The Journal of Asia TEFL

Students' Speaking Motivation and their Perspectives on a Task-based Language Classroom: Pedagogical Implications

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Introduction

Motivating students to speak in the classroom is a daunting task faced by a number of language teachers around the world. In the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) context, where English is used and spoken mostly as a foreign language, students having no interest and no motivation in learning and in using the English language in the classroom is a common challenge among English teachers in the region (Souriyavongsa, Rany, Mohamad Jafre, & Leong, 2013). Some studies in the literature (Adhikari, 2010; Aleksandrzak, 2011; Khamkhien, 2010; Nguyen, 2011) revealed a number of factors for why these students are not motivated to speak English. For example, there is a lack of confidence on the part of the students to speak (Nguyen, 2011) since they are not exposed to speaking activities and practices (Aleksandrzak, 2011). Students think that speaking in the classroom is not learning new concepts at all since they only practice what has been taught to them by their teacher (Adhikari, 2010). They also lack the necessary vocabulary to express their ideas (Al Hosni, 2014). Lastly, English is not a medium of instruction and it is taught in the local language by many English teachers (Khamkhien, 2010).

In Thailand, there is a serious problem of English language proficiency among students (Ulla & Winitkun, 2017). Thus, English language teaching has been taken seriously by all schools and universities especially with the ASEAN economic integration (Baker, 2012; Crocco & Bunwirat, 2014; Kirkpatrick, 2011) where English is used as a working language. In fact, a number of methods were implemented in order to improve the language proficiency of the students. For example, some Thai schools across the country are hiring foreign English-speaking teachers to help the local teachers teach English to their students (Hickey, 2014). Schools and universities are using western-published English textbooks to support the students' language learning (Nomnian, 2014). Additionally, the ability to communicate and to be understood in the English language through different language tasks is more emphasized in classrooms (Ahmad & Rao, 2013); hence, the use of different language tasks and various interactive activities in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms is prevalent. Some researchers (Masrom, Alwi, & Daud, 2015; Sabet, Tahriri, & Haghi 2014) believe that students' speaking fluency and confidence would improve if they were exposed to active, engaging, and collaborative language learning activities. Therefore, the present study is conducted to investigate the impact of task-based language activities on Thai students' attitudes towards improving their English-speaking skills.

TBLT in EFL Classrooms

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is an approach to English language teaching (ELT) which makes use of tasks as its principal component towards teaching and learning the language (Ellis, 2009). As approaches to language teaching and learning underwent several shifts in focus and style, TBLT has been popular since the 1980's (Hismanoglu & Hismanoglu, 2011). It has attracted ESL and EFL teachers, and researchers as it centered on the learners learning through tasks and activities rather than on teachers teaching in the classroom. The basic principle of task-based language teaching according to Ellis (2009) is that learners should be given the time to engage and complete various language tasks in order for them to become successful language learners. To Jeon and Hahn (2006) TBLT offers language learners the opportunity for a much wider use of the language with real-life tasks. The notion of using the language in a meaningful task is further maintained by Ellis (2013) when he assumed that when a language is used constantly as a tool to communicate meaning, learners would be able to learn the language effectively. Therefore, students-students interaction in the classroom through different engaging tasks, where they would be able to use the language in communication is the key factor towards attaining language learning.

Generally, a number of previous studies in the literature (Masrom et al., 2015; Munirah & Muhsin, 2015; Sarıçoban & Karakurt, 2016; Ulla & Winitkun, 2017) had reported positive results of a more active, engaged, and task-based classroom towards students' fluency, speaking motivation, and confidence in the use of the English language. For example, the work of Sabet et al. (2014) showed that the task-based approach to teaching had a positive impact on learners' motivation. Likewise, Masrom et al. (2015) also conducted a study on the role of task and motivation in language production. The study revealed that motivated learners who performed the task tend to produce lexically complex language than those who were not motivated in the task. Furthermore, a study by Munirah and Muhsin (2015) also showed that students' speaking accuracy can be improved by using the task-based approach to teaching. It was also revealed that the task-based approach motivates students to learn and improve their self-confidence. Lastly, a study by Sarıçoban and Karakurt (2016) further revealed that students' listening and speaking skills have greatly improved through the use of various task-based activities in an EFL classroom.

