

Exploring Task-Based Approach to Teaching Oral Communication Skills in English to Sri Lankan Undergraduate Students

Hakmana Parana Liyanage Waruni Shashikala
University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Colombo, Sri Lanka

It is vital that Sri Lankan undergraduate students learn to speak competently because they need to become capable communicators in order to accomplish a wide range of goals and to become useful members of their communities. However, teaching oral communication skills to English language learners has always been a challenge for the language teacher. As a result, teachers have often attempted to look for new methods that would enable students' learning process by creating a difference in the English as a second language (ESL) learning-teaching classroom. This paper describes the applications of the task-based language teaching (TBLT) methodology in which communicative tasks engage a group of undergraduates in authentic conversation in order to teach oral communication skills in an academic setting. The Sri Lankan ESL learning-teaching context was chosen as the research context for this study and comprised a sample of randomly selected 60 2nd-year undergraduates whose proficiency in English was at elementary level. This utilized both qualitative and quantitative measurements and followed the model, presented by Willis (1996), which includes three stages: pre-task stage, task-cycle and language focus for TBLT in the ESL learning-teaching classroom. Students were required to work in groups and the task-cycles involved a questionnaire survey game in which they were required to construct "Wh" questions in order to elicit information from others. The findings report that this approach has inspired students better in learning oral communication skills unlike many conventional teaching methods which promote a form-focused theory. They tried to experiment with what they knew without fear of being corrected by the teacher when an error was made, got feedback from their peers and formulated & reformulated their ideas with a sense of accuracy and fluency. The researcher recommends that ESL teaching practitioners use TBLT methodology in their classroom, since this enhances learners' accuracy and fluency. Furthermore, language teachers can spend more time in reflection which will allow them to think critically on their classroom behaviour. They can identify and work on their weaknesses in the classroom as well as building on their strengths.

Keywords: task-based language teaching, English as a second language, authentic communication

1. Introduction

Teaching oral communication skills to second language (L2) learners has always been a challenge for the L2 teacher. As a result, teachers have often attempted to look for new methods that would enable students' learning process by creating a difference in the L2 learning-teaching classroom. The task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach evolved as a result of this difference under the rubric of task-based instruction, the interest area of researchers like Prabhu (1987), Nunan (1989), and Long (1985) in the mid-80s: a reaction to the then practiced traditional teaching methods. (Richards, 2006, pp. 6-9)

Unlike traditional approaches to teaching language in which the methodology made much use of repetitive practice and drilling, the TBLT classroom involved students as problem solvers and such activities had specific real world tasks for them to complete. Long & Robinson explain this as: "... a task-based approach, in which real-world needs become the motivating force for task design, will generate interactions which engage inquisitional processes and lead to interlanguage development." (Quoted in Skehan, 1998, p. 124). It treats language primarily as a tool for communication and it helps learners to develop the competence which is required in order to effectively and confidently use their L2 in a variety of situations outside the classroom. Therefore, this method was frequently promoted "as an effective teaching approach, superior to 'traditional' methods, and soundly based on theory and research." (Swan, 2005, p. 376). This approach promotes an integration of language skills in tasks which are authentic rather they being taught in isolation and hence, has increasingly gained popularity in recent years as a step forward in English language teaching pedagogy. As Willis (1996) explains, "The skills form an integral part of this process-they are not being practiced singly, in a vacuum" (p. 25). Tasks hold the central part in TBLT though they have been defined in many different ways by researchers.

1.1 TBLT in ESL Learning-Teaching Context in Sri Lanka

There is a great demand for English language in Sri Lanka because knowing English means a chance to get a better job and the ability to lead a better life. In fact, it affects almost every aspect of human lifestyle and possible future targets. At school level, learners often fail to achieve proficiency in English and as undergraduate students they face the added challenge of learning academic English. Teaching language skills in the ESL learning-teaching classroom has always been the subject of long-term debate because there is always an imbalance between the rigorous adherence to grammar structures and the application of such syntactic elements in authentic communication.

1.1.1. Oral Communication Skills

Being able to establish spoken interaction between two or more people is referred to as oral communication. This process is unique since it has more than an exchange of words between two parties and is extremely important for "sociological encounter" (Halliday, 1978, p. 139). Austin (1962 cited in Clybe, 1994, p. 2) claims that communication is an "instrument of action" because the powerful role of language in human communication is reflected in oral communication.

In the researcher's teaching context, ESL learning-teaching classrooms are filled with Sinhalese students who have a tendency to use their mother tongue very often. Achieving communicative competence is challenging for them. However, effective communication skills are required to perform well in a variety of personal, professional and academic settings confidently. As Skehan (1998, p. 135) claims, "The major factor, of course, is

that all three goals-fluency, accuracy, and complexity-have to be achieved” to communicate effectively. This is where the challenge lies for the teacher because teachers need to teach both communication skills and speaking skills. In this context, performing tasks in the classroom seems a better way for teaching and learning such skills since tasks enable interaction among students.

