Using Task-Based Language Teaching to Improve English Speaking Fluency: An Action Research Study with Vietnamese Non-English-Majored University Students

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ABSTRACT

This action research project investigated the effectiveness of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in improving the speaking fluency of 28 non-English major, first-year university students in Vietnam. The study involved a 10-week intervention where students engaged in communicative tasks designed to promote authentic language use. Data were collected through classroom observations, teacher checklists, and informal student discussions. To assess fluency, specific indicators such as speech rate, pauses, and repetitions were examined. The findings revealed that TBLT positively impacted students' speaking fluency, as evidenced by improvements in speech rate, pauses, and repetitions. Students also expressed positive perceptions of TBLT, emphasizing the benefits of pre-task planning, collaborative work, and a focus on meaning over form. The study suggests that TBLT might be an effective approach for enhancing spoken fluency among university students, particularly those with prior grammatical knowledge but limited communicative practice.

Keywords: Task-Based Language Teaching, speaking fluency, non-English major university students

Introduction

Many second language learners prioritize mastering spoken English, often measuring their progress by improvements in their ability to communicate effectively (Richards, 2008). In Vietnam, students with strong English skills benefit from numerous career opportunities. However, English education in Vietnam—similar to other Asian countries—has faced significant challenges, often stemming from Confucian ideals and traditional teaching practices. These approaches typically emphasize linguistic rules and explicit instruction, with minimal focus on communicative competence (Loi, 2011, as cited in Nguyen & Jaspaert, 2020). According to Edwards and Willis (2005, as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2014), most students who receive instruction primarily through traditional methods graduate without the ability to communicate effectively in English. To address these persistent issues with students' language proficiency, the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) took decisive action. In December 2018, it introduced the General Education English Curriculum (GEEC), marking

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a pivotal shift in language teaching from a language-centered approach to a learner-centered approach. The aim of this new curriculum is to improve communicative competence rather than to master linguistic knowledge.

While GEEC promotes communicative competence and learner-centered instruction at the high school level, many first-year university students still enter higher education with limited spoken fluency. This indicates a gap between the intended outcomes of GEEC and the actual communicative abilities of students. Despite the curriculum's emphasis on communication, the influence of grammar-focused instruction and exam-oriented teaching in secondary schools remains strong. Consequently, first-year university students, particularly those at the CEFR A2 level, often struggle to use English fluently in real-life contexts. This study seeks to address that gap by applying Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT).

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is described as the "strong version of the communicative approach, where language is acquired through use" (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011, p. 199). This approach motivates learners to utilize language for meaningful, real-life communication (Ellis, 2009), leading to positive attitudes from both educators and students (Bryfonski & McKay, 2017, as cited in Jackson, 2022). For example, teachers have observed students eagerly applying language in authentic scenarios (Erlam & Tolosa, 2022), and students engaged in TBLT spend substantial time communicating, which fosters fluency development (Frost, 2004, as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2014). A wealth of research supports TBLT's efficacy in enhancing students' communicative competence across multiple dimensions (Nghia & Quang, 2021; Tran, 2022), particularly in improving speaking skills among learners of diverse proficiency levels and age groups (Albino, 2017; Hasnain & Halder, 2023; Masuram & Sripada, 2020; Namaziandost et al., 2019; Nget & Poohongthong, 2020; Ngoc, 2023; Panduwangi, 2021; Sugianto & Han, 2020; Thu, 2021; Zúñiga et al., 2023).

At the researcher's university, first-year students at the CEFR A2 level were frequently assigned to his courses. These learners generally had a solid grasp of English grammar but found it difficult to apply their knowledge effectively in real-world communication. Having been taught mainly through traditional grammar-focused methods, they often struggled with spoken fluency. In response to these challenges, the teacher initiated an action research project that incorporated TBLT into classroom practice. As TBLT has been widely recognized for its potential to support speaking fluency, this study explores how it can address the persistent difficulties faced by these students.

Literature Review

The Theoretical Rationale for TBLT

TBLT is well-supported by both cognitive-interactionist and sociocultural theories of Second Language Acquisition (Erlam & Tolosa, 2022). Key cognitive theories supporting TBLT include the information processing, the noticing hypothesis, the output hypothesis, and the interaction hypothesis (Erlam & Tolosa, 2022). These theories highlight the role of tasks in providing input and opportunities to process language for meaning (Robinson, 2001, as cited in Erlam & Tolosa, 2022), encouraging attention to form (Schmidt, 1995, as cited in Erlam & Tolosa, 2022; Ellis, 2003), encouraging language production (Swain, 2005, as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Robinson, 2011, as cited in Erlam & Tolosa, 2022), promoting negotiation of meaning, feedback, output modification, and acquisition (Long, 1983, 1996, as cited in Lightbown & Spada). From a sociocultural perspective, language learning is viewed as a social process that occurs through interaction and collaboration (Vygotsky, 1978, as cited in

Lightbown and Spada, 2013). Tasks create a platform for learners to engage in collaborative dialogue, receive scaffolded help within their Zone of Proximal Development, and co-construct meaning (Ellis, 2003). Tasks are viewed as tools that mediate learning through interaction, with different learners approaching the same task in various ways (Ellis, 2003).

