

Speaking Fluency of Grade 8 Students Using Task-Based Learning Activities: Basis for Speaking Enhancement Program

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ABSTRACT

Speaking is one of the essential elements of communication in English as foreign language teaching. Certainly, it is an aspect which needs extraordinary attentions and instructions. It should be developed and enhanced as a means of effective communication. It is also regarded as one of the most difficult aspects of language learning. Many language learners find it difficult to express themselves in spoken language. They are generally facing problems to use the foreign language to express their thoughts effectively and this has been identified as a struggle of the Grade 8 students of Bongabong Technical and Vocational High School. Hence, this study aimed to determine the speaking fluency of the Grade 8 students in terms of stress, intonation, pronunciation, and vocabulary using task-based learning activities. A total of 40 Grade 8 students were considered in the study. They were given different tasks to investigate their speaking performance individually, in pair, or in group. To measure their performance, a 5-point Likert's scale rubric was used to evaluate what the students were having difficulty with and found out that they had struggle with pronunciation and vocabulary. The result showed that the students performed significantly different in the three performances based on the computed mean rating. Group performance outperformed individual and pair performance indicating that the techniques of teams promote the speaking fluency of the Grade 8 students. Also, there is a need to provide intervention using the proposed enhancement program as shown in the resulted low performance of the respondents.

Keywords: Speaking fluency, Task-Based Learning Activities, stress, intonation, pronunciation, vocabulary

Introduction

Students' development of communication skills is said to be one of the implicit areas of a country, which aspires the students to become globally competitive. To master this skills, students must be trained to use English in communication orally. The frequency in using the language will determine the success in speaking ability. Without implementing the experience of learning the language in real life, it is difficult for the students to master speaking ability. Hence, speaking competence can be accomplished by practicing it orally. In the Philippine setting, a highly proficient English speaker gains respect from the community and earn a high profile identity. Moreover, the literacy of the language brings you more opportunity and opens gateway to a high

paying job. On the other hand, the Philippine education is trying to educate Filipinos about the language (English) hoping that this will be of great help to the country in reaching progress. The policies are even mandated by the government in Executive Order No. 210. S. 2003 and DepEd Order No. 36, s. 2006 to strengthen the use of the English language as a medium of instruction in the educational system.

Proficiency in the language is also one of the country's strengths that has helped drive the economy and even made the Philippines the top voice outsourcing destination in the world, surpassing India in 2012. However, in a recent roundtable discussion organized by the British Council, key stakeholders from the government, academe, private, and non-government sectors acknowledged that even if the Philippines is doing fine in terms of English competency, questions have been raised about how much of a competitive advantage it still has for the country. The stakeholders agreed that the country needs to step up its efforts in improving the teaching and learning of English, developing it as a vital skill of the workforce. This is an initiative that could potentially strengthen the Philippines' distinct advantage in this part of the world, particularly with the upcoming ASEAN economic integration (Cabigon 2015).

In the country's educational system, English language is implemented and taught in different subject areas for the students to be proficient in learning and speaking the language and enable them to meet the demands and challenges of the 21st century education. However, despite the consistent experimentation and spontaneous observation of the teachers, they still see their learners failing to acquire, not the higher order skills in communication, but just the basic ones. It is a challenge up to this day on how to address these failures.

Furthermore, when teaching English, most students face problem in learning speaking. Student's inattention to it are the major problems that the Junior High School of Bongabong Technical and Vocational High School are experiencing especially in oral fluency. The teacher observed that the students deliver their messages without fluency and precision. These was testified further by their inability to spontaneously construct good, grammatically and technically correct sentences in recitations, class reporting and group presentation during the conducted observation. It is also reflected on the result of the least mastered competency report in English every quarter where the number of learners who achieved the given competencies are at low mastery level (15-34%). They have deficiency in learning speaking English especially in fluency, pronunciation, stress, vocabulary, and intonation aspects and cultural background of the language. These indicators in speaking are considered in the experimentation due to its low performance rates.

