

## TASK-BASED ORAL COMMUNICATION TEACHING

**Dr. Deepa S**

Assistant Professor

Indian Institute of Management, Kozhikode

IIM Kozhikode Campus P.O., Kozhikode – 673570, Kerala

India

[deepa@iimk.ac.in](mailto:deepa@iimk.ac.in)

[deepas2805@yahoo.in](mailto:deepas2805@yahoo.in)

+91-0495-2809443

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Dr. Deepa S is an Assistant Professor in the area of Humanities & Liberal Arts in Management at IIM Kozhikode. Along with contributing in grooming the communication skills of upcoming managers, Dr. Deepa has also successfully developed some highly effective courses in her area for students pursuing their career in management. She has presented and published her research in national and international conferences and journals and has three published books to her credit. Her current areas of interest are: Managerial Communication, Written Communication Skills, Online Communication, Employment-related Communication, and Soft Skills for Managers. She conducts training programs in these areas.

### Abstract

Oral communication fulfills a number of general and discipline-specific academic functions. It is vital to learn to speak, since it provides students a set of skills they can use all through their lives. Speaking is the mode of communication used very often to express opinions, make arguments, offer explanations, transmit information, and make impressions upon others. Students need to speak well in their personal lives, future workplaces, social interactions, and political endeavors. They will have to attend meetings, make presentations, participate in discussions and arguments, and work with groups. If necessary instruction and opportunities to practice speaking are available, students place themselves to achieve a wide range of goals and be useful members of their communities.

This paper describes the applications of the task-based approach to teach oral communication skills in an academic setting. A course “Oral Communication Skills” was taught to the post-graduate students studying Management in a private business school to make them proficient in oral skills. The present study tries to explore the possibility and feasibility of task-based approach to apply for the teaching of oral communication.

**Key words:** Oral Communication, Task-based approach, conversation.

## TASK-BASED ORAL COMMUNICATION TEACHING

### Introduction

Globalization has made it imperative for graduates to be proficient in oral communication skills so that they can function effectively in the academic and professional setting. Consequently, oral communication skills course is included in undergraduate and postgraduate classes. In spite of the need, and the varied ways of including oral communication skills in curriculum, there appears to be little research available that provides a more specific understanding of the methods and approaches of teaching oral communication for these students. Oral communication covers a wide area, ranging from formal presentations to participation in teams and meetings.

This paper tries to seek the possibilities to apply task-based approach in teaching oral communication skills. This study reports on an investigation into the teaching of oral communication to the post-graduate students of Management at a private B-school in India. The paper describes the dimensions of “oral communication skills” and “task-based approach”. It then introduces the goals of this particular course. The paper then talks at length about the pedagogy adopted to deliver the course and concludes with the discussion of the success and limitations of task-based approach.

### Oral Communication Skills

Luthans (1973) refers to the importance of communication effectiveness within an organization when he states: "Communication is one of the most frequently discussed concepts in the entire field of organization and management, but it is seldom clearly understood. In practice, effective communication is a basic prerequisite for the attainment of organizational goals, but it has remained one of the biggest problems facing modern management. Most estimates state that about 70% of an active human being's life, and a higher proportion (about 90 percent) of a typical manager's time, are spent communicating" (p. 234).

Di Salvo, Larsen, & Seller (1974) found the most important communication activities were listening, routine information exchange, advising, persuading, instructing and small group problem-solving. The findings were based on a survey of graduates of a college of business administration five years after they finished their university training. The results of the Di Salvo et al. (1974) study clearly indicate the importance of communication requiring intense personal contact at the interpersonal, small group and organization level. However, communication, unlike many other academic subjects, causes apprehension in students which could continue on into the organizational world.

Oral communication reflects the persistent and powerful role of language and communication in human society. As Halliday (1978, p. 169) explains, communication is more than merely an

exchange of words between parties; it is a “...sociological encounter” (Halliday, p. 139) and through exchange of meanings in the communication process, social reality is “created, maintained and modified” (Halliday, p. 169). Such a capacity of language is also evident in Austin’s (1962) earlier work on speech act theory where, as cited by Clyne (1994, p. 2), language and thus communication is an “...instrument of action”. Speech act theory, concerned with the communicative effect, that is, the function and effect of utterances, dissects an utterance into three components: the actual utterance (the locution); the act performed by the utterance (the illocution); and the effect the act has on the hearer (the perlocution). Searle’s (1969) work further defined speech acts as directives, imperatives, requests, and so on.

