



Original Research

Students' Perception of the Benefits and challenges in Practicing Task-Based Speaking Activities in EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate students' perceived benefits of task-based activities (hereafter, TBSAs) in grade 11 English textbook and the challenges the students face in practicing them at Shambu Secondary School. A mixed-method research method with a descriptive case study design was used. The data were collected through a questionnaire and interview. Descriptive statistics was employed for the content analysis of the questionnaire, and thematic analysis was used for the interview data analysis. The results revealed that students had favorable perceptions about the benefits of TBSAs, reporting that it is very crucial for the development of their speaking performance, like fluency, comprehension, pronunciation, and vocabulary, by creating confidence in them. The results also showed that students encountered some challenges during the TBSAs, and students with low English proficiency felt shy and nervous when working in groups because of a lack of effectiveness and efficiency when they practiced the activities, which led them to use their L1. According to the results, students also face challenges in practicing in TBSAs due to the large class size,. Thus, it was concluded that to raise the level of students' speaking ability, using TBSAs is very crucial if the obstacles are minimized through teacher training.

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INTRODUCTION

Various language education approaches that encourage interaction are presently accessible to improve interactive learning. TBLI began in the 1980s as a result of Prabhu's Community Language Teaching in India (1987). Learning in task-based education is led by a task and occurs via social interaction (Ellis et al., 2019; Nunan, 2004). According to Bygate 2020; Ellis et al., 2019; Willis, 1996, the purpose of task-based instruction is to strengthen students' language abilities in communication, which are inextricably linked to their social

environment. Social interaction as a task-based learning process has several qualities that may help with language education (Motallebzadeh, 2013).

Students learn English in order to use it efficiently and meaningfully in the classroom. According to Harmer (2014) and Nunan (2004), English serves as a universal language or lingua franca. English is used by politicians, businesspeople, international students, and tourists to work and interact with others. As a result, speaking ability performance is crucial for non-native speakers

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everywhere. Despite having many opportunities to learn English, EFL students have trouble presenting performances in the language. Particularly, the difficulty of the issue increases in an EFL context. This issue may be due to improper speaking task instruction, affective and cognitive learning styles, and teacher and student influences on speaking task student practices in the classroom.

Speaking performance can be taught using a cutting-edge method called task-based speaking activities. Task-based speech has actually been adopted by many cultures, including Asia (Ellis et al., 2019; Nunan, 2004; Gleason, 2013). Positive sentiments about task-based speaking instruction (hereafter, TBSI) and its use in EFL classes are shared by both teachers and students. Speaking tasks have been used in EFL classes in the Ethiopian context. While studies on TBSI's attitudes, influencing variables, and implementation have been undertaken abroad with notably encouraging findings, they have not been sufficiently conducted in Ethiopia, especially at the secondary school level.

When seen through the lens of published textbooks, Ethiopia's foreign language instruction seems to have begun to move toward more communicative techniques and approaches, which have resulted in a change in the amount of time students spend in class actively communicating with one another. It is also evident that though there are the best tasks and activities designed in the textbooks, it needs creative approaches to practice the speaking activities however it would be difficult. It is useful to summarize the importance and the challenges of the speaking activities based on Ur (1996) that asserts speaking seems to be the most important of the four language skills with its difficulties.

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According to Burns (1997), speaking is an interactive process of meaning construction that includes information production, reception, and processing through, grammar, pronunciation, or vocabulary. Therefore, making the most of class time and providing chances for pupils to improve their speaking abilities are crucial when there is little opportunity for speech contact outside of the classroom. Task-based speaking (TBS) as the central unit of planning and instruction in language education is one of the greatest approaches to improving the communication skills of EFL students (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

Before, dealing with what students do or don't do using the TBSAs, it was found necessary to overview the speaking activities designed in grade 11 students' textbook. In the textbook, there are fairly distributed listening, speaking, reading, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and writing activities. Speaking, there are activities like, panel discussion on environmental hazards, pronunciation of English words, vowels and consonants, interviews, expressing preferences, participation in discussion, public speeches on agriculture in Ethiopia, dialogues, debates, talking, likes and dislikes, solving global warming, expressing praise, asking for apology and permission and giving an opinion (MoE, 2023).

From the expertise view of the researcher, all these activities were well designed and beneficial for students' speaking development. What motivated the researcher then was to explore whether the students have positive perceptions for these for these activities and whether they face some challenges when they practice these activities.