With regards to stress, spoken words with correct sounds but wrong stress placement are more difficult to comprehend than words with the correct word stress, but incorrect sounds. Learners' failure to acquire English word stress patterns is one of the pronunciation errors that possibly lead to misunderstanding so it requires continuous repetition of speaking activities. Different perspectives of the learners how they perceive words and their meanings also affect their

speaking skills. There are words which seem to be the same in spelling and same in pronunciation but they differ in meaning. Some words are pronounced differently as to what their spelling spelled out. These are just some of the cases where the students are experiencing and it really affects their learning and speaking skills.

Meanwhile, it is beyond doubt that pronouncing a language properly is a key aspect when understanding and making ourselves understood. Pronunciation is a key aspect in the development of students oral skills. Proper pronunciation is inherent to any competent speaker but this competence can (and must) be trained in any non-native speaker. Another important indicator is vocabulary. Without sufficient vocabulary, students cannot communicate and express their feeling both in form of spoken and written effectively. The more students master vocabulary the more they can speak, write, read and listen as they want.

The students enrolled in Bongabong Technical and Vocational High School (BTVHS) appeared to be heterogeneous learners from the most to least developed barangays of the Municipality of Bongabong. According to survey, only 50 out of 170 students can finely speak English. It spells out that English teachers are facing challenges on how to capacitate them in performing oral tasks in English. When speaking activity is being conducted, they are mostly not interested and not confident to speak up. It makes the students passive in speaking activity. Every time they are tasked to speak, they hardly participate in class discussion. They prefer written activities over oral presentation. One problem why students lack in communication skills as far as English language is concerned is that the learners are not given rigid training in their education concerning the use of the language appropriately without any hassle. Therefore, there must be different forms of technique to ease students speaking skills at all levels

As a result of recent changes made in teaching methods and techniques, individual, pair and group work are considered as main strategies in most English learning situations, especially when communicative, learner centered or task based syllabuses are used. The field of English language is in transition, as it seeks new approaches, and re-examines older ones in order to address the range and level of English proficiency required for participation in today's global community. Collaborative and individual language learning are familiar to almost all English language researchers, and they have been emphasized by different methodologists and syllabus designers.

In this study, task-based learning activities are used to stimulate real communications of the students in the target language. The learners are prepared for the task, report the task and then they learned the language that arises naturally in the task cycle. Through this, teachers probably access students' speaking skills and determine their fluency level. Although some may argue otherwise, whether such method is meaningfully useless to the process of learning, this however, is the subject of inquiry in this study.

Along these lines, the study tried to find out on how task-based learning activities can address the problem in students speaking fluency of Bongabong Technical and Vocational High School. This study was measured with respect to stress, pronunciation, intonation, and vocabulary

through different speaking activities in terms of individual or independent production of task, pair or production of activities with partner, and group activities or collaborative learning of task with others to be evaluated with rubrics. It will give light to question on how effective the teachers are in implementing language-teaching strategies. Furthermore, the proposed speaking enhancement program was formulated after the analysis and interpretation of the results for instructional intervention.

Literature Review

This part presents the related literature and studies both foreign and local which significantly helped the researcher in the development of the theoretical foundations of the study.

Dakowska (2011) claimed that speaking is now the most emphasized skill in the field of foreign language teaching, but unfortunately, it is also recognized as the most difficult one to develop in classroom conditions. Students are constantly encouraged to use the target language during classes, but when the lesson is over, they have no possibility to use it in real communication. Of course, some learners seek the opportunity to speak their foreign language outside the classroom; however, most do not try to practice the target language at all. Certainly, one of the disadvantages of teaching English as a foreign language is that students cannot use the language in everyday speech. De facto, speaking a foreign language means being able to interact with people in authentic situations, not only during classroom controlled speaking activities. Therefore, teacher's task to develop that skill is extremely challenging and needs much time, as only by practice may learners succeed. In the majority of schools, however, communicative efficiency is still not a priority. In most classes teachers fail to provide students with activities that would reflect genuine interaction. Students rarely talk to each other and rarely have the possibility to talk to a teacher as well.

