Effect of task-based learning on Agricultural Machinery Engineering Students' English Speaking Ability at Rajamangala University of Technology Isan, Nakhonratchasima

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Abstract : This research aimed to investigate effects of task-based learning (TBL) on Agricultural Machinery Engineering Students' English Speaking Ability at Rajamangala University of Technology Isan, Nakhonratchasima Province. Twenty three third-year students, majoring in Agricultural Machinery Engineering, who enrolled in a Crop Production subject in academic year 2012, participated in this study. Prior to and after completing six lesson plans, participants were assessed for their English speaking ability using a five-level rubric scale English speaking test. In addition, participants were surveyed for their opinions towards TBL using a questionnaire. Results of English speaking scores were compared using the dependent samples t-test. The students could improve their speaking ability from 1.00 in the pre-test to 2.09 in the post-test (p<0.001). In addition, the students showed positive opinion towards the incorporation of TBL in developing their English speaking ability. The findings indicated beneficial effects of integrating TBL in other English subjects to improve students' English proficiency.

Keywords : task-based learning, task, English speaking ability, students' opinion

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1. Introduction

New technology and use of the Internet caused major transition in terms of business, education, science, and technological progress. All of which demand high proficiency in English. Thus, the role of English in Thailand is as important as in many other developing countries (Wiriyachitra, 2009).

English has been compulsory subject for all Thai students to learn from a primary school level to university level. However, English proficiency of Thai students is low in comparison to many other countries in Asia. This problem also occurs with Engineering students at Rajamangala University of Technology Isan (RMUTI). They cannot use English at work places effectively. Results of satisfaction survey from the companies that students join co-operative education before graduation showed that the weakest knowledge of students was English and improvement of English ability is crucial. Results of students' opinion also confirmed that they wanted most to improve English skill for preparing their readiness to join co-operative education (annual report, 2009). In addition, English proficiency is important to increase their competitive ability with those from other countries because engineering is one of the occupations that will be most affected due to the implement of ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in 2015. The Ministry of Education also promotes teaching other subjects in English for preparing students to AEC.

Task-based learning (TBL) has increasingly achieved popularity in recent years and has been recommended as a way forward in English language teaching (ELT) (Ellis, 2003). TBL is an approach which uses tasks as a basic unit for planning and teaching (Thornbury, 2006). Prabhu (1987) defines a task as 'an activity that requires learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process'. Willis (1998) proposes a task as an activity where the target language is used by the learner for communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome. Ellis (2003) defines a task as activities that call for primarily meaning-focused on language use. In contrast, exercises are activities that call for primarily form-focused. Nunan (2004) defines a communicative task as a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, middle and an end. In conclusion, all the various definitions discussed above emphasize the fact that a task is an activity which requires learners to use the language for communicative purpose with focus on meaning rather than form in order to achieve an outcome.

Many studies indicate that TBL can encourage students at tertiary level to become more independent and address their academic needs. Moreover, TBL creates variety for the students and lead to significant improvement regarding their language. It offers enough opportunities for students to express themselves in the target language. Accordingly, the researchers chose to use TBL to

investigate its effectiveness in improving English speaking ability of Agricultural Machinery Engineering students at Rajamangala University of Technology Isan.

Participants were 23 third-year Agricultural Machinery Engineering students of Rajamangala University of Technology Isan, Nakhonratchasima.

2.2 Methods and instruments

Participants involved in a 6-week lesson plans of a Crop Production subject using TBL concepts (approximately 2.30 hour/lesson plan). In each lesson plan, the task was divided into 3 stages: pre-task, task cycles, and language focus stages. In the pre-task stage, teacher introduced the topic, highlighted useful words and phrases in order to prepare the participants to perform the task. In the task cycle stage, participants had to do the activities including development of posters or brochures and orally present them to the audiences. At the end of the class, the teacher executed the language focus stage by emphasizing on forms.

Prior to and after completing the 6 lesson plans, two raters assessed English speaking ability of the participants using a five-level rubric scale English speaking test that was modified from the criteria used in the TOEIC test. Furthermore, the researcher gathered participants' opinions towards TBL using a 12-item questionnaire. The findings were interpreted according to the following criteria:

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Participants

4.51 – 5.0   strongly agree

3.51 – 4.50   agree

2.51 – 3.50   neither agree nor disagree

1.51 – 2.50   disagree

1.00 – 1.50   strongly disagree

2.2 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were utilized to explain the findings of the study. Then data from the English speaking test were compared using the dependent samples t-test. The level of statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

3. Results and Discussion

Twenty three third-year Agricultural Machinery Engineering students of Rajamangala University of Technology Isan, Nakhonratchasima completed the study. The findings of their English speaking ability are demonstrated in Table 1. It can be seen that average scores of participants significantly increased from 1.00±0.00 to 2.09±0.59 ($p < 0.001$, Table 1).

Table 1: Data of English speaking ability of the participants

English speaking ability	N	Mean	Standard deviation	t	P-value*
Pre-test (level)	23	1.00	0.00	-8.74	0.000
Post-test (level)	23	2.09	0.59		

* P-value from the dependent samples t-test

The findings confirmed positive effects of incorporating TBL to improve English speaking ability of the third-year participants majoring in Agricultural Machinery Engineering. In this study, TBL was divided into 3 phases: pre-task, task cycle and language focus stages, which allowed the participants to learn English through relaxing atmosphere. The process helped to enhance their motivation and confidence in using English. Thus the participants showed an increase in English speaking score. As Brown (2002) mentioned, intrinsic motivation and self-confidence helped the learners to succeed in accomplishing any language task. During the language focus stage, the participants had opportunities to repeatedly practice words with the same difficult vowel sound that made them speak more confidently (Scrivener, 2005).

Table 2: Findings from questionnaires about TBL learning

Items	$\bar{x}$	S.D	Interpretation	Rank
1. I enjoy learning English using tasks.	4.45	0.60	agree	2
2. When I use tasks, learning English is easier.	4.14	0.71	agree	6
3. Tasks make me want to learn more English	4.00	0.62	agree	7
4. Tasks are helpful in learning English	4.45	0.51	agree	2
5. TBL makes learning English Interesting	4.41	0.59	agree	3
6. TBL encourages me to speak more English	4.36	0.58	agree	4
7. TBL gives me confidence in using English	4.36	0.58	agree	4
8. TBL is useful when learning English.	4.41	0.59	agree	3
9. Giving an oral report makes speaking English easier.	4.41	0.59	agree	3
10. Giving an oral report helps me feel more confident in using English	4.59	0.67	Strongly agree	1
11. I feel that my English speaking skill has improved	4.23	0.61	agree	6
12. TBL help me to learn about Crop Production	4.14	0.64	agree	5
Total	4.33	0.61	agree	

4. Conclusion

Results of this study could be concluded as follow:

4.1 Students' English speaking ability was significantly developed (p< .05) after learning through a task-based learning approach.

4.2 Students had positive opinions towards learning English through task-based learning.

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