

# INVESTIGATING THE USE OF SPEAKING TASKS IN ENGLISH CLASSES AT LE QUY DON GIFTED HIGH SCHOOL IN NHA TRANG

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**Abstract:** The current study investigates the types of speaking tasks used in grade 11 classes at Le Quy Don Gifted High School. The data of research were collected by means of classroom observations, questionnaires and interviews. The teachers' use of tasks was documented through classroom observations and their difficulties in tasks implementation were explored through questionnaires and interviews. The data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The overall findings show that the commonly used tasks are 'ask and answer questions', 'work in pairs to make a dialogue', 'talk about personal experiences', and 'arrange information'. Additionally, the teachers reported large class sizes, students' low confidence, students' mixed proficiency level as major obstacles in their task implementation..

**Keywords:** Tasks, speaking skills.

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

A considerable body of research has focused on how task design or manipulating task characteristics influences language learning (Adams & Ross-Feldman, 2008; Bygate, 2016; García Mayo & Azkarai, 2016; Kuiken & Vedder, 2012; Robinson, 2011). However, how teachers use tasks in their actual classrooms and what task types they use has largely been neglected. Nguyen, Newton and Crabbe (2018) explore how teachers used textbook tasks in EFL classrooms, but do not address students' perspective. Jeon and Hahn (2006) carried out research on task-based language teaching (TBLT) at a Korean secondary school. The results indicated that TBLT positively affected students' speaking ability. Nevertheless, there is little research into classroom use of speaking tasks in high school in Vietnam from both teacher and student perspectives. Bui (2017) conducted the research to investigate teachers' difficulties perceived in conducting TBLT at University of Languages and International Studies (ULIS) in Hanoi. Although these studies provide useful insights in teaching speaking through TBLT, there is still a gap for the investigation into speaking task types. The current study contributes to understanding tasks with a classroom focus by investigating task types used in English speaking classes at a high school in Vietnam.

Teaching English in Vietnam is greatly affected by examination-oriented practice and the curriculum highlights the theoretical information and does not provide students with

adequate space for hands-on experience (Canh, 2011; Nguyen, 2014). Therefore, this study investigated the use of speaking tasks employed in the grade 11 classes at Le Quy Don Gifted High School for the purpose of exploring teachers' current practice of speaking tasks as well as their difficulties in task implementation. The present study is of great value to understanding speaking task types in use in from teachers' perspectives. English teachers in Vietnam could benefit from this study by using alternative task types to teach their students speaking. The findings can be useful for English teachers at junior high school level or even primary level for the purpose of improving the learning environment as well as students' speaking ability.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Task-based language teaching (TBLT)

Task-based language teaching pertains to teaching a second or foreign language that helps engage learners in authentic language use by performing a series of tasks (Bygate, 2016; Long, 2015).

### 2.2. Task definitions

There are a great number of task definitions proposed by well-known authors (Bygate, Skehan & Swain, 2001; Long & Crooks, 1992; Ellis, 2003, 2009; Skehan, 1998; Willis & Willis, 2007). Common in these task definitions are a focus on meaning rather than language form (i.e., expressing meaning), a clear outcome and reflection of real world activities. Ellis (2009) clearly specifies that learners can use whatever language resources they have in order to achieve the outcome of the task. While some scholars (e.g., Long & Crooks, 1992; Long, 2015) give greater emphasis on the real world aspects of tasks as authenticity, Ellis (2003) holds that a task should involve processes of language use similar to processes involved in doing real world tasks. According to Ellis (2003), there are two forms of task authenticity, namely situational authenticity and interactional authenticity. The former refers to replication of real world tasks and the latter the processes involved that assist language acquisition in doing tasks.

### 2.3. Task types

Three key task taxonomies relevant to the present study include Willis's (1996), Nunan's (2001) and Ellis's (2003). Willis (1996) taxonomises tasks based on cognitive processes involved such as listing, ordering, comparing, problem solving, sharing personal experiences and creative tasks. In Nunan's (2001) categorisation of tasks, there are pedagogic tasks and real-world tasks. In this way, pedagogic tasks correspond to tasks with situational authenticity as Ellis (2003) describes above.

### 2.4. Oral tasks

A group of researchers and language educators suggest different types of oral tasks and name them more or less based on task genres. This categorisation of tasks are more teacher-friendly and can act as a guide for teachers to use in the classroom. Bailey (2005), Harmer (2012) and Kayi (2006) suggest a number of speaking tasks that can be

used in the classroom, namely conversations, guided conversations, interviews, information gap and jigsaw activities, scripted dialogues, drama, role-playing, picture-based activities. Meanwhile, Morozova (2013) further add tasks that involve students giving their thoughts on topics assigned by teachers; listening to classmates' thoughts and responding, presenting in groups on a completed project, describing pictures or doing dramatic monologues

## **2.5. Teaching speaking**

Speaking is considered as the most difficult skill among the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). According to Brown (2001), speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving and processing information. The target of teaching speaking skills is communicative efficiency.

