

SPEECH FLUENCY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING: AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

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Abstract

Speech fluency is an essential component of communicative competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. However, many language learners experience difficulties maintaining continuous speech, selecting appropriate vocabulary in real time, and expressing ideas without excessive hesitation. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) offers a communicative approach in which learners use the target language to achieve meaningful outcomes. This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of TBLT in developing EFL learners' speech fluency by comparing task-based instruction with conventional speaking instruction. A quasi-experimental pre-test–post-test control-group design is proposed. Participants, consisting of [number] university EFL students, are assigned to experimental and control groups. The experimental group receives instruction through communicative tasks, including information-gap activities, problem-solving tasks, decision-making activities, and oral narratives, while the control group follows the regular speaking curriculum. Speech performance is evaluated using measures of speed fluency, breakdown fluency, and repair fluency. Quantitative data are analysed using appropriate inferential statistical procedures. The study is expected to contribute to a more precise understanding of how structured task-based practice can support oral fluency development in university-level EFL education. The final version will report the empirical findings obtained from the actual experiment.

Keywords: Task-Based Language Teaching, speech fluency, EFL learners, oral communication, speaking skills, task repetition, pre-task planning, experimental study.

Introduction

The development of oral communication skills is one of the central objectives of contemporary English language education. In an increasingly interconnected world, learners are expected not only to possess grammatical knowledge and an adequate vocabulary but also to communicate their ideas clearly, spontaneously, and effectively. Despite the importance of speaking proficiency, many learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) experience considerable difficulties when participating in spontaneous oral communication. Their speech may be characterised by long pauses, frequent hesitation, repeated words, false starts, and difficulties organising ideas under real-time communicative pressure.

These difficulties suggest that knowledge of linguistic forms does not automatically lead to fluent spoken performance. Learners need regular opportunities to retrieve linguistic resources, formulate messages, negotiate meaning, and respond to interlocutors in meaningful situations. Consequently, the development of speech fluency requires pedagogical approaches that provide sustained and purposeful opportunities for language use.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) represents one such approach. Rather than organising instruction exclusively around the presentation and practice of grammatical structures, TBLT places meaningful tasks at the centre of the learning process. Learners use

the target language to achieve specific communicative outcomes, such as solving a problem, exchanging information, making a decision, or producing a narrative. These activities encourage learners to focus on meaning while mobilising their available linguistic resources.

Ellis (2003) identifies the relationship between task performance, language use, and second-language learning as a central issue in task-based pedagogy. Similarly, Skehan (2003) discusses the role of tasks in second-language acquisition and examines how task conditions influence learners' linguistic complexity, accuracy, and fluency.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of task-based instruction should not be assessed solely through general speaking scores. Speech fluency is a multidimensional construct that can be examined through the temporal organisation of speech, the occurrence of pauses, and the frequency of repetitions and self-corrections. An investigation of these dimensions can provide a more detailed account of learners' progress.

The purpose of this study is therefore to investigate the effectiveness of Task-Based Language Teaching in developing EFL learners' speech fluency through a comparison of experimental and control groups.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent does Task-Based Language Teaching influence the development of EFL learners' speed fluency?
2. How does task-based instruction affect breakdown fluency, particularly the frequency and duration of pauses?
3. Does TBLT lead to greater improvement in speech fluency than conventional speaking instruction?
4. Which features of task-based instruction may contribute most effectively to learners' oral fluency development?

The study advances the following hypotheses:

H1: Learners receiving task-based instruction will demonstrate greater improvement in overall speech fluency than learners receiving conventional speaking instruction.

H2: The experimental group will demonstrate an increase in speech rate and mean length of fluent runs following the intervention.

H3: The experimental group will demonstrate a reduction in inappropriate pauses, hesitation phenomena, and unnecessary repetitions. These hypotheses will be evaluated using the results of the pre-test and post-test assessments.

Literature Review

The Concept of Speech Fluency in Second Language Learning

Speech fluency has been conceptualised in different ways in second-language acquisition research. In its broad sense, fluency may refer to a learner's general ability to communicate effectively. In a narrower sense, it concerns the temporal characteristics of spoken language, including the speed, continuity, and smoothness of speech production.