The present study attempts to investigate the effectiveness of TBLT to teaching oral communication skills to ESL students in an academic setting. The researcher decided to embark on this study through her own experience as an ESL teacher at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura. The application of task-based instruction to teaching L2 grammar was not being practiced in the researcher’s teaching context. L2 teachers practiced conventional grammar teaching methods in their classrooms.

The proposed study has been structured to answer the following research questions:

- (1) If students improve their oral communication skills after the task-based language teaching approach (TBLT)?
- (2) How do they perceive this approach to teaching oral communication skills?

1.2 Structure of the Paper

Other than the introduction which describes the subject matter under investigation, this study includes three main areas. The second section involves an account of related literature on the TBLT methodology; third, research methodology which highlights the methods of data collection and analysis; fourth, analysis of data and discussion of findings followed by conclusions and implications.

2. Theoretical Background

This provides a comprehensive review of literature about the theory and research in the area that underpin the study under investigation. This focuses altogether on three areas of study: the development of TBLT Approach, as an extension of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Methodology, TBL to teaching oral communication skills in English including a discussion of research evidence, and a critical overview of the arguments for and against TBL.

2.1 TBLT: An Extension of CLT

Language learning & teaching has passed through many phases and undergone many changes over the past few decades. This field was dominated by grammar based approaches for many decades. Over time, the then practiced traditional classroom activities and methods of teaching received little demand subsequently and as a reaction to these conventional teaching methodologies, a notion of communicative competence (CC) as the central phenomena in language teaching and learning was developed by a group of linguists. This approach came to be known as CLT (Richards, 2006, pp. 6-9).

TBL is one of them and is considered to be the most productive of these innovations in which the features of CLT can be found in a more specific communicative way to L2 instruction. As Nunan (2004, p. 10) illustrates, “CLT is a broad, philosophical approach to the language curriculum that draws on theory and research in linguistics, anthropology, sociology, and psychology” whereas, “Task-based language teaching represents a realization of this philosophy at the levels of syllabus design and methodology.” This method incorporates processes which are believed to best facilitate language learning in the classroom. In fact, many L2 researchers

like Fotos and Ellis (1991), Newton (1995), and Wesche & Skehan (2002) have raised their interest and support for TBL as a suitable instructional method for second language learning-teaching since it promotes real-life like communication.

2.2 The TBLT Approach

TBL is very much unique and has been the interest area of many researchers as a language teaching model with many benefits since “In task-based language teaching, syllabus content and instructional processes are selected with reference to the communicative tasks which learners will need to engage in outside the classroom...” (Nunan, 1991, p. 279). The use of language is promoted for a variety of different purposes and functions in the real world. Many linguistic scholars insist that the traditional grammar teaching PPP method can be replaced by TBLT since the very appropriate practical use of grammar can be enhanced with tasks. In this context, one of the challenges faced by the teacher in the TBLT classroom is that engaging students in a variety of tasks is necessary for enabling language acquisition. Here, it is vital to examine the role of tasks in this method.

2.2.1 Tasks in the TBLT approach

A central phenomenon of this methodology is that the tasks in this approach have resemblance to real-life situations and therefore, promote meaningful authentic communication among learners. Prabhu (1987: 24), one of the first methodologists who developed an interest towards TBL, considers a task as “an activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process.”

According to Prabhu, the TBL method enables students’ practicing of language since it requires students’ full engagement in a language task, rather than just learning TL structures. Rod Ellis differentiates tasks from classroom exercises and as he states, tasks have non-linguistic outcomes whereas exercises produce linguistic ones. (2003: 30). As Ellis (1994, p. 595) explains, a task is “...some kind of activity designed to engage the learner in using language communicatively or reflectively in order to arrive at an outcome other than that of learning a specified feature of the L2.” Willis (1996, p. 23) defines tasks as activities “... where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome.” According to Willis (1996, p. 23), with TBLT, students will be completing tasks involving “real-life” situations which prepare them for authentic communication outside of the classroom. Swain’s (2001, p. 11) view of a task is: “an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective.”

Although these definitions focus on somewhat different aspects of what constitutes a task, they all share the common core that pedagogical tasks in this approach involve learners’ communicative language use which focuses on meaning rather than form: a balance between the language form and competence in order to achieve a specific goal. Most importantly, this language should be recycled naturally.

According to the above discussed definitions, tasks in the TBL method emphasize the importance of focus on meaning. In fact, in the TBLT classroom, tasks will provide students with opportunities and language to practice and be able to communicate more effectively and accurately in real-life situations.

2.2.2. Characteristic features of TBLT

The above definitions of tasks indicate that this approach is characterized by a set of features and this section briefs these basic characteristics which exemplify TBLT. In fact, these features serve as a guideline for

implementing TBLT in the L2 learning-teaching classroom.