## **2.6. Teachers' difficulties in tasks implementation**

A number of studies have investigated teachers' perceived challenges when carrying out tasks in the classroom. Bui (2017), for example, investigated the teachers' perceptions of difficulties in the implementation of tasks at University of Languages and International Studies (ULIS) in Hanoi, Vietnam. The researcher divided the difficulties in task implementation into two categories, namely internal and external factors. Specifically, internal factors include interference of exam-oriented teaching method and students' mixed proficiency level, while external factors comprise inadequate teaching hours, students' unfamiliarity with task-based teaching, students' insufficient of vocabulary and background knowledge, teachers' misconception of "task" and task design and teachers' lack of constant real-life use of target language.

Among the factors as shown, the two biggest obstacles teachers identified were limited teaching hours and exam-oriented pedagogical method. Similarly, in Mustafa's (2013) study, crowded classes, inadequate time, lack of technical facilities and students' mixed proficiency levels are major difficulties. Chang and Goswami (2011) conducted a study to investigate factors that hamper the implementation of tasks in Taiwanese Colleges. The teachers in this study indicated some factors that hinder their implementation such as teachers' lack of enough knowledge and skills about oral teaching and its implementation, and insufficient teacher training. These difficulties and those above are also reported in many other studies (Adam & Newton, 2009; Carless, 2011; Hu, 2002; Li, 1998, 2001, 2003; Littlewood, 2007; Ng & Tang, 1997; Shaoqian & Jiaxin, 2016; Zhang, 2007).

## **3. RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **3.1. Research questions**

The present study investigated the use of speaking task types and teachers' difficulties in task implementation. Therefore, the following research questions were put forward:

RQ1: What are teachers' reported frequency of use of different speaking task types?

RQ2: What are teachers' difficulties in task implementation?

### **3.2. Participants**

There were three 12 participating teachers in this study including one four males and two eight females with teaching experience about 8 to 20 years. Additionally, 104 grade 11 students from three majors classes, namely Physics, Chemistry and Literature at Le Quy Don Gifted High School participated in the research.

### **3.3. Data collection instruments**

The data collection methods used in this study were classroom observations, questionnaires and interviews. The researcher took 12 classroom observations in 11<sup>th</sup> grade classes specializing Chemistry, Physics and Literature. In terms of questionnaires, two written questionnaires were handed out to the participants in order to acquire the data for the research. For both teacher and student questionnaire, there were close-ended questions and open questions to allow them to write down their ideas.

## **4. FINDINGS**

### **4.1. Teachers' use of textbook tasks**

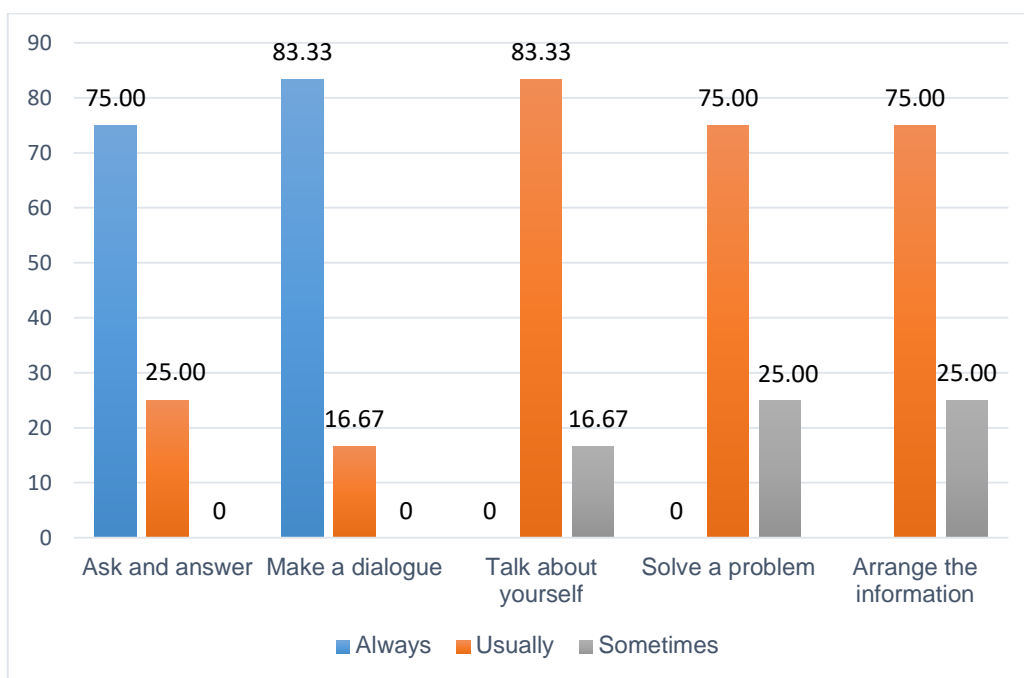
It is important to note that of the 34 speaking tasks in use during 12-period classroom observations, the majority were related to working in pairs and individuals. Specifically, there were 10 "ask and answer" tasks that were regularly used from Unit 11 to Unit 15, 4 "making a dialogue with partners" tasks and tasks that involves students sharing personal ideas about an issue was the next popular type with 7 speaking tasks that were used in different topics. Besides this, there were two "discussion" tasks about ways to save energy and seven "group presentation about a particular topic" tasks. The remaining speaking tasks include two "interview" tasks, one "role-play" task and one "picture description" task.

