



## ***Enhancing EFL Oral Proficiency through Task-Based Language Teaching***

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### ***Abstract***

*This present research explores the effectiveness of the Task-Based Language Teaching approach in developing the speaking proficiency among EFL learners. The present cross-sectional study targeted 80 freshmen students at the University of Algiers 2, English Department. It adapted the mixed-methods design in which the tools for collecting data are questionnaires for quantitative and interviews for qualitative. The results showed that TBLT significantly increases students' oral proficiency, along with favorable attitudes by both students and teachers toward the approach. It concludes with pragmatic recommendations for future integration of TBLT into EFL curricula to advance the speaking skills of the students.*

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## 1. Introduction

With the global rise of English as the dominating language for international communication, a need arose for effective methodologies in language teaching. EFL learners, particularly in the countries where English is not used as a second language, have difficulties in acquiring oral proficiency. These problems are often accentuated by traditional methods of language teaching, which have a preponderance on grammatical accuracy rather than on communicative competence.

The alternative that has much promise to replace these traditional methods is Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). This latter refocuses the traditional role of rote and repetition into using the language on meaningful, real-life tasks. According to Ellis (2003), TBLT places emphasis on the use of the target language for communicative purposes, something which is quite important in the development of fluency. In fact, Willis and Willis's (2007) research shows that TBLT enhances language proficiency and engages learners and increases their motivation.

In EFL contexts such as Algeria, where the target language is taught as a foreign language, learners in general achieve lower levels in speaking because of a lack of appropriate exposure to the target language. The present paper investigates to what extent TBLT is responsible for enhancing the speaking skills of first-year EFL learners attending the University of Algiers 2. The current study investigates the potentiality of TBLT for compensating, at least partially, for some of the

communicative barriers that these learners face by focusing on the pragmatic use of language via tasks.

## 2. Literature Review

The literature review provides a brief but comprehensive analysis of language teaching methodologies with an emphasis in moving from traditional methodologies including Grammar-Translation and Audio-Lingual to communicative methodologies as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). It reveals how TBLT has evolved as a learner-centered approach used in teaching a language through meaningful tasks. Hence, the review discusses the original stigma associated with TBLT in terms of its role in fostering communicative competence and enhancing the EFL learners' speaking skills; the criticisms concerning the incorporation of tasks with regard to the complexity and cognitive load of the process.

### 2.1 Traditional Language Teaching Methods

The Grammar-Translation Method and the Audio-Lingual Method were the reigning methods in language teaching up until the communicative methods became prevalent. The Grammar-Translation Method involves sentence translation, grammatical structural analysis, and memorization by rote, according to Richards and Rodgers (2001). Though this methodology proved helpful in promoting reading and writing skills, it saw criticisms regarding its inability to address oral skills. They first encounter the written form of the language and result in negligible language

proficiency when speaking in real life. According to Littlewood (1981), through this approach, students develop a marked inability to use the language for spontaneous communication. As such, it does not adequately address fluency development.

Similarly, the Audio-Lingual Method draws much from behaviorist psychology and is heavily dependent on repetition, memorization, and drilling of patterns of language. It focuses on building up linguistic habits through reinforcement, and its chief concern is accuracy and form. While it allows speaking practice, its orientation to drilling does not really encourage meaningful interaction. According to Brown (2007), the Audio-Lingual Method does not develop communicative competence because while learners may easily be able to mimic structures, they are unable to change such patterns appropriately in natural life. This shortfall has received innumerable reproaches because learners are not prepared for spontaneous, real-world communication. Larsen-Freeman & Anderson (2013) added that limitations like these have created the need to go toward more communicative methodologies (such as TBLT) which operationalize language use in authentic contexts promoting both fluency and accuracy.

## ***2.2 Communicative Language Teaching and Its Evolution***

The shortcomings of the traditional approaches, including the Grammar-Translation Method and the Audio-Lingual Method, catalyzed the growth of CLT in the 1970s. Unlike earlier approaches,

which had hitherto emphasized grammatical accuracy or parrot-like drilling, respectively, CLT placed greater emphasis on functional use in real-life contexts. The shift was reflective of a growing recognition of the limitations of methods which neglected the development of learners in communicating effectively in authentic situations. As Hymes had said back in 1972, language teaching had to include much more grammatical knowledge. He suggested that the language learner needs to develop an understanding of communicative competence, which is defined as the ability not only to use grammatically correct sentences but also to know how to use appropriate language in varying social and cultural contexts.