Oral reporting skills are essential for many successful careers, especially in management. The emphasis on these skills has continually been discussed (Nelton, 1991; Francese, 1994; Lubin, 2007). In a survey of 725 upper and middle managers, presentation skills were listed as the most important skills needed for success in today’s business environment (“Critical Link,” 1991). Maes, Weldy, and Icenogle (1997) also found managers cited oral communication skills as the top skill needed.

In more recent times, the importance still has not changed. Gail Golden, a consultant for RHR International, an executive-coaching firm, states that the skill “is really important for career success, promotions and professional credibility” (Lubin, 2007). Of 34 business-related skills, making effective oral presentations was ranked second by department chairs as the individual skill which they believed was most crucial for graduating business students (Wardrope, 2002). Yet some studies suggest that new graduates of business programs are not equipped with the proper skills to orally communicate effectively (Gray, 2010). Sapp and Zhang (2009) found that in a study of 234 business supervisors over a five year period, “spoken communication skills” was cited as one of four skills of eleven where most skills development is needed by business interns in their organizations.

Moreover, a growing body of literature demonstrates a link between communication and business performance. Research suggests, for example, that communication practices affect both the success of individual managers (Alexander, Penley, & Jernigan, 1992; O’Reilly & Roberts, 1977; Penley, Alexander, Jernigan, & Henwood, 1991; Russ, Daft, & Lengel, 1990) and the success of teams and organizations (Snyder & Morris, 1984; Sypher, Bostrom, & Seibert, 1989; Willits, 1967).

Competent oral communication skills are essential to personal success in the fields of business. Empirical studies have linked oral communication ability to such measures of success as finding a job (Krzystofik & Fein, 1988) and progressing in a career (Estes, 1979). Yet, Ingram and Frazier (1980), and Hanson (1987) found that new business graduates are frequently perceived as being “deficient” in communication skills.

For successful communication, students require more than the formal ability to present well and a range of formulaic expressions. Successful communication is context dependent and therefore embedded in its particular discourse community (Bizzell, 1989). To function successfully

academically and professionally, one needs to learn effective oral communication skills. Conversational speech comes naturally for many people. Yet, in more formal speech, effective communication skills are critical. An effective communicator is able to conduct himself in a variety of personal, professional, and academic environments with confidence.

Oral communication can take many forms, ranging from informal conversation that occurs spontaneously and, in most cases, for which the content cannot be planned, to participation in meetings, which occurs in a structured environment, usually with a set agenda (Rahman, Mojibur M., 2010).

Oral communication is not only about language and how it is used for communication. There are other skills which are to be acquired in order to communicate effectively. These include audience understanding, active listening, non-verbal communication (body language, eye contact) style, humility, conciseness amongst others. By the time, the students reach the post-graduate level, it is assumed that they are aware of the basics of the language and therefore teaching speaking skills makes no sense. What they need at that stage is communication skills. This is where the challenge lies for the teacher. He has to know the needs of the individual students. The best way to comprehend this is to observe and understand how the learners perform a task in the class. To acquire such skills, task-based approach appears to be the most appropriate.

### **Task-based Approach**

Task-based syllabus design has been the interest area of quite a few researchers and curriculum developers in second/foreign language teaching in the mid 80s (Long 1985; Breen 1987; Prabhu 1987; Nunan 1989). This was basically the outcome of the pervasive awareness to the communicative language teaching. Under the rubric of task-based instruction, a variety of approaches can be found, e.g., “procedural syllabuses,” “process syllabuses,” and “task-based language teaching” (Long and Crookes 1993). Primarily, the term “task” itself has been a complex concept, defined and analyzed from various perspectives (Crookes 1986; Duff 1986; Foley 1991; Crookes and Gass 1993a, b; Sheen 1994; Lantolf and Appel 1994; Skehan 1996).