Segalowitz examines fluency from a cognitive perspective, emphasising the relationship between language processing, automaticity, and the ability to produce speech efficiently. From this perspective, fluent speech depends partly on learners' ability to access and coordinate linguistic knowledge without excessive processing demands.

An important distinction in fluency research is the difference between perceived fluency and utterance fluency. Perceived fluency concerns the impression created by a speaker's performance, whereas utterance fluency can be investigated through measurable

temporal characteristics of speech. These dimensions are related, but they should not be treated as identical.

Following the framework discussed by Tavakoli and Skehan, speech fluency can be examined through three interconnected dimensions: speed fluency, breakdown fluency, and repair fluency.

Speed fluency concerns the rate at which speech is produced. It can be measured through speech rate, articulation rate, and the mean length of fluent runs.

Breakdown fluency refers to interruptions in the flow of speech. It can be examined through the frequency, duration, and distribution of silent pauses and, where appropriate, filled pauses.

Repair fluency concerns the ways speakers repeat, reformulate, or correct their utterances during production. Typical indicators include repetitions, false starts, reformulations, and self-corrections.

These dimensions provide a comprehensive analytical framework for investigating oral fluency development. An increase in speech rate, for example, may indicate more efficient language production, while a reduction in excessive pauses may suggest improved access to linguistic resources. Nevertheless, an increase in speed should not automatically be interpreted as improved communicative performance if it is accompanied by reduced comprehensibility or excessive errors.

For this reason, the present study examines fluency through multiple indicators rather than relying on a single measure.

Theoretical Foundations of Task-Based Language Teaching

Task-Based Language Teaching is grounded in communicative approaches to language learning and research into second-language acquisition. Its central principle is that learners can develop their language abilities through participation in meaningful activities that require them to use the target language to achieve an identifiable outcome.

Ellis provides a comprehensive account of task-based language learning and teaching, discussing the nature of pedagogical tasks, their relationship to language acquisition, and the implications of task design for classroom practice.

Within a task-based framework, activities are organised around communicative purposes rather than exclusively around the controlled practice of predetermined linguistic structures. Learners may be required to exchange missing information, select the most appropriate solution to a problem, plan an event, compare alternatives, or narrate a sequence of events.

Willis presents a practical framework for organising task-based lessons around three broad stages: the pre-task phase, the task cycle, and language focus. This structure provides opportunities for learners to prepare for communication, complete tasks, report their outcomes, and reflect on the language used.

The pre-task phase introduces the topic, establishes the communicative purpose, and may provide relevant vocabulary or planning time. During the task cycle, learners work individually, in pairs, or in groups to achieve a communicative outcome. In the post-task or language-focus stage, attention can be directed towards useful expressions, recurring problems, and relevant language forms.

Importantly, the use of tasks does not require the complete exclusion of explicit instruction. Teachers can draw attention to linguistic accuracy before or after a communicative activity while preserving the central role of purposeful language use. For the development of

fluency, TBLT is particularly relevant because it gives learners repeated opportunities to formulate messages and respond to changing communicative demands. Such practice may help reduce the time needed to retrieve words and construct utterances.

Task-Based Instruction and the Development of Oral Fluency

The relationship between task-based instruction and speaking performance has received considerable attention in applied linguistics. Skehan discusses how task conditions and task implementation influence the production of second-language learners, particularly in relation to complexity, accuracy, and fluency.

The effects of task-based pedagogy may depend on several factors, including task type, linguistic difficulty, planning conditions, opportunities for interaction, and the extent to which learners repeat or extend their performances. Task repetition is particularly relevant to fluency development. When learners perform a similar task more than once, they may become more familiar with its content and communicative demands. This familiarity can reduce the cognitive resources required for planning and allow greater attention to linguistic formulation.

Hsu investigated the combined effects of task repetition and post-task transcription on second-language oral performance. The study examined complexity, accuracy, and fluency and found that the instructional conditions influenced aspects of learners' oral production and subsequent performance.