It could be seen that the majority of speaking tasks carried out during the 12-period classroom observations are in line with features of tasks described by Ellis (2003) among others. That is, they primarily focus on meaning to let students convey their ideas and allow students to use whatever linguistic resources that they are having. What's more, these oral tasks provide linguistic input, obtain clear outcomes so as to help students bolster their oral ability as well as self-confidence during their oral learning progress.

### **4.2. The frequency of use of speaking tasks by teachers**

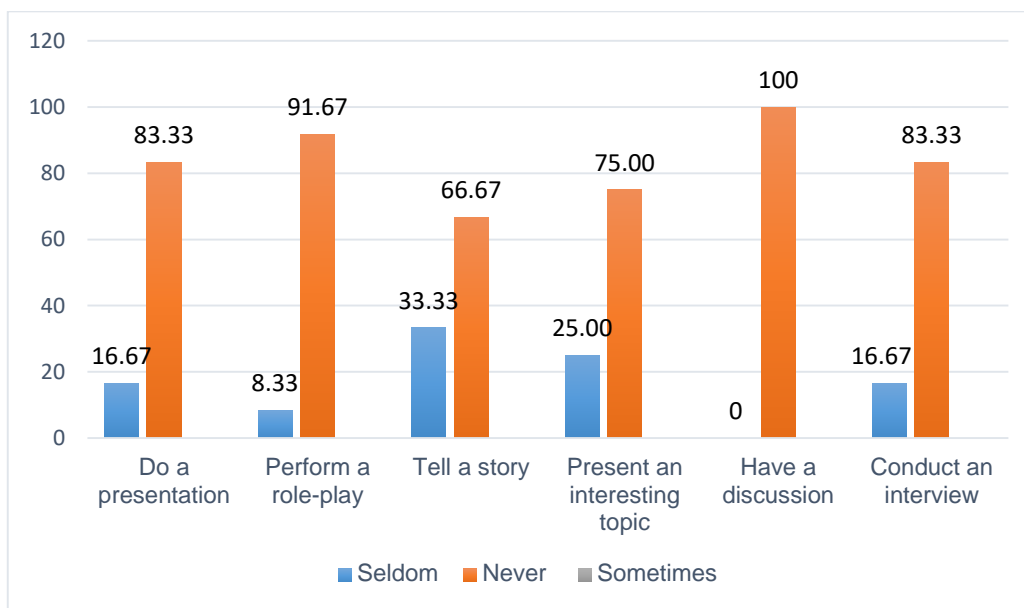
In order to investigate the frequency of the use of various task types in teaching speaking, questionnaires were delivered to 12 teachers to ask about the level of frequency they employed speaking certain task types in lessons. The results are categorized into most frequently used tasks and less frequently used tasks, and the results for the former are presented in Figure 1 and those of the latter in Figure 2.

Figure 1. *Most frequently used tasks*



As the Figure 1 show four commonly used tasks in the speaking lessons, as the teachers reported are ‘ask and answer the questions’, ‘making a dialogue based on a given situation’, and ‘talk about yourself’ and ‘arranging information’. Specifically, 9 of 12 teachers always used “ask and answer the questions” task and 25.00% of them usually do so, meanwhile almost all the teachers (10 of 12 teachers with roughly 83.00%) stated that their most used oral task is to let students work in pairs to create a conversation based on a given situation. The next commonly used oral task is information arrangement reported by 75.00% of the teachers usually using them and 25.00% of them reported that they occasionally conducted this type of speaking activity. Finally, the majority of teachers (10 of 12 teachers or roughly 83.00%) said that they usually conducted a task that allows students to talk about themselves.

As seen from Figure 2, interestingly, just only one teacher (8.33%) stated that she let students perform a role-play based on a situation and 100% of teachers never, let students carried out a debate. Additionally, nearly 68% of the teachers stated that they never let students tell a story, and two out of 12 teachers (16.67%) let students conduct an interview and report back to the class. Besides this, the percentage of giving a presentation or letting students give a presentation of a topic of their own interest is 83.33% and 75.00% respectively. The teachers said they never conducted these oral tasks in the speaking lessons because the thing is that they had to follow the sequence of speaking tasks in the textbook and regulations of the school curriculum.