The last two decades have seen a remarkable growth in task-based language learning and teaching (Willis, 1996; Skehan, 1998a; and Bygate, Skehan and Swain, 2000a). The interest is because “task” is seen as a construct of equal importance to second language acquisition (SLA) researchers and to language teachers (Pica, 1997). “Task” is not only a means of clinically eliciting samples of learner language for purposes of research (Corder, 1981) but also a device for organizing the content and methodology of language teaching (Prabhu, 1987). On the other hand, as Bygate, Skehan and Swain (2000b) point out, “task” is viewed differently depending on whether the perspective is that of research or pedagogy.

Definitions of tasks are generally “context-free” (Bygate, Skehan and Swain, 2000b). The term “task” has rather different meanings in different contexts of use. A task is a “workplan”; that is to say, it takes the form of materials for researching or teaching language. A workplan typically involves the following: (1) some input (i.e. information that learners are required to process and

use); and (2) some instructions relating to what outcome the learners are supposed to achieve (Rahman, Mojibur M., 2010). Breen (1989) pointed out that task-as-workplan is to be distinguished from the task-as-process (i.e. the activity that transpires when particular learners in a particular setting perform the task). The activity predicted by the task-as-workplan may or may not be in harmony with the activity that crops up from the task-as-process.

While talking about the definitions of “task”, Skehan (1998a) proposes four significant criteria:

1. meaning is primary;
2. there is a goal which needs to be worked towards;
3. the activity is outcome-evaluated;
4. there is a real-world relationship (p. 268).

Widdowson (1998a) criticizes such a definition of “task”, and argues that the “criteria do not in themselves distinguish the linguistic exercise and the communicative task” (p. 328). He further states that “exercise” and “task” differ with regard to the kind of meaning, goal, and outcome they are directed towards. An exercise is premised on the need to develop linguistic skills as a prerequisite for the learning of communicative abilities, while a task is based on the assumption that linguistic abilities are developed through communicative activity. Widdowson proposes that what constitutes the primary focus of attention, the goal, the way in which the outcome is evaluated and the relationship to the real-world are all interpreted differently in accordance with this basic difference in orientation.

Task-based language teaching has many purposes. Willis (1996: 35–6) identifies eight purposes:

1. to give learners confidence in trying out whatever language they know;
2. to give learners experience of spontaneous interaction;
3. to give learners the chance to benefit from noticing how others express similar meanings;
4. to give learners chances for negotiating turns to speak;
5. to engage learners in using language purposefully and cooperatively;
6. to make learners participate in a complete interaction, not just one-off sentences;
7. to give learners chances to try out communication strategies; and
8. to develop learners’ confidence that they can achieve communicative goals.

These purposes relate to two general goals: communicative effectiveness and L2 acquisition. Interestingly, seven of Willis’s purposes relate primarily to communicative effectiveness; only one, (3) relates specifically to L2 acquisition. This reflects, perhaps, the general perception among language teachers and educators that task-based teaching is mainly directed at improving students’ abilities to *use* the target language rather than at enabling them to *acquire* new linguistic skills (Samuda, 2000). It is in contrast with the orientation of SLA researchers such as Long, Skehan and Swain, whose primary concern is how tasks can contribute to language acquisition.

The theoretical perspectives suggest a need to distinguish between task-based performance that contributes to effective language use and that which facilitates L2 acquisition, that is, it cannot

be assumed that achieving communicative effectiveness in the performance of a task will set up the interactive conditions that promote L2 acquisition. Students may perform a task successfully without the need to participate in much meaning negotiation or the need to attend to linguistic form. In the process, they may emphasize fluency over accuracy or complexity by drawing on their lexicalized system, thus failing to stretch their interlanguage systems. The task may not confront them with the need to collaborate in the joint construction of new knowledge. Similarly, tasks that are directed at improving students' communicative abilities by promoting confidence in using language or by providing opportunities for trying out communication strategies may fail to develop their linguistic skills. It follows that teachers and language educators need to give more attention to the properties of tasks that respectively aim to promote communicative efficiency and L2 acquisition (Rahman, Mojibur M., 2010). Yule's theory of communicative effectiveness (1997) provides a basis for evaluating the kinds of tasks that contribute to developing communicative effectiveness, whereas Skehan's cognitive approach (1998b) suggests the kinds of tasks that are needed to promote accuracy/complexity and, thereby, potentially to influence language acquisition.