Pre-task planning may also support fluency by giving learners time to organise ideas, retrieve vocabulary, and anticipate the structure of their responses. However, planning does not necessarily produce identical effects across all fluency measures or task types. It should therefore be investigated as a component of task implementation rather than assumed to be universally beneficial.

A systematic research synthesis by Medina Fernández, which examined 61 studies and meta-analysed 11 of them, reported a medium-to-large overall effect of task-based interventions on oral production ($d = 0.78$). The review also identified task repetition and pre-task planning as potentially beneficial for aspects of language performance, including fluency.

Further evidence that fluency can respond to pedagogical intervention comes from Tavakoli, Campbell, and McCormack. Their study of English for Academic Purposes learners reported greater fluency gains in the experimental group receiving additional fluency strategy training than in the control group receiving general speaking and listening practice. Taken together, these studies provide a theoretical and empirical basis for examining task-based instruction as a means of developing oral fluency. However, the extent to which its effects can be observed among university EFL learners depends on the instructional context, the tasks selected, and the measures used to evaluate performance.

Research Gap and Significance of the Present Study

Although previous research supports the pedagogical value of task-based language instruction, general speaking proficiency and speech fluency are not interchangeable constructs. A learner may improve in vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, confidence, or task completion without demonstrating equivalent improvement in the temporal organisation of speech.

Accordingly, a focused investigation of fluency should distinguish among speech rate, pause-related measures, and repair phenomena. This distinction makes it possible to identify the dimensions of performance that respond most clearly to instructional intervention. The present study addresses this issue through a comparative experimental design involving an experimental group receiving task-based instruction and a control group receiving conventional

speaking instruction. By examining pre-test and post-test performances, the study seeks to establish whether TBLT produces measurable fluency gains and to identify which indicators show the greatest change. Its potential contribution lies in the operationalisation of speech fluency as a multidimensional construct and the evaluation of task-based instruction through observable features of learner speech.

Methodology

Research Design

The study employs a quasi-experimental pre-test–post-test control-group design. This design allows changes in speech fluency to be examined over an instructional period and compared across two groups receiving different forms of speaking instruction.

The independent variable is the instructional approach: task-based language teaching in the experimental group and conventional speaking instruction in the control group. The dependent variables are the indicators of speech fluency, including speech rate, articulation rate, mean length of fluent runs, pause frequency, pause duration, and repair frequency. Where random assignment is not feasible, intact classes may be used. In this case, initial differences between the groups should be examined and acknowledged when interpreting the results.

Participants and Research Context

The participants will be 60 university students studying English as a Foreign Language at The university of economics and pedagogy. Their approximate age range will be 18-19, and their English proficiency level will be B1 – B2. The participants will be organised into two groups:

Experimental group: 30 students receiving task-based instruction.

Control group: 30 students receiving conventional speaking instruction.

Both groups should follow comparable curricular content and receive the same total instructional time. Where possible, their initial proficiency levels should be established through placement-test results or pre-intervention speaking assessments. Participation should be voluntary. Participants should be informed about the recording and assessment procedures, and their personal information should be protected throughout the research process.

Instructional Intervention

The intervention is designed around meaningful communicative tasks that require learners to exchange information, make decisions, solve problems, describe events, and explain their opinions.

The proposed intervention period is eight weeks, with two sessions per week. The duration and frequency should be adjusted to the actual teaching schedule.

The experimental group will participate in tasks such as:

1. **Information-gap activities:** learners exchange information unavailable to their partners and work towards a shared outcome.
2. **Problem-solving tasks:** learners discuss a situation, evaluate possible solutions, and justify their decisions.
3. **Decision-making tasks:** learners compare alternatives, negotiate priorities, and reach a group decision.
4. **Narrative tasks:** learners describe pictures, recount events, or construct a coherent story.
5. **Collaborative planning tasks:** learners prepare a schedule, organise an event, or develop a proposal.

6. **Repeated speaking tasks:** learners complete a task and subsequently repeat it, either with a new partner or under slightly modified conditions.

Tasks should have clear outcomes and require genuine communication. Learners should be encouraged to convey meaning rather than simply reproduce prepared sentences. Each task-based lesson may follow three stages.