An article of Sun Star Pampanga (2017), suggests that we need to promote fluency and mastery on the use of the foreign language since it is an integral part of education. However, due to the reason that English is not our mother tongue and not being used on conversations on a regular basis, there are still Filipino learners who still need help to improve their communicative skills with the use of the English language. This has been the primary objective of each English teacher to make their students good speakers or users of the language. Yet, there are still some ways to aid the problem of students still struggling in learning the language. This will be possible by creating different teaching techniques to address the deficiencies.

Moreover, Hernandez (2015), explained that helping young learners master their mother tongue significantly heightens their competency to acquire the globally dominant English language. The Department of Education itself recognizes that English proficiency is a competitive edge that previous generations of Filipinos used to enjoy. Sadly, there is no denying that many of today's high school or even college graduate have difficulty in expressing their thoughts clearly and logically in English. English language particularly in speaking must be developed among students for this will enable them to communicate confidently and express themselves effectively.

However, speaking proficiency is elusive for most of the students nowadays. Teachers should be able to take necessary measures to pursue the improvement of the student's speaking proficiency.

This was discussed further by Suelto (2015) in her article that learning English aims to help students use the language effectively for real life purpose. Students need to use English to become functional in professional, academic, and social settings. In the Philippines, English Proficiency is found out to be declining. A recent language test result showed that the Philippines is no longer the top one English-speaking country in Asia. This brought up an alarming impact towards job-providing industries in and out of the country, and is currently driving the Department of Education to intensify the effort of providing an educational system that will improve students' mastery in English. However, programs and projects conducted by schools are not enough to promote the development of English language proficiency among Filipino students. Teachers have to be competitive enough in using the language to effectively teach students in becoming critical and analytical in communicating with the use of English.

Barrot (2016), suggested that when preparing task-based syllabus, tasks should not be sequenced based on their linguistic content but based on specific tasks following some principled criteria. Tasks should be clearly described as well by specifying the task content which includes the input (supplied verbal and non-verbal information), procedures (series of activities to be performed to accomplish a task), language activity (receptive or productive), and outcomes (verbal and non-verbal output). During the main task, learners can be asked to listen, view, and read materials which serve as an input. Preferably, these materials should be authentic and aligned to 21st century themes for learners to better develop their language, intercultural competence, and social and self-transformation. These tasks should also be collaborative and has social relevance. As part of the post-task activity, learners may be asked to do collaborative projects with emphasis on social participation and contribution. It provides ideal linguistic environments and conditions for negotiated interaction and are thus potentially beneficial for language learning.

However, despite its current application, task-based learning approach has raised several debates on educators and researchers. Ellis (2014) criticized it due to misunderstanding regarding the "task". It is very often when a 'new' approach receives the support of theorists and researchers in academe, critics will follow. TBLT is very obvious challenging the educators who still implementing traditional teaching due to its easiness and requiring less work for the teacher. However, the implementation of TBLT may face several problems for the teachers and students.

- a. Task Difficulty - difficulty in understanding the task, requiring more time or more attention and resources,
- b. Cognitive & Linguistics Demand- there must be vocabulary or structures the learners did not know. It is often found in EFL classroom in which during the earlier stage of learning, the students don't have any primer knowledge about the target language.
- c. Authenticity of the Task -it is been highlighted that the task in TBLT should be real world context. But there are tasks like describing a picture to someone else so that they can draw the picture, identifying the differences between two pictures, telling a story based on pictures etc. which are unlikely to occur in real life situations.

Methodology

This study employed descriptive method of research. The subject of the study were the Grade 8 students of Bongabong Technical and Vocational High School. 5-point Likert's scale rubric and timeline of activities were used as the instrument of the study.

