

# **Perception Of Electrical Engineering UTM Students On Task-Based Speaking Activities In Fostering Students Communication In English**

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**Abstract :** One of the main issues in second language learning is ESL learners who are less proficient in the language opt to avoid speaking in English language classes. This study was done using a questionnaire survey on electrical engineering students of Universiti Teknologi Malaysia and focused on the students' perspectives on task-based speaking activities in fostering their communication in English. This study also seeks to find out which types of task-based speaking activities that highly promotes their communication in English. The types of task-based speaking activities are problem-solving, information-gap, and sharing personal experience or feelings. Results showed that most of the students agreed that task-based speaking activities improve their communication in English as it offers the students opportunities to practice the language in English classes. The findings also identified the types task-based speaking activities that most promotes their communication in English. Several suggestions are provided for future application in ESL classes.

*Keywords :* perception students, task-based speaking, fostering students

## **Introduction**

Communication is essential because effective communication helps a speaker to express idea clearly. Language learners have to practice the target language as an alternative to master the language. To be able to communicate in English is an advantage for Malaysians especially for students in the tertiary education. This is because English proficiency possessed by students will be an aid in the teaching and learning process.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Minister of Human Resources said that the government had done the very best to help unemployed graduates. This includes providing 50,000 people with retraining programs in information technology, English proficiency and other skills since 2001 and 96 percent of them were Malays.

Widdowson (1979) stated that the problem lies in students even though they were given formal English education; they still remain deficient in the language. In fact, they are unable to use it in normal communication and understand its use. The beginning of the unemployed graduates low proficiency in English starts at schools. Their refusal to use English in their daily conversation led them to have little oral practice in the target language. This situation shows that they do not seize the opportunities given to practice the language in English classes. Some learners might find speaking English in front of the class is very intimidating. Consequently, some of them are reluctant to speak in English. It means that, regardless of how many English classes they have attended, if they do not practice the language, they will not be able to improve their communication skills as well as their self-confidence.

Task-based speaking activities can be a platform for learners to start practice their communication in the English language. Task-based speaking activities which were usually conducted in pair work or group work can make learners to communicate easily. Roman (2006)

stated that people learn effectively from each other. These could occur in task-based speaking activities because learners learn from each other and they practice their speaking skills. He also claimed one skill that impresses people is good speaking skills and it comes with endless practice.

Given the nature of task-based speaking activities which draws language learners' attention on the completion of tasks rather than language functions, it is hoped that learners could improve their proficiency in English. In particular, the activities focused in this study were information-gap, problem-solving and sharing personal experience or feelings.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To determine whether task-based speaking activities promote students' communication in English language classroom.
2. To identify the types of task-based speaking activities which encourage students to communicate in English.

### **Significance of the Study**

Good grades in written examinations do not guarantee proficiency or fluency in using the language. This can be seen through learners' ability to use the language in speaking. The ability to communicate in English is very crucial for students especially for those who will be involved in areas where English language is highly needed for their future professions. In task-based speaking activities, learners will engage in pair work or group work to complete the assigned tasks and this will develop their speaking skills. It also further encourages the students use of English language for both personal and professional needs.

The findings of this research could benefit the followings:

#### **1. UTM undergraduates**

UTM students with problems communicating in English could make use of task-based speaking activities as one way to improve their speaking skills. Self-awareness on the importance of English could be improved and more students would grab the opportunities given to practice the language. These students could be made aware that by engaging in task-based speaking activities, they can actually practice and improve their speaking competencies. Task-based speaking activities could increase their self-confidence in using the language. Self-confidence is a form of motivation which acts as a catalyst in language learning. In addition, they will know the relevance to communicate in English in the ESL classrooms

#### **2. School teachers**

English teachers can make use of task-based speaking activities in their ESL classroom. The findings could provide them alternatives to help learners in improving their communication through TBSA. By implementing task-based speaking activities in school at an earlier stage, it could provide the students exposure to the practical rather than the theoretical part of learning English. In addition, they could exploit task-based speaking activities for their own benefit as extra classroom activities or as a variation of their teaching approach.