Pre-task stage. The teacher introduces the topic, clarifies the task outcome, activates relevant knowledge, and provides limited planning time where appropriate.

Task cycle. Students complete the task individually, in pairs, or in small groups. The teacher facilitates communication and monitors participation without unnecessarily interrupting fluency-oriented interaction.

Post-task stage. Students report their outcomes, reflect on communication difficulties, and receive feedback on selected language features. Where appropriate, they repeat the task to improve their performance.

The control group will study the same general topics and practise speaking for an equivalent amount of time, but instruction will follow the existing speaking curriculum rather than the structured task-based sequence. To strengthen the comparison, the teacher, instructional materials, lesson duration, and assessment conditions should be kept as consistent as practicable across groups.

Instruments and Data Collection

The principal instrument will be an oral speaking assessment administered before and after the intervention. The assessment should include comparable tasks that elicit sufficient spontaneous speech for fluency analysis. A picture-based narrative and a problem-solving or decision-making task may be used to sample both individual speech production and interactive communication. All speaking assessments should be recorded under comparable conditions. The recordings will be transcribed and analysed using clearly defined measurement criteria.

The following indicators will be examined:

Fluency dimension	Measure	Operational definition
Speed fluency	Speech rate	Number of words or syllables produced per minute, with the calculation method specified consistently
Speed fluency	Articulation rate	Number of syllables produced per minute of phonation, excluding pauses
Speed fluency	Mean length of fluent runs	Average number of syllables produced between predefined pauses
Breakdown fluency	Pause frequency	Number of silent pauses meeting the adopted threshold per minute

Breakdown fluency	Mean pause duration	Average duration of qualifying silent pauses
Repair fluency	Repair frequency	Number of repetitions, false starts, reformulations, and self-corrections per defined unit of speech

The definitions and thresholds used for pauses and repair events should be established before the recordings are coded. The same criteria must be applied to both groups and both testing occasions. Where resources permit, two trained raters should independently code a subset of the recordings. Inter-rater agreement should be calculated using a statistic appropriate to the measurement type, and disagreements should be resolved through an established coding procedure.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data will be analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Means, standard deviations, and changes between pre-test and post-test scores will be calculated for each fluency measure. The primary analysis will examine whether the experimental group improves more than the control group. An analysis of covariance, using post-test scores as the dependent variable and pre-test scores as a covariate, may be appropriate when its assumptions are satisfied. Alternatively, a mixed-design analysis may be used to examine group, time, and group-by-time effects. The selection of the statistical procedure should depend on the distribution of the data, the study design, and the suitability of the model assumptions. Effect sizes and confidence intervals should be reported alongside p-values to indicate the magnitude and precision of any observed differences. The statistical significance threshold should be established before the analysis.

Where several fluency outcomes are tested, the potential impact of multiple comparisons should also be considered.

Results

Note for completion: This section must be populated with the actual pre-test and post-test data after the experiment. No numerical findings are assumed in this draft.

Descriptive Statistics Table 1 should present the descriptive statistics for each fluency measure in both groups before and after the instructional intervention.

Comparison of the Experimental and Control Groups The inferential analysis should determine whether observed changes differ significantly between the groups after accounting for their baseline performance.

Summary of the Findings Once the statistical analysis has been completed, the results should be summarised in relation to the research questions and hypotheses. Particular attention should be paid to whether TBLT produces improvement across several fluency dimensions or whether its effects are concentrated in particular measures. The analysis should also establish whether the evidence supports each hypothesis, partially supports it, or fails to support it.

Discussion

The discussion will interpret the empirical findings in relation to the theoretical framework and previous research on task-based language teaching and second-language speech fluency.

If the experimental group demonstrates a greater increase in speech rate or mean length of fluent runs than the control group, this pattern may indicate that repeated opportunities for meaningful language production support more continuous speech. Such an interpretation

would be consistent with research examining the relationship between pedagogical intervention and temporal fluency measures.