Building on Hymes' theory, Canale and Swain 1980 identified the four most important parts of communicative competence which lie at the heart of CLT. Grammatical competence means the mastery of linguistic rules, including syntax, morphology, and phonology, that form the basis for appropriate language use. Obviously, grammatical knowledge on its own is not enough. Students also need to possess sociolinguistic competence: knowledge of the social conventions that lie behind the use of language, including politeness, formality, and expressions suited to particular contexts.

Additionally, discourse competence is the art of structuring sentences and ideas coherently in any spoken or written discourse, maintaining the logical flow of language meaningfully. Finally, strategic competence involves breaking down in communication and recovering with the

help of paraphrasing, seeking clarification, or employing non-verbal gestures. Together, these elements comprise the foundation of communicative competence, which CLT seeks to develop by focusing on real-life language use, interaction, and the negotiation of meaning in communication. This was a very holistic approach, differing quite significantly from methods that had gone before, and it has since become one of the dominant paradigms in language teaching.

### 2.3 Task-Based Language Teaching

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), as the extension of Communicative Language Teaching, further elaborates on meaningful communication by centering language learning around tasks. In the context of Nunan's definition (2004), tasks are activities that require learners to use language to achieve a specific outcome; they will be devised so as to mimic real-life situations. Such authenticity in relevance allows real-life practice by the learners concerning language use in context, which helps in closing the gap between instruction in the classroom and use in everyday life. In distinction to CLT, TBLT shifts focus from communicative competence to active participation in language use by the learners through tasks that promote the ability of learners to use the language in practical outcome-driven contexts.

As Ellis (2009) submits, the central component of TBLT is engagement in actual language use through tasks. Learning in TBLT focuses on such tasks that make meaning primary rather than

form. In this way, the learners are provided with an opportunity to try out language use without immediately feeling the pressure of grammatical accuracy. Ellis, once more, proffers that TBLT maintains a balance between fluency and accuracy in such a way that through the development of more complicated tasks, learners refine their language. Grazib (2019) further elaborates that task-based learning encourages meaningful communication by focusing on real-world tasks, promoting both fluency and communicative competence. The authenticity and communicative nature of the tasks in themselves will provide an ideal environment for the acquisition of language, as natural language would be used outside of the classroom.

Finally, pedagogical principles like Task-Based Language Teaching include task sequencing, learner autonomy, and meaningful input to make learning far more effective. According to Willis (1996), the TBLT emphasis on tasks allows learners to work toward developing fluency while being exposed to input that stretches their linguistic boundaries. In contrast with the more traditional approaches, which have focused on repetition and other form-focused drills, TBLT approaches enable learners to communicate in a more natural way with others, which leads eventually to greater linguistic competence. When it comes to writing, Nouar (2020) claimed that task-based writing significantly improves the writing skills of business students by promoting engagement in realistic, purposeful tasks. According to Skehan (1996), tasks allow language learning holistically because learners can

deal with the three key communicative competencies-grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic-which are combined into a meaningful whole.

The following comparative table provides an overview of how language teaching methodologies have evolved, highlighting some key contrasts that exist between the GTM/ALM/CLT approach on one hand and the TBLT on the other.

**Table 1. TBLT & Language Teaching Approaches**

|                                  | <b>Grammar-Translation Method</b>             | <b>Audio-Lingual Method</b>               | <b>Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)</b>                 | <b>Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)</b>                   |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Focus</b>                     | Grammatical accuracy, translation of texts    | Habit formation through repetition        | Communicative competence, use of language in social contexts | Meaningful communication through task completion             |
| <b>Key Features</b>              | Sentence translation, vocabulary memorization | Pattern drills, repetition of structures  | Role plays, simulations, functional language use             | Real-world tasks, outcome-based learning, interaction        |
| <b>Emphasis on Communication</b> | Minimal focus on communication                | Limited focus on communication            | Strong emphasis on interaction and fluency                   | Focus on achieving real-world outcomes through communication |
| <b>Role of Learner</b>           | Passive learner, focused on accuracy          | Passive, imitates language patterns       | Active participant in communicative exchanges                | Active, autonomous language user in task completion          |
| <b>Role of Teacher</b>           | Authority, directs all aspects of learning    | Authority, provides models for repetition | Facilitator, encourages meaningful communication             | Facilitator, designs task, supports through scaffolding      |