- *Learner-Centeredness*

This emphasizes learner-centered tasks as a way of achieving communicative competence: one of the unique characteristics of TBLT. Therefore, teachers should always encourage students' involvement in performing task activities. In this approach, "As a rule, the teacher withdraws after allocating tasks to the learners to allow them to manage the interaction themselves" (Seedhouse, 1999, p. 150). Here the teacher plays the role of an observer first and then, of a facilitator while giving opportunities for students to use language naturally throughout the task. As Willis claims, this approach provides learners with a comfortable environment where they can produce and practice their TL with each other. (Cited in Swan, 2005, p. 390)

- *Authentic Language Use*

A task designed for the TBLT classroom should be authentic to the life reality. Performing tasks which focus on day-to-day language allows learners to practice and eventually produce realistic language outside the classroom. Many Asian students don't get sufficient opportunities to practice their TL outside the classroom. Therefore, TBLT can be implemented as an important method to teaching target languages since they will have chances to communicate in a realistic setting (Jeon & Hahn, 2006, p. 124). As Ellis (2003) describes this situation, "...tasks can function as a useful device for planning a communicative curriculum, particularly in contexts where there are few opportunities for more authentic communicative experiences..." (p. 30).

- *Meaning-Focused*

Although various definitions of TBLT have been forwarded, they all emphasize that tasks in this method should involve learners' communicative language with a focus on meaning rather than form. Unlike in the conventional grammar teaching method where "students spend much of their time in isolated linguistic structures in a sequence...." (Doughty & Long, 2003, p. 64) and meaning is often ignored, TBLT promotes a form-meaning connection as a fundamental methodological principle.

- *Promote Cooperative & Collaborative Learning*

In the TBLT classroom, learners work together to complete a task activity in small cooperative teams: groups or pairs. In order to achieve the goal or target set by the teacher, learners need to use their L2 cooperatively or collaboratively. In this context, the teacher should design tasks which require active participation and true communicative interaction among learners in their TL. When students have to rely on each other to complete a task, they negotiate meaning with each other and this interaction promotes communicative language acquisition: a theory that is widely known as Long's "Interaction Hypothesis" (1983)

- *Provide Evaluative Feedback*

Teachers in the TBLT classroom should pay much attention to give appropriate evaluation to their students' learning outcomes. According to researchers, such evaluative feedback is extremely useful since it facilitates the progression of students' communicative language use. According to Doughty and Long (2003, p. 14), "...learners can make some sort of comparison between the information provided in feedback and their own preceding utterance". In fact, TBLT is not complete without this step because students should be given an opportunity to report on what they have found and experience their achievements. The completion of a given task is not the end of that task.

2.2.3. Framework for TBLT

There are several frameworks proposed for TBLT by many researchers such as Willis (1996), Skehan (1996, 1998), Ellis (2003), Nunan (2003, 2004), and Frost (2006). However, the model advocated much in literature is the one designed precisely by Jane Willis (1996, 1998) and is the framework used by the researcher in this study. This common framework includes three stages: pre-task-preparatory stage, task-cycle-performing the task and post-task-language focus. Today, many teaching practitioners follow this model to teaching foreign language to non-native speakers around the world.

2.2.4. Research in TBLT

Different ideas about TBLT have emerged over the past two decades and this section covers such studies conducted to investigate the validity and reliability of TBLT approach. Although many studies have produced evidence in support of this approach, this has been challenged too. These investigations are extremely important for the present research because they cover a wide range of aspects to be covered in this study.

Prabhu's Bangalore Project (1979-1984) can be regarded as the oldest attempt which established the idea of getting learners to acquire English through tasks. He practiced communicative tasks with students over a period of five years and the findings indicated that TBLT might present a promising model and an alternative method to those existing approaches.

The findings of a study conducted by *Ellis and Fotos (1991)* reveal that the adoption of communicative grammar-based tasks as the central unit can facilitate the acquisition of implicit knowledge. In this study, they compared this structure-oriented TBLT approach with a more traditional rule presenting method and found that their approach helped Japanese college-level EFL students develop their knowledge of complex syntactic structures.

J. Willis & D. Willis (1996/2007) are strong advocates of TBLT and the model presented by them is perhaps the most advocated in literature. They too emphasized on a methodology for using tasks to enable authentic communication while focusing on meaning not producing specific language structures. As they report, "...learners are free to choose whatever language forms they wish to convey what they mean..." (Willis & Willis, 1996, p. 24). Drawing on data collected for nearly ten years, they discussed the problems perceived by L2 teachers when implementing around the world. According to them, "the most important change that we can make simply involves reordering textbook activities" (Willis & Willis, 2007, p. 209).

Foster and Skehan (1996) examined the impact of meaning/form focused strategic planning, un-detailed strategic planning and minimal strategic planning on EFL students' speech and the findings reported that the meaning/form focused strategic planning could promote learners' fluency, accuracy and speech complexity.

Based on the findings of a study which involved interviews with teacher educators, teachers and ministry officials, *Nunan (2004)* reports that TBLT has emerged to be an inseparable part of curriculum guidelines and syllabi in many Asia-Pacific countries.

