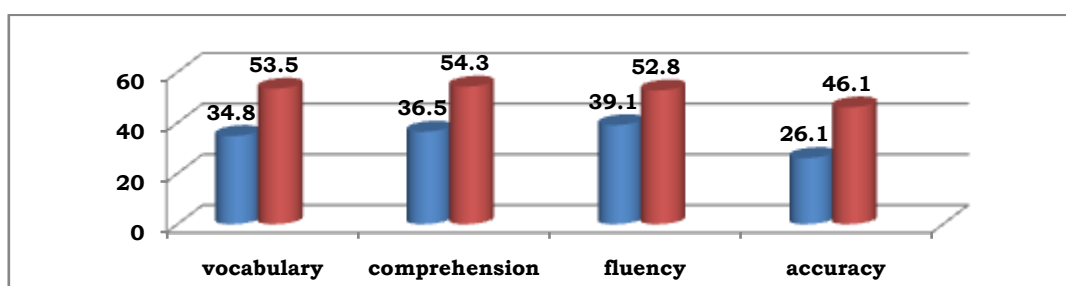
Figure-1 below shows a comparison between the pre-test and post-test. The mean percentage in post-test (51.5) is higher than the mean percentage in the pre-test (34.125).

Fig. 1 Graphical presentation of the findings



Objective 2 is to find out if Task-based approach improves their fluency and accuracy in the given context. In Figure-2 the bar graph given below shows that in all the four aspects of language namely, Vocabulary, Comprehension, Fluency and Accuracy, mean percentage in post-test is higher than the mean percentage in pre-test. Vocabulary – 53.5>34.8, Comprehension – 54.3>36.5, Fluency – 52.8>39.1, Accuracy – 46.1>26.1

Fig. 2 Graphical presentation of the findings in all four aspects of language



V. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The findings show that there is a positive effect of the Task-Based Program on the overall speaking skills of the rural students of grade VI to VIII. The findings also show that the students improved in the sub-skills – fluency and accuracy.

VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study is on par with the study of Cheng-jun Wang’s (2006) whose findings concluded that the communicative tasks design has been proved to be effective in promoting the learners competence. The present study is on par with the study of Tareq Mitib Murad (2009) who affirms that TBLT is a rewarding technique for the Palestinian teachers and students as it augments students’ fluency and accuracy. Hence it is concluded that Task-based approach is an effective teaching approach to develop speaking skills of the rural students.

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