The above table shows how the TBLT overcomes certain deficiencies of the older approaches by promoting real and meaningful communication through the execution of tasks. Although CLT was more interactive, TBLT takes it a step ahead by situating the learning in realistic contexts, stimulating activity on the part of the learner, and emphasizing how the communication will result in an outcome. In addition to developing communicative competence, this mirrors how language is actually used in real-life situations, making this approach all the more effective in developing proficiency in a second/foreign language.

## 2.4 Speaking Skills in EFL Contexts

Speaking has always been considered one of the most difficult skills to achieve while learning a language. It not only puts a demand on learners for a good command of the grammatical and lexical systems of the language but also for using them in real time, involving complex cognitive, linguistic, and social factors (Bygate, 1987; Goh & Burns, 2012). While speaking, as a productive skill, entails simultaneous processing of meaning, form, and context, it is more cognitively demanding compared to receptive skills such as listening or reading (Levett, 1999). This holds even truer for EFL learners, for whom speaking

is often perceived as the most salient language skill and an indispensable tool for effective communication in both academic, professional, and social environments (Goh & Burns, 2012; Richards, 2015).

Florez (1999) describes speaking as a collaborative activity in which meaning is generated through information production, reception, and interpretation. Interactivity is noted in the requirement for learners to produce not only language but also to listen to and respond to the interlocutors in real time—a feature which becomes more relevant in EFL situations where chances for authentic communication may be at a premium. Nation & Newton (2009) categorize speaking skills under two major components of fluency and accuracy. Fluency is thought of as ease of a speaker to go through a speech in continuous time without any breaks, or to be more accurate, with good flow. Accuracy is about using grammatically correct structures, lexis, or even phonetically correct. Both elements are in need of balancing by EFL learners so that their intended message would be conveyed appropriately.

Speaking skills hold a great position in EFL contexts; many learners would rather make the speaking skill their priority over reading and writing for example (Baker & Westrup, 2003). This is because speaking pertains directly to learners' participation in real-world communication, which is considered crucially imperative to social, academic, and professional success in general. With globalization, which assumes that English is the lingua franca, opportunities in employment and academic success are highly reliant on a person's

proficiency in spoken English (Richards, 2015).

Recent research in foreign language acquisition has addressed the effectiveness of TBLT in developing EFL speaking. In the Task-Based Language Teaching approach, communicative tasks are to be provided within contexts similar to natural situations. In this respect, the learners should have ample opportunities for both fluency and accuracy practices. Studies by Skehan (2014) and Willis and Willis (2007) have shown that the more mentally challenging the tasks are, which in turn require learners to engage in problem-solving, negotiation of meaning, and spontaneous conversation, the deeper the language processing will be, and this will lead to a more effective development of speaking skills. It becomes even more relevant for EFL learners, because usually the classroom environment becomes their main field for practicing spoken language.

The paper presents how TBLT contribute to the development of such highly needed speaking skills among the first-year EFL students at the Department of English, University of Algiers 2. Thus, this study has tried to develop learners' ability in using English fluently and accurately in both academic and social settings by providing task-based activities to the learners based on real-life communication.

### 3. Methodology

This research employed a descriptive case study design to probe into the effectiveness of Task-Based Language Teaching in improving the EFL learners'

speaking performances. It gave a comprehensive account of both students' and teachers' experiences and perceptions.

### 3.1 Sample

The participants were 80 first-year EFL students and 6 teachers from the Department of English at Algiers 2 University. The former were selected through a purposive sample representative of the learners who had sufficient prior knowledge in both English grammar and vocabulary to engage in the TBLT activities. The latter selection was performed with regard to those prospective informants' experience and acquaintance with the teaching approach of TBLT.