Swan (2005) challenges the superior notion attributed to TBLT. According to him, this method fails to fulfill the claims it has made and therefore, "the exclusive advocacy of TBI reflects a perennial and damaging pattern of ideological swings in language teaching theory and practice." As he claims, many teaching practitioners seem unwilling to adopt this approach since TBLT seems to view grammar as unnecessary for beginners. This method is also doubted for its claim that "traditional" approaches have failed to promote

language acquisition.

Bruton (2002) argues that studies which promote TBLT such as Kowal and Swain don't show evidence of learners' oral development in the classroom. It is also claimed that little evidence is found about using tasks as central units to resolve the question of language correctness in learners' oral communication. He insists that learners' will benefit from a balance between "teacher-fronted and non-teacher-fronted activities," rather than starting with exclusive communicative tasks.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Methods and Procedures

This section presents the methods and processes followed by the researcher to examine the effects of TBLT on developing Sri Lankan undergraduates' oral communication skills and how this approach is perceived by them. In fact, this experimental study follows a pre-test – post-test research design. This study is explorative in nature and follows both qualitative and quantitative dimensions for data collection & analysis.

3.2 The Research Context & Participants

The Sri Lankan ESL learning-teaching context was chosen as the research context for this study. The proposed study comprised a sample of randomly selected 60 2nd-year undergraduates whose proficiency in English was at elementary level. They were from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Sri Jayewardenepura. Here, two groups (30 + 30) were taken for the validity and reliability of the findings of this study. These students undertook *The Functional English I Course* which was a compulsory credit for all of them. The said course stressed that the students prepare themselves for both enhancement in academic studies and achievement in the demands of the real-world.

3.3. Instrumentation

This study followed the model presented by Willis (1996) for TBLT in the TL learning-teaching classroom and followed the type of tasks which had specific goals since such tasks encouraged students to talk to each other more freely and share their personal information and experience (p. 28). In order to collect data to answer *the first part* of the research question, tests and scores were used. The researcher reflected on her own teaching methods in the target language learning classroom. The instrument utilized here consisted of a series of task-based lessons practiced with two groups at three stages: pre-task stage, main-task stage and post-task stage. These lessons were designed with the integration of tasks to match the objective of this study. Students were required to work in groups and these task-cycles involved questionnaire survey games in which they were required to construct "Wh" questions in order to elicit information from others. The post-task stage included a Production Practice activity designed to evaluate participants' speech after the implementation of the TBLT method. The participants were tape-recorded when they were evaluated. Data were mainly collected from pre, main & post-tasks and classroom observations also provided supporting evidence for the findings. Then, the most common accurately & inaccurately constructed "Wh" questions were categorized, and a comparison was made between the pre-task scores and those of the post-task in order to find whether there is a significance difference between the scores achieved by the students at the two task stages. This comparison revealed whether the students have improved their oral communication skills or not.

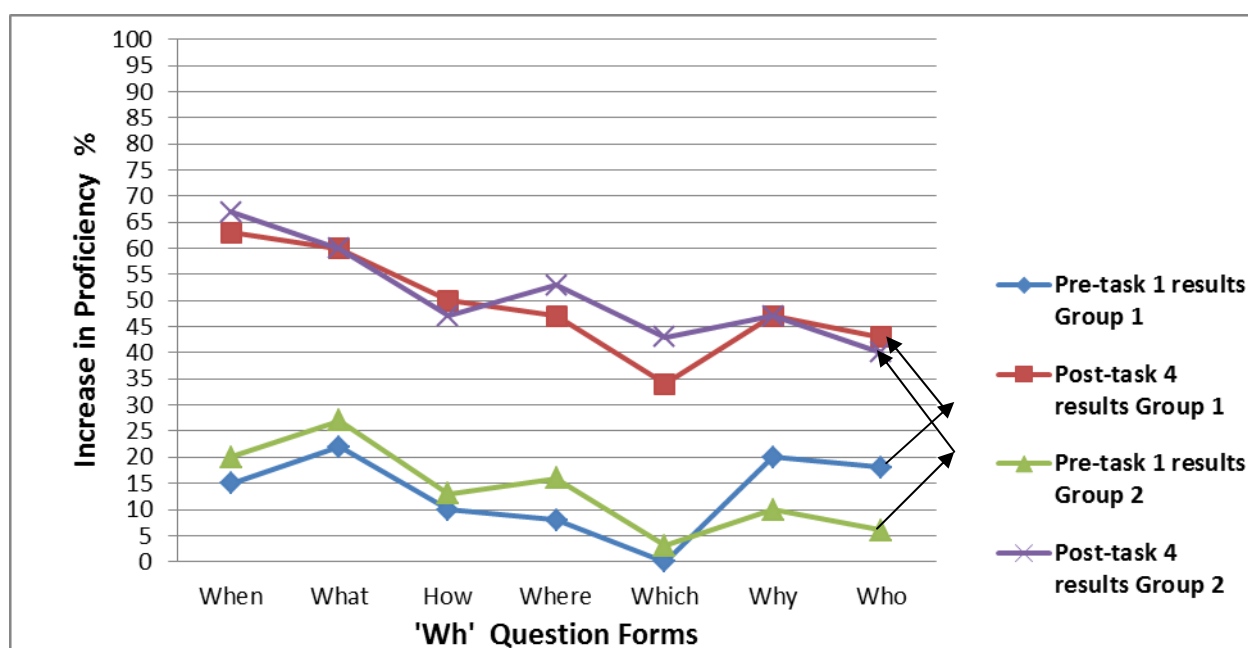
The *attitudinal questionnaire*, administered to the sample for their feedback on this approach to teaching oral communication skills, consisted of items about learners' attitudes towards learning English. This includes a 5-point Linkert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* and had three dimensions: *Learners' understanding of tasks and TBLT*, *Learners' views on implementing TBLT* and *Reasons for choosing or avoiding TBLT*. This was administered to the sample before and after the implementation of TBLT.