The Role of Tasks in TBLT

Ellis (2003) emphasizes that tasks are central to this instructional model. According to Larsen-Freeman & Anderson (2011), tasks are defined as purposeful activities that engage learners in communication and have clear objectives, allowing both teachers and students to measure the success of their interaction. Tasks encourage language use, meaning negotiation, comprehension of input, and attention to form - elements that collectively contribute to second language acquisition (Van den Branden, 2006). Ellis et al. (2020) identified four key criteria for defining a task: (1) the primary focus is on conveying meaning; (2) the task involves some type of gap to be addressed; (3) learners rely mainly on their own knowledge and skills; and (4) the task has a specific communicative objective.

Willis (1996) categorizes tasks into six main types: listing, ordering and sorting, comparing, problem-solving, sharing personal experiences, and creative tasks. Meanwhile, Prabhu (1987, as cited in Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011) identifies three distinct task types: information-gap tasks, opinion-gap tasks, and reasoning-gap tasks. Information-gap tasks require participants to exchange information to complete a task, while opinion-gap tasks involve learners expressing personal views, preferences, or emotions. In reasoning-gap tasks, learners infer or derive new information by processing the given data. Additionally, Ellis (2009) provides another layer of classification by distinguishing between focused and unfocused tasks, as well as input-providing and output-prompting tasks. Unfocused tasks allow students to engage in general communication without focusing on specific language forms, whereas focused tasks emphasize the use of particular linguistic elements, such as grammar structures. Input-providing tasks encourage receptive activities like listening and reading, often introducing new language forms, while output-prompting tasks require learners to actively produce language through speaking or writing.

A Framework for Task-Based Lessons

Ellis (2006) proposes a structured framework for task-based lessons, consisting of three sequential phases, as shown in Figure 1. This framework ensures a clear and logical flow, while also allowing flexibility in the choice of activities for each phase. Notably, only the during-task phase is essential to the lesson, though the pre-task and post-task phases, though optional, can significantly enhance language development by optimizing task performance.

Table 1

A framework for designing task-based lessons (Ellis, 2006, p. 80)

Phase	Examples of options
A. Pre-task	Framing the activity (e.g., establishing the outcome of the task) Planning time Doing a similar task
B. During task	Time pressure
C. Post-task	Number of participants Learner report Consciousness-raising Repeat task

The pre-task phase is designed to prepare students for task performance in ways that facilitate language acquisition (Ellis, 2006). This preparation can be achieved through three primary strategies: (1) capturing students' interest in the task topic, (2) activating relevant background knowledge, and (3) providing essential language support (Ellis, 2006). Activating learners' prior knowledge benefits their engagement and performance (Jackson, 2020). Additionally, offering a model helps students grasp both the content and the language required to complete the task effectively (Ellis, 2019). Observing others perform the task can also reduce cognitive load, making it easier for learners to complete the task themselves (Willis, 1996). Research suggests that pre-task planning enhances performance by improving both fluency and complexity (Ellis, 2019).

During the task phase, students are given time limits for task completion, which, as Ellis (2019) points out, encourages greater fluency by fostering quicker responses.

The post-task phase plays a vital role in a task-based lesson (Ellis, 2019). In this stage, free practice activities aimed at reinforcing grammar knowledge are incorporated. These familiar activities can make TBLT feel less intimidating for students (Ellis, 2019). Notably, in TBLT, these grammar-focused activities are introduced after the task, reversing the sequence of the traditional Presentation, Practice, and Production (PPP) approach (Ellis, 2019). Such activities can help learners internalize and automate language forms that they continue to find challenging (Ellis, 2006).

Fluency in Speaking

According to Harmer (2015), fluency reflects effective communication, where even grammatical errors do not hinder the flow if the speaker conveys their message without excessive pauses or struggling for words (Crowther et al., 2015). Hedge (1993) identifies two aspects of fluency in English language teaching (ELT). The first refers to the ability to connect speech units smoothly, without strain, unnatural slowness, or unnecessary hesitation, emphasizing language production. The second focuses on natural language use in classroom activities, which occurs when communication centers on meaning, speakers control the content, meaning is negotiated, strategies are employed, and teacher correction is minimized. Skehan (2003, 2009) further divides fluency into three dimensions: speed fluency (speech rate and density), breakdown fluency (pauses), and repair fluency (self-corrections and repetitions). Ultimately, fluent speech involves maintaining speed, minimizing disruptions, and ensuring effective message delivery (De Jong et al., 2012; Tavakoli et al., 2016), characterized by the absence of excessive pauses, hesitations, or repetitive patterns (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; Segalowitz, 2013).