Statement of the Problem

TBSAs offer various advantages while working in the classroom. According to Ellis (2003), students in TBSI classrooms may benefit from natural learning via real-world experiences. It helps students develop their communication skills outside of class, too. We encourage meaning-based learning and often integrate it with activities. According to Ratnasari (2020), the TBSAs aim to help learners achieve form control while transferring meaning under a time limitation. Huang (2015), and Kusnadi and Muhsin (2015) also claim that the practice opportunities given by TBSI made it an excellent platform for language development, resulting in improved students' speaking abilities. Based on current research and experience, it has been assumed that TBI might be a viable pedagogical option for dealing with frequent issues faced in teaching and acquiring English-speaking abilities in targeted school classes.

To the researcher's knowledge, TBSI has yet to be widely adopted in Ethiopian schools. However, it is undeniable that there have been a few studies that have been undertaken in this area. For example, Gindo et al. (2019) investigated the efficacy of task-based training in increasing learners' speaking abilities at Micha Preparatory School. The results of their study showed that the experimental group was enthusiastic about adopting TBI to improve their speaking abilities. However, the researchers focused on only the effect of task-based instruction in increasing students' speaking abilities. They did not investigate students' perceptions of the advantages of TBSAs and their challenges for students in EFL classes.

The other local research was the one conducted by Dheressa et al. 2024 on, “The effects of task-based speaking instruction on students’ speaking perception at Shambu Secondary School.” The findings indicated that TBSI positively influenced students' English-speaking perceptions. However they did not see the challenges it poses on students practices of the activities unlike the current study the focusses on both students’ perceptions of the benefits of TBSAs and the challenges they encounter when practicing TBSAs, which are designed in the English textbooks of grade 11. For this reason, the present study differs from the two local studies in that it focuses on students' views of the benefits of TBSA and the challenges they face when practicing the TBSAs rather than only focusing on the effectiveness and the effects of TBSI on students’ perceptions. Thus, to determine how the students at Shambu Secondary School experienced the title under study, the following research questions were developed.

Research questions

1. *What are the students’ perceptions of the benefits of task-based speaking activities in grade 11 students’ textbook?*
2. *What are the challenges faced by students in EFL classes during the practice of task-based speaking activities?*

Definitions of task-based speaking activities

Regardless of the obstacles, students strive to achieve their speaking performance. According to the educational definition, TBSAs are classroom activities in which students work together to attain a goal. It may help students make connections between the

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language and the actual world. According to Willis (1996), speaking tasks are always activities in which the learner uses the target language to communicate and attain a goal. A task design must take into account numerous components. According to Nunan (2004), task aspects include objectives, inputs, activities, context, and the roles of teachers and learners. Willis (1996) also suggests a variety of educational activities, including listing, categorising, comparing, solving issues, exchanging experiences, and designing tasks. The framework for task-based lessons is widely regarded as the standard structure for such courses. (Harmer, 2014; Ellis et al., 2019) in their part report that the goal of TBSAs is that it meets the requirements of communicative language teaching and improves communication skills. For learners, TBSAs focus on meaningful communication related to real-world contexts. This creates an environment free from anxiety and inhibition so that students can confidently and excitedly participate in learning activities.

In general, learning activities allow students to collaborate, discuss, and negotiate so that they can orally use their existing background knowledge and experience. Thanks to the TBSAs teachers employ that the students' speaking competency improves, their fluency also increases obviously, and their accurately as well.

Benefits of using TBSAs

Currently, various language learning approaches that foster interaction are being introduced. Learning to speak using TBI, which is led by a task and occurs via social interaction, is one of them (Ellis, 2003; Ellis et al., 2019; Nunan, 2004). According to Bygate (2020), Ellis (2003), and Ellis et al. (2019), the purpose of TBSAs is to strengthen

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students' language abilities in communication, which are inextricably linked to their social environment. Social interaction as a TBSA process has many features that might help in language learning (Shi, 2018; Motallebzadeh, 2013). Through TBSAs, classwork and group work activities have been organised for the students to practice and develop their speaking skills, and the students might recognise that they get benefits from this method of learning. Another benefit that was widely agreed upon by teachers and students is that TBSAs give real-life circumstances for students to practice speaking, encourage them to use the target language more often, boost their confidence and motivation, and create a relaxed English learning environment. According to Nunan (2004), students recognize that TBSAs provide numerous benefits in learning to speak because they provide language experience in the classroom, increase student interaction in class, improve students' communicative competency, and provide students with more opportunities to use English. Thus, it is appropriate to observe the advantages of the activities specified in the students' textbooks.