#### **3. Universiti Teknologi Malaysia**

Faculties in UTM could organize programmes or courses with task-based speaking activities particularly in English. Such programmes or courses could prepare students to attend job interviews in the future. It can also improve their English and allow learners to

be aware that task-based speaking activities could also involve the integration of language skills such as writing.

### **Research Design**

The researcher used a questionnaire survey. A set of questionnaire was designed and distributed to 30 respondents. The questionnaire was chosen because it is cost effective and easy to administer. In addition, questionnaire is useful to protect the privacy of the respondents and it is easy to administer. Hence, it is useful when eliciting personal behaviour of the respondents. It can also reduce respondents biasness when giving feedback (Brien, 1997).

Questionnaire is also easier to analyze compared to other method of data collection such as interviews and observations. Quantitative data gained can be analyzed and presented in the form of tables and charts. It is also less intrusive compared to face-to-face interviews because questionnaire requires more of the personal thoughts from the part of the respondents.

### **Respondents of Study**

This research used the convenience sampling method. The respondents of this study were second year students from the Faculty of Electrical Engineering, UTM. They were chosen because they were enrolled for the Advanced English for Academic Communication (UHB 2422) course in Semester II 2007/2008. The total number of students enrolled for this course was 68 students. The researcher selected one class of 30 students as respondents of this study.

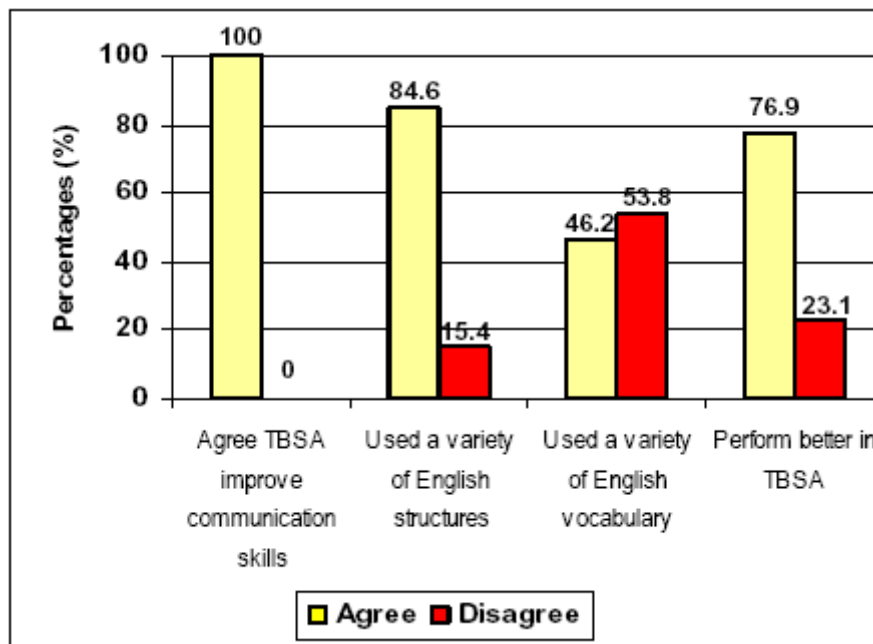
The researcher selected respondents from UHB 2422 course as this course has been identified to have elements of the three types of TBSA focused in this study. The three types of TBSA are problem-solving, information-gap, and sharing personal experience or feelings. In the UHB 2422 course, respondents were exposed on how to conduct a research. From the topics taken from UHB 2422 course outline (Appendix C), the researcher deduced that the respondents encountered the elements of TBSA in the UHB 2422 class. The followings were the tasks that involved the three types of TBSA;

### **Pilot Study**

A pilot study was conducted to ascertain the respondents understanding of the items. During the implementation of the pilot study, three respondents from the Faculty of Electrical Engineering were selected randomly and asked to respond to the questionnaire. They were allowed to write comments or circle any ambiguous statements. This was to identify the specific items or mistakes that occurred in the questionnaire so the statements can be refined to be used in the actual study. It can also help the researcher to confirm the clarity of the items. Some improvements and adaptations were made to the questionnaire to ensure it is relevant with the objectives of the research.