Research Supporting the Effectiveness of TBLT in Improving Speaking Proficiency and Fluency

Numerous studies have demonstrated that TBLT effectively enhances students' speaking proficiency and fluency. A primary theme emerging from this research is the positive impact of TBLT on overall speaking skills and communicative competence. For instance, studies by Sugianto et al. (2020) and Nget et al. (2020) in Indonesia and Cambodia, respectively, found significant improvements in participants' speaking abilities, attributed to engaging tasks, structured task cycles, and relevant topics. Thirty-four undergraduates at the Department of English of Madalika University of Education in Indonesia participated in Sugianto et al.'s (2020) action research, which collected data from observations and pre- and post-tests. Nget et al.'s (2020) study involved seventy-eight students in grade 9 at Rohal High School in Banteay Meanchey, Cambodia.

Furthermore, Panduwangi (2021) in Indonesia showed that TBLT-instructed students outperformed those in traditional settings in terms of speaking accuracy and fluency. Even among non-English major freshmen, TBLT proved more effective (Panduwangi, 2021). Within the Vietnamese context, research by Thu (2023) and Ngoc (2023) further confirms TBLT's positive influence on students' overall speaking abilities, encompassing elements like task achievement, fluent speed, vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Thu's study involved thirty-eight non-English major third-year students at Dong Nai Technology University, Vietnam. Sixty students from Saigontourist Hospitality College, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, participated in Ngoc's study. Her quasi-experimental research used data from pre- and post-tests and a questionnaire.

A recurring factor contributing to these positive outcomes is increased student motivation and engagement. Nguyen (2022) examined the effects of task-based instruction on reading comprehension among non-English major university students in Vietnam and found significant improvement in students' reading performance. Although the focus was on reading rather than speaking, the study supports the effectiveness of TBLT in promoting learner engagement and shifting away from traditional grammar-based methods. Learners frequently express positive attitudes towards TBLT, citing its ability to meet their interests and learning needs (Nget et al., 2020). Studies in various countries, including Angola (Albino, 2017), India (Hasnain & Halder, 2023), and Colombia (Zúñiga et al., 2023), highlight how TBLT encourages active participation and fosters a willingness to speak English. Participants consistently report feeling more motivated to use the language, particularly through collaborative activities like pair and group work and well-designed tasks (Hasnain & Halder, 2023; Zúñiga et al., 2023). This heightened motivation is often linked to the authentic, real-life communication scenarios inherent in TBLT tasks (Nget et al., 2020).

Beyond general proficiency, several studies specifically emphasize TBLT's role in developing speaking fluency, characterized by increased speech speed, fewer pauses, elaborated discourse, and improved interaction. Albino (2017) observed enhanced fluency with better accuracy and richer discourse among Angolan students, noting that TBLT encouraged them to speak more. This case study collected data from picture descriptions and interviews. The study involved forty pupils in grade 9 at PUNIX-Cazenga. Similarly, Masuram and Sripada (2020) in India found improvements in college students' task achievement, grammar, and fluency. This quasi-experimental study gathered data from surveys, observations, pre- and post-tests, participants' diaries, and casual interviews. Hasnain and Halder (2023) further confirmed this in India, observing fluency enhancement with fewer pauses and more words. The design of specific task types also plays a crucial role in fostering fluency. Thirty undergraduates who studied for B.Ed from one college in Kolkata, West Bengal, India, participated in the study. Data were obtained from pre- and post-tests, surveys, and semi-structured interviews. Namaziandost et al. (2019) in Iran, for instance, demonstrated that information-gap tasks were particularly effective in influencing EFL students' speaking fluency compared to opinion-gap and reasoning-gap tasks. This quasi-experimental study involved 140 EFL Iranian students aged 15-18 at the CEFR B1 level from two English language institutes. The underlying principle appears to be TBLT's inherent ability to motivate learners to converse and interact extensively in the target language (Zúñiga et al., 2023). This qualitative study used data from surveys, interviews, and speaking rubrics. Twenty EFL undergraduates at the CEFR A2 level from a university in Medellin, Colombia, participated in the study.