Challenges Students Face When Using TBSAs

Researchers have identified time constraints, individual differences, mixed ability, and crowded classes, as well as the use of L1 and examination, as barriers to practicing TBSAs (Nunan, 1989; Ellis et al., 2019). However, the teacher remains a crucial interactional partner in TBSAs classrooms by taking the role of motivator (i.e., launching the students into action by constructing joint projects), organiser (making sure that students know what they are expected to do and organising temporal and spatial aspects of task

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performance), and, last but not least, conversational partner and supporter, as the more proficient, knowledgeable interlocutor who can feed the language-learning needs of different students in a wide variety of ways (Van den Branden, 2016). Thus, besides the benefits of TBSAs, it is mandatory to see the challenges these activities impose on students and propose for more work in the future.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

The study comprised 42 Shambu Secondary School students (24 (57.14%) males and 18 (42.86%) females). The purposeful sampling technique was used in the investigation.

Instruments

The researcher used a questionnaire and an interview to obtain the relevant information. The questionnaire has 15 questions, with 10 items ($\alpha = 0.829$) addressing the advantages of TBSA and 5 items ($\alpha = 0.958$) focusing on what the respondents faced as challenges during practicing with the TBSAs. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale with options ranging from "1" (strongly disagree) to "5" (strongly agree). Similarly, 10 interview guide questions were used to acquire data that supported the quantitative data.

Data collection procedures

Data gathering was done during the second semester of March 2022. To collect the questionnaire data, copies of the questionnaire were provided to Shambu Secondary School students, and all the copies were filled out and collected from the participants as they finished. It took the participants roughly 25 minutes to finish the questions. After that, the researcher interviewed eight students who agreed to participate. It took each student 15-

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20 minutes to answer the interview questions. Furthermore, the researcher took notes during each conversation. The interview replies were then classified, transcribed, and thematically organised and evaluated.

Data analysis

SPSS version 26.0 was used to analyse the values and determine the means (M), standard deviation (SD), frequency, and Cronbach Alpha from the questionnaire data. The mean (M) scores for students' perceptions of advantages and difficulties are interpreted as follows: STs: M = 1.00-1.80: highly disagree; M = 1.81-2.60: disagree; M = 2.61-3.40; M = 3.41-4.20: agree; and M = 4.21-5.00: strongly agree. Content analysis was used to analyse the material acquired during interviews. Students that took part in the interview were categorised as S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, and S8.

Ethical Considerations

Participants in the study were assured that the information they submitted would be kept private and used only for the purpose of this research. Additionally, they were told that they may stop participating at any time or choose not to submit their answers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Research questions 1 and 2 sought to identify the advantages and challenges of TBSAs when used in English classrooms. The data from the questionnaire and interview were analysed in the sections that follow. The perceived benefits of the TBSAs were discussed first, followed by the challenges they pose on students when they practice the activities.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics for students’ perceptions of the benefits of TBSAs

Sn. Benefits of TBSAs:	SD(1)		D(2)		U(3)		A(4)		SA(5)		M	SD
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
1 Help students improve their speaking proficiency.	2	4.8	2	4.8	6	14.3	25	59.5	7	16.7	3.79	0.951
2 provide the opportunity for natural learning of speaking	0	0	8	19	5	11.9	26	61.9	3	7.1	3.57	0.887
3 Contribute to the improvement of fluency.	0	0	0	0	0	0	35	83.3	7	16.7	4.17	0.377
4 Increase the improvement of students’ speaking comprehension.	0	0	0	0	0	0	34	81.0	8	19.0	4.19	0.397
5 Increase the improvement of students’ pronunciation.	0	0	0	0	0	0	28	66.7	14	33.3	4.33	0.477
6 Increase students’ use of vocabulary.	0	0	0	0	0	0	33	78.6	9	21.4	4.21	0.415
7 Increase students’ use of grammar.	0	0	0	0	5	11.9	31	73.8	6	14.3	4.02	0.517
8 Promote positive relationship in the classroom	0	0	0	0	11	26.2	28	66.7	3	7.1	3.81	0.552
9 Increase students’ confidence in speaking English.	0	0	0	0	0	0	33	78.6	9	21.4	4.21	0.415
10 Activate students’ needs and interests to speak English	0	0	0	0	7	16.7	29	69.0	6	14.3	3.98	0.563
Average Mean Score 4.028												

