THE EFFECT OF TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING ON REDUCING SPEAKING ANXIETY AMONG EFL LEARNERS

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DOI:https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23199418

Annotation. Speaking anxiety remains one of the most persistent affective barriers to oral proficiency in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. This thesis examines how Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) can reduce learners' speaking anxiety by shifting classroom focus from accuracy-driven performance to meaningful, goal-oriented communication. Drawing on foreign language anxiety theory and the task-based framework, it argues that pre-task planning, collaborative interaction and a low-stakes evaluative climate lower the affective filter and increase learners' willingness to communicate. Practical recommendations for EFL teachers are also offered.

Keywords: task-based language teaching, foreign language anxiety, speaking skills, EFL learners, willingness to communicate, affective filter.

In the context of globalization, the ability to speak English fluently has become a key academic and professional competence. Yet many EFL learners who perform well in grammar and reading tests remain silent during oral activities. Teachers frequently observe learners who avoid volunteering answers, speak in a barely audible voice, or rely on memorized phrases instead of spontaneous speech. Research consistently identifies foreign language anxiety as one of the main causes of this reluctance. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) described it as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs and feelings arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process. Among the four skills, speaking is regarded as the most anxiety-provoking, since it exposes the learner's limitations in real time and in front of peers. The aim of this thesis is to examine how Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) can reduce speaking anxiety among EFL learners and to outline the conditions under which it does so most effectively.

Horwitz et al. (1986) distinguished three interrelated components of foreign language anxiety: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety. Communication apprehension refers to discomfort in interacting with others, fear of negative evaluation reflects concern about how peers and teachers judge one's performance, and test anxiety stems from fear of failure in assessment situations. Anxiety has also been shown to disrupt all stages of language processing, from input to output, reducing both the quantity and the quality of learners' speech. Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis provides an explanatory link between emotion and acquisition: when anxiety is high, the affective filter rises and prevents comprehensible input from being converted into acquired competence. Anxiety is therefore not merely an emotional discomfort but a direct obstacle to language development.

Traditional teacher-centred methods, such as the Presentation–Practice–Production model, often intensify this problem, because they place heavy emphasis on the accurate reproduction of target forms and on immediate public correction of errors. TBLT offers a fundamentally different orientation. In this approach the task serves as the central unit of planning and instruction. According to Ellis (2003), a task has a primary focus on meaning, contains some kind of information or opinion gap, requires learners to

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rely on their own linguistic resources, and leads to a clearly defined non-linguistic outcome. Pedagogical tasks should also resemble real-world activities, such as planning a trip, solving a problem or reaching a group decision. Willis (1996) proposed a widely used framework in which a pre-task phase introduces the topic and activates vocabulary, a task cycle engages learners in pair or group work followed by planning and reporting, and a final language focus phase directs attention to the forms that emerged during communication. This sequence delays explicit attention to form until after meaningful interaction has taken place, which is central to its affective benefits.

The anxiety-reducing potential of TBLT can be explained by the fact that each main source of anxiety finds a counterpart in its design. Fear of negative evaluation is eased because the focus falls on the task outcome rather than on accuracy, so errors come to be perceived as a natural part of communication. When learners concentrate on exchanging information or solving a problem, their attention moves away from constant self-monitoring, which is one of the main triggers of anxiety, and cognitive resources are freed for speech production. A lack of linguistic readiness is compensated by pre-task planning. Strategic planning time improves the fluency and complexity of learner output; from an affective perspective, preparation also reduces uncertainty, so learners who know what they want to say feel less exposed when speaking.

Communication apprehension, in turn, is reduced through collaborative interaction. Pair and small-group work replaces the threatening teacher-fronted format in which a single learner must speak before the entire class. In small groups learners rehearse ideas, negotiate meaning and receive peer support before any public performance, and this gradual progression from private to public speech builds confidence step by step. Test anxiety decreases when assessment is formative and process-oriented, because speaking is then perceived as practice rather than examination. In TBLT success is measured by whether the task outcome has been achieved, not by the absence of mistakes, and corrective feedback is postponed to the language focus phase and addressed to the whole class rather than to individuals. This depersonalizes error correction and protects learners' self-esteem. Authentic and purposeful tasks also counter low motivation by shifting learners' attention from themselves to the problem they are solving. Repeated success in completing meaningful tasks strengthens learners' self-perceived communicative competence, which leads to greater willingness to communicate; this creates more opportunities for practice and further reduces anxiety, forming a positive cycle.

For TBLT to reduce anxiety effectively, however, it must be implemented deliberately rather than as an occasional set of communicative games. Tasks should be sequenced from simple, closed information-gap activities such as map tasks or spot-the-difference exercises to more open tasks such as role-plays and debates. Even two or three minutes of planning time allow anxious learners to organize their ideas and retrieve vocabulary. Speaking should move from pairs to small groups and only then to whole-class reporting, while errors are noted during the task and discussed collectively afterwards. Topics connected to learners' interests, local culture and future professions increase engagement, and instruments such as the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz et al., 1986) can be used before and after a TBLT course to evaluate its effect. At the same time, TBLT is not a universal remedy: highly anxious learners may initially find unstructured tasks overwhelming, and large classes can make monitoring difficult. Task-based work should therefore be combined with clear instructions, scaffolding and a consistently encouraging classroom atmosphere.

In conclusion, speaking anxiety is a significant affective barrier that limits EFL learners' oral development, largely because traditional instruction exposes learners to public evaluation of their

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accuracy. Task-Based Language Teaching offers a theoretically grounded alternative. By prioritizing meaning over form, providing planning time, organizing collaborative interaction and postponing error correction, it addresses each of the main sources of foreign language anxiety identified in the literature. TBLT lowers the affective filter, strengthens learners' self-confidence and increases their willingness to communicate, although its effectiveness depends on careful task design, gradual sequencing and the teacher's ability to create a supportive environment. Further empirical research, particularly experimental studies with pre- and post-intervention anxiety measurement in local EFL contexts, is needed to confirm and refine these conclusions.

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