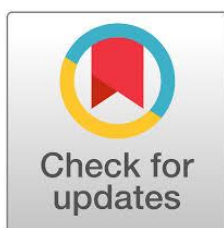


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Task-Based Activities to Improve Oral Communication Skills in Adult Learners

María Belén Detken Landázuri^{*1}, María Rossana Ramírez-Ávila²,
Carlos Humberto Chancay Cedeño¹

¹Universidad Técnica de Manabí, Ecuador

²Graduate School, Faculty of the Master program, Universidad Casa Grande, Ecuador

^{*}Corresponding author email: mdetken6387@utm.edu.ec

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Abstract

In-service teachers in an online course had problems interacting in English. They experienced negative feelings when they had to perform orally. Thus, this action research study with qualitative and quantitative data analysis aimed to apply task-based activities to improve spoken interaction. The sample was twenty-five in-service teachers. Their level of English was A2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference. Their ages ranged between thirty and fifty. The participants were teachers from different public schools on the Coast of Ecuador. Pre and post-tests were applied to compare participants' performance from the beginning and after the intervention. Findings disclosed that the mean raised from 17.72 to 19.12, and $p < 0.000$ is interpreted as the results are statistically significant and task-based activities improve students' speaking performance. In-service teachers showed that as their confidence increased in their oral performance, their frustration and anxiety were reduced. Lastly, participants commented that they replicated some task-based activities in their classes. The implications of this study involve other English teachers, EFL researchers, and students who want to apply the same strategy in their teaching and learning process.

Keyword: adult learning; EFL; interaction; speaking skills; task-based activities

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Introduction

In the educational context, English is considered the universal language, and speaking is difficult to develop (Beltrán, 2017). English serves the objective of international communication, as Rao (2019) expressed. Thus, mastering communication skills is the most valuable aspect of the modern EFL context (Hanifa, 2018). Integrated performance drives communication with native and non-native English speakers, so speaking skills must be developed alongside other skills (writing, reading, and listening).

One means of communication is speaking. It can be one of the most challenging skills, especially in adults. These challenges may appear due to affective, cognitive, or performance factors (Hanifa, 2018), and the complexity of the interaction of these factors results in frustration and boredom negatively. Unlike listening, reading, and writing, speaking skills are in higher demand in the competitive world (Vellayan et al., 2020, cited in Santhanasamy & Yunus, 2022).

According to Cuitiño et al. (2019), being able to communicate is one of the objectives in the community of people learning a new language. Learning to communicate is mastering grammar and using that knowledge to express feelings and ideas verbally. Interaction can be a venue for communication; there is a great impact on students' learning process when there is interaction and when their expectations are set according to objectives (Cuitiño et al., 2019). In addition, Figueroa and Intriago (2022) mentioned that when users speak, they transmit a message, which could be taught through active dialogues. Therefore, role-playing can help produce better speaking outcomes in an environment that provides opportunities to engage in different contexts and social roles (Ding, 2018).

Most of the articles investigated have focused on children and adolescents, and few or no studies have considered adult participants (Araujo, 2018). Teaching adults differs from teaching children or adolescents due to their prior knowledge. Additionally, feelings of shame or lack of confidence could be a reason for them to find the learning process difficult to accept. Another difference is that, in some way, adults need to learn a new language; it may be because of their work or because they may have to travel (Ramírez-Sosa & Peña-Estrada, 2022).

As a result of the lack of research on how to teach speaking skills to adults, a gap exists in educational programs. UNESCO (2023) showed that literacy in young adults has been increasing over the years, so it is important to consider them for the acquisition of the English language. Participants in this study had trouble communicating verbally in English. They do not have courses or a teaching curriculum that focuses on speaking.

Hence, this article raised the possibility of improving their speaking fluency through task-based activities. In this regard, Gil (2019) explained that task-based instruction is a field of CLT (Communicative et al.). Its main objective is to ask students to participate meaningfully using the target language. Peña and Onatra (2009) expressed that task-based learning is useful for balancing between doing well and feeling good about using the target language. Consequently, by doing this, students will feel comfortable with their knowledge and pronunciation. Rao (2019) noted that there is a major dilemma centered on the problem of task-based activities for teaching speaking to adolescents and young adults. This investigation explores the following research question: To what extent will task-based activities improve adults' speech fluency?

