

Relationship between Language Attitudes towards Task-Based Language Teaching and English Language Speaking Performance among Malaysian Polytechnic Students

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Abstract: Language attitude towards learning a second language is just as important as the language learning method they use. It is considered one of the essential factors which affect learners' learning process. Despite receiving sustained academic attention from scholars, few studies have been devoted to investigating students' language attitudes on task-based language teaching (TBLT) and its influence on students' speaking performance. Hence, this study aimed to examine the relationship between students' language attitudes towards TBLT and English language speaking performance. This study adopted a quasi-experimental research design. Thirty polytechnic students enrolled in the Communicative English II course participated in the study. An attitudinal questionnaire was used to gauge the students' language attitudes towards the use of TBLT in enhancing their speaking performance and an oral presentation task was used to measure the students' speaking performance. By using the data collected through the questionnaire and oral presentation scores, the relationship between students' language attitudes towards TBLT and speaking performance was determined using descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation. The findings of the study showed that students demonstrated positive attitudes toward the impact of TBLT on their speaking performance. A weak positive correlation was found between students' language attitudes toward TBLT and English language speaking performance. The findings of the study have practical implications for improving teaching practices and provide insights into the use of TBLT for teaching speaking skills.

Keywords: language attitude, task-based language teaching, English language learning, speaking performance

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is a productive skill and is generally considered the most fundamental skill that needs to be acquired by learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) for communicating their ideas, opinions, feelings, thoughts, and emotions to others. Speaking can also be considered the most common means of conveying a message to others and being able to communicate effectively is a basic requirement that should be prioritized in English education (Azadi et al., 2015). On the other hand, language learners are said to be proficient learners of a language if they can speak that language. It is no surprise that speaking proficiency is often used as a measure of a learner's success in second language learning (Nunan, 1991, p.39). Thus, fostering speaking skills among second language learners has always become the primary focus of second language teaching and learning due to its significance and its use for communication purposes.

Another important factor that language instructors need to consider when it comes to teaching speaking in an ESL context is learners' language attitudes. Language attitude has long been acknowledged as an important determiner of achievement in language acquisition, particularly in multilingual societies. According to Holmes (1992), people develop attitudes towards languages that are a reflection of their views about the people who speak the languages as well as the contexts and functions with which they are associated. In fact, Manolopoulou-Sergi (2004) claims that the attitudinal component has been shown to have a significant impact on language learning and teaching.

To raise the level of English language proficiency among Malaysian students, the Ministry of Education has adopted and implemented the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for language curricula as a benchmark for developing students' communication competency as they progress from preschool to tertiary-level and beyond (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). By the time students complete their tertiary-level education, students will be well prepared to meet the challenges of the 21st century concerning the use of English as a means of communication in different contexts of use. Different strategies and approaches such as improving the English proficiency of in-service English teachers, introducing the teacher guide in implementing the CEFR-aligned curriculum, altering School Based Assessments (SBA) syllabus and curriculum to fit the CEFR descriptors, selecting international CEFR-oriented references resources and materials are implemented to ensure that Malaysian students' competence in speaking English is intensified.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Despite the greater emphasis placed on the English language, Malaysian ESL learners still find speaking very difficult to master and tend to exhibit low performance in speaking ability (Bokhari et al., 2015; David et al., 2015; Azlan et al., 2019; Vellayan et al., 2020). In this regard, Malaysian polytechnic students are no exception. Studies have shown that when students are required to speak or present in Communicative English classes, very often students are hesitant to actively speak and participate in classroom activities (Abdullah & Majid, 2013; Radzi & Embi, 2018). Instead of trying to express their ideas and thoughts in speaking activities or discussions, students frequently choose to remain passive in their learning (Radzi & Embi, 2018). Some of the factors contributing to this issue are, students have low-level of English proficiency and command (Abdullah & Majid, 2013; Radzi & Embi, 2018), students experience speaking anxiety (Uzairah Mohd Ali, 2020) and communication apprehension (Kho & Ting, 2021, 2023). Other than that, students' attitudes and behaviours are also considered to be influencing students' participation in classroom activities (Abdullah & Majid, 2013). These

problems are believed to have affected students' speaking performance, particularly in their oral presentation assessments and their interest in learning the language in the classroom. This indirectly will hinder the effort of the Department of Polytechnic Education to produce students or graduates who are competent in the English language.