4. Findings and Discussion

Overall, this study seeks the extent to which TBLT is applicable to teaching oral communication skills to a group of L2 learners. In fact, an attempt is made to discover what changes have occurred in the classroom after the implementation of the TBLT methodology.

The findings show that these students' oral communication skills have significantly improved by the end of these task-activities. *Table 1 & 2* (Appendix 1) illustrate those observed differences at main and post-task stages. *Tables* provide evidence of the inaccurate use of "Wh" questions by students with some examples and shows how the number of errors made by student has decreased eventually. Mechanical counting was useful in rendering specific statistics and the results are presented in Chart 1 for better illustration and clarification.

4.1 Significant Improvement in Proficiency: A Remarkable Change in Atmosphere



Graph 1. "Wh" question forms.

As shown in Graph 1, the researcher could observe a gradual drop in the number of erroneous constructions made by students as they passed through the pre, main and post-task phases of these tasks. Similar to Skehan (1998), this study shows how learners have improved their accuracy, fluency and complexity during these tasks. Their performance at different stages of these tasks reveals that a considerable number of students has developed their proficiency in the use of "Wh" questions though their proficiency levels slightly vary. The post-task phase reports a significant change in terms of their communicative competency. Most importantly, these students

seemed highly motivated during the tasks.

This exhibits a significant change in the classroom atmosphere after the application of TBLT in these lessons. Those who had encountered problems in the use of “Wh” questions subsequently had fewer complications in using them quite accurately in their sentences. This is clearly evident by the fact that the number of errors occurred in the pre and main-tasks has dropped eventually during the tasks. Their performance during the post-task, in particular, reveals that TB lessons seem acceptable to most students in terms of helping them improve their oral communication skills. Interestingly, the area which seemed extremely problematic for almost all (58/60) students had become less problematic for many students in the post-task phase. Remarkably, their performance was not poor after the application of TBT.

4.2 Reasons for Better Performance

The participants’ performance during the pre, main & post-tasks provides evidence to see the suitability of TBLT instruction to teaching oral communication skills. Unlike in those conventional language-teaching classrooms, there was a regular fall in the number of errors committed by students when forming “Wh” questions in the TBLT classroom. Indeed, these students’ better performance, precisely their satisfactory learning of oral communication skills, has resulted from the application of TBLT. Therefore, this study, similar to Swan (2005), promotes TBLT as superior to traditional teaching approaches.

Here, it is worth studying what has developed an interest in students in this approach, and these could be synthesized from students’ post-task results and classroom observations during the task-activities.

4.2.1 Incidental not intentional: the best method

In this study, students’ method of approaching tasks was natural and they were not under the impression that they were learning in the ESL classroom. This research, similar to Richards (2006), proves that learners in the TBLT classroom can comprehend the lesson easily because the atmosphere is relaxing for them, unlike in the conventional language teaching classroom. Similar to Willis and Willis (1996/2007), the researcher observed that learners in the TBLT classroom were free to choose whatever language to convey meaning. This study, like Ellis (1994), states that integration of skills into tasks designed with a focus on meaning could arouse students’ interest since the whole ESL learning experience was found to be exciting not intentional. Learning oral communication skills were no longer boring and difficult. This process was promoted by Ellis (2009: 2) for teaching as “incidental rather than intentional.”

4.2.2 Use of authentic material motivate learners

Classroom observations show that language learning in the task-based classroom has occurred as a natural phenomenon since these task-based lessons include situations similar to those of the real-world. These learners’ performance during the post-task proves the argument of Nunn (1991) that TBLT actively engages students in authentic interaction since its content has relevance to real world. Similar to Nunan (1989), it was the application of tasks with naturalistic language and real-life like situations which increased students’ interest in the lesson. They provided students with much meaningful language input and what they learned in the classroom could be of great help to solve certain problems in real-life. The findings, similar to Long and Robinson (1988), report that the motivating factor in the TBLT classroom is that real world needs are addressed.