While these studies present promising results, they also highlight certain limitations. Most research focuses on general speaking competence without providing an in-depth analysis of specific fluency metrics. Additionally, although TBLT is well-researched across different

educational contexts, there is a lack of studies specifically targeting non-English majors, first-year university students - particularly those at the A2 proficiency level - within the Vietnamese context. This gap underscores the importance of investigating how first-year students adapt to TBLT and how it influences their fluency development over time.

Aims and Objectives of the Study

This study investigates the effectiveness of TBLT in enhancing the speaking fluency of non-English major, first-year students enrolled in an English Foundation course at UEL. To achieve this aim, the study pursued three objectives: (1) to assess the degree to which TBLT improves students' speaking fluency and (2) to explore their perceptions of the approach's impact on their oral communication skills.

Research Question

To achieve the study's objectives, the study addressed the following research question:

How does TBLT affect the speaking fluency of first-year non-English major university students in Vietnam?

Methods

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

The action research was conducted at the University of Economics and Law (UEL), located in Thu Duc District, Ho Chi Minh City. The university offers a range of programs tailored to the proficiency levels of non-English major students, aiming to equip them with the skills needed to use English effectively. Equal emphasis is placed on developing all four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—with the goal of helping students achieve a CEFR level of B1, which is required for graduation. The English classrooms at UEL are well-equipped with various educational tools, including television screens, computers, speakers, and other resources that enhance the learning experience. This research site was selected because it was the researcher's current workplace, providing him with direct access and facilitating collaboration. Additionally, the researcher was able to secure permission from the head teacher to carry out the study and collect the necessary data.

The participants in this study were 28 first-year students aged 18-19, enrolled in a Foundation English course during Semester 1 of the 2024-2025 academic year. They were selected through convenience sampling, as the study was conducted in the researcher's own class as part of an action research project. They had taken a placement test administered by the university before they registered for this class. Their English proficiency was at the CEFR A2 level. The students majored in economics or law. They had good knowledge about grammar, but they were not able to apply it in communication. The course lasted ten weeks. There were three 4-hour and 15-minute sessions each week. This class was chosen for this research for various reasons. First, the researcher was assigned this class, so he had certain convenience when conducting the study. Second, the participants, who were familiar with more traditional teaching methodologies, were new to TBLT. Last, the coursebook contains a range of authentic tasks in the speaking sections, which were particularly appropriate for the objectives of the study.

Design of the Study

The researcher utilized classroom-based action research (AR) to achieve the objectives of the study. Classroom-based AR was well-suited to this study for several reasons. Burns (2010) highlights that AR enables teachers to better understand classroom challenges and dilemmas,

driving meaningful improvements in their teaching practices. AR helps teachers improve their skills and expertise (Descombe, 2010). Additionally, as Mills (cited in Creswell, 2012) explains, AR involves systematic procedures that allow educators to gather data, refine their instructional methods, and enhance both their teaching effectiveness and students' academic progress. Generally, there are four main phases in AR: planning, acting, observing, and reflection. These four stages create a continued spiral, with cycles iterating until the expected results are obtained. However, due to time constraints, this study implemented only one research cycle, with the hope that future iterations will refine the findings and yield more comprehensive results.

Data collection & analysis

Teacher's Checklist. Five students were randomly selected for observation during task performance. An observation checklist (*see Figure 2*) was used to assess their speaking fluency. The checklist employed a Likert scale, following the recommendation by Burns (2010), to ensure a focused evaluation of specific aspects of fluency. Its primary objective was to measure the learners' speaking fluency and determine the effectiveness of TBLT. The checklist, adapted by the researcher from the IELTS Speaking Band Descriptors (public version) by Cambridge English, focused on three key criteria: rate of speech, pauses, and repetition**.** A Likert four-point scale, ranging from 4 for excellent to 1 for poor, was applied to each of the criteria.

- **Rate of speech**: *4 (fluent and natural, with steady flow)* referred to speech that maintained a consistent rhythm, with only minimal slowing; *1 (very slow, fragmented delivery)* indicated that sentences were frequently broken and difficult to follow.
- **Pauses**: *4 (few brief pauses, rarely noticeable)* meant that hesitations were short and did not interrupt meaning, while *1 (long pauses before most words)* indicated a strong disruption to communicative flow.
- **Repetition**: *4 (rarely repeats words or phrases)* referred to a clear progression of ideas without unnecessary recycling, whereas *1 (excessive repetition, hard to follow)* meant that the speaker relied heavily on repeating words or structures, reducing fluency.