Enhancing students' speaking ability has always been the primary goal of English language lecturers at Polytechnic Malaysia. Considering the aforementioned problems, the current study attempts to use the TBLT approach in Communicative English classes to enhance students' speaking proficiency. TBLT approach is chosen in this study as it provides learners with opportunities to communicate and use the language in authentic situations by completing various task-based instruction tasks. This study attempts to investigate the use of TBLT as a practical way of teaching speaking skills among polytechnic students while helping students to increase their speaking performance, particularly in their oral assessments and also their attitudes.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to examine the relationship between students' language attitudes towards TBLT and English language speaking performance among Malaysian polytechnic students. Specifically, the objectives of the study are:

- i. To measure students' language attitudes towards the use of task-based language teaching in enhancing speaking performance.
- ii. To determine the relationship between students' language attitudes towards task-based language teaching and English language speaking performance.

Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated in accordance with the research objectives:

- i. What are the students' language attitudes towards the use of task-based language teaching in enhancing speaking performance?
- ii. Is there a relationship between students' language attitudes towards task-based language teaching and English language speaking performance?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language Attitudes

Language attitude plays an important role in second language teaching and learning. Different definitions of attitude have been provided in the literature by scholars. Crystal (1997) defines the term attitude as the way learners feel about their own language or other languages. Attitudes have been defined by Nathial (2018) as the willingness to react positively or negatively to a specific idea, object, person or situation. Brown (2000), on the other hand, considers attitudes as a set of beliefs that learners hold towards members of the target language group and also towards their own culture.

According to Gardner (1985), attitudes are associated with motivation because they promote learners' overall orientation. The motivation to acquire a second language, in particular, is based on having positive attitudes toward the community of people who speak the second language as well as a desire to interact with and resemble the members of that community

(Gardner & Lambert, 1972). Brown (1994b) states that the success of second language learning is associated with language attitudes. He posits that positive attitudes are advantageous to learners whereas negative attitudes may cause learners to lose motivation, which could prevent them from achieving language proficiency. Chamber (1999) avers that when a learner has a positive attitude towards the language and learning, learning occurs more easily. Thus, language attitude plays a crucial role in second language learning and it can be used to explain linguistic behaviours among second language learners.

Task-based Language Teaching

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is an extension of the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) that attempts to apply principles of second language learning to language teaching. TBLT, according to Ellis & Shintani (2014, p.135), is an approach that attempts to develop the communicative competence of learners by engaging them in meaning-focused communication through the performance of tasks. They further assert that TBLT is not only aimed to develop fluency in the communicative process but also to develop learners' linguistic competence and interactional competence. A fundamental principle of TBLT is that language is treated primarily as a tool for communication rather than a subject to be studied or manipulated in TBLT (Ellis, 2003). Therefore, tasks should be considered the core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 223).

TBLT approach is considered a learner-centred approach to language teaching as the learners are typically characterised as active agents. Through task performance, learners acquire their implicit and explicit second language knowledge and gradually become more proficient in comprehending and producing the target language for meaningful purposes (Van den Branden, 2016). In addition to the central role that is taken by the learners, tasks are considered a central component of TBLT because they provide suitable conditions or environments for effective language learning (Richards & Schmidt, 2010; Willis, 1996; Ellis, 2003).

According to Brown (1994a), task-based language teaching views the learning process as a series of communicative activities connected to the curricular goals. Task-based language teaching enables learners to use the target language forms they believe will best help them achieve their communication target (Ellis, 2003; Willis, 1996). As can be seen, the priority of task-based language teaching is placed on the completion of the tasks, which are assessed in terms of the outcome (Willis and Willis, 2007). Thus, the tasks and outcomes should have some kind of practical significance and application.

Theoretical Framework of Task-based Language Teaching

The study draws on the framework of TBLT developed by Willis (1996) mainly consists of three instructional stages. There are pre-task, task cycle, and language focus, which are shown in Figure 1.

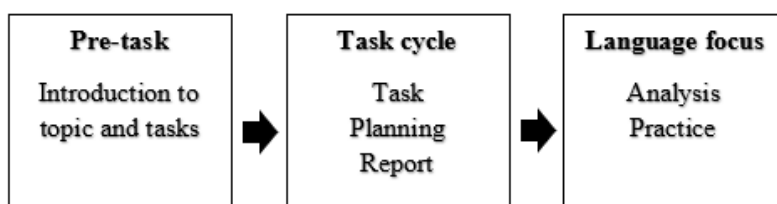


Figure 1: Task-based Learning Framework (Willis, 1996)

In the first stage of the framework, pre-task aims at preparing learners to perform the task in ways that will promote language acquisition. In this stage, the topic and task are introduced to learners. Teachers explore the topic with the class, activating topic-related words and phrases. Willis (1996) claims that pre-task can equip learners with the language they need. Here, learners are responsible for selecting the appropriate language for any given context themselves. In this stage, the tasks and objectives that learners need to achieve will be explained by the teacher.

