Application of Task-Based Language Teaching in Teaching Speaking to the 1st Year Non-English Major Students: An Action Research at Ha Tinh University

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Abstract

   Speaking is one of the most important skills in English language learning. However, the teaching and learning English speaking at Ha Tinh University are still far from satisfactory, which has urged the researcher to carry out the present study.
   By describing and analyzing the survey questionnaire, pre-test and post-test collected, the researcher managed to find out the reasons for the students' weak speaking skill and justify the effectiveness of using task-based language teaching to improve the students' speaking skill. Although the research has revealed some limitations, its findings prove that task-based language teaching improves students' speaking skill. Besides, this study has provided some implications for the teaching of English speaking skill for Vietnamese students.

Keywords: speaking, action research, task – based language teaching

A. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, English has been considered one of the most important and compulsory subjects for Vietnamese students. English subject consists of 06 or 09 credits hours due to each university. In addition, due to our country's recent regional and global integration, it is essential for people to communicate in English to keep up with the development of the world. Therefore, speaking plays an important role because without it, communication cannot take place directly among people. According to Nunan (1991), speaking skill is an essential process for learning English. Performances through speaking are an indicator of success in careers and finally in life.

When the researcher works as an English teacher at Ha Tinh University, she has faced two striking problems. First and foremost, students are very weak at English, especially speaking skill. They always sit quietly and passively in the speaking lesson. Besides, they cannot implement speaking tasks well when teachers require, which makes them fear of English classes. Another issue she has met here is the teaching method. Most of English teachers apply the traditional approaches such as teacher-centered or lecture-oriented in teaching speaking skill. Therefore, it is one of the main causes leading to students' non-involvement and passiveness in the classroom. To deal with this trouble, the researcher has tried to find out a suitable way or an interesting teaching method to improve students' speaking skill.

In fact, many educators and researchers have made an effort to give effective ways. In addition, through reading the teaching document as well as listening to lectures about English language teaching methods, the researcher is interested in task-based language teaching and supposes that it is an effective approach to solve with this problem. Nunan (1992, p. 98) stated that "task learning increases student talks, makes the classroom atmosphere input". He also pointed out that *task-based language approach* may play a crucial role in the communicative language classroom: a variety of tasks could be employed depending on students' needs, interests, and language proficiency levels.

The above mentioned situation has urged the researcher to conduct an action research at Ha Tinh University (HTU) "Application of task-based language teaching in teaching speaking to the 1st year non-English major students'.

With the purposes of finding out possible explanations for the weak speaking skill and the effect of task-based language teaching on students' speaking skill, the research questions are:

1. What are the possible reasons that lead to the students' weak speaking skill?
2. To what extent does task-based language teaching improve students' speaking skill?

The method employed in this study is an action research, with the use of a number of instruments, namely tests, questionnaires, and interviews.

Action research has been proved to be the best choice for this study because the study was aimed at improving the students' speaking skill within a certain context. The combination of different instruments used in this research would help the researcher to gain reliable data and have a close investigation into the problems that the students were having.

B. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

According to Brown (1994) and Burns and Joyce (1997), speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving and processing information. Its form and meaning are dependent on the context in which it occurs, including the participants themselves, their collective experiences, the physical environment, and the purposes for speaking. Cunningham (1999) states that speaking requires that learners not only know how to produce specific points of language such as grammar, pronunciation, or vocabulary (linguistic competence), but also they understand when, why and in what ways to produce language (sociolinguistic competence).

Nunan (1998, 2001) points that speaking is the natural state of language, as all human beings are born to speak their native languages. It is thus the most distinguishing feature of human beings. This verbal communication involves not only producing meaningful utterances but also receiving others‟ oral productions. Speaking is thus regarded as a critical skill in learning a second or foreign language by most language learners, and their success in learning a language is measured in terms of their accomplishment in oral communication.