Table 2

Teacher's Speaking Fluency Checklist

Criteria	4 (excellent)	3 (good)	2 (fair)	1 (poor)
Rate of speech	Fluent and natural, with steady flow	Moderate pace, with some slowing	Slow and hesitant at times	Very slow, fragmented delivery
Pause	Few brief pauses, rarely noticeable	Occasional pauses between ideas	Frequent pauses, disrupting flow	Long pauses before most words
Repetition	Rarely repeats words or phrases	Some repetition to maintain flow	Frequent repetition and corrections	Excessive repetition, hard to follow

Before the main study, the checklist was piloted with a small group of students in a similar class to ensure clarity, appropriateness, and ease of use. Revisions were made based on feedback and trial results to improve its reliability for assessing speaking fluency.

Observations. Before conducting this action research, the lecturer informally observed that many students, despite having a solid grasp of grammar, struggled to express themselves fluently in spoken English. This recurrent issue prompted the researcher to systematically explore how Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) might improve students' oral fluency. To investigate this phenomenon more rigorously, two formal classroom observations were conducted - one during the first two weeks (Observation 1) and another during the final two weeks of the course (Observation 2).

Observation 1 took place in a speaking lesson that applied the TBLT framework, in alignment with Ellis's (2006) model, which includes pre-task, during-task, and post-task phases. The goal of the lesson is to express interest and excitement. For the pre-task stage, students listened to four conversations in which useful phrases for expressing excitement and interest were used. After that, they answered comprehension questions. The teacher then introduced useful phrases for expressing interest and asking follow-up questions. During the task phase, students worked in pairs, having sufficient time to plan and prepare their ideas. In the post-task stage, the teacher provided feedback, focusing on grammar and vocabulary. Five students - H., Th., T., P., and Ph. - were selected for close observation using the checklist.

Observation 2 was conducted during a speaking lesson in the final two weeks of the course. The lesson focused on discussing upcoming celebrations such as birthdays, holidays, or graduation events. This task aimed to promote spontaneous language use and personal expression, aligning with the principles of opinion-gap and information-gap tasks (Prabhu, 1987; Willis, 1996). In the pre-task phase, the teacher brainstormed vocabulary related to celebrations such as public holidays, gifts, and meals. This step was designed to scaffold learners' lexical resources and reduce cognitive load, consistent with the recommendations of Ellis (2006) and Willis (1996) for preparing learners to perform a communicative task effectively. During the task phase, students worked in small groups to share and compare their plans for future celebrations. They were given time to plan their ideas before discussing them - an approach shown to support fluency by allowing learners to organize thoughts and retrieve relevant language (Ellis, 2019). In the post-task phase, the student with the most interesting plan shared it with the class. The teacher also gave targeted feedback on the use of "*be going to*," as many students struggled with it. As with Observation 1, the same five students - H., Th., T., P., and Ph. - were observed using the fluency checklist, which assessed the rate of speech, pauses, and repetition. These criteria were selected based on Skehan's (2003, 2009) fluency dimensions and adapted from the IELTS Speaking Band Descriptors.

Data from the checklists were compiled and visualized through charts, with scores input into Excel for further analysis. The scores - ranging from 1 (poor fluency) to 4 (excellent fluency) - assessed students' rate of speech, pauses, and repetitions. Excellent speakers demonstrate a fluent, steady flow with minimal pauses and rare repetition. Good speakers maintain a moderate pace with occasional pauses and some repetition to sustain flow. Fair speakers exhibit slow, hesitant delivery with frequent pauses and repeated corrections. Poor speakers speak very slowly with fragmented delivery, long pauses before words, and excessive repetition, making it hard to follow their speech.

Informal Discussions. During the final week, the students engaged in informal group discussions to express their opinions on how TBLT had influenced their speaking fluency. These discussions served two key purposes. First, they provided students with an opportunity to reflect on their learning experiences, helping them become more aware of how specific TBLT activities supported or hindered their fluency development. Second, they allowed the researcher to gather qualitative data based on students' self-reported experiences and insights.

The researcher observed and took informal notes during these sessions, which helped reveal both effective aspects of the TBLT implementation and areas in need of refinement. Although the students were not given explicit theoretical instruction on TBLT, they had engaged with TBLT tasks throughout the course, so their awareness was based on practical exposure rather than formal knowledge of the method. This means their feedback was grounded in experience rather than theoretical bias.

Discussions involved small groups of 4-5 students to encourage active participation and diverse perspectives. This allowed for more focused conversations and prevented individual students from dominating the discussion. While the discussions were largely open-ended, the teacher-researcher used guiding prompts to stimulate student reflection and ensure key areas were addressed. These prompts included questions such as:

"How does this way of learning compare to your previous experiences learning English?"

"Do you feel that your speaking fluency has improved? If so, how?"

"What suggestions do you have for improving our classroom activities?"