In the task cycle stage, opportunities will be provided to learners to typically perform the task in pairs or small groups in the task phase aiming to achieve the objectives of the task, although this depends on the type of task given. The role of the teachers in this phase is to guide, monitor and encourage communication among learners using the language resources they already have at their disposal during the planning phase. Feedback and advice from the teachers come when learners need it most to fulfil the task. Then, learners present reports to the class while the teachers act as a chairperson during the report phase.

The last stage in this framework is language focus. In the analysis phase, learners have a closer look at the language structures, which should have turned up during the task cycle. Language issues are reviewed to raise awareness of task-related words or phrases. By this phase, learners have already grasped the meaning of the new language and they need to focus on form. In the practice phase, it is important to provide learners with the chance to practice and drill the language that has emerged from the task.

Task-based Language Teaching and Language Attitudes

Numerous studies on learners' attitudes towards the use of task-based language teaching have been carried out (e.g., Xuyen & Trang, 2021; Nget et al., 2020; Sholeh et al., 2021; Zhu Xiu, 2016). These studies revealed a correlation between positive attitudes and successful language learning.

In a study by Xuyen and Trang (2021) in Vietnam, 58 university EFL learners' attitudes towards the use of task-based speaking activities were examined. The results indicated that EFL learners had positive emotions or feelings towards task-based speaking activities. The learners in the study were found to be aware of its effectiveness which supported their oral performance. A majority of the learners in the study acknowledged that task-based speaking activities lessons were interesting and the activities were their preferred activity during the English classes over other activities. Other than that, most learners attested that they comprehend grammar structures without difficulty through task-based speaking activities, which also gave them more confidence when reporting in front of their class. Not only that, almost all of the learners felt that task-based speaking activities improved their presentation skills and helped them broaden their vocabulary as they could speak English more frequently during speaking practices.

Zhu Xiu (2016) shed light on the literature with a study examining the attitudes of EFL learners towards TBLT. The study was conducted with 166 Chinese EFL learners at the tertiary level. The results showed that Chinese EFL learners generally hold positive attitudes towards TBLT. The findings revealed that learners would like to carry out TBLT activities in their English class as it provided a relaxing atmosphere for language learning and could help them to develop their integrated skills of language.

A study by Nget et al. (2020) on the effect of task-based instruction on ninth-grade students' English-speaking skills in the Cambodian context revealed that students in general were satisfied with their task-based instruction experiences. The findings indicated that students preferred that their teacher utilise task-based instruction more frequently in the future so that they could acquire English faster when they used it more often.

The same was also confirmed by Sholeh et al. (2021) in their study on learners' attitudes toward TBLT in a junior high school in Central Java, Indonesia. Their study showed that most EFL Indonesian learners generally demonstrated a positive attitude towards TBLT in English learning. Most learners believed that TBLT provided them with a relaxing environment for language learning and they were able to use the acquired expressions and grammar patterns through tasks. From the literature on language attitudes, it can be concluded that TBLT may develop positive attitudes among ESL learners.

As can be seen, language attitudes can be considered one of the essential factors which affect learners' learning process. Despite receiving sustained academic attention from scholars, little has been done to investigate how Malaysian polytechnic students respond to TBLT in this respect. Since the language attitudes of students can influence and determine the success or failure of language learning, it is, therefore, necessary to investigate the influence it may have on language learning, especially students' speaking performance in ESL classrooms. Moreover, this study is expected to supplement the existing knowledge which would help researchers or language instructors to better understand task-based language teaching. Therefore, these are the gaps that have encouraged the researcher to conduct the current study.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a quasi-experimental research design using quantitative methods. By using the data collected through questionnaires and oral presentation scores, the relationship between students' attitudes towards TBLT and English language speaking performance was determined.

Participants

One intact class of 30 polytechnic students (male=11, female=19) enrolling in the Communicative English 2 course in Politeknik Kuching Sarawak was chosen as the participants of the study. The age range of the students was between 17 and 20 years old. They were also homogeneous in terms of their educational background and learning experience as all students had completed their Communicative English 1 course.