Nunan (2003, p. 3) defines the meaning of "teaching speaking" as teaching ESL learners to (1) produce the English speech sounds and sound patterns; (2) use word and sentence stress, intonation patterns and the rhythm of the second language; (3) select appropriate words and sentences according to the proper social setting, audience, situation and subject matter; (4) organize their thoughts in a meaningful and logical sequence; (5) use language as a means of expressing values and judgments; (6) use the language quickly and confidently with few unnatural pauses, which is called as fluency.

Bartz (1979) described 5 kinds of speaking components that enhance fluency, understanding, and quality of communication content, quantity of communication content and the exertion in communication. Fluency is smooth, constantly and naturally speaking. Understanding refers to supply of content or data to make the audience understand. Quality of communication refers to the language accuracy to speak.

Quantity of communication content refers to capacity of content. The exertion in communication refer to the speakers try to understand by verbal and non-verbal in communication. Parrot (1993) stated that the speaking components which influence speaking ability were previous knowledge and experience of the listeners, language knowledge, and listeners‟ attitude and expectation.

The important components of speaking are language knowledge, fluency and accuracy. The speakers have a lot of language knowledge: pronunciation, vocabulary and structure, they communicate fluently, accurately and appropriately in the different situations.

From the previously mentioned survey of the studies dealt with task-based learning (TBL), it has become evident that TBL is a different way to teach English. It can help the student by placing him/her in a situation like in the real world where oral communication is essential for doing a specific task. Task based learning has the advantage of getting the student to use her/his skills at her current level. TBL is concerned with learner and not teacher activity and it lies on the teacher to produce and supply different tasks which will give the learner the opportunity to experiment spontaneously, individually and originally with the foreign language.

Some previous studies regarding task-based application in the EFL classroom were summarized in this section to give an overview of what researchers had done so far in this new field. Fan–Jiang's (2005) study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of implementing TBLT in a Taiwanese primary school, and her finding revealed that TBLT could enhance students' motivation and attitudes toward learning English.

Guo (2006) examined the characteristics of task-based interactions in senior high school students, their communicative competence throughout the process, and their opinions about collaborative activities. Her results revealed that there were longer turns in spontaneous speech and increasing use of interactional adjustments toward the end of the treatment period, and using supplementary cooperative materials involved students in comprehending and producing the target language more willingly and more effectively

There are numerous studies relating to using TBLT in teaching speaking skill. Ngan (2009) reported that after task-based project her first year non-major students of English at National Economics University "regarded TBLT as a motivating experience". Moreover, "The learning outcomes were enhanced and the learning process became more enjoyable and rewarding" (p. 89).

Additionally, Hien (2010) presented that "TBLT could increase the students' participation in speaking lesson in terms of quantity and quality and help the good and average students improve their oral ability more" (p. 43). However, with the achievement of the previous researches, the researcher expects that TBLT can improve the students' current speaking ability in speaking lesson at her teaching context.

C. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed action reasearch that follows steps in Nunan's action research cycle (1992) and developed this action in four steps as follows: Problem identification, Preliminary investigation, Intervention, and Evaluation. In problem identification, the researcher observed and did a pre-test to affirm the students' speaking ability. In preliminary investigation, after analyzing the results from the pre-test, the researcher raised a point "What are the possible reasons that lead to students' weak speaking lesson?" After that, a survey questionnaire was used to answer this question in the second week. In Intervention, the researcher gave a Task-based introduction and training to the students and implemented task-based in the speaking lessons. In evaluation, in order to measure the effect of TBLT on the students' speaking ability, pretest and posttest were conducted to gather data which were analyzed quantitatively. The study was conducted at HTU using 32 second semester students as subject.

D. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

This section describes the research findings based on the analysis of the collected data derived from the application TBLT in the teaching of speaking at the second semester students at HTU. The data and findings of the study are presented based on the results of students'survey questionnaires, pretest, posttest and interviews. They are obtained from seven meetings in the using TBLT in speaking lessons.

1. Analysis of questionnaire
a.   Students' attitudes towards speaking skill
Basing on the answers of question 1 and 2, the researcher will know the students' attitudes towards speaking skill.

