



Enhancing Listening And Speaking Skills In English For Specific Purposes (ESP) Through Task-Based Learning

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Abstract

Task-based learning (TBL) stands out as an effective and prominent tool for language teaching. Considering the evolving classroom context and syllabus design, developing modern and innovative language teaching and learning methods is crucial. As challenges continue to increase in today's classrooms, embracing innovative teaching and learning methods is imperative to meet the demands of a technologically advanced learning environment. Among various techniques, task-based learning emerges as one of the most effective ways to tackle classroom challenges, especially given the diverse student backgrounds, the influence of regional languages, and concerns related to English language fluency, structure, vocabulary, comprehension, interactions, and pronunciation.

This study aims to expose the effectiveness of the TBL approach on Aviation English students' listening and speaking ability. Twenty-five graduate students from the Oman Aircraft Control College participated in the study. Throughout the 2023 academic year, the participants actively participated in task-based learning for 15 weeks. Approved TBL lesson plans were used by the department head to collect the data, and pre-and post-English listening and speaking tests were adapted from ICAO language training requirements. The data were statistically examined using the mean, standard deviation, and t-test for dependent samples. According to the study's findings, task-based learning improved Aviation English students' English listening skills in a statistically different way from before the trial. 05 level. The participants had significantly higher mean scores on the post-test ($\bar{X}=8.63$) than the pre-test ($\bar{X} = 3.50$), and the English-speaking ability of first-year undergraduate students through task-based learning after the experiment showed a statistically significant difference at the .05 level. The participants had significantly higher mean scores on the post-test ($\bar{X}=10.63$) than on the pre-test ($\bar{X}=6.83$).

Keywords: TBL, Pre-tasks, Post-tasks, Task cycle

Introduction

Language is an inseparable medium and natural phenomenon with the combinations of lexis, syntax, sounds, signs and gestures that meet men's social needs in spoken and written expressions. As English is a lingua franca, it plays a pivotal role in cultural preservation, advancement, and transmission. Like other languages, English has developed tremendously globally in various fields and purposes, such as study, as a tool for overcoming difficulties (Lee, 2019), finance, and other sectors. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has played a significant role in developing and improving the educational system. It provides a transparent, coherent, and comprehensive framework for the primary four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These growing importance in the communicative needs of people have been underscored worldwide and have significantly increased than expected. Hence, it is essential to thoroughly consider the requirement of learning a foreign language in the Sultanate of Oman to attain adequate communication skills for interacting with people in various situations. It is crucial as foreign languages are commonly used in this country across all industries, including finance, work, education, medicine, aviation, engineering, and other societal fields.

Omani education can be divided into pre-1970 and renaissance phases after 1970 (Najar,2016). English has become the primary foreign language in public schooling since the inception of modern education in Oman in the 1970s. It is one of the main subjects from grade 1 until the period before starting higher education. English is the medium of instruction for all important specialisations in higher education and, thus, gains an essential influence on all aspects of society. Traditionally, Oman has used a teacher-centred approach in English classrooms where the teacher is the primary source of knowledge, and students are expected to listen and memorize. Also, Oman embraces the English language and culture without fear of impacting their local language and culture. They take pride in their own language and culture (Al-Abri as cited in Al Seyabi, 2002). Therefore, to effectively communicate in any situation, it is crucial for Omani students to acquire proficiency in the English language. Despite the Omani education system providing guidelines and policies for many years, there is a need to enhance the English language learning process. Even after twelve years of education, many students still face challenges communicating effectively in basic English. The Ministry of Education has stated the importance of English in Omani education through its message: "The government recognises that facility in English is important in the new global economy. English is the most common language for international business and commerce and is the exclusive language in important sectors such as banking and aviation. The global language of science and technology is English, as are the rapidly expanding international computerised debates and telecommunications networks, which are becoming an increasingly important part of academic and business life"(as cited in Al-Issa, 2006, para11). However, there is still a need for improvement in the ability of Omani students to communicate effectively in basic English.

