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DESIGNING EFFECTIVE TASKS FOR DEVELOPING SPEAKING SKILLS IN HIGH SCHOOL FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Abstract

This article explores the design of effective tasks aimed at developing speaking skills in high school foreign language learners. Although speaking is widely recognized as a critical component of communicative competence, it often receives limited attention in classroom practice due to time constraints, curriculum demands, and the dominance of accuracy-focused instruction. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) offers a pedagogical framework that emphasizes meaningful communication, interaction, and learner engagement. The article outlines key characteristics of effective speaking tasks, including relevance, cognitive challenge, interactional structure, and authenticity. It highlights the importance of needs analysis, appropriate task selection, and structured sequencing through pre-task, task, and post-task phases. Several task types are discussed with regard to their practical application in high school contexts. The article also addresses common challenges, including learner anxiety, unequal participation, and assessment issues. It concludes that well-designed, context-sensitive speaking tasks can foster both fluency and confidence, creating more dynamic and communicative classroom environments.

Keywords: *communicative competence, task design, authentic communication, speaking skills, high school learners, foreign language learning.*

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ЖОҒАРЫ СЫНЫП ОҚУШЫЛАРЫНЫҢ ШЕТ ТІЛІНДЕ СӨЙЛЕУ ДАҒДЫЛАРЫН ДАМУҒА АРНАЛҒАН ТИІМДІ ТАПСЫРМАЛАРДЫ ҚҰРАСТЫРУ

Аңдатпа

Мақалада шет тілін үйреніп жүрген жоғары сынып оқушыларының ауызша сөйлеу дағдысын дамытуға бағытталған тиімді тапсырмаларды жобалау мәселесі қарастырылады. Ауызша сөйлеу коммуникативтік құзыреттіліктің маңызды құрамдас бөлігі ретінде кеңінен танылғанымен, тәжірибеде ол жиі уақыттың шектеулігіне, оқу бағдарламасының талаптарына және дәлдікке бағытталған оқытудың басымдығына байланысты жеткілікті назарға алынбайды. Тапсырмаға негізделген тілдік оқыту әдістемесі (Task-Based Language Teaching, TBLT) оқушылардың мағыналы қарым-қатынасын, өзара әрекеттестігін және белсенділігін баса көрсететін педагогикалық негіз ұсынады. Мақалада ауызша сөйлеуді дамытуға арналған тиімді тапсырмалардың негізгі сипаттамалары айқындалады: өзектілігі, когнитивтік күрделілігі, өзара әрекет құрылымы және аутенттілігі. Сондай-ақ қажеттілікті талдаудың, тапсырмаларды дұрыс таңдаудың және оларды алдын ала тапсырма, негізгі тапсырма және тапсырмадан кейінгі кезеңдер арқылы құрылымдап орналастырудың маңыздылығы атап өтіледі. Орта мектеп жағдайында олардың практикалық қолданылуы

тұрғысынан әртүрлі тапсырма түрлері қарастырылады. Сонымен қатар оқушылардың мазасыздығы, теңсіз қатысуы және бағалау мәселелері сияқты жиі кездесетін қиындықтар талқыланады. Қорытындылай келе, контекстке бейімделген, жақсы жобаланған ауызша сөйлеуді дамытуға арналған тапсырмалар оқушылардың еркіндігі мен сенімділігін қалыптастыруға ықпал етіп, сабақта анағұрлым динамикалық әрі коммуникативтік орта құруға мүмкіндік береді.

Тірек сөздер: коммуникативтік құзыреттілік, тапсырма әзірлеу, аутентті қарым-қатынас, ауызша сөйлеу дағдылары, жоғары сынып оқушылары, шет тілін үйрену.

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РАЗРАБОТКА ЭФФЕКТИВНЫХ ЗАДАНИЙ ДЛЯ РАЗВИТИЯ НАВЫКОВ ГОВОРЕНИЯ У СТАРШЕКЛАСНИКОВ, ИЗУЧАЮЩИХ ИНОСТРАННЫЙ ЯЗЫК