Chart 1: Students' attitude towards speaking skill
■ Very ■ Rather ■ Little ■ Not at all
12%   7%
28%   53%
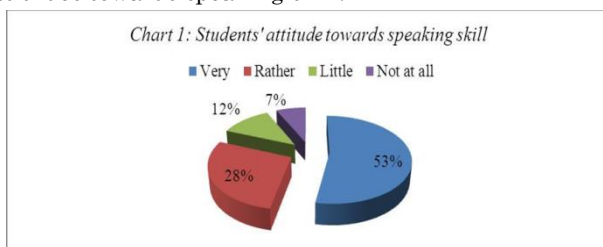
From the chart 1 above, the question 1"s responses can be seen that the majority of the students recognized the importance of speaking skill. While 53 % and 28% of the students supposed that speaking skill was important or

rather important, only 7% of them answered that speaking skill was not important. Besides, 12% of the students thought that it was little important.

Chart 2: Students' interest towards speaking skill
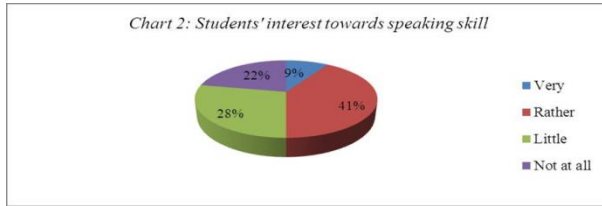
For the responses of question 2, the chart shows that there were a small number of the students (9 %) who were very interested in learning speaking skill. Moreover, 41 % of them were rather fond of speaking skill. In contrast, there was a similar figure between the students (28%) who were little interested in speaking skill and the ones (22%) who did not like it at all.

b. Students' motivations and learning styles
The question 3 and 4 were asked to find out students' motivations and learning styles, as well as some reasons for their weak speaking skill. The answers to the questions were presented as follows:

Table 1: Students' motivations

Reasons	Number of response	Percentage
a. It will be helpful for my future job.	27	84 %
b. It helps me communicate with foreigners.	10	31 %
c. It is one of the compulsory skills in the textbook.	23	72 %
d. It helps me enjoy English songs and stories.	5	16 %
e. Other(s) (please specify): It helps me talk to my relatives living abroad. My dream is to travel all over the world, so I want to master speaking.	2	6 %

As for question 3, most of the students (84%) said that they learned speaking skill because it was helpful for their future jobs. In addition, it was understandable that there was a quite big of the students (72 %) learning speaking skill as it was one of the compulsory skills in the textbook. Besides,

31 % students said that to communicate with foreigners stimulated them to learn this skill. Only a small number of students (16 %) who enjoyed English songs and stories wanted to learn. And the rest of the students (6 %) gave some different reasons for their learning speaking. One of them said that learning speaking English would help them talk to her/his relatives living abroad. Another one said that his dream was to travel all over the world, so he wanted to master speaking English fluently.

Table 2: Students' learning styles

Statements	Number of response	Percentage
a. learning by observing and listening to native speakers; talking to my friends in English and learn English wherever possible.	3	9 %
b. learning English words by reading and writing them again and again and listen to teacher explain everything in the textbook and writing down everything in my notebook.	13	41 %
c. learning grammatical rules and doing grammar exercises and learning through reading newspapers, magazines…	6	19 %
d. learning by games, pictures, films, videos; listening to cassettes and talking in pairs or in groups.	10	31 %

The fourth question pointed out that the students' learning style was quite various. As we can see in table 2, the minority of the students (9 %) who tended to study communicatively learned by observing and listening to native speakers; talking to my friends in English and learn English wherever possible while 41 % of the authority-oriented learners had the habit of learning English by reading and writing them again and again and listen to teacher explain everything in the textbook and writing down everything in their notebook. Moreover, 31 % concrete learners said that they liked to learn by games, pictures, films, videos; listening to cassettes and talking in pairs or in groups. It means that this type of learners might feel bored and uninterested in the same types of speaking activities in the class. The rest accounted for 19 % analytical learners who liked learning grammatical rules and doing grammar exercises and learning through reading newspapers, magazines…