Classroom environments should provide students ample opportunities to practice and enhance their speaking and listening skills. Their lack of confidence may hinder their ability to apply classroom learning to real-world situations. According to Al Weshahi, S. J. S. (2022) claimed that a gap between teaching and learning creates shocking disappointment in students' evaluation. Nassim, S., & Labidi, W. (2019) recommended that using podcasts in listening and speaking classes encourages student's collaboration, participation and understanding. Additionally, the same author suggested that podcasts assist instructors and make the class more engaging, inspiring, and authentic.

Moreover, Meksopawannagul (2015)observed that studies measuring communication skill levels, studying technology, and conducting research have seen inadequacies in the communicative ability of foreign language students. This can make it difficult for students to adapt to more interactive, student-centered, or inquiry-based methods, which are more common in modern educational systems. Furthermore, it was noted that students faced challenges in expressing themselves and could benefit from support to build confidence in participating actively in classroom discussions. In order to enhance language learning, it is imperative to provide students with the opportunity to practice in small groups, focusing on understanding the meaning of the language rather than just the form. One effective method that serves this purpose is Task-Based Learning (Nunan, 2004). Its emphasis on practical tasks, rather than rote memorisation, ensures that students develop their language skills

in a significant and applicable way. (LANSARI, W. C. C., & BOUABDALLAH, F. H., 2023) Task-based learning (TBL) involves using practical tasks like problem-solving and games that reflect real-life situations to teach language, shifting from traditional methods to enhance communicative skills effectively.

TBL consists of three teaching and learning stages: pre-task, task-cycle and post-task. It can be defined as follows:

PRE-TASK

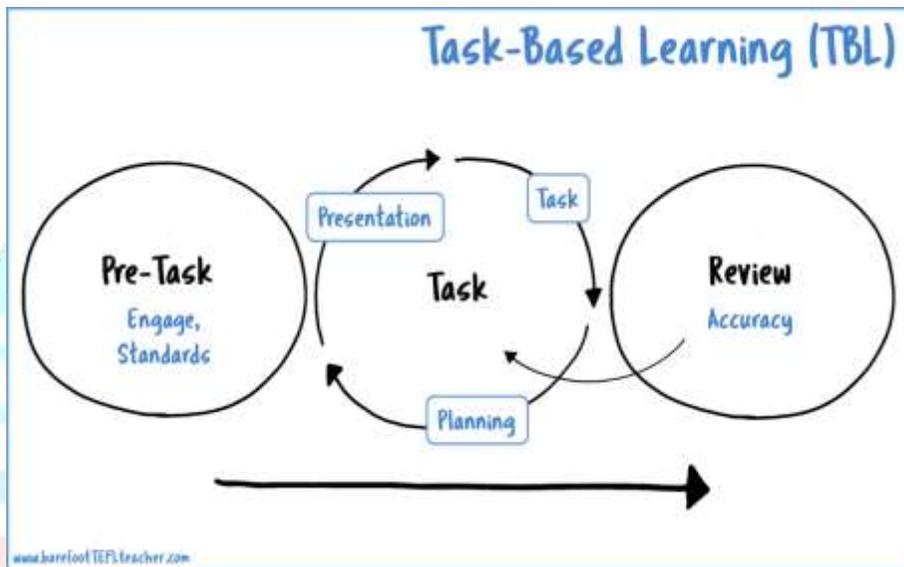
Introduction to topic and task

TASK -CYCLE

Task -> Planning -> Report

POST-TASK

Analysis and practice



The teacher begins by providing clear instructions for the pre-task, guiding the students, and emphasizing the required vocabulary. In the task-cycle stage, students collaborate in teams, pairs, or individually to solve tasks and prepare for a class presentation. During this phase, the teacher plays a crucial role in monitoring, providing guidance, and offering constructive feedback. Ultimately, the teacher and students collaborate to enhance error correction and deepen their understanding of language usage. Throughout all three phases, students utilize language that mirrors everyday communication.