### **The Oral Communication Skills Course (OCS)**

The course under discussion was offered as a core course in the second trimester in the Post-graduate Diploma in Management Programme at a private B-school. The course content was as follows:

#### **Oral Communication Skills**

1. Getting comfortable with English as a language The nature, purpose and characteristics of good conversation
2. Using English in conversation: introductions, greetings, gratitude, opinions, explanations
3. Conversing with suitable stress, intonation and meaning
4. Making small talks: Initiating, maintaining and concluding conversations
5. Communicating disagreement and anything negative
6. Formal and informal group discussions and handling situations
7. Presentation skills
8. Gestures and body language

The Oral Communication Skills Course was offered as a compulsory course. It followed a course on Written Communication Skills that was offered in the first trimester. It was offered to prepare the students to take more advance level course in Managerial Communication in the third trimester and it also prepared the students to use the language in real life situations whether it is academic, social or professional situations. This course aimed at developing learners' communication skills for specific academic and professional needs such as leadership, organizational, and interpersonal communication skills. The students met twice a week for the class. The duration of each session was ninety minutes and it was conducted in the workshop mode.

Accordingly, the goals of the OCS course were to facilitate the post-graduate management students:

- Understand the nature, purpose and characteristics of good conversation;
- Develop conversation skills suitable stress, intonation and meaning;
- Initiate, maintain and finish conversations;
- Use English in conversation: introductions, greetings, explanations, opinions, agreements & disagreements;
- Develop skills for extempore and impromptu, debates, oral presentations, and group discussions;
- Provide opportunities for exercising initiative, leadership, and practicing organizational and participation skills in group situations;
- Develop cross-cultural awareness.

### **Description of Tasks/Activities**

The course was structured as a series of tasks/activities. These were designed hierarchically and can be classified as initial, supporting, core and fusion activities.

#### **Initial Activities**

##### ***Course Discussion***

It was important that the students become clear about the goals of the course and their relevance to the program. It was also important to assess students' speaking skills based on their prior knowledge and experience and in direct relation to course activities. Keeping in mind these things, the first class began with a course syllabus discussion activity. Students were given a copy of the syllabus in advance; they were asked to read it and put questions.

##### ***Introductions***

Students were asked to make pairs, ask each other some questions (listed by the instructor), and take turns introducing each other. This activity worked as an ice-breaker and initiated group bonding in the class.

##### ***Extempore***

The individual oral presentations in the form of extempore were designed to serve as pretests. Students were instructed to make a three-minute presentation on a topic of their choice. They were given minimum instructions. The goal was to find out the level of their oral communication skills, given their background and experience (if any).

##### ***Listening and Participating Sessions***

Students were given some cues (words and expressions). After listening attentively to the instructor, the students had to ask questions seeking further information on the given cues. This activity generated interest amongst students to interact in order to clarify and assisted them in shedding off their initial inhibitions about using the language.

After finishing the initial activities, the teacher devoted some classes to explain the rubrics of the oral communication skills.

## **Core Activities**

### ***Group Discussion***

In this core activity, the students were engaged in a formal/informal discussion on an assigned topic. This activity was completely student-led, i.e., students played all the roles (observer, group presenter, and participating members). The participation skills inculcated in the initial activities facilitated this activity. After the performance, students were given individual feedback. They were also informed about the errors they committed for future improvement.

### ***Role-play***

For this activity, the students were asked to make groups of three to five students. Each group was given a situation/problem and was given a day's time to prepare. They prepared their role and performed in the class. In the later stage, the groups were assigned situations on-the-spot on which they had to perform after ten minutes of preparation time.

The instructor commented on individual performances and gave individual feedback to each student.

### ***Oral Presentations***

The purpose of this task/activity was two-fold: to make the students understand the qualities of an effective presentation and to facilitate them practice oral presentations. The students were asked to discuss on what makes an effective presentation. Based on their comments, the instructor gave a model presentation that demonstrated the basics of oral presentation with and without power point slides, and graphics along with discussing the fundamentals of delivering effectively keeping in mind the non-verbal aspects of communication. After sensitizing them on presentation skills, the instructor explained the evaluation criteria and the assessment sheet.

The students were then asked to make presentations in groups which were video-taped for the purpose of improvement and were considered as pre-test presentations. Peer and instructor feedback was given to each student. This practice session enhanced the student understanding of an effective presentation and they got to know their own presentation skills.