Figure 2. *Less common speaking tasks*

### 4.3. Teachers' difficulties in implementing speaking tasks in classrooms

Table 1. *Teachers' perceived difficulties in using tasks in speaking lesson*

| DIFFICULTIES   | Teachers<br>(N = 12) | (%)   |
|--|----------------------|-------|
| 1. Crowded class   | 11                   | 91.67 |
| 2. Students' mixed proficiency level                           | 7                    | 58.33 |
| 3. Students' unwillingness to speak due to low confidence      | 11                   | 91.67 |
| 4. Students' unwillingness to speak due to insufficient ideas. | 9                    | 75.00 |
| 5. No speaking exams/ tests                                    | 8                    | 66.67 |
| 6. Students do not collaborate in group work                   | 3                    | 25.00 |
| 7. Students do not have motivation to learn speaking           | 6                    | 50.00 |

The teachers were also asked in the questionnaire what difficulties they encountered when implementing tasks and their perceived difficulties are presented in Table 4.1. The result shows that the greatest challenges the teachers reported are large class size (91.67%) and students' fear for speaking due to their lack of confidence (91.67%) and insufficient ideas (75.00%). Only 3 teachers, or 25.00% of them supposed that students did not work together when working in groups. Students' disinterest in speaking (50.00%), mixed proficiency (58.33%) and the fact that national examination that does not have a speaking component (66.67%) are additional difficulties.

## 5. DISCUSSION

Regarding the first research question, the finding is consistent with that by Nubia (2016) who stated that students' favourite speaking topics fall into motivating topics or topics which constitute a challenge to be resolved. Additionally, findings from Nubia (2016) indicate that sharing personal experience task proves an active and voluntary involvement of students. Maley and Duff (2001) also states that drama activities might encourage students to converse in different scenarios with natural communication and meaningful context. It is also consistent with findings from other research (Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2012; Thepsuriwong, 2014), which found that role-playing tasks are good for the development of students' vocabulary size and for the development of conversational language.

Concerning the second research question, the findings are consistent with Li (1998), Jarvis and Atsilarat (2004), Jeon and Hahn (2006), Nishino and Watanabe (2008) who indicated that teachers find it hard to manage large classes, particularly when carrying out TBLT. This can be understandable that the number of students in class ranges from 35 to 44 and it was obviously rather difficult for teachers to observe and supervise students' task performance in pairs or groups. Additionally, they are familiar with the traditional lecture-oriented approach and teacher-centered classrooms. This may result from the fact that most Vietnamese's high school EFL teachers still employ grammar-translation which foregrounds students' grammar learning through translation and interpretation of rule after rule (Brown, 2001).

## 6. LIMITATIONS, FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS AND CONCLUSION

### 6.1. Limitations of the study and future research directions

The current research has several limitations. First, the study was conducted at one single school for gifted students, with a focus on only three teachers and students from this school. The results therefore should not be generalized to other contexts. Future research should address a variety of teaching contexts with larger samples.

Secondly, the research was able to document students' perceived task preferences and these might not say much about how tasks actually engage students and their actual challenges. Research into how students carry out certain types of tasks will be useful to inform textbook design, and materials selection. And task implementation in order to enhance students' learning through speaking tasks.

Thirdly, the present study only focuses on speaking tasks in speaking lessons. It did not look at how speaking tasks are used in other skills-based or language focus lessons. Exploring oral tasks in light of these other sections of the unit is useful.

Finally, the teacher observation and questionnaire is limited, so the results should be read with caution. Further research is clearly needed as to how important teachers perceive of different aspects of tasks.

Even though there are a few limitations, this research greatly contributes to the study of TBLT. First, it is a hands-on investigation of the actual practice of teaching speaking through tasks in the high-school context, thereby contributing to the literature in this area. Second, this study is necessarily vital for the professional development and training of English language teachers because as it exposes the differences between the teachers' perceptions and practices. Some factors that contributed to such differences were actually beyond the teachers' control, e.g., students' learning needs and the washback effect from public examinations, etc. Both students and teachers in this study exposed their interest for tasks which will pave a way for further studies of implementation strategies in the future.

## 6.2. Conclusion

The study investigated types of speaking tasks employed in a high-school context and it is hoped that it contributes to our understanding of speaking tasks from both teacher and student perspectives. It adds to our understanding of the ways teachers use tasks and a wide range of tasks reported being used and preferred, which further informs task design, task implementation to engage students. It provides insights into further professional development for teachers to use a more student-centered, real life-related and communication-oriented teaching approach in not only Le Quy Don Gifted High School but also in other high schools across Vietnam and other EFL contexts.

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