Task-based learning offers numerous advantages over alternative teaching methods. According to Long (2015), TBL encourages the use of everyday language in a natural way, which can help students feel more at ease and improve their absorption of the target language. The TBL approach nullifies feelings of stress and worries about grammar and form and allows students to relax and communicate naturally until the task completion. My experiences in teaching Listening and Speaking skills in aviation English classrooms at Oman Aircraft Control College (OACC), lack of real-life situations, non-routine situations, the influence of first language (L1), encounter diverse accents, lack of comprehension, over-reliance on Arabic, segregation of listening and speaking taught separately etc. The problem is that the teacher's focus in some schools is on grammar and reading comprehension, which can limit the practice of speaking and listening skills. Classroom activities like debates, discussions, or role-playing may not always involve real-life listening and speaking scenarios. Additionally, teachers should focus more on activities that promote listening and speaking, rather than relying solely on grammatical rules and structure. Considering these factors and the crucial role of English in both learning and teaching, it is evident that task-based learning activities play a vital role in enhancing English speaking and listening skills.

Literature Review

The review is structured into four parts, focusing on theories related to listening skills, speaking skills, task-based learning, and English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

Listening Skills

The word "listening" has its roots in Old English and can be traced back to the Old English word "hlýsnan" or "hlosnian," which means "to listen or hear attentively." The Old English term is believed to be derived from the Proto-Germanic word "hlusnōną," meaning "to listen." In Latin, the word "clamare" means "to shout" or "to call out," and from this root, the Latin word "audire", meaning "to hear" or "to listen", is derived. "listening" has become the modern form of the verb, referring to giving attention to and perceiving sounds or words.

Listening is a receptive skill and can be regarded as one of the most widely used language proficiencies. Over 40% of daily communication is dedicated to listening. Many studies show that students acquire approximately 90% of the information presented in school by listening to their instructors and peers. In today's digitally globalized world, achieving professional success necessitates strong English communication skills, encompassing proficiency in both speaking and listening. Listening involves more than simply hearing; it also consists of comprehending the language, an essential part of effective communication. The process of learning to listen in our first language (mother tongue) occurs naturally and often goes unnoticed, making it easy for us to overlook its complexities. Bano (2017) cited that listening was usually categorized as a receptive skill rather than an active one, such as speaking, which made it seem passive. However, as Admadi (2016) pointed out, mastering listening comprehension is challenging. Instead of simply receiving information, it involves creating a message using phonic material. In conclusion, addressing listening comprehension skills in two distinct sections is important. Sound processing is essential for enabling listeners to distinguish between word utterances and phrases, as well as to perceive language-related qualities such as intonation, pitch, and tone. Secondly, the listener actively processes the speech they hear by organizing it into meaningful chunks. This cognitive process helps them to better understand the speaker's message by identifying linguistic patterns. Additionally, it aids in retaining and later retrieving important knowledge by categorizing and grouping meaning and details.

Speaking Skills

Speaking defines the reciprocal exchange of meaning and comprehension. The essence of communication lies in the significance it conveys. This is essential for exchanging information and facilitating communication among people daily." Communication involves putting a message together and interacting with other people. We speak for various reasons, such as being sociable, doing something for someone else, responding to someone else, expressing our feelings or opinions about something, exchanging information, referring to an action or event in the past, present or future, etc. It is characterised by its symbolic nature, encompassing verbal expressions, symbols, and gestures accompanying spoken language. Symbolic action transcends the confines of verbal communication. Communication is an interactive procedure involving two key participants: the sender (S) and the receiver (R). These communication agents engage in a mutual influence on one another through interstimulation and response. Speaking is a productive language skill, the same as writing.