After validating the said instrument of the study, a letter was sent to the Dean of the Graduate Studies for approval of the conduct of the study and forwarded to the School Head of Bongabong Technical and Vocational High School. Since the study was conducted during their English subject schedule to avoid conflict from other subject's schedule, approval of the School's Division Superintendent was not needed. Upon approval, the study was conducted to the Grade 8 students for 7 days and there were prepared lesson plans employed within the teaching of the employed speaking activities.

The gathered data were collated, tabulated, and analyzed. Descriptive statistics such as mean, frequency, and percentage were computed

Results and Discussion

Based on the data obtained in this research, possible reasons were discussed and elaborated. The research problems mentioned in the introduction chapter will be raised again for further analysis.

To view the data statistically, the individual performance did not seem to be effective in this setting, conditions, and with these participants. One factor might be that they did not have enough opportunity to have verbal exchange with each other; which means that the learner-learner interactions were not emphasized. However, some researchers do not strongly claim that individual work has no role in language learning process. Individual work may work better for other language learning elements like reading, writing, and listening. As a strategy, it can be suitable for different situations of language learning (Ellis, 2014). Accordingly, it must be noted that individual work might have some positive effects on speaking fluency, yet the results of this research did not approve this.

It has been noted that most of the students had encountered difficulty in terms of pronunciation and vocabulary. This attests that there is a large amount of students experiencing difficulty in appreciating pronunciation. Factors behind this might include the awkwardness they felt while twisting their tongues, following pronunciation inflections and learning to apply pronouncing words based on certain diacritical marks. Students were also unable to produce a vocabulary mastery. Their difficulties include lack of chances to practice using the words and the inability to comprehend the exact meaning of a particular words, phrases or sentences.

The result conforms to the study of Tabula (2010) that the linguistic errors committed by the respondents in their oral expositions are phonological and grammatical in nature; in terms of phonology, they committed errors in vowel sounds and consonant quality; and in terms of grammar, their errors are mostly morphological and the least is lexical.

Table 1
Mean Scores on the Level of Speaking Fluency of Grade 8 students in Individual performance using Task Based Learning Activities

Indicators	Mean	Description
Stress	2.55	Satisfactory
Intonation	2.63	Satisfactory
Pronunciation	2.38	Fairly Satisfactory
Vocabulary	2.35	Fairly Satisfactory

As shown in Table 2, results of pair performance showed a significant improvement on the students' speaking fluency based on the computed mean rating per indicator compared to individual performance. The pairing of the participants was based on their ability-heterogeneity. Since fluency is acquired naturally and can not be taught (Chambers, 2007), the improvement of the participants in pair performance may be due to the great degree of interaction they had with each other. Therefore, interaction in pair work counts as facilitator for increasing the level of interactions among learners.

Results further revealed that students performed low mastery level in vocabulary. It indicates that whether in pairs or individual, the students cannot express what they want to say for they have no idea what correct or proper words to express. They could not fluently communicate with their peers by using correct grammatical forms and appropriate vocabulary with good pronunciation for they face a little amount of time trying to conceptualize and think of a proper words to express. Therefore, they are having a hard time producing rich vocabulary in impromptu sessions.

Mora (2013) reported that in order to master vocabulary, teachers must expose the students more in reading as much as possible, review recommended word list from credible sources, employ good spelling technique, use words in a sentence, and expose more in different instructional activities or worksheets about communication skills.

Table 2
Mean Scores on the Level of Speaking Fluency of Grade 8 students in Pair performance using Task Based Learning Activities

Indicators	Mean	Description
Stress	2.68	Satisfactory
Intonation	2.78	Satisfactory
Pronunciation	2.60	Satisfactory
Vocabulary	2.33	Fairly Satisfactory

The results obtained from the data analysis of the third table provides sufficient evidence that group performance turned out to have improved the speaking fluency of the participants. Group work seemed to have had characteristics of its own that some scholars have strongly emphasized. Interaction as a dominant factor in group work might be regarded as the most important element affecting the results of this group. The groups permit students to share their knowledge and help other students in acquiring the skills needed (Allen and Feldman (2008).