After this, students were asked to give a final presentation for evaluation. Students made formal presentations where each presentation was followed by a question-answer round, and was concluded by the presenter. At the end of the semester, students were assessed using these tasks.

## **Supporting Activities**

### ***Problem-solving Communication Activities***

These activities were scheduled thrice during the trimester. The first was a tower building task that required small groups to make the strongest and the tallest tower with the help of straws and cello tape, exchanging information with each other. It was designed as a collaborative group activity that also provided practice in giving and asking for clear directions and instructions.

During the thirty minute activity, for 10 minutes the students had to communicate only through non-verbal communication.

The second activity was Balloon game. It focused on being creative in the art of making innovative designs using balloons. The leader of the group was blindfolded and was required to create a unique design with the balloons using narrations and descriptions from the team members and exchange of information and opinions.

The third activity was The Positive Language game, which focused again on asking questions, giving replies and conversing using positive words. The student groups had to converse on a given topic without using negative verbal expressions like no, not, never, and the like. These communication activities served two purposes: they allowed the OCS instructors to analyze various other skills of the students like leadership, team spirit, organization etc. In addition, the skills for giving and receiving clear instructions and directions served as enabling skills for use in major tasks (e.g., the group project).

### ***Cross-cultural Presentations in Groups***

Since the students in the program were from several parts of the country, designated groups introduced their states (e.g., Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal etc.) to the rest of the students. The introductions included oral presentations and question/answer period. They provided conditions for authentic, cross-cultural communication among the students, and turned out to be popular events.

### **Fusion Activity**

This group activity aimed at enhancing the qualities of initiative, leadership, innovation and creativity, organizational skills, and participation apart from Business Communication. Students worked in groups to produce an oral communication based strategy to draw people to their innovative product and convince them. Various tangible and intangible products – consumables, concepts, services, consultancy etc – could be designed and presented by the students. The activity was completely student led. Within the framework of some broad guidelines on what they could and could not do, the students decided the product/service, the design, and their roles. The activity was designed in a cycle: the guidelines were introduced in week two; students discussed the topic in week three, and the design in week four. Week six was mostly used for project preparation, practice, and rehearsal. The activity was wrapped up in week eight, when all the sections got together and appreciated critically each other's effort. Throughout this major activity, the instructor played the role of language consultant and handled queries.

### **Conclusion**

The tasks described in this paper were well received by the majority of the learners. They found the experience to be rewarding, intrinsically interesting, and educationally beneficial. They got involved in the task, because the tasks were giving the feeling of real life situation. Their final performances were impressively polished and much improved, that is, the final product was of

high level. 74 percent students scored grade “A”. But, at the initial stage there were some problems in carrying out these tasks. Sometimes it went out of control of students and even of the instructor. This paper has discussed the applications of the task/activity-based approach to designing a syllabus for an oral communication skills course in an academic setting. It has presented a case study based on the actual development of such a course in the PGDM programme at a private B-school. This course was quite successful in achieving its goals: in their annual program evaluations, 27% of the student body referred to the OCS course, or some aspects of it, in response to the question: What did you like most about your institution? Part of this success can be attributed to the task-based approach which emphasizes functional uses of language, i.e., what people do with language. Furthermore, if the activities/tasks selected relate to well-defined needs in specific institutional contexts, the course becomes more relevant and useful in the minds of the students.

On the other hand, the course described in this paper was structured as a series of activities/tasks. However, if these were not perceived to be connected to one another, if they had not fit well defined goals and objectives, if the processes underlying their design had not got sufficient attention, and if the assessment criteria were not perceived to be valid, then the course would have been reduced to just one meaningless activity after another. Thus, in spite of the perceived success of this syllabus design, constant improvements need to be made.

To conclude, the activity/task-based approach to syllabus design has much potential, but it has a long way to go before it can claim empirical success in the field of second language curriculum developments. More data is needed, using different quantitative and qualitative research methods. Case studies provide useful empirical data in this context. The study presented in this paper, although it is at best a descriptive account at this point, contributes to the growing number of case studies in applying the task-based approach to syllabus design.

### **Scope for Further Research**

The author is of the view that there is a scope for in-depth studies to be conducted not only in the Management institutes, but also in the other traditional and professional courses. There is a scope for further research in these and a comparative analysis of teaching oral communication by this method and others can be another area of further probe.

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