Instruments

An oral presentation test and an attitudinal questionnaire were used as instruments of the study.

The oral presentation test was employed as the primary data collection instrument in this study. The oral presentation test was used to evaluate students' speaking abilities after the implementation of a TBLT approach. As the oral presentation in the course is tailored for individual presentation, it was deemed ideal to be used as the instrument to gauge students' speaking performance. The assessment of the oral presentation test was based on three main criteria, namely language, task fulfilment and delivery.

To obtain data pertaining to students' attitudes towards the use of TBLT in enhancing their speaking performance, a questionnaire was used as a secondary instrument in the study. This questionnaire is an attitudinal questionnaire partly adapted from Hamouda (2016) and Nget et al. (2020). The questionnaire used in this study is divided into two sections. Section 1 intends to collect students' demographic features in terms of age and gender. Section 2 consists of 24 items in the form of a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly

Agree” with values 1 to 5 assigned to each alternative. A total of 14 items (Item 1, 3, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20 and 21) were adopted from Hamouda (2016) and 6 items (Item 2, 4, 5, 6, 11 and 24) were adopted from Nget et al. (2020). The researcher included 4 new items (Item 10, 17, 22 and 23) to the questionnaire. Minor modifications were made to the wording of some items so that they were appropriate for the study. The adapted questionnaire used in the study was pilot tested and recorded a relatively good reliability score of .850.

Data Collection Procedure

Firstly, a three-week intervention (3 hours a week) were administered to the students. They were taught based on the three-stage task-based instruction by Willis (1996). The three stages of task-based instruction are pre-task, task cycle and language focus.

In the pre-task stage, the English lecturer introduced the topic and tasks to the students, activating topic-related words and phrases. To ensure that students were fully prepared for the main task, pre-task activities were used. In the task cycle stage, two task cycles were employed in the lesson to ensure all the learning outcomes can be achieved within the three-week treatment. In this stage, students were required to complete the tasks individually, in pairs or in small groups. They were required to prepare the task reports using the language they already had at their disposal during the planning phase and then presented the task reports to the class in spoken forms. At this stage, the lecturer mainly acted as a facilitator most of the time in helping students to complete the tasks assigned. In the language focus stage, the English lecturer reviewed what happened in the task reports and highlighted important language forms for the students to analyse. Finally, in the practice phase, the English lecturer provided students with more chances to practice and drill the language that had emerged from the task.

After completing the intervention, a post-oral presentation test was administered to students. All students were required to carry out a similar oral presentation but on a different product or service. Students were then required to choose another product or service of their choice and research the necessary information needed for the oral presentation. Students were required to give a four-minute to a five-minute individual oral presentation. Students’ oral presentations were evaluated by the lecturer using the same oral presentation rubric.

Lastly, in order to learn more about students’ attitudes towards the TBLT approach, an attitudinal questionnaire was administered to them after the oral presentation test.

Data Analysis

For the data analysis, two types of statistical analysis, namely descriptive and inferential statistics, were employed in the study. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the characteristic of the data such as frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations. As for the inferential statistics analysis, correlational analysis (Pearson Product-Moment Correlation) was used to test the hypotheses of the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Students’ Language Attitudes towards TBLT

To answer research question one, descriptive statistics analysis (frequencies, means and standard deviation) was used to identify students’ language attitude levels towards the use of TBLT in enhancing speaking performance. The overall mean value of students’ language

attitudes was 3.74 (SD = .402). The score indicates that the student's attitudes towards the use of TBLT in improving their speaking abilities were positive. The finding of this study confirms the findings of previous studies that examined the attitudes of learners towards TBLT (Sholeh et al., 2021; Xuyen & Trang, 2021; Zhu Xiu, 2016).

Results reveal that most students believed that TBLT provided more opportunities for them to practice speaking (M = 4.07, SD = .691) and they were able to help them to apply the acquired English language skills to real-life situations in the future (M = 4.20, SD = .551). It can be inferred by the fact that the need for sufficient opportunities for students to engage in practical speaking tasks or activities in the process of language learning is high. Therefore, task-based speaking activities are deemed to create a difference in the language classroom by providing students with a purpose and a natural context for language use.