The sample included 62 female and 18 male students with ages of between 17 and 20. All participants had more than seven years of learning formal English and whereby worthy subjects for the study. Teachers' sampling, on the other hand, included four females and two males, with over eight years of experience in teaching EFL and who have received training in TBLT.

### 3.2 Data Collection Tools

The data were collected through questionnaires and interviews. The students' questionnaire consisted of 20 items that outlined attitudes toward speaking activities and experiences in respect to TBLT. The questions fell into the following categories: information on demographic issues, perception about speaking skills, and experiences associated with TBLT. The questions fell into three categories: information on demographic issues, perception about speaking skills,

and experiences associated with TBLT. The 5-point Likert scale ranged from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*; this was provided for the capture of students' responses.

The questionnaire for teachers focused on 15 items that included teaching practices, challenges faced, and opinions on TBLT effectiveness. In this paper, this questionnaire also used a 5-point Likert scale; questions were open-ended to give the teacher an opportunity to elaborate on experiences.

In addition to these questionnaires, semi-structured interviews for students and teachers were conducted for more profound insights about their experiences with TBLT. Interviews in English took approximately 20 minutes. Questions for interviewed students concerned perceived gains in speaking ability, comfort during the activities performed within TBLT, and general satisfaction in relation to the learning process. The interviews with the teacher were to capture perceptions of the challenges and benefits relating to the implementation and observation of improvements in students, with suggestions on how further improvement may be done to TBLT practices in the classroom.

## 4. Results

The following are the results deriving from the study undertaken in the framework of the employment of Task-Based Language Teaching to improve the speaking skills of first-year EFL students at the University of Algiers 2.

#### 4.1 Quantitative Findings

This section deals with numerical data collected from the investigation, pointing out the statistical trends and patterns that have emerged from assembled results. The quantitative findings give insight into the larger implications of the research and form a basis for interpreting the data in their context.

##### 4.1.1 Students' Perspective

This sub-section focuses on the shift to the students' perception in light of findings. It places outcomes within the lived experiences and opinions of the participants.

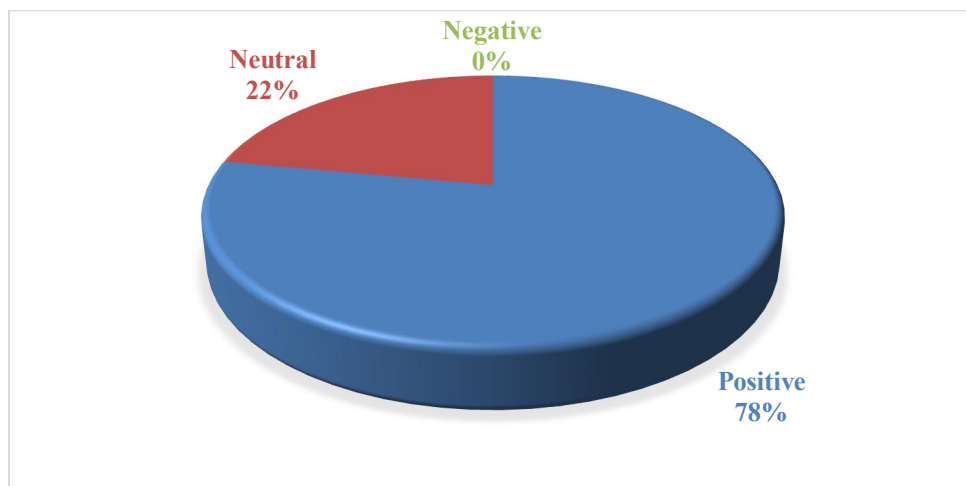
##### 4.1.1.1 Students' Motivation and Attitudes Towards TBLT

The majority of learners were highly motivated to learn the English language. In

this regard, it has been observed that 92% of the learners showed motivation to learn the language, which indicates high interest on the part of the students in their improvement in proficiency.