To enhance this skill, it would be beneficial to focus on improving fluency and clarity, mastering voice modulation, and refining pronunciation. These speaking skills help convey information, engage listeners, and interact meaningfully. Developing strong speaking skills can help minimize listener misunderstandings. Ariyanti (2016) stated three types of speaking situations: interactive, partially interactive, and non-interactive. Interactive scenarios include face-to-face dialogue, which involves two-way communication. Practical speaking skills improve students' listening comprehension by engaging in effective conversations that require active listening and responding appropriately, promote critical thinking, helping students to evaluate their ideas before expressing them, enhance an individual's sense of competence and self-worth and ensure that the messages are understood as intended, reducing misunderstandings and fostering better communication. Furthermore, Khagjaninejad (2016) argued that teaching speaking skills should be integrated with other skills rather than being taught separately. In conclusion, it is essential for teachers to have a solid grasp of effectively using content, vocabulary, sounds, and grammatical structures. This will enable them to create organized learning opportunities for students to practice and develop their speaking skills according to their levels and potential, ultimately leading to impactful results.

Task-Based Learning (TBL)

TBL, a method endorsed by esteemed experts in the field such as Prabhu (1987), Nunan (1989), and Willis (1996), has gained significant traction in both ESP and ELT. Their definitions of tasks, presented in chronological order, further solidify the credibility of this approach. For instance, a TBL task could be a role-play scenario where students are given a specific situation and must interact in English to resolve it. Another example could be a group discussion on a given topic, where students must express their opinions and listen to others' viewpoints.

Prabhu, a figure of immense respect and recognition, is not just a proponent but the pioneer of TBL. According to him, a task is an activity that necessitates learners to derive an outcome by processing provided information while enabling teachers to supervise and regulate the process (Prabhu, N.S. 1987, p.24).

Nunan's book, "*Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom*," published in 1989, uses the term 'task' instead of 'activity'. He defines a task as a classroom activity in which learners understand, manipulate, produce, or interact in the target language while focusing mainly on meaning rather than form. Nunan proposed a framework for analysing communicative tasks categorised based on their goals, input data, activities, settings, and roles. Willis (1996) defines tasks as activities the learner engages in using the target language for communication (goal) to achieve an outcome. This emphasis on communication as the primary task goal in TBL is a key feature that makes it a powerful approach and underscores its effectiveness in promoting language use.

Nunan suggested that tasks should be divided into three stages: pre-task, task cycle and post-task. In the pre-task phase, the instructor thoroughly addresses the subject. Students collaborate in pairs or small groups to complete the activity during the task cycle stage. In the final stage of TBL, students engage in language concentration or post-task activities, where they analyze the language structure and put into practice what they have learned. Nunan's framework was used in this investigation because it is a prevalent model, and several researchers have successfully applied Nunan's framework in their inquiry into task-based learning (TBL) research. Students are immersed in the target language and use it to communicate effectively rather than form. The language learned is based on a series of several tasks. TBL syllabus also played a vital role in task-based classrooms. The syllabus comprises course materials, assignments, and grading criteria. Additionally, the TBL syllabus mainly focused on form, learner-centred, real-world language use, task fluency, and learners' motivation (Townsend-Cartwright, L., 2014). Learners' linguistic development is essential to the task-based learning (TBL) syllabus. According to (Ellis et al. C. 2020), implementing three frameworks (pre-task, task-cycle and post-task), classroom interactions, the authenticity of the materials, etc, make learners more proficient in using the target language.