### c. Students' difficulties in learning speaking skill

Table 3: Students' problems in learning speaking skill

Question 5: Which problems do you encounter in learning speaking skill? (You can have more than one choice)	Number of response	Percentage
a. I am worried about making mistakes and too shy to speak English.	14	44 %
b. I am fearful of criticism or losing face.	4	13 %
c. I cannot think of anything to say.	17	53 %
d. I have no motivation to express myself.	9	28 %
e. I lack background knowledge.	21	66 %
f. I use Vietnamese.	20	63 %
g. My English (pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar structures) is poor.	24	75 %

Table 3 presented that 75 % of the students who were weak at English in terms of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar structures had difficulties in speaking skill. Besides, the next biggest problems are that they lacked background knowledge (66 %) and 63% of them used Vietnamese in speaking lesson. Moreover, more than 50 % of them reported that they could not think of anything or ideas to say while 44 % students were worried about making mistakes in speaking English. Additionally, 28 % of them said that they had no motivation to express themselves and the lowest percent of the students (13%) were fearful of criticism or losing face when they practiced speaking.

d. Students' opinions on speaking activities in the textbook

Graph 1: Students' opinions on speaking activities in the textbook
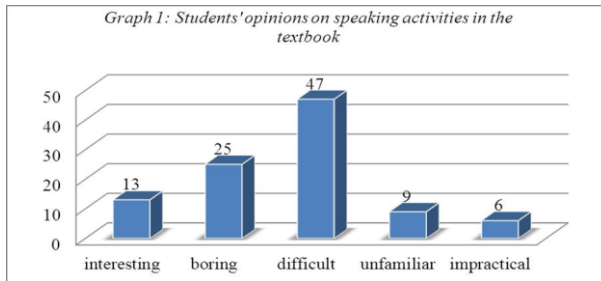
The result of graph pointed out that whereas the large number of students (47%) found the activities in the textbook difficult, 6 % of them said that these topics were impractical. Besides, while 25 % students felt that the speaking topics were so boring, 13 % of them supposed that they were quite interesting. And the rest of students (9 %) shared that these topics were unfamiliar for them to speak. In short, most of them realized that the speaking topics in the textbook were difficult and boring. Therefore, it is essential for the teachers to adapt or apply a new method in speaking lesson.

e. Teachers' teaching methods in speaking class
Below are students' comments on their previous teachers' teaching methods

Table 4: Students' comments on their previous teachers' teaching method

| Question 7: Which statement(s) is/are true about your previous English teacher? (You can choose more than one option)	Number of response	Percentage
a. Teachers could not monitor activities because of the larger class size.	5	16 %
b. Teachers followed the speaking activities in the textbook all the time.	27	84 %
c. Teachers sometimes used English; he/ she mainly used Vietnamese in speaking lessons.	18	56 %
d. Teachers interrupted me to correct every grammatical or phonological mistake that I made while talking.	13	41 %
e. Teachers asked students to practice while sitting at his/her desk and observed.	15	47 %

f. Teachers' instructions were not clear enough.	7	22 %
g. Teachers often focused on grammatical rules more than language use.	29	91 %
h. Teachers praised you when you did well.	8	25 %
i. Teachers only called some active students who raised hands to speak. He/ she seldom encouraged weak students to speak.	21	66 %

From the figures in the table 4 above, we can see that the teachers' teaching methods are one of the main reasons leading to the students' poor speaking ability. 91 % of the students reported that their teachers often focused on grammatical rules more than language use. 84 % of them reflected that the teachers followed the speaking activities in the textbook all the time, which made them uninterested. 66% of them complained that their teachers only cared for good students without paying attention to weak ones. Many students said that their teachers maybe low in their English proficiency (56%) and inactive in speaking class (47%). Other reasons, such as not monitoring activities in a big class well (16%), not praising students' good performance and not giving clear instructions (25%) also influenced a small part on the students' speaking abilit