This shows how vital the language of English is for learners in their studies and employment opportunities. In addition, 78% of the learners appreciated the approach called TBLT for being able to help them in advancing their speaking ability. Such learners welcome the core communicative activities characterizing TBLT, albeit some do not know the terminology. Only 22% did not acknowledge TBLT by name but agreed the tasks were helpful in advancing their language.

Fig. 1. Students' Attitudes towards TBLT



##### 4.1.1.2 Self-Assessment of Speaking Levels

The learners reacted with a tendency of being fairly good when they were asked

to self-assess their ability to speak English. 54% of the learners rated their speaking

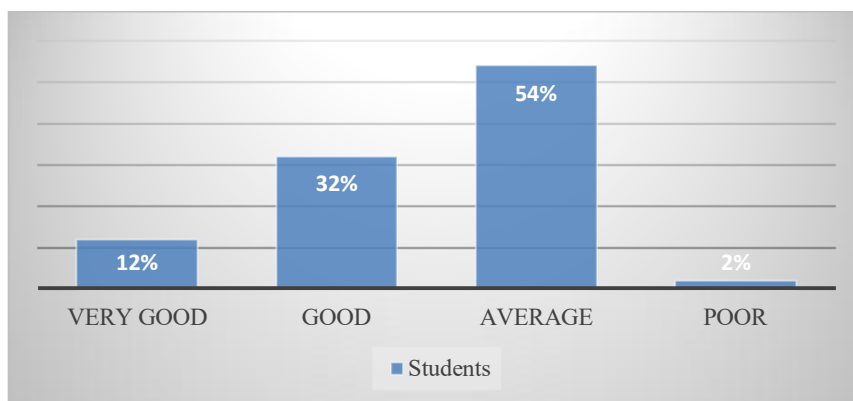
level as average, which means that almost half of the participants believed their good enough competence level needed more practice.

Further, an impressive 32% of learners regarded their speaking as good, which means a big part of the class had already reached such a level of proficiency

that allowed them to say what they wanted in English. On the other hand, learners rated only 12% as very good speakers, which also depicts the scope for improvement in being more fluent and

accurate. Only 02% of learners rated their speaking ability as poor, meaning the majority were at least able to possess some basic proficiency.

**Fig. 2. Students' Self-Assessment of Speaking Level**

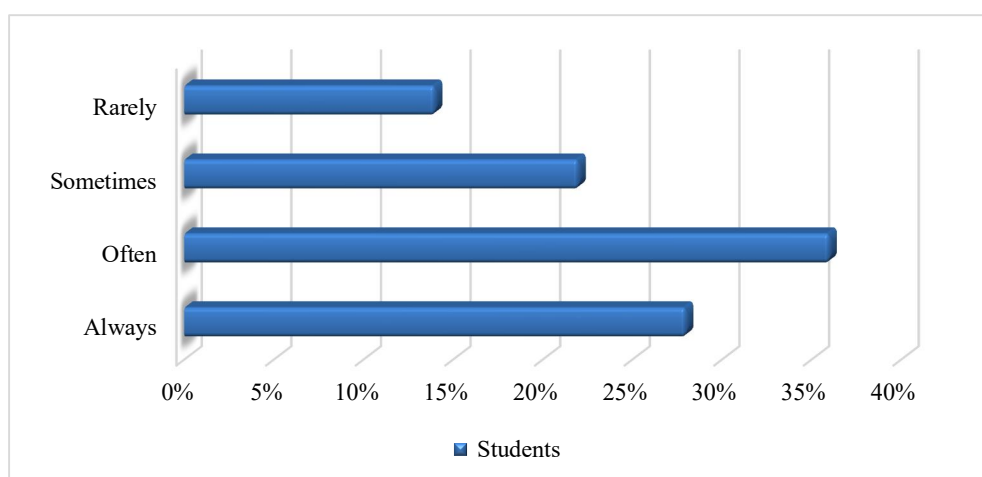


#### 4.1.1.3 Students' Participation in Oral Sessions

Results indicated that the classroom atmosphere was generally conducive; 68% of the students claimed that they felt comfortable during the oral sessions. This would therefore mean that the greater majority of the learners actually found the

speaking activities and classroom conditions helpful to participate in and practice language. On the other hand, 32% felt uncomfortable during these sessions and may indicate a need for more inclusive activities or additional support for learners that might be less confident in speaking.