### **Data Analysis**

In order for English language learners to be able to communicate well in the target language, they need to practice the language. The extent of the improvement in English through participation in TBSA is illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1** Improve English Speaking Skills through Task-based Speaking Activities

Figure 1 reveals the percentages of how the respondents can improve their speaking skills in English. For item, “I use a wide range of English vocabulary when communicating with my partner/ in groups.” 46.2 percent of the respondents agreed that they were actually using a wide variety of English vocabulary when communicating in TBSA. Interestingly, for item “I agree that using English in class during PW/ GW helps to improve my communication skills.”, all (100 percent) the respondents believed that participating in TBSA help to improve their communication skills. While 84.6 percent of the respondents agreed that they used a variety of English structures and 76.9 percent of them agreed that they perform better in TBSA.

This findings highlights that TBSA can improve the respondents English speaking skills. A possible explanation for this is TBSA do not limit the use of English in class compared to a specific structured task which could be focusing on a particular language function or vocabulary area. Hence, the students ought to use various English structures. This results is similar to Pica, Kanagy and Falodun (1993) who asserted that tasks should be different from what any other typical classroom activities. The agreement to the statements where the students were able to use a wide variety of English vocabulary (46.2 percent) and English structures (84.6 percent) attest the conclusion mentioned earlier. In fact, one of the respondents stated,

*“Task based activities definitely (definitely) will improve my English and also help my fellow friends who are (does) not very fluent in English. It will encourage them to speak in English thus, improve their English.”*

It can be summarized from the response that the respondents agreed TBSA help to improve their communication skills. Another respondent specified that Malay students can improve their communication skills through TBSA as mentioned in the following response,

*“...can improve our Malay students (student) in English.”*

Although TBSA do help the respondents to improve their communication skills, it still requires effort from the part of the learners. They have to try speaking in English and not just participate in the TBSA per se. This is supported by a response given from one of the respondents,

*“Task-based speaking surely can more or less improve our level of English (English proficiency level) as long as we speak English.”*

TBSA is also a fun way to improve the respondents communication skills. This is approved by a respondent with the response,

*“Speaking activities among student will help them to communicate better (the great communication on them). It is fun and we can (will fun and) learn English at the same time.”*

Apart from improving respondents English vocabulary and English structures, they also agreed that TBSA help them to perform better in English classes. This corroborates the findings of Fotos (1998) that those who interacted in groups when completing a tasks, outperformed those who did not interact at all. Students can sometimes be passive in class, thus TBSA could enhance their participation and interaction through classroom tasks. This is because if they perform better in groups, they will also have the confidence in using the English language. According to a respondent,

*“PW/ GW are (is) important to improve the English proficiency level. It is good to give me more confident.”*

Another respondent agreed that TBSA enhanced students confidence in using English. As one of the respondents stated,

*“PW/ GW give me more confidence (confident) to student to speak in English.”*

In brief, this section illustrates how task-based speaking activities foster students communication in English namely by providing ample opportunities to practice English speaking skills and improving their communication skills as suggested by Stone (1991).

## **Conclusion**

This study focused on task-based speaking activities (TBSA) in fostering students communication in English. Primary data were collected by randomly distributing questionnaires to 30 second year students of Faculty of Electrical Engineering, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. Out of thirty questionnaires that were distributed, four questionnaires were incomplete and as a result this study was analysed based on 26 questionnaires. To reiterate, the main objectives of this study were to determine whether task-based speaking activities promote students' communication in the English language classroom and to identify the types of task-based speaking activities which encourage students to communicate in the English language.

Several conclusions can be drawn based on the findings of the study:

1. Task-based speaking activities do foster students communication in English by providing opportunities for the students to practice their speaking skills.

2. Task-based speaking activities also improve the students speaking skills by reactivating their knowledge of English vocabulary and English structures.
3. Students with low level of proficiency in English participate in TBSA during English classes and were not intimidated by their low level of proficiency.
4. Problem-solving is the most preferred type of TBSA that encourages the students to participate and use English in the English language classes.

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