Key: M= 1.00 - 1.80: strongly disagree; M= 1.81–2.60: disagree; M= 2.61-3.40; M= 3.41–4.20: agree; M= 4.21–5.00: strongly agree

In Table 1, the descriptive statistics about students’ perceptions of the benefits of TBSAs indicated that learning through TBI had a great benefit for students to improve their English speaking proficiency. In Items 3, 4, 5, 6, and 9, the data showed that the mean of each item (M = 4.17; M = 4.19; M = 4.33; M = 4.21; and M = 4.21) was above the average mean score (M = 4.028), which indicates that the respondents strongly agreed that learning through TBSI had many benefits for their fluency, comprehension, pronunciation, vocabulary, and confidence in speaking English respectively. In Items 1, 2, 7, 8, and 10, even though the mean of each item (M = 3.79; M = 3.57; M = 4.02; M = 3.81; and M = 3.98), was less than the average mean score across the table (M = 4.028), they all agreed that TBSAs improved their speaking

proficiency, provided them the opportunity for natural learning of English, increased their use of grammar, promoted positive relationships among students and between students and the teacher as well, and activated them to speak English respectively.

The data collected through the interviews also revealed that students perceived that they benefited from speaking tasks during TBSI in their classes. They reported that they were satisfied with the speaking tasks. For instance, S1 argued that he was interested in the speaking tasks, for they helped him improve his pronunciation and cooperate with his partners in the classroom practices. S4 also replied that he liked speaking tasks since they are useful for his speaking in English language learning by using those TBSI. He added that he could remember and use the vocabulary

and was confident enough to convey his ideas in English.

Besides, S5, S6, and S7 contended that speaking tasks were very useful in developing fluency, grammar, and comprehension, too. S5, for example, replied that she could communicate fluently and used to practice the

grammar confidently; it made her cooperative, interactive, and helped her in her speaking. Furthermore, S2 and S3 reported that speaking tasks helped them to communicate with their group members, discuss different issues, help one another, and comprehend and develop their vocabulary.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics of students’ perceptions of the challenges of TBSAs

Sn	Challenges in TBSAs	SD(1)		D(2)		U(3)		A(4)		SA(5)		M	SD
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
1	Students lack time to practice it	0	0	2	4.8	5	11.9	35	83.3	0	0	3.79	0.520
2	Students’ lack of participation due to large class size.	0	0	2	4.8	2	4.8	34	81.0	4	9.5	3.95	0.582
3	Students’ low level of English proficiency.	0	0	2	4.8	2	4.8	30	71.4	8	16.7	4.04	0.715
4	Students are shy and nervous when working in groups		0	2	4.8	4	9.5	29	69.0	7	16.7	3.98	0.680
5	Students’ lack of effective and efficient assessment methods	0	0	2	4.8	0	0	32	76.2	8	19.0	4.10	0.617
6.	Get more opportunity to speak in L1 instead of English	0	0	2	4.8	1	0	30	71.4	9	16.7	4.09	0.619
Average Mean Score											3.99	.562	

Key: M= 1.00 - 1.80: strongly disagree; M= 1.81–2.60: disagree; M= 2.61-3.40; M= 3.41–4.20: agree; M= 4.21–5.00: strongly agree

In [Table 2](#), the descriptive statistics regarding students’ perceptions of the challenges TBSAs pose to the respondents indicated that TBSAs are full of challenges. In Items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6, the data showed that the mean of each item (M = 3.79, M = 3.95, M = 3.98, M = 4.10, and M = 4.09) was above the average mean score (M = 3.99), which indicates that the respondents agreed that TBSAs are challenges for students. Students with low English proficiency feel shy and nervous when working in groups because of a lack of effective and efficient assessment methods and because it paves the way for learners to discuss in their L1, respectively. Even though the means of Items 1, 2, and 4 (M = 3.79, M =

3.95, and 3.98) respectively are below the average mean score across the table, the data indicated that the respondents agreed that TBSAs are problems to students because they lack time to practice it As a result, it makes participate in a minimum amount due to the large class size.