Анотация

В статье рассматривается проектирование эффективных заданий, направленных на развитие устной речи у старшеклассников, изучающих иностранный язык. Несмотря на то что устная речь широко признаётся важнейшим компонентом коммуникативной компетенции, на практике она часто получает ограниченное внимание из-за нехватки времени, требований учебной программы и преобладания обучения, ориентированного на точность. Методика обучения иностранному языку на основе заданий (Task-Based Language Teaching, TBLT) предлагает педагогическую рамку, в которой акцент делается на осмысленном общении, взаимодействии и вовлечённости учащихся. В статье выделяются ключевые характеристики эффективных заданий по развитию устной речи, включая их актуальность, когнитивную сложность, взаимодействующую структуру и аутентичность. Подчёркивается значение анализа потребностей, правильного подбора заданий и их структурного упорядочивания через этапы предзадания, выполнения и постзадания. Рассматриваются различные типы заданий с точки зрения их практического применения в условиях средней школы. Также обсуждаются типичные трудности, такие как тревожность учащихся, неравномерное участие и проблемы оценки. В заключение отмечается, что хорошо спроектированные, учитывающие контекст задания по развитию устной речи могут способствовать формированию беглости и уверенности, создавая более динамичную и коммуникативную атмосферу на уроках.

Ключевые слова: коммуникативная компетенция, разработка заданий, аутентичное общение, навыки устной речи, старшеклассники, изучение иностранного языка.

Introduction

Oral communication remains one of the most underdeveloped skills among high school students learning a foreign language. While curriculum frameworks often include speaking as a target skill, in practice, it tends to receive less systematic attention than reading, writing, or grammar instruction. Many learners complete several years of language study without gaining the confidence or ability to participate in basic conversation. This disconnect between instruction and outcome stems not only from time constraints or classroom management challenges but also from the nature of the tasks used during speaking activities.

Traditional speaking exercises often emphasize accuracy over meaningful interaction. Dialogues are memorized, role-plays are limited in scope, and discussions are either too structured or too vague to engage learners authentically. As a result, students may be technically correct but unable to initiate or sustain conversation in real-world contexts. In contrast, approaches that

prioritize communication as a central goal—rather than a byproduct of grammar instruction—are more likely to help students develop both fluency and strategic competence.

One such approach is task-based language teaching (TBLT), which organizes instruction around the completion of real-life tasks that require communication. Rather than focusing on isolated language forms, TBLT encourages learners to use language as a functional tool to accomplish specific goals [1]. These goals might include solving a problem, giving advice, conducting a survey, or narrating a personal experience. The emphasis is on meaning, negotiation, and interaction—skills that are essential for effective spoken communication.

Task-based language teaching as a solution

High school learners benefit from speaking tasks that reflect genuine communication and offer room for autonomy, creativity, and critical thinking. However, designing such tasks is far from straightforward. Teachers must consider the linguistic demands of the task, the cognitive load it imposes, the classroom conditions under which it will be carried out, and how it fits into broader learning objectives. A poorly designed task may lead to silence, disengagement, or mechanical language use, defeating its communicative purpose. A well-designed task, on the other hand, can push learners to stretch their language abilities while maintaining a focus on purposeful, contextual use. Creating conditions that support the development of speaking skills in the classroom requires both a clear understanding of TBLT principles and a practical ability to implement them in age-appropriate, engaging ways. In high school settings, where students are at varying levels of language development and cognitive maturity, this balance becomes particularly important.

The success of task-based instruction in developing speaking skills depends not only on the overall pedagogical framework but also, crucially, on the design of individual tasks. Not all speaking activities are equally effective in promoting meaningful language use or supporting language development. Effective speaking tasks must be carefully structured to engage learners cognitively, support authentic interaction, and offer opportunities for both spontaneous communication and focused language use. In the context of high school foreign language classrooms, these tasks must also take into account the developmental stage, interests, and social dynamics of adolescent learners.

The design of speaking tasks in a high school foreign language classroom must strike a careful balance between linguistic demands, cognitive challenge, and learner engagement. While Task-Based Language Teaching offers a flexible framework for promoting communicative competence, the effectiveness of any given task depends largely on how well it aligns with the learners' developmental stage, language proficiency, interests, and educational context [2]. High school students occupy a unique position in the language learning continuum: they are no longer beginners in most cases, yet they often lack the fluency and confidence required for spontaneous interaction in a second language. As such, task design must be both intentional and adaptive.

A foundational step in designing effective speaking tasks is needs analysis. Although often associated with adult learners, needs analysis is equally relevant in secondary education. Teachers should consider not only the formal language objectives outlined in curricular documents but also the communicative situations learners are likely to encounter both inside and outside the classroom. Surveys, informal interviews, classroom observation, and student reflection can provide insight into learners' interests, speaking challenges, and preferred modes of interaction. This information enables teachers to design tasks that are relevant, motivating, and appropriately challenging.