2. Analysis of test

The result of pre-test and posttest was compared to investigate using task-based language teaching in class to improve English speaking ability of the learners. The graph below showed the students' improvement.
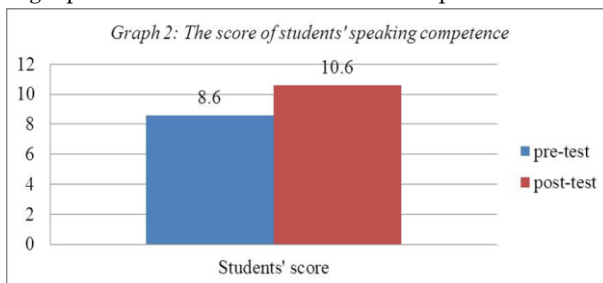
Before the study, the research found that the students had low speaking ability. The improvement of scores from pre-test to post-test changed

significantly. Basing on the results of tests, the researcher could know the average of student score in two tests: pre-test and post-test. The pre-test showed that the students were difficult to speak, so their average score was 8.6. However, after learning seven task-based language teaching lessons for 7 weeks, the result of the post-test (10.6) was higher than the pre-test. It proved partly that TBLT affected positively to the students' speaking ability.

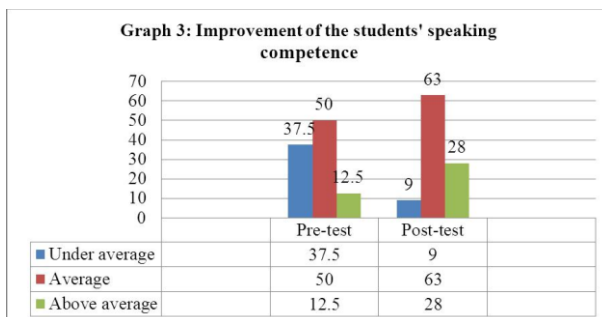**Table 5: The comparison of the percentage of students who passed the passing grade**

Level	Pre-test		Post-test	
	Student No	Percentage	Student No	Percentage
Under average	12	37.5 %	3	9 %
Average	16	50 %	20	63 %
Above average	4	12.5 %	9	28 %
Passing grade	20	62.5 %	29	91 %

Note: *Under Average: Students' speaking score in the scale of 5 – 7*
   Average: Students' speaking score in the scale of 8 – 11
   Above average: Students' speaking score in the scale of above12

As the result was presented in the table 5 above, the researcher realized that there was a good change through two tests. The number of students passed the passing grade increased. 20 students (62.5 %) passed at the pre-test and at the post-test there were 29 ones (91 %) passing. Besides, while the students with under average level decreased in pre-test (12 students) and post-test (3 students), the ones with average and above average level went up slightly. To sum up, the students' speaking achievement was improved clearly.

Graph 3: Improvement of the students' speaking competence

	Pre-test	Post-test
Under average	37.5	9
Average	50	63
Above average	12.5	28

The level of the speaking competence in Graph 3 showed the student's speaking competence conducted in the test. From the graph, it can be noted that the students' speaking competence was improved. The proportion of students with the level of under average decreased from pre-test (37.5%) to post-test (9%). Besides, the percentage of the average level students and above level ones tended to increase.

3. Analysis of interview

After each TBLT lessons, the researcher conducted an interview with the students to get their viewpoints about teaching. When she asked the students if TBLT was improving their speaking skill or not, almost all of the students said that it was effective and their speaking skill was improved; they had something to say; they could talk a lot; because TBLT helped them to learn many useful vocabularies and sentences patterns.

When the researcher asked the students how TBLT improved your speaking skill and what difficulties TBLT caused you. The students said that the strengths were that firstly, the content was very good; it was useful and practical for their future jobs; they would like to learn it. Secondly, there were many different speaking activities applied in TBLT, so that they could have fun while learning the language. Furthermore, they had something to say about the topic and also had many chances to practice their oral English. In terms of difficulties, some students replied in the speaking activity, especially the group activities, when they worked with their partner or group members, their partner sometimes got stuck and slowed down; that made them felt embarrassed. Moreover, others said that the tasks were quite challenging for them to carry out while some of them had low English proficiency.