Apparently, the above-cited literature only dealt with a task-based approach as a strategy to teach and to improve students' listening and speaking skills in EFL contexts. Empirical studies that concentrate on students' perceptions on the use of different activities in an EFL classroom as well as students' motivation to learning and speaking the English language are still rarely conducted and explored especially in the ASEAN context. Thus, the purpose of the present study is to provide additional literature on Thai students' perspectives on the use of different language tasks in the language classroom and their motivation to learn and perform language tasks in an EFL context. Specifically, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. How do Thai students rate their level of motivation when learning English in a task-based EFL classroom?
2. How do Thai students perceive a task-based language EFL classroom?

Method

Participants

With the use of a purposive-convenience sampling method, the participants were 137 Thai EFL learners who were enrolled in a general English class at a Thai university during the third term of 2017-2018. All these students, whose age ranged from 18-21 years old had an English proficiency of A1 (based on CEFR) according to the results of their university English placement test on listening, reading, and writing. After being considered to be the target participants for the research, these students were informed

about the study, including its objectives and rationale. They were also informed about their voluntary participation; that there would be no grade deduction or addition for those who would participate or not; and that the gathered data would be treated with the utmost confidentiality.

TABLE 1
The Different Tasks/Speaking Performances Set for Each Unit in the Teaching Material for Four Weeks.

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4
1.Contacting lost and found section; 2. Booking a ticket online; 3. Renting a taxi; 4. Filling out an arrival and a departure card; 5. Complaining about damaged luggage.	1. Ordering foods, drinks, and desserts; 2. Offering and asking for foods; 3. Making a reservation; 4. Inviting someone for dinner; 5. Asking about and describing food experiences.	1. Talking about locations; 2. Asking for and giving a recommendation; 3. Making a comparison about cities; 4. Asking for a direction; 5. Asking for transportation information.	1. Describing a country's festival; 2. Asking about people's activities and plans; 3. Asking for and giving suggestions; 4. Asking for and checking of information.
Final week: Individual interview			

Instruments

The researcher utilized a survey to collect the data for the study. The survey which was written both in Thai and English was adapted from Pietri (2015) with regards to learners' speaking skills and was modified for this study to better describe the context. With the help of a Thai teacher, the survey questions were translated into Thai to make the student-respondents comfortable with the questions. It consisted of two parts; part 1 concentrated on the level of students' motivation to use English in the classroom, while part two identified the students' perspectives with regards to the use of different language tasks and activities in their EFL classroom. The survey was a Likert-scale of 5 response options with very high (5), high, average, low, and very low (1) (for the motivation questions); and strongly agree (5), agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree (1) (for students' perspectives on TBLT) as indicators.

Procedure

Before conducting the study, permission through a letter to the director of the university's language institute was sought. The objectives and the purpose of the study were discussed in the letter. After this approval was received, students were then informed about the study and the procedures were explained. The utmost confidentiality in all information given was also emphasized to the students. Furthermore, tabulation of the data from the survey followed and they were described according to their frequency count, mean, and standard deviation.

Findings and Discussion

For the purpose of data presentation, analysis, and interpretation percentages for very high and high, and low and very low were combined against the percentage for average in Table 2. For Table 3, percentages for strongly agree and agree, and strongly disagree and disagree were combined against the percentage for neutral.

TABLE 2

The Percentage of Students' Level of Motivation in a Task-based EFL Classroom

Statements	High	Average	Low
How would you rate your level of motivation in a task-based language classroom in terms of…			
1. improving your English-speaking skills?	97.08	2.92	
2. participating in any English-speaking group exercises in the classroom?	63.50	35.77	0.73
3. speaking English in the classroom?	56.20	40.15	3.65
4. sharing and expressing your ideas in English with your classmates in the classroom?	40.88	51.09	8.03
5. sharing and expressing your ideas in English with your teacher in the classroom?	55.47	41.61	2.92
6. using English outside of your classroom?	32.84	44.53	22.63
7. attending and studying English in your class?	86.86	10.22	2.92
8. performing tasks and activities in your English class?	86.13	12.41	1.46
9. answering the questions from your teacher in the English language?	64.23	34.31	1.46
10. using the English language in your daily life?	37.96	44.53	17.51