Procedure

The research followed an AR model, with each phase aligned to the framework outlined by Burns (2010). The process was divided into four stages:

Phase 1 – Planning. The project began with the identification of a specific problem: the need to enhance students' speaking fluency. The researcher developed a detailed plan to address this issue, including a thorough literature review to identify relevant theories and best practices. Permission to conduct the research was obtained from the head teacher at UEL, and the researcher informed the students about the purpose and scope of the study. The project was scheduled to run over a 10-week period **(**from August 12 to October 20, 2024**),** integrated into the Foundation English class for Semester 1.

Phase 2 – Acting. The researcher implemented TBLT throughout the semester to evaluate its impact on students' speaking fluency. Observations were conducted at two points: (1) the **f**irst observation conducted during the first two weeks of the course (August 12–25) and (2) the second observation conducted during the last two weeks of the course (October 7–20). During these observations, the researcher used the checklist to assess the students' fluency based on the rate of speech, pauses, and repetition**.** In the final week of the course (October 14–20), the students participated in informal discussions to share their thoughts on TBLT's effectiveness. The researcher observed and took notes to capture key insights in an informal manner.

Phase 3 – Observing. Following the completion of the course, the researcher reviewed the data collected from the observations and informal discussions. Meaningful patterns and trends were identified, leading to data-driven conclusions about the impact of TBLT on students' fluency.

Phase 4 – Reflecting. In the final stage, the researcher engaged in critical reflection, analyzing how the findings could inform future teaching practices. This reflective process, as emphasized by Burns (2010), is an essential element of AR as it deepens the teacher's understanding of their instructional methods. The researcher compiled the results into a comprehensive report that highlighted key findings and their implications for future research and teaching practices.

Results/Findings

Findings from the Checklists

Table 3

Fluence Scores of Observed Students.

Student	Rate of Speech (Weeks 1–2)	Rate of Speech (Weeks 9–10)	Pauses (Weeks 1–2)	Pauses (Weeks 9–10)	Repetition (Weeks 1–2)	Repetition (Weeks 9–10)
H.	2	4	1	4	1	4
Th.	2	4	1	4	1	4
T.	1	3	1	3	1	3
P.	1	3	1	3	1	3
Ph.	1	3	1	3	1	3

Figure 1

Changes in fluency scores over time

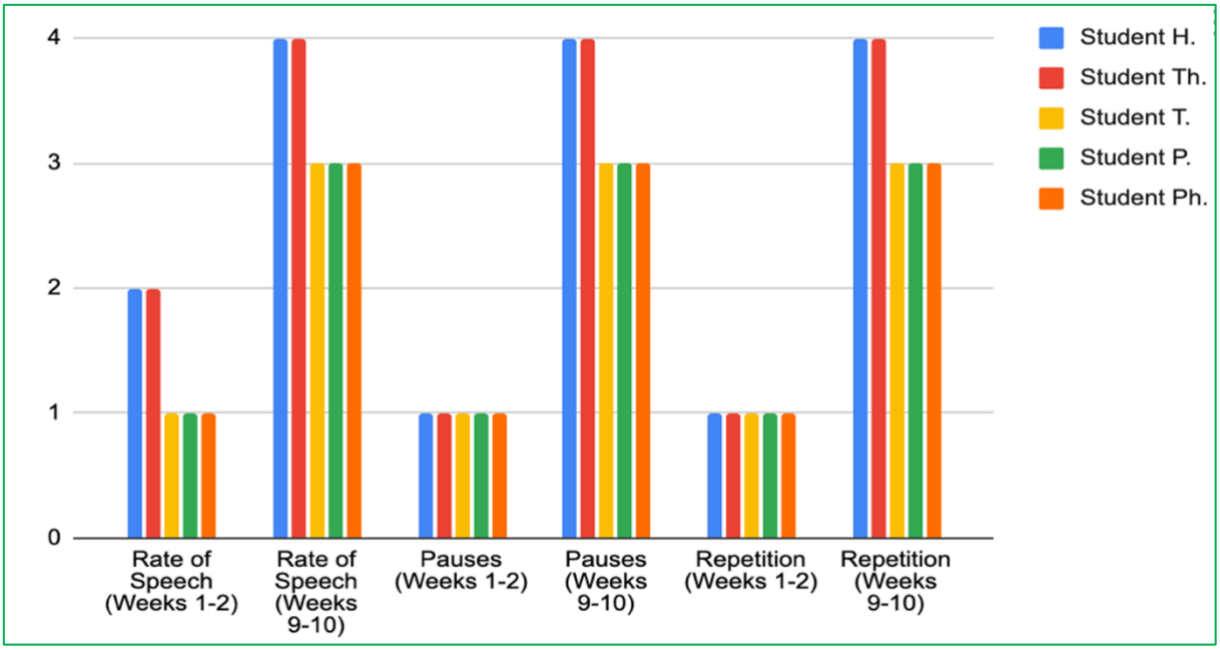

Table 3 shows that in the first two weeks, students H. and Th. scored 2 in rate of speech and 1 in both pauses and repetition, indicating limited fluency. Figure 1 demonstrate that students T., P., and Ph. received scores of 1 in all areas, reflecting significant fluency challenges. However, results from weeks 9-10 show substantial improvement.