Task-based learning lesson plans are designed to create activities that mirror real-life situations where students are required to use the target language to complete tasks. As (Daniel et al., 2022) point out, these lesson plans are geared towards developing communicative skills by transitioning learners from abstract learning to real contexts, thereby reducing their dependence on the teacher. The design of such lesson plans should take into account linguistic awareness and be based on task-based learning frameworks. Teachers implementing task-based learning should be aware of the influence of task design and implementation on language outcomes. The framework of a TBL lesson plan is as follows:

- Objectives
- Target language
- Lesson Plans and Materials

Procedure:

- Warm-up (5 minutes)
- Introduction to task (10 minutes)
- Pre-task (10 minutes)
- Task-cycle (25 minutes)
- Post -task (15 minutes)
- Wrap-up (5 minutes)
- Extension activity (optional)

In summary, many studies show that the task-based learning technique is the most effective teaching method in an ESP context, among many other methods the teacher applies. As learners work to complete a task, they have abundant opportunities to interact with others. This is believed to aid in language acquisition by encouraging learners to comprehend and express meanings. This approach was selected because it is practical and highly suitable for ESP courses, which focus on developing communicative competence in specific fields, such as aviation, banking, medicine, automobile, etc.

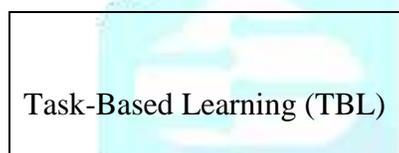
Research Objectives

The study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To understand the effectiveness and relevance of task-based materials.
2. To find out the improvements in listening and speaking through TBL.
3. To know the benefits of task-based learning in listening.
4. To identify the necessity of task-based learning in speaking.

Conceptual framework

The independent variable



The dependent variable



English listening ability

English speaking ability

Research Hypothesis

- 1) Students who do TBL activities in listening will perform better.
- 2) Students who do TBL activities in speaking will perform better.
- 3) Students can acquire meaning rather than form.
- 4) Students get more opportunities to use the target language.
- 5) Students can be exposed to speaking through the target language used in listening.

Research Methodology

The research participants were aviation English students at Oman Aircraft Control College, a Vocational Training College in the Sultanate of Oman. In the first semester of 2023, the sample included 30 graduate students from various aviation backgrounds, such as ground operators, assistant air traffic controllers, and fire and safety professionals.

Research instruments

Data was systematically gathered utilizing the following instruments:

The pre-test and post-test

The researcher meticulously conducted the pre-test at the outset of the course and the post-test in listening and speaking with equal precision after the course was completed, underlining the crucial role of these tests in the research. The two test scores of listening and speaking were compared to see the effectiveness of TBL. It was administered on the College campus under the supervision of the Head of the Department. The tests lasted one hour and thirty minutes.

Listening assessment criteria

In a crucial step towards understanding the learner's proficiency in listening skills, the researcher conducted a placement test as a pre-test before the commencement of the course. This test, adapted from Oxford English for Aviation Placement Test, consisted of 5 parts and scored 50. This pre-test was pivotal in the research process, the one-hour test duration. The parameters set were the range of words and numbers, listening for gist, details, and extensive. Each question carries one mark. The researcher played the listening audio only once. In order to guarantee the integrity and accuracy of the assessment process, the placement test underwent a thorough review before receiving approval. This examination was conducted and organised under the responsibility of the Head of Civil Training at Oman Aircraft Control College, who ensured that the test met all necessary standards and effectively evaluated the candidates' abilities.

Speaking assessment criteria

The second data collection instrument was the ICAO speaking test. The test was adopted based on the ELPT of Pilots and Air Traffic Controllers prescribed by ICAO standards. It assesses the English language proficiency of pilots, air traffic controllers and other aviation industry employees (as mentioned above) to ensure clear and effective communication for aviation safety. The results of the test are rated on a scale from 1 (Pre-elementary) to 6 (Expert), with a minimum level of 4 (Operational) required for international operations. This ensures that all aviation professionals have the necessary English language skills to maintain safety and efficiency in global operations.