4.2.3 Tasks enable target language learning

Tasks used in this cycle increased interaction among students and these in sequence made students more motivated and the whole experience was intrinsically interesting and helpful. The suitability of tasks can become a potential factor to motivate learners and in this study, the feasibility of tasks was confirmed by students' performance. It was observed that students learned by doing tasks which required their interaction in order to negotiate meaning and oral communication skills were eventually acquired. This study, similar to Ellis (2006) and Nunan (1989), reports that the purpose behind task-based methodology is to "...create opportunities for language learning through collaborative knowledge building" (p. 97).

4.3 Students' Perceptions about TBLT

The findings from the questionnaire indicate that all these learners (100%) have ranked this approach as extremely important to teaching target language skills. One respondent has stated that this method really helps them learn and such statements clearly show that they all agree that learning speaking skills in English through tasks has taken a positive phase and the whole L2 learning process has started to be enjoyable after the implementation of TBLT. As Willis (1996) points out, well-designed tasks make learners participate in complete interactions and consequently, this increases students' motivation towards language learning. Similarly, this study reveals that integration of tasks which are communicative in nature to teaching such skills has produced an effective outcome.

The data collected from the attitudinal questionnaire reveal that the TBLT approach to teaching oral communication skills in the classroom was well-received and found to be interesting by students. In fact, these students were not used to the TBLT method to learning L2 skills. Quite surprisingly, these participants' responses report that they could realize a change in the classroom atmosphere after the implementation of TBLT. Most of the participants were in contact with the researcher without any hesitation during the task-performance. Apparently, this approach, as Willis (1996) states, provides learners with a comfortable environment for learning oral communication skills, and creates a rapport which is enjoyable for both L2 teachers and learners. Further, the informants' responses, similar to Seedhouse (1999), prove that tasks remove teacher's dominance in the TBLT classroom creating a learner-centered atmosphere, and this enables interactional collaboration among peers which leads to L2 learning. Also, all these students agreed that they benefitted from the implementation of TBLT since this method promoted meaningful authentic communication, one of the key conditions of language learning, among students. These participants, similar to Ellis (2003), claim that meaning-focused tasks promote development of skills which are integrated rather than being taught in isolation.

Also, in the TBLT classroom, language analysis was incorporated only after learners had performed the task and therefore, as these respondents stated, they never felt bored. Swan (2005) referencing many researchers like Prabhu (1987), Nunan (1989), J. Willis (1996) and etc... states "Instructed language learning should primarily involve 'natural' or 'naturalistic' language use, based on activities concerned with meaning rather than language." (p. 377). Similarly, in this study, learners are given opportunities to practice their TL in a natural setting with a meaning-form focus. In the post-task phase, the focus is on the form of language used to perform the task-cycle. Overall, performing task-based activities seems to be helpful in motivating students to learn oral communication skills and seems to have positively affected their attitudes towards English language learning.

5. Conclusions and Implications

This study examines the impact of TBLT on students' classroom performance and how this approach is perceived by them. This section includes a summary of the most important findings followed by some implications drawn from them.

5.1 Oral Communication Skills Through Tasks

The above discussed findings of this research, backed by many studies of linguistic scholars, indicate the effectiveness of task-based lessons in helping students acquire oral communication skills while practicing them in tasks with real life-like situations.

In this TBLT classroom, learners constantly tried out communication strategies in order to complete the task. Precisely, they tried to experiment with what they knew without fear of being corrected by the teacher when an error was made, got feedback from their peers and formulated & reformulated their ideas. In this interactive environment, learners gradually gained confidence to achieve the goals set for the tasks and as a result, the amount of TL used in the classroom increased. Task-based lessons provided students with opportunities to learn how to negotiate, question, respond, and share information using naturalistic language with a sense of accuracy and fluency. The results reveal that a change in teaching methods can bring changes in students too. This approach inspired students better in learning oral communication skills unlike many conventional teaching methods which promote a form-focused theory. With this learner-centered approach, students' autonomy in L2 learning was improved. In this study, TBLT is proved to be effective in motivating students in speech lessons. Tasks with contexts and goals close to real life are powerful because students show interest in what they are familiar with and as Littlewood (1981) claims, such tasks possess both structural and functional values. This inductive way of teaching "Wh" questions seems well received by students.

Hence, findings answer the research questions of this study;

(1) If students improve their oral communication skills after the task-based language teaching approach (TBLT)? yes

(2) How do they perceive this approach to teaching oral communication skills? this approach is well-received by students.

5.2 Speech Thorough TBLT: The Researcher's Context

In the researcher's teaching context, the traditional perception of language learning was a matter of drilling language structures seriously and in isolation. However, these structures as isolated teaching content had not been useful in language teaching & learning. This was the first time that students as participants of a study had the opportunity to learn oral communication skills with the application of tasks. It was observed that students actively took part in these task-based lessons. By the end of the task, students were able to ask and understand questions, interact quite fluently and give extended answers.