Referring to the data related to the results of this group, one can see that the indicators showed a significant improvement when in group. However, pronunciation and vocabulary were still the weakest points. In comparison with the first two conducted activities, pronunciation result when in group developed a good pronunciation with minimal error but still does not mean they sounded exactly like a native speaker. Factors behind this is perhaps because they gained confidence when they practice as a group and there is no opportunity for others to make fun of somebody if he/she mispronounces a word. In addition, vocabulary in group showed more improvement and able think creatively about how to use English to achieve the goal. Nonetheless, there are still students who had an inadequate vocabulary words to express their ideas properly. Factors behind this are because individual speaking time is limited when working in group, not all students are able to work to their full potential because of time and the roles they are taking, communication in groups is generally less intimate than in interpersonal settings because there are so many personalities and levels of relationship to consider.

This run parallel to the notion of Gorjian (2014) that is very common that many foreign language learners have problems in teaching and learning process. In this case, many of English foreign learners have difficulties in pronunciation and vocabulary teaching process because of some factors. There are five factors that influence learners' pronunciation and vocabulary: mother tongue, age, amount of exposure to phonetic ability, personality, and motivation.

Table 3
Mean Scores on the Level of Speaking Fluency of Grade 8 students in Group performance using Task Based Learning Activities

Indicators	Mean	Description
Stress	3.40	Very Satisfactory
Intonation	3.48	Very Satisfactory
Pronunciation	3.23	Satisfactory
Vocabulary	3.22	Satisfactory

The proposed module is hereby designed based from the results of the study to address the students' weakest and lowest areas of accomplishments with the ultimate aim of upgrading their competency in Speaking Fluency. These were anchored to the learning competencies in their grade level, implementable strategies and learning activities students to accomplish, resources needed, time frame, and expected outcome to be achieved.

With the lowest result of this study, the researcher was motivated and determined to help the students raise their confidence and competence in the field of English language. Specifically, the researcher conceptualized this program to raise the level of mastery of students in oral language.

Through the proposed enhancement program, it is not only the students' performance in English that would be enhanced and molded but also their academic standing in other subjects with English as a medium of instruction. Gaining a confidence and competence in English would help them perform better in school and in the real life scenarios and performances in the future. In the end, it is anticipated that the improved students' speaking fluency would result to the overall institutional performance. Inspired with this end in mind, this English Speaking Enhancement Program is conceptualized.

Conclusion

Taking the results of the data analysis and the probable reasons into consideration, one can come up with the illuminating importance of group performance in developing the speaking fluency of the Grade 8 students. Meanwhile, individual work should not be undermined. Nevertheless, the results of this research did not give solid grounds to advocate the effectiveness of individual performance on promoting Grade 8 students' speaking fluency. It did not seem to be effective on speaking fluency in this setting, conditions, and with these participants. It could probably count positive in another language setting. However, it can be concluded that individual performance is not a very significant factor in improving speaking fluency of the Grade 8 students.

The results obtained from individual performance in this research may not be generalized to any other language settings and other language elements.

In sum, pair performance and group performance can be regarded as two positive strategies in developing speaking fluency of the Grade 8 students. Nonetheless, the group performance outperformed the two by using interaction as a dominant factor in teamwork affecting the results of this group as they came up with more verbal language hence resulting in improving their speaking fluency.

It is recommended that teachers incorporate various competencies in certain lessons to enhance and improve students' weaknesses in speaking and from there they could formulate and think of some drills suited for them and that will enhance those weaknesses. Students' knowledge on the topic affects the way they deliver the message and unconsciously use of repetitious words or fillers affects their performance in speaking which requires a need to develop an intervention plan to further enhance the students' performance in speaking by designing appropriate module or program with varied activities.

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