Task types for developing speaking skills

Once learner needs are identified, the next step involves selecting or creating task types that support specific speaking outcomes. In the high school context, tasks should reflect a range of communicative functions, from expressing opinions and narrating experiences to negotiating meaning and giving advice. For example:

- Information-gap tasks require learners to exchange information in order to complete a task. These encourage turn-taking, questioning strategies, and clarification requests.

- Opinion-gap tasks involve discussing personal views or making value judgments, which fosters expressive language use and the ability to justify ideas.
- Role plays and simulations allow students to adopt different perspectives and use language in varied social contexts. These are especially useful for rehearsing functional language in real-life scenarios such as ordering food, making appointments, or resolving conflicts.
- Problem-solving tasks challenge learners to analyze a situation collaboratively and propose solutions, stimulating critical thinking and extended dialogue.
- Interviews and surveys provide authentic interaction and often involve both planned and spontaneous speech, especially when students summarize or report results afterward.

When selecting task types, it is important to consider the complexity and structure of the activity. According to cognitive task complexity theory, tasks can vary along dimensions such as reasoning demand, number of steps, and degree of planning involved. Tasks that are too open-ended may overwhelm less proficient learners, while overly rigid tasks can limit opportunities for creative language use. Therefore, teachers should provide scaffolding in the form of guiding questions, visual supports, or sample expressions. This support can be gradually removed as learners gain confidence and competence.

Designing effective speaking tasks

A well-designed task incorporates staging and sequencing to support learners throughout the process. One commonly used structure in TBLT is the three-phase model: pre-task, task cycle, and post-task [3]. During the pre-task phase, learners are introduced to the topic and may review relevant vocabulary or engage in a brief warm-up discussion. This phase prepares learners conceptually and linguistically for the main activity. In the task cycle, learners perform the core task, typically in pairs or small groups, and then prepare a brief report or summary to share with the class. This stage emphasizes meaning-making and fluency, while also encouraging collaboration. In the post-task phase, teachers may provide feedback, focus on useful language that emerged during the task, or guide learners through a reflection process. This phase is critical for reinforcing language patterns, raising awareness of gaps, and consolidating learning.

Designing speaking tasks also requires sensitivity to affective factors. Many high school learners experience anxiety or self-consciousness when speaking in a foreign language, particularly in front of peers. Tasks should therefore be structured to reduce performance pressure and build a supportive classroom atmosphere. Pair and small group work can help lower the affective filter by creating a more intimate, low-risk environment. Furthermore, giving students some degree of choice and autonomy—for instance, allowing them to select topics, decide on task formats, or co-create scenarios—can increase motivation and investment in the task.

Incorporating authenticity into task design is equally important. While tasks do not always need to replicate real-life situations exactly, they should at least simulate communicative conditions that feel purposeful and relevant. Authentic materials, such as menus, schedules, news articles, or video clips, can serve as prompts for discussion and create a stronger connection between classroom tasks and the outside world. Likewise, tasks that involve real audiences or outcomes—such as presenting to classmates, conducting peer interviews, or producing a class podcast—can enhance the sense of purpose and engagement.

Finally, task design must also consider assessment and feedback, even if these aspects are not the primary focus of the task itself. Teachers should determine whether the task is primarily formative or summative in nature and plan how learners' performance will be monitored or supported [4]. Rubrics, checklists, or peer-assessment forms can be used to guide observation and provide targeted feedback. However, in early or intermediate stages of fluency development, feedback should focus more on communicative effectiveness and effort than on linguistic perfection.

Challenges of implementing TBLT in high schools

While the task-based approach offers a promising framework for promoting spoken language development, its effective implementation in high school classrooms is not without significant challenges. These challenges arise from pedagogical, institutional, psychological, and logistical

factors, all of which influence how speaking tasks are perceived, executed, and supported. Understanding and anticipating these issues is essential for teachers and curriculum designers who aim to integrate meaningful speaking opportunities into language instruction.

One of the most frequently cited obstacles is the limited time available for communicative activities within a tightly packed school schedule. High school language classes are often short and meet only a few times per week. This restricts the time available for conducting complete task cycles, especially those involving pre-task preparation, group work, presentations, and post-task reflection or feedback. In addition, many national or regional curricula are structured around grammar-based progression, vocabulary lists, and standardized testing. As a result, teachers may feel pressure to prioritize coverage of content over communicative competence, leading to speaking tasks being sidelined or shortened.