The test covered pronunciation, structure, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension and interactions. The researcher implemented the ICAO rating scale, a framework established by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) to assess and ensure a standardized English language proficiency level to evaluate speaking proficiency, ensuring a comprehensive and globally recognised assessment tool. The testing period is established to last between 8 and 10 minutes for each student. The speaking test was conducted both at the beginning and end of the course, ensuring a comprehensive assessment of the progress after implementing task-based learning and teaching. The data from the pre-test and post-treatment tests were used to answer the second research question on the impact of task-based learning and instruction in the study. To ensure the validity of the scoring, the researcher and the Head of Civil Training assessed the students' performance using the ICAO rater scale. Additionally, the speaking tests were recorded for further analysis.

The Task-based Lesson Plans

The study on task-based learning, listening and speaking, and the course syllabus regarding purpose, content, grammar structure, aviation standard phraseology, and authentic aviation-related videos and audios were reviewed to create the task-based lesson plans. The class utilized the textbook "English for Aviation for Pilots and Air Traffic Controllers," published by Oxford. This comprehensive resource features a variety of scenarios drawn from real-world aviation situations, providing practical context for learners. The instructional approach follows a task-based model developed by Nunan (2004), which is structured into three distinct phases: the "pre-task," where students are introduced to the topic; the "task cycle," during which they engage in activities to practice their skills; and the "post-task," where they reflect on their performance and consolidate their learning.

Data Collection Procedure

The 15-week trial unfolded in carefully structured stages, each designed to maximize student engagement and educational outcomes. Each week's schedule consisted of four hours of instruction, divided into two similar lessons to reinforce learning.

In the very first week, participants attended a comprehensive two-hour introductory session. This session was crucial, as it outlined the study's objectives, clarified the roles that students would undertake, and detailed the evaluation methods that would be employed throughout the trial. Additionally, the procedures were explained thoroughly to ensure all students understood what to expect.

Following this introduction, the second lesson of the week was dedicated to a significant two-hour pre-test designed to gauge the students' baseline knowledge. Subsequent lessons continued from the second lesson of week two through to the first lesson of week fifteen.

Notably, the two-hour post-test was scheduled for the last lesson of week ten, serving as a pivotal moment to assess the student's progress and learning outcomes. In total, an impressive 34 hours were invested in delivering in-person instruction, fostering an interactive and supportive learning environment for all participants.

Data Analysis

This research tested the effectiveness of task-based learning in improving the students' English listening skills. The examination of these hypotheses was based on the use of language in effective communication.

To assess the students' English listening abilities, mean scores were calculated from the pre-test and post-test results. A t-test was conducted to determine the significance of the differences based on the total number of samples in the dependent group. This analysis included calculating each student's mean and standard deviation to see if there was a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores.

Additionally, the second hypothesis focused on whether task-based learning was linked to an increase in speaking ability. A speaking assessment was performed, and the students' scores were totalled and converted to average scores. These mean scores were then analyzed to check for significant differences between the pre-test and post-test results.

Finally, a record was maintained after each lesson in the teaching log to document the research findings.

Results of the Study

Each objective is discussed in relation to the results of the study.

1. An approach based on task-based learning significantly improved learners' English listening abilities at the .05 level.
2. A task-based learning approach significantly improved learners' English-speaking ability at the .05 level.

The post-tasks revealed that learners showed high levels of motivation, cooperation, and attention and were also solely responsible for a better understanding of meaning rather than form by using TBL lesson plans. The variety of activities during the lessons ensured that practice in speaking English was both effective and enjoyable.

Table 1 The English Listening Test: A Comparison of Mean Scores on Pre-test and Post-test

Listening	N	Full Score	\bar{x}	S.D.	t	p
Pre-test	30	15	3.50	2.515	21.977*	.000
Post-test	30	15	8.63	1.810		

* $p < .05$

The data in Table 1 showed that the students' English listening ability was significantly higher after task-based learning at the .05 level. The participants had significantly higher mean scores on the post-test ($\bar{X} = 8.63$) than on the pre-test ($\bar{X} = 3.50$).

Table 2 An analysis of the mean scores of the pre-test and post-test on English Speaking.