A reduction in pause frequency or pause duration may suggest that learners have become more efficient in planning and producing utterances. However, pauses do not always indicate a lack of proficiency. Some pauses perform important discourse functions, allow speakers to organise complex ideas, or occur naturally at grammatical boundaries. Consequently, pause reduction should be interpreted in relation to pause location, length, and communicative context.

Similarly, changes in repair frequency require careful interpretation. Repetitions and reformulations can indicate production difficulty, but they can also be useful strategies for maintaining communication and clarifying meaning. A lower repair rate should therefore not automatically be treated as an improvement unless it is considered alongside other indicators of performance.

The instructional contribution of task repetition should also be examined. Familiarity with task content and procedure may allow learners to allocate fewer resources to conceptual planning and more to linguistic production. Nevertheless, the extent of this benefit may depend on the complexity of the task, the availability of planning time, and learners' initial proficiency levels.

An important implication concerns the relationship between fluency and accuracy. More rapid speech does not necessarily represent more effective communication if grammatical control, intelligibility, or content organisation deteriorates. For this reason, the findings should be interpreted holistically, with fluency treated as a distinct but interconnected dimension of speaking proficiency.

Finally, the discussion should consider whether the study's results are consistent with previous findings, which outcomes differ, and how contextual factors may explain these similarities or differences. Any explanation should be proportionate to the available evidence and should avoid attributing causal effects to factors that were not directly investigated.

Pedagogical Implications The study may have several implications for university-level EFL instruction, depending on the empirical findings. First, speaking lessons can incorporate regular communicative tasks with clear outcomes rather than relying exclusively on controlled oral drills. Tasks that require students to exchange information, solve problems, or make decisions create opportunities to use language for purposeful communication. Second, teachers may integrate structured task repetition into speaking lessons. Repeating a comparable task can provide learners with opportunities to refine the organisation and delivery of their messages. The benefits should be evaluated in relation to both fluency and overall communicative effectiveness. Third, pre-task planning may help learners prepare ideas and retrieve relevant vocabulary. Teachers should determine an appropriate balance between planning time and spontaneous production in accordance with learning objectives and proficiency levels. Fourth, speaking assessment should use transparent criteria. Combining speech-rate measures with pause and repair indicators can offer teachers a more detailed picture of learner progress than a single holistic speaking score. Finally, task selection should reflect learners' proficiency levels, educational needs, and communicative goals. A varied programme of narrative, information-gap, problem-solving, and decision-making activities can provide different opportunities for practicing oral production.

These recommendations should be refined after the empirical findings have been established.

Limitations and directions for further research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the results. A limited sample size or the use of intact classes may reduce the generalisability of findings. Differences in learners' initial proficiency, attendance, motivation, and prior exposure to communicative instruction may also influence the outcomes.

In addition, the duration of the intervention may affect the extent to which changes in fluency can be detected. Immediate post-test improvement does not necessarily demonstrate long-term development, so delayed assessments would provide useful evidence concerning the retention and transfer of learning gains.

The measurement of fluency also presents methodological challenges. Different pause thresholds, transcription procedures, task types, and calculation methods can produce different estimates. Clear operational definitions and consistent coding procedures are therefore essential.

Future studies may investigate the individual and combined effects of pre-task planning, task repetition, corrective feedback, and task complexity. Research involving larger samples and multiple institutions could also clarify whether the effects of TBLT vary according to proficiency level, instructional context, or learner characteristics.

Conclusion This study is designed to investigate the contribution of Task-Based Language Teaching to the development of speech fluency among university EFL learners. By comparing an experimental group receiving task-based instruction with a control group following conventional speaking instruction, the research examines changes in speech rate, articulation rate, fluent-run length, pause behaviour, and repair frequency.

The multidimensional measurement of fluency is central to the study because oral proficiency cannot be adequately represented by speaking speed alone. A comprehensive analysis must consider the continuity of speech, the nature of pauses, and the strategies learners use to maintain or repair communication.

The theoretical framework and research design provide a basis for evaluating the instructional value of meaningful communicative tasks. However, the study's effectiveness claims and final conclusions must be based on the actual experimental data. Once the results are available, the findings will establish the extent to which task-based instruction produces measurable fluency gains and will support evidence-based recommendations for EFL teaching.

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