**Fig. 3. Students' Rate of Participation in Speaking Sessions**



Learner's participation in oral sessions was variable: globally, the results showed a fairly active class. 28% of the learners answered that they always

participated in oral sessions, which denotes that one-third of the class regularly took part in the speaking activities. Besides, 36% answered that they often participated,

and 22% mentioned that they sometimes did so. These figures denoted that the majority of learners were active in classroom discussions. However, a minority of 14% reported that they seldom participate, which indicated that for some students, more encouragement or even activities directed particularly at them could be in order in speaking tasks.

#### **4.1.1.4 Effectiveness of Task-Based Language Teaching**

The students were very positive about the effectiveness of TBLT. In total, 92% of participants reported that this approach is helpful and proficient in improving the speaking skills. The learners explained that communicative tasks helped them a lot to develop their confidence and fluency. However, 08% learners were unaware even of the name TBLT but all praises for the communicative activities employed in the classroom. This would appear to indicate that although the formal notion of TBLT was not widely known, its practical aspects in terms of task-based learning were valued clearly by the majority of the students.

#### **4.1.2 Teachers' Perspectives**

The teachers' questionnaire was used to describe the teachers' perceptions concerning the effectiveness of TBLT in the development of learners' speaking skills. This was addressed to six EFL teachers, and the findings obtained showed a unanimous optimistic perception of TBLT in enhancing participation and boosting speaking ability by encouraging the learners to be active.

##### **4.1.2.1 Teachers' Role in the Classroom**

The teachers also stressed that their position in the TBLT classroom is not to be controllers but rather facilitators. They said they usually let students take the lead in communicative tasks: guiding them when necessary but giving learners autonomy to practice speaking for real-life contexts. This is consistent with the very core of the TBLT approach, where students are to be very active in their language use, while the teacher guides them through tasks that appeal to meaning rather than form.

##### **4.1.2.2 Effectiveness of TBLT**

All teachers agreed that TBLT was an effective methodology in developing the speaking skills of learners. They said this was because TBLT allowed students opportunities to practice spontaneous communication, improving their fluency. Teachers had observed that during activities of tasks where learners had to engage in real-life-like speaking, they were more confident and creative in expressing themselves. The emphasis on both fluency and accuracy in such tasks resulted in a highly positive development of the speaking ability in learners.

##### **4.1.2.3 Classroom Participation and Confidence**

Teachers also reported that TBLT strengthened the participation of learners through comfort in engaging in communicative tasks. In interactive task environments—often through group work or discussions in pairs—learners managed to practice speaking without the fear of making mistakes. It is a matter of major consequence in developing a sense of confidence among learners whereby

learners became more ready to take risks in speaking.

#### **4.1.2.4 Speaking Fluency and Accuracy**

The balance between the two aspects; fluency and the development of speaking accuracy are effectively made in TBLT, as was stated by the teachers. They explained that though fluency was a primary goal for them in communicative tasks, there was nevertheless a good amount of attention to accuracy since learners were encouraged to reflect on their use of language and correct errors during the post-task feedback session. This holistic approach to language learning secured the surety that learners not only talked with more fluency but also with more grammatical accuracy.

#### **4.2 Qualitative Findings**

The interviews also provided further details on the effects of TBLT. According to students, the tasks allowed them to practice speaking in a low-pressure context, which minimized their anxiety and emboldened them to take risks with the language. Some learners said that before TBLT they were scared to talk in front of the class and be laughed at, but this is now easier because they realize they practice with their classmates, they are not being tested.

On the other hand, teachers mentioned that TBLT generated a more interactive classroom atmosphere, which enabled the students and teachers to interact meaningfully. Some of the teachers revealed that TBLT has transformed their classroom from a traditional lecture room into a lively space where students were seriously involved in learning. They added

that learners were not only learning English but they were using it.