Literature Review

Some Considerations about Teaching Adults

Two concepts have been developed in EFL: learning and acquiring a new language. Castillo et al. (2023) stated that people *acquire* a language when they understand messages. In other words, if students can comprehend and use the vocabulary and grammar in the messages, their spoken ideas will be more understandable and fruitful in daily practice. Dahlstrom (2020) mentioned that people *learn* a new language by studying it consciously and knowing how it works and its rules and principles. One way to evidence that students are conscious is when they produce; for example, when working on written or oral tasks.

When adults learn a new language, they go through many factors: motivation, attitude, and cognition. Naumčiuk (2023) highlighted that some elements that allow the acquisition of a new language are affective and cognitive commitments. Teachers should implement these elements when planning their lessons so that students are engaged and are more likely to participate.

Ricardo et al. (2023) expressed that language acquisition differs between children and adults because adults can access prior or innate knowledge. In addition, Naumčiuk (2023) indicated that adults and advanced learners are more predisposed to use language learning strategies than younger learners. Teachers engage students and upgrade their proficiency by creating programs, curricula, books, and activities with a methodology that helps them acquire the vocabulary better. The teacher's efforts encourage them to achieve their goals.

Teachers of adult students must be confident in their knowledge. Pereddo (2020) expressed that Ecuadorian English teachers are more confident when exposed to speaking activities and task-based instruction, which reduces their anxiety. In addition, Heymo and Danna (2019) encouraged students to interact with their peers to be active in classes, use the target language more, improve, and practice it. Ferrando (2017) advised that teachers should design a variety of activities in English that motivate students to learn, and this can increase their self-esteem.

Motivation helps adults be willing to learn English, improving the learning process. Álvarez and Rojas (2021) redefined that *motivation* when learning any language is, without a doubt, the basis and driving force of learning (p. 2). The same authors have demonstrated that task-based activities facilitate understanding in oral ability. A related topic of motivation is the affective filter. Lessard-Clouston (2018) assured that students are blocked from any input if the affective filter is high. Students will not continue learning if they feel uncomfortable or nervous or have self-esteem problems. As a result, a high-affective filter prevents any student from learning, while a low-affective filter does the opposite.

Task-Based Activities

According to López and Velásquez (2022), task-based activities have been evolving to the present day. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has been labeled as one of the most effective and long-lasting approaches to learning a second language. Mejía et al. (2023) stated that "The Task-Based Learning approach is fundamentally focused on carrying out tasks set by the teacher so that students can distinguish specific objectives of the target language, which is intentionally introduced" (p. 55), which means that the activities have a perceived purpose and a clear outcome. Poma (2019) added that task-based activities aim to allow students to use language in a real context. In the same discussion, Nickerson (2021) highlighted that favorable learning and

performance result from the synergy between different aspects of task demands, such as the level and condition of the task.

Task-based instruction creates many opportunities for students to engage in classroom activities (Pham & Do, 2021). Ha et al. (2021) stated that implementing the task-based instruction approach means parts of the methodology that use high-level technology in language acquisition with effective results in the teaching process. Thus, all electronic devices provide functions and gadgets that support and complement tasks.

Castillo et al. (2023) said that to develop confidence in students, talking to them is necessary to help their personal growth. Nget et al. (2020) detailed that task-based language teaching is an approach that engages learners in productive and interactive communication to improve their performance. The same authors added that implementing this type of learning entails some challenges, such as the teacher's knowledge of this way of teaching and the lack of language precision. In addition, they show different types of tasks, such as ordering, comparing, and solving problems, among others.

Poma (2019) considered that the task-based learning process has phases; these are the pre-task phase (before the task), the task phase (during the task), and the post-task phase (after the task). Furthermore, the author explained five parts of an activity: goal or goals, input, procedure, roles (of the participants), and scenario. The researcher and the authorities can ensure teachers plan effective learning activities by following these parts. This author argued that collaborative learning is very important so teachers can use small groups to proceed with the activities. From another perspective, Barandica (2023) advised that teachers should plan their classes thinking about the type of students, scenario, and topic, among others.

Speaking

Being able to express themselves orally is considered one of the main linguistic skills essential for English teachers to develop when they are not native speakers since their inadequate development limits their teaching (Criollo-Vargas et al., 2022). According to Garro (2019), speaking is one of the four skills required in the communication process of any language worldwide. It consists of producing sounds and systematic verbal statements to transmit meaning. Pérez et al. (2022) described that students practice a particular linguistic pattern through speaking. The same authors indicate that to have a successful conversation, students

need to become good listeners. Students' oral performance requires time and cooperation between students and teachers. Dávila and Barrera (2023) assured that EFL students can use the language during an active conversation.