When asked what the teacher should do to help them improve their speaking skill in the next lesson, some suggestions were given. Most of the students hoped that their teacher should supply them with more vocabularies and structures and let them practice the words longer and more carefully in Pre-task stage. In addition, they suggested that the teacher should put good students into groups so that they could complete the task easily. Furthermore, the teacher should list their mistakes in detail in post-stage so that they could not repeat them at the next time.

Based on the reflection stated above, it could be seen that TBLT brought many positive aspects. However, there were also many weaknesses found during the teaching and learning process and they should be solved to get a better result. Therefore, it is necessary for the researcher to adjust her lesson plans so that their students could improve their speaking ability.

E. DISCUSSION OF THE REASEARCH QUESTIONS

a. What are the possible reasons that lead to students' weak speaking skill?

According to the findings of the questionnaire delivered to the students, the researcher could conclude that the possible reasons leading to students' weak speaking skill were from both students and teachers.

Reason from students

First and foremost, the students' interest and motivation toward English, especially speaking skill are different and low. Most of students are not fond of learning English. Some students say that they learn English for their future job while the others learn because it is a compulsory subject at school and they want to communicate with foreigners. From those, it can be seen clearly that they learn English for some useful and required purposes instead of learning for voluntary ones. Therefore, this is one of the main reasons making them bad at English.

The second reason comes from the students' learning styles. Through analyzing above, it is not surprising that the large number of students tends to learn English by rote or depend on the textbook or the teacher. Besides, someone concentrates on doing grammar exercises or reading comprehension and writing rather than using English to communicate in speaking lessons. Thus, the students' passive learning cannot help them to improve their speaking skill.

Last but not least, the students' different personalities influence on their spoken English. For instance, the majority of students are not confident of speaking English in front of class because they suppose that their English proficiency is poor, which leads to their using Vietnamese. In addition, there are also plenty of students who are worried about making mistakes and too shy to speak English in the class. As a result, they always keep silent during the classroom activities.

Reason from teacher

Firstly, the teachers" teaching method is not effective and renewed during teaching speaking skill. The majority of teachers focus on teaching grammar grammatical rules more than language uses. Moreover, most of the teachers follow the speaking activities in the textbook all the time. They usually make use of available materials without adapting them to be suitable for their students' interest and level. Due to those factors, the students are not interested in speaking lessons and cannot improve their ability. In addition, the habit of using Vietnamese instead of English will make the students follow.

Secondly, the teachers are not flexible and quite passive. They often sit at their place and ask their student to practice in pairs or in groups, which leads to the students' low enthusiasm in speaking activities. Furthermore, there are lots of teachers who discourage their students by correcting their mistakes while they are speaking or calling on some good and active students in the class instead of weak ones. Therefore, these cannot stimulate the students to learn speaking skill well.

2. To what extent does task-based language teaching improve students' speaking skill?

It is found that the students' speaking skill is improved after the implementation of TBLT; the speaking class is not silent anymore. The comparison of the results in pre-test and post-test has proved that TBLT brings lots of effectiveness for the students. In the pre-test, there are 12 students who do not pass the passing grade while surprisingly the numbers of students not passing the passing grade are 3 ones at the post-test. Besides, the quantity of under average students has decreased significantly from 37.5 % at the pretest to 9 % at the posttest.

It is undeniable that TBLT makes a slight improvement on the students' speaking skill. Especially, task-based activities seem to be motivating in speaking lessons because the most important feature of task-based activities focuses on communication. It helps the students to use the language English as a communicative language and creates them plentiful opportunities to express their opinions and ideas that are given in the designed task-based learning activities.

F. CONCLUSION

This part shows some conclusions drawn from the study, comments on the limitations of this action research, and gives some recommendations and suggestions for further studies.