Students who participated in the interview shared their opinions about factors affecting their speaking English during TBSAs in the EFL classroom. Regarding Item 1, [Table 2](#), students contended that they did not have enough time to convey the meaning or perform their products. S3 reported that one of his problems was that he sometimes responded to the speaking situation slowly, so

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he needed more time to practice speaking. S4 also stated it as follows:

I found it difficult to convey my idea instantly and spontaneously because I had a short-term memory too. As a result, I think the time to speak was not enough. I am quite shy when producing English orally. Besides, I was not confident about using English in the classroom.

The rest elaborated on their opinion about their English fluency and ability as follows: For example, S8, in congruence with S5, believed that sometimes his vocabulary, grammar, and prior knowledge of the topic are not related to the requirement of the speaking task because he is not proficient enough.

Discussion

So far, the researcher has tried to get answers for RQ1 (the students' perceptions of the benefits of task-based instruction in English-speaking classes) and RQ2 (the challenges of students' speaking performance during TBSI). We discussed the data results, focusing on the students' perceptions of TBSI's benefits and the challenges it presents in the classroom.

The result indicated that the students had a positive perception of the benefits of the TBSAs as they confirmed that TBSAs improve their speaking fluency, comprehension, pronunciation, vocabulary, and confidence because it provides them the opportunity for natural-like learning of English. This result is similar to [Le and Nguyen \(2022\)](#), who reported that the students had positive perceptions toward TBSI and TBSAs. Regarding TBSAs, the findings of [Pham and Nguyen \(2014\)](#), and [Le and Huynh \(2019\)](#) also showed that EFL students had a positive perception of task-based speaking

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activities used in speaking lessons. This indicates that regardless of their competency in the speaking performances mentioned, they liked the speaking tasks and activities.

The results further showed that different factors hinder students from sufficiently practicing TBSAs in EFL classrooms. According to the results, a large number of students in a class, diversified student abilities, and students' frequent use of L1 in their groups were some of the challenges, because the class has more than 40 students, posing more challenges. Regarding varied ability groups in a class, [Harmer's \(2014\)](#) findings indicated that differentiated classrooms hinder students from performing and using the target language. The results also show that students are not confident in using English and discussing their opinions when performing speaking tasks because of a lack of prior knowledge, vocabulary, and grammar. This result is consistent with the study of [Wahyuningsih and Afandi \(2020\)](#), who contended that students' speaking problems, including lack of appropriate vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and lack of confidence, are obstacles to using TBSI. This result is consistent with the study of [Wahyuningsih and Afandi \(2020\)](#), which showed students' speaking problems, including a lack of appropriate vocabulary and grammar and mispronunciation. Based on the findings, the researcher argues that the student's perceptions of the benefits of TBSI deviate from their perceptions of the practice of TBSAs.

CONCLUSIONS

The study revealed that the task-based speaking activities designed in grade 11 students' textbooks have significant benefits for students' English speaking performances.

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Specifically, their positive perceptions of the benefits of TBSAs in the areas of language proficiency, speaking confidence, and the opportunity it gives to practice English naturally are to be encouraged if the practice is found on the ground. However, it was realized from the data that students often face challenges in engaging in task-based speaking activities to achieve what they perceive as positive. The major challenges they faced were time limits to practice the tasks and the opportunity they got to freely discuss in L1 when they were in groups to perform those activities. The other big challenge was that students were less proficient in what the teacher was saying in English. Thus, it could be suggested that though the design of the speaking activities in the students' textbooks was accepted positively by the participants, it needs more attention to improve students' overall use of the target language.

Recommendations

From the conclusions given, it could be recommended that if teachers incorporate more opportunities for students to practice their spoken English through scaffolding and support during speaking activities, it can help students improve their proficiency in the target language. This could include giving students sentence starters, vocabulary lists, or model dialogues to help guide their conversations. By implementing these recommendations, students can become more confident and proficient in using the target language in real-life situations. These tools can provide instant feedback and allow students to track their progress; ultimately, enhancing their speaking skills in a more personalized manner can greatly benefit students in their language acquisition journey.

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By simulating real-life conversations, students can gain practical experience and improve their communication skills through TBSAs.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

The author confirms the sole responsibility for the conception of the study, presented results and manuscript preparation.

Declaration of competing interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Data availability

The data used in this research is available upon request.

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