The ability to speak is beneficial for students when they undergo strict selection in job interviews (Rao, 2019). Likewise, the same author said that there are three types of speaking situations these are interactive (phone calls and face-to-face conversations, among others), partially interactive (speeches), and non-interactive (recordings, videos). Regardless of its importance, this skill has not been given its significance; activities such as memorizing dialogues have been carried out for years (Göktürk et al., 2020). Furthermore, a major problem in education is the lack of English teachers with good communication in this language (Rao, 2019).

Acquiring this skill is difficult because students fear making mistakes or cannot plan their speech (Göktürk et al., 2020). In Ecuador, the teachers and EFL students participating in this study experience different limitations in the educational system. Most teachers focus on instructions rather than practical use of the language (López et al., 2021). They also explained that in teaching oral skills, the teacher plays a role in contributing to students' achievement during oral activities. In addition, the same authors expressed that teachers are the ones who impact student's success in speaking, so they must improve their teaching. Hence, this study aimed to analyze how task-based activities can help and reinforce oral skills in adult learners of a foreign language.

Method

Action research was implemented to determine improvement in students' speaking performance. The study posed this research question: To what extent will task-based activities improve adults' speech fluency? Quantitative and qualitative measurements were applied to understand the results. Data was triangulated for the interpretation and a comprehensive evaluation of the measurable outcomes and the experiences of the participants in this study.

Description of Participants

This study was conducted in Ecuador's online English teaching program from June 8, 2020, to December 23, 2020. Participants were twenty-five in-service teachers from different public schools on the Coast of Ecuador. A few of them (three in total) had an English teacher's

degree, others (twelve) had a Spanish teacher's degree, and the rest (ten) did not have any degree related to education. Their ages ranged between 30 and 50 years. There were twenty women and five men. They were part of this online English course's first group of students. Their English level was A2.2, determined through a placement test (International Test of English Proficiency, Boston Educational Service). Most enjoyed participating in communicative activities but were sometimes afraid to speak out loud. They tended to feel more confident when they had to do written activities.

Data Collection

To answer the first research question: To what extent will task-based activities improve adults' speech fluency? A pre and post-test design was applied. It was a speaking task. The group was arranged into three random students when the teacher administered the test. While the teacher evaluated the students in one group, the rest worked on reinforcement activities.

A questionnaire was sent to participants (Appendix 1). Students had one question and one minute to answer it; if they were uncomfortable, they could ask the evaluator to change it. This questionnaire was delivered mid-semester and at the end of the level. They had five topics that were covered throughout the quarter.

The pre and post-tests were graded using a speaking rubric with the following criteria: Content and Communication, Fluency, Accuracy, and Pronunciation. Each criterion was divided into scores; the lowest was 3 points, and the highest was 5 points (Appendix 2). The rubric was adapted from the one provided by the textbook. This rubric was shown to different experts in educational training so that they could analyze it and give their opinions. Feedback from other educators to improve the rubric was: Define the purpose of the rubric, provide clear descriptions of the characteristics of the work associated with each component of speaking skill, clearly specify the indicators and criteria for each level of performance, evaluate and articulate specific components and expectations of the rubric. The rubric was improved accordingly.

Pedagogical Design

The focus of the project was to promote oral interaction using task-based activities. The set of tasks to reach the goal was applied during the whole process. The activities were chosen and modified from the Ecuadorian Board of Education modules for the English teaching area of A2 level. The project sought to enhance oral interaction and provide a structured, curriculum-

aligned approach to language development by incorporating task-based learning from the Board of Education modules.

The tasks were carefully selected to encourage active participation, collaboration, and practical application of language skills. The focus was on linguistic aspects and on fostering meaningful communication. Participants engaged in various activities that involved real-life scenarios, discussions, role-playing, and problem-solving exercises. These tasks aimed to create a dynamic and interactive learning environment and promote the development of oral communication skills.

Additionally, ongoing observations and feedback were collected throughout the process to assess the effectiveness of the tasks in achieving the intended outcomes. This feedback loop allowed adjustments and refinements to be made to the tasks, ensuring continuous improvement and alignment with the participants' needs.