In relation to the classroom atmosphere, a majority of students felt that TBLT promoted language use by creating a comfortable environment (M = 3.80, SD = .610) and speaking English became easier for them after engaging in speaking activities (M = 3.93, SD = .740). This reflects the impact of task-based speaking tasks on the classroom learning environment as students feel more confident and relaxed when using the language. Therefore, the main responsibility of any English lecturer is to create an environment where students can practise speaking in the classroom. This finding is in line with Zhu Xiu (2016) and Sholeh et al. (2021), who reported that students preferred TBLT activities because they provided a relaxing atmosphere for language learning.

With regards to the oral presentation, students held the view that TBLT was appropriate for them getting ready for their oral presentations, (M = 4.10, SD = .548). Students believed that task-based speaking activities helped them to develop their presentation skills (M = 4.07, SD = .583) and they were able to structure their presentations better (M = 3.93, SD = .521). The finding corresponds to the finding by Xuyen & Trang (2021) which found that task-based speaking activities helped students to improve presentation skills. Based on the findings, it can be seen that task-based speaking tasks provide students with more opportunities to better develop and structure their presentations.

Furthermore, after completing the task-based speaking activities, students believed that they could achieve more progress in speaking (M = 4.03, SD = .669) and they could get a sense of improvement in their English speaking (M = 3.77, SD = .774). Moreover, students also agreed that TBLT activities helped them to understand the functions of language better (M = 3.87, SD = .507) and improved their pronunciation (M = 3.83, SD = .592). The results of this study indicate that task-based speaking activities provide students with more opportunities to focus on the functions of language and speaking accuracy in terms of their pronunciation, allowing them to have more opportunities to overcome their pronunciation mistakes.

Overall, the finding also suggests that most students would like their lecturer to use TBLT more often in the future (M = 3.87, SD = .776). This indicates that students see task-based speaking tasks as beneficial for them to enhance their speaking skills in the classroom.

Relationship between Students' Language Attitudes towards TBLT and English Language Speaking Performance

To answer research question two, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between students' attitudes towards TBLT and English language speaking performance.

Table 1: Pearson Correlation Test for Students' Language Attitudes towards TBLT and English Speaking Performance

	English Language Speaking Performance		Interpretation
Language attitudes towards TBLT	Pearson Correlation	.230	Slight relationship
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.221	
	N	30	

Based on the magnitude of association guidelines suggested by Lodico, Spaulding and Voegtle (2010), the result presented in Table 1 indicates that there is a slight and positive relationship between students' attitudes towards TBLT and English language speaking performance ($p = .221$). The result reveals that students' attitudes towards TBLT were slightly associated with English language speaking performance. This finding is in line with Zhu Xiu (2016), Nget et al. (2020), Xuyen & Trang, (2021) and Sholeh et al. (2021), who reported that EFL learners generally had positive attitudes towards task-based speaking activities. Thus, it is clear that task-based language teaching has the potential to help students develop positive attitudes in their language learning, despite the result only indicating a slight and positive relationship.

However, other factors such as students' proficiency level, their level of speaking anxiety or communication apprehension, and the familiarity with the product used in their presentation, must also be considered as to why the students' attitudes towards TBLT were only slightly associated with English language speaking performance.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, the findings of the present study can conclude that the use of TBLT was well received by students and TBLT was able to promote positive language attitudes among polytechnic students. This means that task-based speaking activities indeed can encourage students to become more interested in learning a language. Thus, there is a necessity for polytechnic English lecturers to shift their teaching approach to the TBLT approach in enhancing students' speaking performance. English lecturers are advised to pay special attention to students' attitudes and use task-based activities to help students to form positive attitudes towards second language learning. Moreover, English lecturers should also consider modifying the current coursebook materials to include more speaking activities that would provide students with more opportunities to use the target language and improve their speaking ability. English lecturers may also need to create different speaking tasks that resemble academic and real-life speaking to help students acquire language more naturally. It is imperative for English lecturers to gradually integrate the speaking tasks into the lessons so that it may help low-proficiency students to be more active and confident in using the language.

The findings also suggest that there was a weak positive correlation between students' attitudes towards TBLT and English language speaking performance. Despite showing a weak relationship between the variables, the study has provided insights that could help English lecturers adapt their teaching styles and practices in teaching speaking skills in ESL classrooms by adopting more speaking tasks. Future research could further explore the students' attitudes towards TBLT and English language speaking performance in different contexts and use qualitative methods to gain a more in-depth understanding of the students' attitudes.

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