TBLT approach is an effective, innovative and practical method to teaching foreign languages and seems feasible when used in teaching speech. Unlike in those conventional approaches to language learning, in this TBLT classroom, even those less confident students became extremely excited. Since they benefitted much from these task-activities, psychological barriers like anxiety, stress and fear are packed away. In this approach, students didn't have a feeling of being forced to speak in the classroom. In fact, they tended to discover language features

themselves rather than being arranged for them. The researcher didn't explain language rules right at the beginning of the lesson, but implied these structures through examples or small reminders given to students during the completion of tasks. This was mainly because tasks provided the opportunity for students to interact with each other and acquire language knowledge naturally: performing a task was similar to doing an ordinary activity in their daily life which required communication.

Findings of this study indicate that due to factors like relaxed environment, group interaction, authentic material, and learner-centeredness, and spontaneous learning, students voluntarily involved in these task-based lessons. The researcher's observation during the lessons witnesses that students were inspired to communicate with friends in class in order to complete the task. One reason which seemed to have motivated students in the TBLT classroom was that they had opportunities to practice authentic language freely. In short, they disliked teacher-centered classrooms where teacher played a dominant role.

The findings challenge the criticisms forwarded by linguistic researchers such as Swan (2005) and Bruton (2002) that TBLT methodology fails as an alternative to many traditional language teaching approaches since this study confirms that TBLT could be one of the most appropriate teaching procedures that help students communicate both accurately and fluently with other speakers of English in real world.

The participants' views about this approach revealed that they had realized the usefulness of communicative skills in helping them organize their tasks. They were receptive to the idea of TBLT while learning English as a second language.

As findings report, students are more motivated with lessons in which interaction and communication are encouraged. An enjoyable learning atmosphere had developed due to this newly implemented method which in turn made a great impact on their L2 learning. On the whole, this approach can be implemented as a different pattern of classroom activity to teaching "Wh" question forms since acquisition of such skills through tasks has taken a positive phase. This study, similar to Prabhu (1987), confirms TBLT methodology as a promising model to teaching L2 skills.

5.3 Pedagogical Implications

On the basis of the findings and conclusions of this research, the researcher would like to suggest few recommendations to future researchers and L2 teachers. These implications will contribute not only to the improvement of students' classroom performance and motivation but also to the teacher's professionalism.

The researcher recommends that ESL and EFL teaching practitioners use TBLT methodology in their classroom, since this enhances learners' accuracy and fluency and will also be helpful in changing their attitudes towards English. Apparently, task-based teaching of oral communication skills requires much serious consideration before action. The researcher insists that the teacher should investigate carefully the current situation before applying it so that practical results can be achieved.

In order to make students actively engage in tasks, teachers should have tasks with a clear outcome and especially provide them with opportunities to show their ability. Therefore, teachers should be careful when choosing materials for their students. It is also recommended that curriculum designers include TBLT in their English textbooks, but they should contain well-designed task-activities because carrying out a variety of tasks influences learners' progress in L2. According to Allwright and Bailey (1991), "...learners can 'switch off'

because they do not like the way the content of their course is presented in the teaching materials.” (p. 162). L2 teachers play a significant role in TBLT procedure. Therefore, the researcher recommends that all language teachers become familiar with this approach. English supervisors can organize pre-service and in-service training programs for teachers in the use of TBLT procedures and principles in their classroom practices. Whenever students were given opportunities to involve in authentic communication, willingness for language learning was observed. Therefore, serious attention should be paid to create situations in which students make progressive use of content learnt through a variety of tasks.

Furthermore, language teachers can spend more time in reflection. This will allow them to think critically on their classroom behavior. They can identify and work on their weaknesses in the classroom as well as building on their strengths. As Wallace (1991) claims, “teachers should be encouraged to become reflective practitioners by reflecting on their professional experience.” (p. 26). in fact, no method is perfect. Teachers should be trained to renew themselves.

Finally, the researcher recommends that future research is essential to investigate the effect of TBLT on developing speaking skills of Sri Lankan undergraduates at different stages. Also, research is essential on the impact of TBLT on developing other language skills.