Students T., P., and Ph. progressed to scores of 3 in all fluency aspects. In the initial observation, student T. paused frequently between words, but by the end of the study, she only paused occasionally to find the right expression. Her responses evolved from short answers to more extended, well-developed ideas. Similarly, students P. and Ph., who initially struggled with word retrieval and often resorted to Vietnamese, exhibited smoother speech with fewer pauses and repetitions in later sessions.

Notably, students H. and Th. demonstrated the most improvement. By weeks 9-10, both paused only briefly to select appropriate words, with no noticeable repetition. Their speech became smoother and more natural, with student Th. even demonstrating sound linking, as in, "*I'm gonna celebrate...*".

Overall, the charts visually represent the positive impact of the TBLT intervention on students' speaking fluency. The observed improvements in rate of speech, pauses, and repetition suggest that TBLT effectively enhanced students' ability to communicate more fluently and naturally over the course of the study.

Teacher's Notes Analysis

In the final week, the 28 students engaged in informal group discussions about TBLT's effectiveness in improving speaking fluency. The researcher informally took notes during these discussions.

Some students particularly valued the pre-task planning phase, emphasizing how it helped them structure their ideas and reduce hesitation during the task. One student commented, "*I felt much more confident speaking when I had time to think about what I wanted to say beforehand*". However, another student noted that the planning time sometimes led to over-reliance on memorized phrases, hindering spontaneity.

Others emphasized the positive impact of pair and group work on their fluency. A student remarked, "*Working in groups made me feel less nervous about speaking"*. Another student shared: "*I had a lot of chances to speak with my partner and sometimes they corrected my mistake. This helped me speak English more fluently and accurately*". Another learner said: "*It was group work that encouraged us to communicate in English a lot. This enhanced my speaking skills, particularly fluency*".

It was noticeable in student feedback that the focus on meaning rather than form was a repeating theme. A number of learners thought that it was focused on expressing their ideas instead of correct grammar structures, which encouraged them to communicate in English with more fluency. One student shared, "*I can speak more fluently if I don't mind whether I use correct grammar or not*". One student explained, "*When I don't focus on correct grammar, this means I don't have to think much before I speak. This improves my fluency*". Another student added, "*Not thinking about grammar too much, I feel less worried and focus more on how to express my ideas successfully*." Similarly, another learner said, "*Thinking about perfect grammar when speaking makes me less confident*".

On the other hand, certain challenges about TBLT are presented in student feedback. Some students felt that they needed more training in grammar since they worried that the accuracy of their utterances suffered without correct grammar. For instance, one student felt that "*incorrect grammar makes your utterances less coherent and cohesive*." One student shared, "*Listeners will find your ideas hard to understand when you use incorrect grammar*". Another student said, "*I'm trying to use accurate grammar in order that my ideas won't be misunderstood*".

Discussion

Impact of TBLT on Fluency

The present action research's findings on learners' improved oral fluency, evidenced by a faster rate of speech, fewer pauses, and repetitions, align strongly with a substantial body of prior research**.** Studies by Albino (2017), Hasnain and Halder (2023), Masuram and Sripada (2020),

Ngoc (2023), Panduwangi (2021), Thu (2023), and Zúñiga et al. (2023) consistently demonstrate TBLT's effectiveness in enhancing speaking fluency. This consistent pattern across various contexts underscores TBLT's inherent ability to foster implicit language acquisition (Ellis, 2019), which enables more natural and effortless communication. The structured yet flexible nature of tasks and task cycles, central to TBLT, is frequently cited as a key contributing factor. As supported by Ellis (2006) and Willis (1996), these components are conducive to language acquisition, encouraging meaningful interaction and negotiation of meaning (Robinson, 2001, as cited in Erlam & Tolosa, 2022). Collectively, these elements create an environment rich in authentic communication opportunities, directly contributing to the observed fluency gains.

Role of Pre-Task Planning

The present research offers further evidence supporting the crucial role of pre-task planning in boosting speaking fluency, reinforcing and expanding upon existing literature**.** Our participants reported that allocated planning time significantly improved their fluency, reducing nervousness and increasing confidence. This allowed them to organize ideas, preventing communication breakdowns and consequently enhancing their utterance in terms of fluency, word choice, and syntax. These findings are consistent with the observations of Hasnain and Halder (2023), Sugianto et al. (2020), and Zúñiga et al. (2023), who also highlighted the positive effects of planning on fluency and overall task performance. The mechanism behind this improvement, as posited by Ellis (2019) and Willis (1996), is that pre-task planning allows learners to activate prior knowledge and prepare linguistic resources, leading to greater complexity, accuracy, and spontaneity in language use. However, it is imperative to ensure that pre-task planning does not lead to memorized speech, as this could compromise the naturalness of communication, a point that warrants careful consideration in TBLT implementation (Ellis, 2019).