Findings

Participants in this study had very high expectations regarding their ability to speak English fluently and accurately in the target language. At first, in a brief interview with the whole group, they said that they felt they could not speak correctly and fluently when teaching. Furthermore, some explained that they could not teach oral expression and that most of their classes were Spanish. They realized that lack of vocabulary and lack of other people to practice the target language were some of the problems. They had no awareness of their English proficiency or self-confidence in speaking English, meaning they could not communicate assertively using the target language. The teachers had an A2.2 then and were concerned about their pronunciation and accent. Due to this, these teachers could not teach English as a complete language; their strengths were writing and grammar, and their classes focused on grammar.

The evaluation was conducted in small groups, with three participants per group, where they were given a question to answer. These questions were about general knowledge. The goal of asking a single question to the group was to get them to discuss or use the other person's ideas and improve them.

Table 1. Student's perception of their English Proficiency Levels before the placement test*Source: Authors' collection*

	CEFR English Speaking Proficiency Level	Entry level %	Current level (%)
Beginner	A1	25	0
	A2	74	95
Intermediate	B1	1	3
	B2	0	2

The data in Table 1 shows the students' perception of themselves related to the CEFR English Speaking Proficiency Level before they got the results from the evaluation. Analyzing the table, the entry-level group, 74% recognized their level as high beginner, 25% of the students perceived themselves as a low beginner, and only 1% as low intermediate.

Subsequently, after the evaluations based on the Board of Education indicators were analyzed, the current level was 95% determined as high beginner, 3% as low intermediate, and 2% as high intermediate.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics*Source: Authors' collection*

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Pretest	25	16	20	17.72	1.10
Mid-test	25	17	20	18.60	0.96
Posttest	25	17	20	19.12	0.88

Table 2 shows the scores from the first, mid and post-tests. In the pretest, the mean was the lowest of the study and represented students' A2 level. Students felt more stressed and nervous in the speaking section of the evaluation than in the other skills because these questions needed to be answered using the vocabulary and grammar they knew at the moment of the evaluation.

In the mid-test, the mean score improves by 0.88 points. They were more fluent in their answers and kept up in a short conversation. Students felt stressed and nervous in this evaluation, but not as much as in the first because they started to get used to this evaluation format. They recalled what they had learned during the first stage of the program. They already knew what to expect from this part of the set of activities of the evaluation.

The post-test results show higher scores, and the standard deviation is the smallest of the three tests, which means the results were closer to the mean. The result indicates that the task-based activities helped increase their vocabulary, grammar, listening comprehension, and speaking. For the third evaluation, most students felt confident with their knowledge and had some notes from the previous activities with vocabulary and grammar to respond better. This activity was carried out like the previous ones, in small groups, three random students and one question.

Normality tests were run to select the *t*-test and determine if the results were statistically significant. Kolmogorov-Smirnov results for the three tests is $<.002$, which means the data is non-normally distributed; non-parametric tests must be used to compare the pre and post-test results. Non-parametric tests (Wilcoxon) resulted in $p<0.000$. The result means that the data is statistically significant and task-based activities improve students' speaking performance.

During classes, participants commented that they had also been applying some of the activities with their students, helping them develop their basic English skills. They also realized which activities were best for their classes. The researcher advised them to become better teachers and improve their skills by educating themselves and reviewing the topics to reinforce their knowledge.

Although the task-based activities were new to the group of students, it was demonstrated that the topic learned in this way helped participants improve their English communication skills. Error correction in a controlled environment also assisted participants in their learning. Some stated that these activities were difficult to complete initially, but they managed to do so.

Throughout the learning process, students in the program were encouraged to speak, asking them questions related to the topic or letting them explain the topic in another way if there were students who could not understand the activity. This activity increased trust among them. Because all participants are in-service teachers, every time someone asks a question, the

instructor lets one or two of them try to answer it. Besides, if the teacher's explanation was insufficient, participants could explain the topic or question in another way, using the target language.

Discussion

This study aimed to implement task-based activities to improve speaking ability through oral interaction in in-service teachers. Regarding the research question, to what extent will task-based activities improve adults' speech fluency? There was a significant improvement in adults' speech fluency by applying task-based activities. The result was in line with López and Velásquez (2022), who stated that task-based language teaching (TBLT) has been considered one of the most useful and meaningful approaches to learning a foreign language. The results of Table 2 have considerably demonstrated the success of implementing task-based activities in improving speaking ability in adult learners. The goal was achieved as the candidates improved their communication skills and listening comprehension.

The teacher-researchers roles in this study impacted students' learning results because they enhanced their teaching. It is notable in the words of Dávila and Barrera (2023), who assured that the teacher is the one who contributes to the success of the student's oral performance, contributing with effective guidance in the learning process.