#### **5. Discussion**

Results from the learners' perspective confirm existing literature related to developing speaking skills through TBLT. Students' positive attitudes toward communicative activities corroborate what Nunan (2004) explains; TBLT offers the learners an opportunity to use language meaningfully. Confidence is gained when learners carry out realistic and purposeful activities; it motivates them toward owning some responsibility for their language development. Through such work, students fill in the much-considered gap between learning and using the language in real life and are better off dealing with spontaneous communications.

Further confirmation that TBLT creates a supportive framework for language learning is the fact that during the oral sessions, learners are at ease and even ask for more communicative tasks. This corroborates Ellis (2003), who notes that TBLT creates an interactive, less stressful learning environment. Students' confident attempts at enacting speaking activities without the fear of making mistakes show that TBLT helps reduce anxiety and such an environment is, therefore, more apt for language acquisition. It leads further to the findings of Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), who identified anxiety as a barrier to language learning. It helps take away anxiety because TBLT allows learners to concentrate on their fluency and accuracy, therefore communicating with ease.

Besides, learners' self-assessment of their speaking abilities reflects the dynamic nature of TBLT. While many students rated their speaking skills as *average* or *good*, the approach was underlined by real-life communicative tasks, which implies that learners are in a constant process of developing their proficiency. This progressive development of the speaking skill, especially in fluency, is supported by Skehan (1998), who mentions that TBLT supports language proficiency because it concerns the performance of the tasks themselves. Students will have improved their capacity to handle complicated language situations in real time while carrying out those tasks; this again goes to further support the fact that TBLT results in actual linguistic benefits. Moreover, Reffas & Chelli (2019) highlight how task-based approaches, particularly when computer-mediated, can foster language acquisition in vocabulary and beyond.

The teachers' responses also support the wider body of research on the effectiveness of TBLT in teaching languages. In their affirmative response, all three teachers reported that TBLT encourages greater participation and confidence in speaking from students. This assertion supports the contention of Willis (1996) that task-based activities offer the learner the right opportunity to practice language in an interactive and motivating way. The shift in the teacher's role from being an authority figure to that of a facilitator also indicates the learner-centered approach, as Richards and Rodgers have maintained, 2001. While teachers guide through the tasks, learners

could engage in language use themselves for developing autonomy, and communicative competence.

This is further supported by Ellis (2009), who said that TBLT balances activities that range between fluency or accuracy. Classroom authentic tasks, according to this approach, mirror real-life communication and challenge learners to deploy flexibly and aptly the language resources. The outcome will not only be increased fluency in the generation of spontaneous speech but also develop their grammatical accuracy through feedback sessions. It does, indeed, follow that learners will benefit from a holistic approach to the development of the target language, essentially emulating how one would normally use the language in life.

The increase in students' confidence, as reported by teachers, also gives credence to the assertion that TBLT lessens anxiety in the classroom. Teachers also noticed that learners became more at ease taking risks in speaking, something quite crucial for language development. This finding is in line with Krashen's theory (1982) of the affective filter, which claims that a decrease in anxiety allows much better language acquisition. Conclusively, TBLT allows learners to have practice in speaking in a secure and supportive environment without fear of making errors; therefore, students will be empowered in the case of active participation in communicative activities, which will lead to higher engagement and results.

## 6. Conclusion

The findings of this study pointed out the valuable contribution of TBLT to the development of speaking for first-year EFL undergraduate students. This task-based approach, which has been highly efficient in developing communicative competence among learners through engaging them in actual tasks that are said to be authentically carried out in real life, produced marked effects on the improvement of learners in speaking aspects such as fluency and overall communicative ability. It also arose regarding motivation and participation in activities in the English language.

Although it still has some lacuna, especially in fully attaining the accuracy of say grammatical errors and pronunciation problems, TBLT provides a comfortable learning environment wherein learners

practice and improve their oral skills without being afraid of making errors. In fact, both students and teachers developed favorable attitudes toward the TBLT approach for its contribution to building learners' speaking confidence and proficiency.

While some external factor such as academic interruptions and exam pressures were identified as possible complications that may have interfered with the learning results, TBLT had succeeded in improving the speaking skill. The effectiveness of TBLT could, therefore, be given greater emphasis compared to the present practice in the Algerian universities not only in language teaching but also in other areas where task-based methods will have the same effect of encouraging active learning and the enhancement of skills.

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