1. Conclusions

This research was conducted to solve the problems faced by the students of class AC18.12 in their speaking skill. Therefore, in this action research the researcher aims to find out the possible reasons that leading to the students' weak speaking skill and investigate how far task-based language teaching helps to improve students' speaking skill. To achieve these aims, task-based language teaching lessons were designed and taught for the students in class AC18.12 during a period of ten weeks. To measure the effectiveness of applying TBLT in speaking lessons, a pre-test and post-test were delivered for the students and then were compared. A survey questionnaire for 32 students

in this class who were taught with using task-based speaking lessons was also conducted to figure out the reasons for why they are weak at speaking skill. After analyzing the data gained from the survey questionnaire, the interview, the pre-test and post-test, the researcher could answer and draw two following conclusions:

Firstly, thanks to the results of survey questionnaire the researcher can know that the reasons leading to the student's weak speaking skill are from both the students themselves and their teachers. The students' low motivation, passive learning styles and different personalities make them uninterested in speaking lessons. Furthermore, the teachers" old teaching method, inflexibility and inactiveness in the class also affect the students' speaking ability. Many students seem to lose their interest in the speaking lessons.

Secondly, after this action research, the researcher realizes that the implementation of TBLT is successful in improving the students' speaking skill. Most of students who answer in the interview suppose that TBLT motivates them to speak. Especially, there are more weak students changing their attitudes toward speaking skill. Besides, through the comparison of the results in pre-test and post-test the author investigates that the under average and average students' speaking proficiency increase slightly while the number of weak students reduce dramatically. This asserts that the application of task-based language teaching might help the students improve their speaking skill.

The researcher's aim that has been achieved is to improve the students' speaking skill although seven task-based speaking lessons are not much time. However, it is a successful term because the students' good and positive comments on task-based lessons encouraged the researcher to conduct this study.

2. Recommendations

This research indicates that the application of TBLT in teaching speaking has shown many positive effects in the students' progress. Based on the result of the study there are some suggestions put forward to the English teachers, the students, and other researchers.

2.1 The teachers

Firstly, the teacher should try to select the content or different topics on the school"s requirements and also should meet the students' needs. Practical and interesting content can motivate students to actively engage in the speaking activities. Besides, the teacher should pay attention to that the content or topics given to the students should not be very difficult; otherwise, the students may lose interest and get frustrated in the speaking activity.

Instead, the content should be a little bit above average level so that the students feel it is challenging and would like to do it.

Secondly, the teacher should help and facilitate the students to learn the language. When they need help in the language, the teacher should give immediately facilitation and help. The teacher using pair works lets the students help each other in a good way to facilitate the students' language learning.

2.2 The students

The students of class AC18.12 in particular and the ones of HUBT in general should change their attitude towards learning speaking skill. They should be more confident and braver to speak English rather than be afraid of making mistakes or be humiliated by their friends. They should know that mistakes are parts of learning process. Without making mistakes we cannot find our progress. Students should practice English everyday in the daily life. As practice makes perfect, by practicing every day, their speaking skill will be improved day by day.

Moreover, they should not focus too much on the grammatical accuracy which could prevent them from practicing English and make them afraid of making mistakes; instead, they should focus more on their vocabulary mastery and fluency. They should realize that mastering sufficient vocabularies is important in supporting their speaking skill. Without sufficient vocabulary mastery, they could not speak fluently.

2.3 The other researchers

TBLT is one of interesting and joyful approach that can be applied in the classroom to improve the students' speaking skill. Although the researcher has tried to do the best in implementing TBLT to improve the students' speaking skill, the result of this study is not very perfect; therefore, the researcher hopes the other researchers could help to eliminate the weaknesses which were found in this study.

3. Suggestions for further research

The study has opened some directions for future researches

-Using TBLT in other skills such as listening, reading and writing to improve the students' language use.

-Adapting non-task-based materials based on TBLT for teaching speaking skill.

-Implementing TBLT with high ability students to know if it is more feasible than the low ones in foreign language environment.

-Investigating teachers' practices of TBLT are the same as their perceptions of TBLT.

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