Mejía et al. (2023) stated that educators should design a variety of meaningful tasks that allow students to improve their self-esteem while learning. As proposed, in this study, participants felt confident speaking using activities learned in the program that helped students' professional growth while reinforcing their knowledge and interaction with others.

Sánchez (2023) emphasized that motivation is essential for learning a second language, increasing or decreasing student performance depending on its application. Students in this study were motivated to speak because of the teacher's input during the speaking activities. The teacher provided flexible and interactive classroom resources that the students felt in a familiar learning environment. It facilitates the understanding and appropriate use of this methodology with the students.

Regarding the second research question, what is the students' perspective towards these activities? The data found coincided with the study by Quevedo (2023), who mentioned that the student's affective and cognitive commitment are the main factors that enable the acquisition of

a new language. Likewise, in this study, students concluded that task-based activities benefited them due to their high expectations in improving their level of oral expression with great achievements in their fluency and accuracy scores.

The students also found this strategy beneficial because they could better communicate their ideas by developing interpersonal relationships with their classmates, encouraging critical thinking in the students. According to Heymo and Danna (2019), it is essential to encourage interaction with peers due to the satisfactory conditions for acquiring a language. In addition to being more active in class, they will become more familiar with the rest of their classmates, improving and practicing what they have learned in the target language and fostering a pleasant learning environment.

On the other hand, participants mentioned that they felt they could not speak adequately and fluently when teaching their classes at the beginning of the study. They felt insecure and did not trust communicating in the target language due to their pronunciation and accent problems. Rao (2019) supported this statement by stating that the lack of English teachers with adequate knowledge of communication in the foreign language reflects a great concern in the educational process.

In addition, some students showed frustration, stress, and nervousness while applying the study. They could not hold a short conversation without feeling those negative obstacles during the learning process. As highlighted by Lessard-Clouston (2018), the affective filter increases in students because they feel uncomfortable or nervous while learning a language, blocking any input into the acquisition process. Understandably, students have experienced such situations during the application of this study; however, their perspectives changed with the knowledge acquired through the strategy, consolidating its results into positive ones.

Conclusion and Implication

To conclude, the strategy of task-based activities to improve oral skills in adult learners was satisfactory and useful because the students improved their quality of English communication by applying meaningful TBLT activities to achieve the study's objective. It proved positive results as this application encourages active interaction, cooperation, and student

collaboration. It becomes appropriate and significant in capturing students' attention and cognitive development in a meaningful virtual learning environment.

The study impacted students' learning since they improved their oral production and reported replicating this strategy in their daily classes. Furthermore, since the participants applied a wide range of TBLT activities, they were conscious to recognize their strengths and weaknesses in their speaking ability.

The teacher-researcher documented students' reactions and attitudes toward their perspectives of the strategy, noting their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors during the study process. Some participants indicated having some pronunciation and communication difficulties. The intervention allowed identifying individual needs to adjust the strategies and activities accordingly and achieve the study's objective.

Some limitations arose when applying the study. Some students had difficulties using technology, internet access, lack of devices or resources, and low learning predisposition to use the strategy. This situation could affect the reliability of the study. For subsequent studies, it is recommended to replicate the intervention in face-to-face classes.

Overall, this study contributed to the English as a Foreign Language field, specifically improving oral performance in a group of learners (in-service teachers). No studies were found in the search of sources that reported studies related to this type of participant. Thus, this study intends to fill that gap and provide ideas for trainers of trainers.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire

Questions for the speaking evaluation	
1	Which is the most interesting story from different countries that you know?
2	Explain an important invention and what did it change.
3	What do you think will be the most iconic future invention?
4	What is your favorite Ecuadorian myth, and why?
5	Which Ecuadorian myth do you think is true and why?

Appendix 2

Rubric

Purpose: To assess A2 students' spoken performance in an online course.

Criteria/Points	5 pts.	4 pts.	3 pts.
Content and communication	Fully talks about the question.	Appropriate response	Brief or inappropriate response
Fluency	Speaks in longer coherent ideas	Speaks in shorter, understandable ideas.	Brief, speaks phrases or incomplete ideas.
Accuracy	Uses an appropriate level of grammar and vocabulary	Uses some appropriate grammar and word choice.	Uses limited grammar and vocabulary.
Pronunciation	The delivery is understandable.	The delivery is usually understandable.	The delivery is difficult to understand.