References

- Allwright, D., & Bailey, K. M. (1991). *Focus on language classroom*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Arnold, L. (1981). *Communicative language teaching: An introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Batstone, R. (2012). Language form, task-based language teaching, and the classroom context. *ELT Journal*, 66(4), 459-467.
- Bruton, A. (2002). From tasking purposes to purposing tasks. *English Language Teaching Journal*, 56(3), 280-88.
- Bygate, P. (1996). Effects of task repetition: Appraising the developing language of learners. In J. Willis & D. Willis (Eds.), *Challenge and change in language teaching* (136-146). Oxford: Heinemann.
- Clyne, M. (1994). *Intercultural communication at work*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Doughty, C. J., & Long, M. H. (2008). *The handbook of second language acquisition*. New Jersey: Blackwell Publishing.
- Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, R. (2006). Current issues in the teaching of grammar: An SLA perspective. *TESOL Quarterly*, 40(1), 83-107.
- Ellis, R. (2009). The methodology of task-based teaching. *Asian Journal of English Language Teaching*, 11(5), 79-100.
- Fotos, S., & Ellis, R. (1991). Communicating about grammar: A task-based approach. *TESOL Quarterly*, 25(4), 605-628.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1978). *Language as social semiotic: The social interpretation of language and meaning*. London: Edward.
- Jeon, I. J., & Hahn, J. W. (2006). Exploring EFL teachers' Perceptions of task-based language teaching: A case study of Korean secondary school classroom practice'. *Asian EFL Journal*, 8, 123-139.
- Littlewood, W. (1981). *Communicative language teaching: An introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nunan, D. (1989). *Designing tasks for the communicative classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nunan, D. (1991). Communicative tasks and the language curriculum. *TESOL Quarterly*, 25(2), 279-295.
- Nunan, D. (2001). Aspects of task-based syllabus design. Available from <http://www3.telus.net/linguisticsissues/syllabusdesign.html> [Accessed on 26th of September 2012].
- Richards, J. C. (2006). *Communicative language teaching today*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Seedhouse, P. (1999). Task-based interaction. *ELT Journal*, 53(3), 149-156.
- Skehan, P. (1998). *A cognitive approach to language learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Skehan, P. (2003). Task-based instruction. *Language Teaching*, 36(1), 1-14.
- Swan, M. (2005). Legislation by hypothesis: The case of task-based instruction. *Applied Linguistics*, 26(3), 376-401.
- Wallace, M. J. (1991). *Training foreign language teachers: A reflective approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Willis, J. (1996). *Framework for task-based learning*. UK: Longman Publications.
- Willis, D., & Willis, J. (2007). *Doing task-based teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Appendix

Focus on What/When/Where/Who/Which/How & Why

Table 1 (A= accurate / B= inaccurate)

Lesson 1 & 4—Results of the pre-tasks & post-tasks (Group-1)

'Wh' question form	No. of students & percentage total(30)				Examples Inaccurate (I) & Accurate (A) constructions
	pre-task1		post-task 4		
(I) When	25	83%	11	37%	Pre - When studied you school? Main - When you joined new job?
(A) When	5	15%	19	63%	Post - When did you join the new job?
(I) What	23	77%	12	40%	Pre - What you are studying/What your favorite sport? Main - What she study/What her favorite fruit is?
(A) What	7	23%	18	60%	Post - What does she study?
(I) How	27	90%	15	50%	Pre - How are old/How go to classes? Main - How are old you/How you pay for your classes?
(A) How	3	10%	15	50%	Post - How old are you?
(I) Where	28	93%	16	53%	Pre - Where attend your school? Main - Where I married?
(A) Where	2	7%	14	47%	Post - Where did you go?
(I) Which	30	100%	20	67%	Pre - Which faculty from your? Main - Which country from your favorite actor?
(A) Which	0	0%	10	33%	Post - Which country are you from?
(I) Why	24	80%	16	53%	Pre - Why engineering studying you favorite? Main - Why you wearing spectacles?
(A) Why	6	20%	14	47%	Post - Why do you wear spectacles?
(I) Who	25	83%	17	57%	Pre - Who meals your preparing? Main - Who your clothes sew?
(A) Who	5	17%	13	43%	Post - Who comes to visit you?

Table 2

Lesson 1 & 4—Results of the main & post-tasks (Group-2)

'Wh' question form	No. of students & percentage-total (30)				Examples
	pre-task	post-task	pre-task1	post-task 4	
(I) When	24	80%	10	33%	Pre - When did marry you? Main - When she did quit job?
(A) When	6	20%	20	67%	Post - When did she quit her job?
(I) What	22	73%	12	40%	Pre- What are you playing? Main - What do you writing?
(A) What	8	27%	18	60%	Post - What do you write?
(I) How	26	87%	16	53%	Pre - How old you are/How do your going home? Main- How old he is /How does she washing clothes?
(A) How	4	13%	14	47%	Post - How old is he?
(I) Where	25	83%	14	47%	Main - Where do you wanted going? Main - Where did he go play?
(A) Where	5	17%	16	53%	Post - Where did he go to play?
(I) Which	29	97%	17	57%	Pre - Which country from you are? Main - Which university does like?
(A) Which	1	3%	13	43%	Post - Which university do you like?
(I) Why	27	90%	16	53%	Pre - Why do like you green? Main - Why do you liked you mother?
(A) Why	3	10%	14	47%	Post - Why do you like your mother?
(I) Who	28	93%	18	60%	Pre - Who teaching English at school? Main - Who cooking meals you at home?
(A) Who	2	7%	12	40%	Post - Who cooks meals for you at home?