Data from Table 2 shows that 97% of the students were positive about improving and learning English in a language classroom where different tasks were employed. Based on the data in Table 2, employing interactive language tasks can motivate students to attend their English classes (87%), study, and perform in their English class activities (86%). This showed that relevant language tasks and activities in the classroom can help motivate students to improve their speaking skills and learn English in general. Additionally, this result was also found in the studies by Huang (2016), Sabet et al. (2014), and Sarıçoban and Karakurt (2016) when they investigated the impact of the task-based language teaching approach on the students' motivation to study. The findings indicate that TBLT has greatly improved students' learning of English, their motivation, and the improvement of their language skills.

However, despite the positive motivation of the students to improve their speaking skills, and despite the number of students who had a high level of motivation to use English in the classroom, there were still a number of them who found it challenging to use English in speaking especially when talking to their classmates (51%) and to their teacher (42%). This is evident as a number of them only had an average level of motivation in using the English language. Participating in any English speaking group exercises (36%), speaking English in the classroom (40%), sharing and expressing ideas in English with their classmates (51%), sharing and expressing their ideas in English with their teacher (42%), and answering their teacher's questions in the English language (34%) seem to be a problem for a number of the participants. Likewise, only a few of them had a high level of motivation in using English outside of the classroom (33%) and using it in their daily life (38%). These percentages can account for the lack of self-confidence and lack of English vocabulary. Additionally, students' field of study may also contribute to their low level of motivation, where English majors are believed to have more interest and motivation to learn and use English than those students from the science departments (Liu, 2014).

The reported lack of confidence and the lack of vocabulary, which were the challenges that prevented the students from using the target language in speaking, suggested that students also lack practice and exposure to the actual use of the language. Several studies in the literature emphasized that learners should be given enough time to engage in different tasks (Ellis, 2009); be given a much wider opportunity to use real-life tasks (Jeon & Hahn, 2006); and should use the language constantly to become successful language learners (Ellis, 2013).

TABLE 3

Students' Perceptions with regard to Doing Different Language Tasks and Activities in an EFL Classroom

Statements	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Language tasks and activities in the class help me to…			
1. be motivated to learn English.	83.94	15.33	0.73
2. be confident with my English-speaking skills.	53.28	43.80	2.92
3. improve my English vocabulary.	65.69	32.12	2.19
4. perform and do the tasks in the classroom using the English language.	78.83	18.98	2.19
5. share and exchange ideas with my classmates using English.	55.47	40.88	3.65
6. share and express my ideas to my teachers in the English language	67.15	32.12	0.73
7. talk to foreigners using the English language.	64.96	30.66	4.38
8. ask questions to my teacher in English.	68.61	30.66	0.73
9 answer the questions of my teacher in English.	74.45	24.09	1.46
10. pronounce English words clearly.	74.45	24.82	0.73
11. use English as my daily language.	58.39	35.77	5.84
12. improve my presentation skills.	78.83	16.79	4.38
13. improve my communicative skills.	78.83	18.98	2.19

The results showed that percentages under "agree" were higher than those percentages in the "disagree" column. This indicates that students were positive about doing different tasks in their language classroom as compared to those who were not. For example, students perceived that doing different tasks in their EFL classroom helped them to be motivated to learn English (83.49%), practice using English in the classroom (78.83%), improve their presentation and communicative skills (78.83%), pronounce English words clearly (74.44%), and ask (68.61%) and answer (74.45%) teacher's questions in English.

Ellis (2013) has maintained that task-based language teaching offers a great opportunity for students to be exposed to and use the target language in a real-life situation. Hence, students become successful language learners. Therefore, doing and performing all the tasks in the English language classroom helped students to improve their English communication skills.