Speaking	N	Full Score	\bar{x}	S.D.	t	p
Pre-test	30	15	6.83	2.291	13.714*	.000
Post-test	30	15	10.63	2.173		

* $p < .05$

A comparison of Table 2 revealed that first-year students' English-speaking ability increased significantly after the .05 level task-based learning. The participants had significantly higher mean scores on the post-test ($\bar{X} = 10.63$) than on the pre-test ($\bar{X} = 6.83$).

Additionally, evidence from the various task phases suggested that learners felt increased levels of excitement and motivation caused by the instructor's various challenging tasks during the TBL lessons. The

listening techniques used during the research varied from the instructor reading directions to the students to the teacher speaking freely about a task and recording materials. The results showed that the instructor noted a significant improvement in listening and speaking abilities.

Discussion

The study's goal was to ascertain if task-based learning successfully enhanced the Aviation English students' English speaking and listening skills at Oman Aircraft Control College. The findings showed that task-based learning classes greatly enhanced the participants' speaking and listening skills. Additionally, they increased their confidence during the experiment. This was consistent with the research undertaken by Hasan (2014), who concluded that learners had the ability to give priority to the order of the task at hand, which increased the complex nature of performance. The researcher's goal is to ensure that students benefit from his or her work, activities like problem-solving, and assistance with sentence structure and vocabulary. Hasan's research was drawn upon by integrating a pre-task element. The tasks were supported by clear guidance and step-by-step instructions. The learners had the chance to fully immerse themselves in English throughout the pre-task phase.

The task cycle was the part of the task phase that produced the best results. Students swapped the roles of speaker and listener to ask one another questions. The completion of each activity during task-based learning depended on the need for learners to use the kind of English used in real-life situations, especially in pilot-controller messages, to complete each task effectively. An example was when the learners were tasked with doing presentations and problem-solving tasks. As Rodriguez-Bonces and Rodriguez-Bonces (2010) determined, a creditable task can achieve different variables such as a certain level of challenges, an opportunity to experience language optimally and maximize the activation of this language. Thus, the researcher chose topics that students were personally interested in, hence motivating them to exchange information.

The teacher-student relationship is also essential as it develops the student's progress in the task-based learning environment. According to researchers, learning has a more excellent value if language form is not intrinsically the main feature, as this reduces the anxiety levels of learners (Viriya, 2018). A productive environment in the classroom where the teacher is trusted and respected can nurture a naturally pleasant learning scenario in which to focus on task-based learning. The researcher maintained the same persona from the beginning of the study. This persona built a solid bond and trust with learners, achieved by smiling and assuring them that making mistakes in class was perfectly fine. Another feature the researcher used was to emphasize to the students that they should not strive for the language for perfection but instead concentrate on the meaning they wanted to convey. Hardi (2013) was used as the basis for this research. Hardi (2013) saw the role of the teacher's involvement in task-based learning as one of facilitating and leading the use of real language, monitoring pair and group work, encouraging students to involve themselves and be motivated when engaging in tasks and offering feedback and expertise in English when the students so desire. Consequently, students obtained higher scores after instructions.

Furthermore, topics directly relevant to students' professional lives were included. These included weather conditions, decoding NOTAMs, medical issues during the flight, ground movement techniques, etc. As Promruang (2012) states, "The subject matter of task-based learning is both of interest and is relatable to the students."

The study concluded that task-based learning enhanced students' speaking and listening skills. With the task-based learning environment and lesson structure, learners were free to express themselves and used real-world language than would often be the case. Task-based learning classes were successful partly because the teacher encouraged students with a grin and a warm demeanour. Once the students' trust was given to the teacher, the learners could communicate more comfortably. Learners were interested in the subjects tackled in task-based learning and were given plenty of chances to practice their listening and speaking skills. Generally, all of this points out that task-based learning is an effective model in helping learners improve their listening and speaking skills.

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