Task-based speaking instruction relies heavily on interaction, collaboration, and active engagement. However, in classrooms with thirty or more students, managing multiple simultaneous speaking tasks can be logistically difficult. Differentiating instruction becomes more complex when students have widely varying levels of proficiency, motivation, and confidence [5]. Teachers may find it challenging to monitor group dynamics, ensure equal participation, and provide individualized feedback within such environments. Classroom noise levels during speaking tasks may also become disruptive, especially in schools with limited space or resources.

Speaking in a foreign language is an emotionally charged activity, particularly for adolescents who are highly attuned to peer judgment. Many high school students experience a strong fear of making mistakes, being corrected in public, or appearing less competent than their classmates. This anxiety can lead to silence, overuse of their first language, or a reliance on formulaic expressions that limit meaningful interaction. Even when tasks are carefully designed, some learners may resist active participation unless they feel psychologically safe. Building a classroom environment where risk-taking is encouraged and errors are normalized as part of the learning process is essential but requires time, patience, and consistent teacher support.

Implementing TBLT effectively requires more than task materials; it demands a shift in the teacher's role, planning strategies, and classroom management techniques. Teachers must be comfortable facilitating learner-centered activities, monitoring spontaneous speech, and providing responsive, task-relevant feedback. In contexts where teachers have been trained in more traditional, teacher-led methods, this transition may be difficult without targeted professional development. Moreover, teachers need support in designing and adapting tasks to meet their specific classroom conditions and learner needs. Without sufficient training, teachers may revert to form-focused practices, even when claiming to adopt communicative methods.

Task-based learning places strong emphasis on fluency and real-time interaction, which can sometimes result in less attention to accuracy. While this focus is appropriate for promoting communicative confidence, there is a risk that persistent errors will go unnoticed or uncorrected, especially when feedback is delayed or absent [6]. For high school students who are preparing for formal language assessments or academic settings where correctness matters, this imbalance can be problematic. Teachers must therefore find ways to integrate attention to form—through post-task analysis, corrective feedback, or strategic mini-lessons—without interrupting the flow of communication during the task itself.

Another significant challenge involves reconciling the open-ended, process-oriented nature of speaking tasks with institutional expectations for assessment. Traditional assessment systems tend to favor discrete-point tests that measure knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, or comprehension. In such systems, it is often difficult to incorporate performance-based evaluations of speaking that reflect communicative competence. Teachers may struggle to justify time spent on speaking tasks that do not clearly prepare students for exams. In some cases, administrative resistance to alternative forms of assessment may limit the degree to which speaking tasks can be formally integrated into the curriculum.

Access to quality materials, quiet spaces for group work, and technological support can affect the feasibility of speaking tasks in many schools. In under-resourced contexts, where textbooks

are outdated and classrooms are overcrowded, it may be difficult to find or create materials that support interactive, engaging tasks. Digital tools that could support speaking practice—such as language learning apps, recording software, or video conferencing—may also be unavailable or unreliable. These constraints place additional pressure on teachers to be resourceful and flexible in how they design and implement tasks.

Conclusion

In summary, the development of speaking skills in high school foreign language learners requires more than occasional oral practice or scripted dialogues. It calls for an instructional approach that places communication at the center of learning. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) offers a powerful and pedagogically sound model for this purpose, as it promotes the use of language in meaningful, goal-oriented contexts. By engaging learners in tasks that reflect real-life situations, TBLT supports the development of both fluency and functional competence. Speaking tasks designed within this framework can be particularly effective when they are relevant to learners' experiences, cognitively stimulating, and structured to promote interaction. For adolescents, such tasks not only improve language proficiency but also foster confidence, collaboration, and critical thinking.

At the same time, the implementation of task-based speaking instruction presents practical and pedagogical challenges. Teachers must manage classroom realities such as limited time, varied proficiency levels, and performance anxiety among students. They must also find ways to align communicative instruction with curriculum demands and assessment expectations. Addressing these issues requires careful task design, appropriate scaffolding, and a supportive classroom environment that encourages risk-taking and values communication over perfection. Assessment should focus on learners' ability to convey meaning and engage in interaction, using feedback to guide continued growth. When these elements are in place, task-based speaking activities can transform the classroom into a dynamic space where language is not only learned but actively used, preparing students for meaningful communication beyond the academic setting.

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