However, it must also be noted that while most of the students held positive perceptions about the task-based language classroom, there were a few students who neither agreed nor disagreed that task-based language classroom could help them improve their English language ability. This is evident in the percentages under "neutral" where almost half of the students rated some of the items. For example, almost 44% could not decide whether language tasks and activities in the class help them to become confident with their English-speaking skills. This is also in parallel with the percentages given to the items on sharing and exchanging ideas with their classmates using English (41%), using English as their daily language (36%), and talking to foreigners using the English language (31%). Although there are factors to consider like individual differences, exposure to English, and the necessity to use the language, all these factors can be translated to the students' lack of self-confidence to express themselves in the English language.

Gurler (2015) stated that self-confidence is needed to start a conversation and to learn a language in general. If students do not have the confidence to speak and are shy to express themselves in the target language, the learning of the language might not be successful. In the literature, Bahous, Bacha, and Nabhani (2011) mentioned that engagement and interactive classroom activities can develop learners' self-confidence in using the English language for speaking. Therefore, language tasks and activities are also contributing factors towards students' confidence.

Implications and Suggestions

The present study, which identifies Thai EFL students' speaking motivation and their perspectives on a task-based language classroom reveals that students had a high level of motivation towards learning and using the English language in a task-based language classroom. The students' positive perception with

regards to the use of different language tasks in learning the English language is believed to contribute to the improvement of their speaking performance in the different speaking activities in an EFL classroom. The results, although the study was conducted in a Thai public university, have pedagogical implications not only for Thai EFL learners and EFL teachers but to all education institutions which try to improve the speaking ability of their learners. First, the students' level of motivation in learning the English language depends on the activities conducted in the classroom. The more interactive, exciting, and engaging the activities are, the more the students get motivated to learn the language. Therefore, EFL teachers should carefully plan for the day's lesson and make sure that only relevant language activities are conducted in the classroom. Second, there may be some EFL learners who are not used to using the English language whether inside or outside of the classroom and they may lack the speaking confidence to start and carry out a conversation in English; however, constant exposure to and practice in using the language may help towards improving their confidence in using the language. Teachers should also be able to design language activities that will cater to the needs, attitudes, and behavior of EFL learners for them to become successful in language learning. Lastly, students learn better if they perform and do the tasks as a group. Thus, more group tasks should be conducted in the class that will boost and sustain students' confidence and motivation to use the language. Teachers should see to it that these language tasks are carefully chosen in order to achieve the desired goal of success in language learning.

The study, although it reports the findings of the EFL learners' perceptions on a task-based language classroom, admits its limitations. It is conducted only in one university in Thailand; therefore, it cannot be deemed representative of the whole population of Thai students. Likewise, the focus of the present study is limited only on speaking motivation and students' perceptions of the task-based language classroom. Future researchers may want to do a correlational study between students' speaking performance in the task-based language classroom and their motivation to study English. Likewise, a study on speaking performance comparing two groups of students in an EFL setting would also be interesting to explore.

Conclusion

This study highlights Thai students' speaking motivation and their perspectives on a task-based language classroom. Generally, the findings revealed that although students admitted to having a lack of confidence and of vocabulary to use English in their conversation whether inside or outside of the classroom, Thai EFL learners still held a high level of motivation with regards to learning English in a task-based language learning classroom.

From the findings and as discussed extensively in the literature, interactive and engaging language task-based activities in an English as a foreign language classroom can have a positive impact on the learners' speaking skills and to the learning of the English language in general. However, despite TBLT's contribution to EFL learners' speaking development and improvement, such as English learning motivation and language exposure and practices, not all language tasks and activities can be considered effective. Furthermore, not all EFL learners are comfortable with speaking activities in the classroom. Group role-plays, pair work, and group work activities can be seen to be a few of the most engaging and collaborative learning strategies that can be employed in the language classroom. Students may be interested to do any language tasks when they are with their classmates as they may feel the support from each other. Moreover, students are more confident to do the tasks when they know that a specific task offers them an opportunity to practice and learn a set of language skills and to be exposed to different language use. On the other hand, individual interview although it promotes individual communication skills is observed to be less friendly as students may have speaking anxiety that affects negatively their performance. To make the most out of the task-based language lessons, careful consideration before designing the lesson and conducting such activities is vital.

Acknowledgements

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