Influence of Collaborative Work

The current action research further validates and expands upon the well-established benefits of collaborative work, particularly pair and group activities, on learners' fluency gains. Our participants consistently reported increased confidence and improved fluency when engaged in collaborative tasks, feeling more relaxed and less inhibited. These findings directly mirror those of previous studies, including Albino (2017), Hasnain and Halder (2023), Nget et al. (2020), Ngoc (2023), and Zúñiga et al. (2023), all of which underscore the significant impact of pair and group work on oral fluency. The underlying reasons for these improvements, as explained by Ellis (2019) and Willis (2016), are multifaceted: collaborative settings foster a safe environment for linguistic experimentation, reduce anxiety about errors, and encourage mutual support and negotiation of meaning when communication challenges arise. This dynamic interaction not only enhances fluency but also develops crucial communication strategies.

Emphasis on Meaning and Its Effects

The current action research provides additional evidence suggesting that a primary focus on meaning over form significantly contributes to the development of learners' fluency, aligning with the theoretical underpinnings of TBLT and prior empirical work. Participants in this study articulated that prioritizing meaning allowed them to produce more fluent utterances; by not overly concentrating on grammatical accuracy, they could devote more cognitive resources to constructing and conveying their ideas effectively. This observation directly supports Willis's (1996) argument that the freedom to experiment with language to achieve task objectives, without undue concern for form, fosters fluency, which is paramount in genuine

communication. Similarly, Ellis (2019) noted that reduced anxiety about accuracy boosts spontaneity and fluency by allowing learners to concentrate on ideation and message conveyance. Conversely, participants reported that an overt focus on grammar while speaking could impede their fluency. These findings are consistent with a range of previous research, including Albino (2017), Hasnain and Halder (2023), Masuram and Sripada (2020), Nget et al. (2020), and Zúñiga et al. (2023), all of which highlight the positive correlation between a meaning-focused approach and enhanced oral fluency.

Conclusion

This action research was conducted to examine the extent to which TBLT influences learners' speaking fluency. Evidence from this study suggests that TBLT could possibly contribute to the participants' fluency enhancement, including improved rate of speech, fewer pauses, and reduced repetitions. Furthermore, the participants reported favorable feelings toward TBLT. They attributed their better spoken fluency to pre-task planning, pair and group work, and a primary focus on meaning. Therefore, for EFL teachers who are interested in applying TBLT to their classes, this study recommends providing learners with enough planning time, encouraging them to work with their classmates in pairs or in groups, and establishing a learning environment that fosters real and meaningful language use. EFL instructors teaching learners who already possess good grammar knowledge but fail to use it for communication may also find the results of this research relevant.

Limitations and further recommendations

Action research is inherently context-specific, as it focuses on understanding and improving practices within a particular setting. The findings of this study are therefore limited to the specific context of the foundation English course at one university. While the insights gained may be valuable for educators in similar contexts, it is important to acknowledge that the results may not be directly transferable to other settings with different learning environments, student populations, or institutional factors.

Another limitation lies in the absence of inter-rater reliability. As the checklist ratings were completed solely by the teacher-researcher, the results may reflect individual judgment despite the use of a standardized rubric. In future studies, involving a second trained rater would help establish inter-rater reliability and strengthen the objectivity of fluency assessments. Although the checklist was adapted from the IELTS public descriptors and piloted beforehand, further validation of the tool and procedure is recommended for more generalizable findings.

Another limitation is that students were aware that a new teaching approach (TBLT) was being implemented as part of an action research project. This awareness may have influenced their motivation, engagement, and responses during informal discussions. While this is a common feature of classroom-based action research, it may have introduced some bias in students' self-reported perceptions. However, the triangulation of qualitative feedback with observational checklist data helped strengthen the validity of the findings.

The study does not fully address the potential impact of limited pre-task planning time on learners' oral performance. While pre-task planning was highlighted as a beneficial aspect of TBLT, it is unclear how different time constraints might affect fluency outcomes. Further research could investigate the optimal balance between planning and spontaneous communication in TBLT to provide more nuanced guidance for educators.

In addition, future research could employ a different research design to monitor students' development of speaking fluency over time. Future studies could also involve a control group that is instructed with a different teaching methodology.

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Biodata

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