

Learner-Centered Approaches: Their Effect on the Oral Fluency of Students

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The purpose of the study was to determine the effect of learner-centered approaches on the oral fluency of the second-year students in English 202-Communicative English. The study employed a quasi-experimental method, particularly the pre-test and post-test experimental group design. Two groups of students were utilized as the experimental groups of the study. The findings of the study revealed that both groups acquired the same level of oral fluency before the intervention but acquired different levels of fluency after. Based on the result, the conclusion was that the level of speaking fluency of the participants exposed to cooperative learning improved significantly more than those exposed to task-based teaching. An experimental study conducted over a longer period of time and employing randomization could be considered to further investigate the possible results.

Keywords: language teaching, speaking fluency, quasi-experimental method, learner-centered approach, oral fluency, cooperative learning

One of the most significant challenges that language teachers face is to how to make students fluent in the target language, such as English (Miller, 2013; Alam, 2012; Enad, 2010; Limen, 2008). It is very common for second language learners to have disfluency in speaking the target language, with incomplete words, hesitation, and repetition of some words while speaking (Maletina, 2014; Adda-Decker et al., 2003; Laver, 1994). At times, students would choose to be speechless inside the class because of this problem. This problem is indeed apparent internationally (Alam 2012, de Jong & Perfetti, 2011; Wood, 2007) and nationwide even here in the Philippines (Enad, 2010; Limen, 2008). Conversely, fluency is the absence of fillers while speaking, such as “mm”, “er”, “ah”; no silence or filled pauses, and many others that interrupt continuous speech (Maletina, 2014; de Jong, 2012; Wood, 2007; Laver, 1994). Speed in speaking is also included as part of being fluent in speaking the target language. This is commonly the goal of

language teachers for their second language learners – fluency, which is a component of oral proficiency (Cummins, 2014; Solis 2014). Fluency is easier to be achieved depending on one’s exposure to the target language than proficiency because the latter requires more time, depending on one’s exposure to the target language and this also means that the speaker uses the target language with accuracy just like the native speaker (Cummins, 2014; Solis, 2014, CAL, 2014).

Drawing from previous research that argued that learner-centered approaches, like cooperative learning and task-based learning, could help improve students’ fluency in speaking the target language, I was eager to explore these approaches with my language classes. Learner-centered approaches like the ones aforementioned encourage language learners to use the target language while in classroom activities for language learning (Xue, 2013; Alam & Udin, 2013; de Jong & Perfetti, 2011; Enad, 2010). Specifically, cooperative learning enables students to

have peer collaboration in learning the target language (Colorado, 2015) while task-based learning gives them an avenue to use the language communicatively by doing certain tasks either individually, in pairs, or in larger groups (Nunan, 2009). This paper aims to investigate if cooperative and task-based learning could significantly improve students' speaking fluency. The null hypothesis that there is no significant difference between the speaking fluency of students exposed to cooperative learning method and task-based method is tested.

Literature Review

In a learner-centered approach, students are encouraged to discover for themselves whatever new learnings they will be exposed to. The culture in the student-centered classroom is that the students are made to construct knowledge through collaboration with others, synthesizing and reconstructing new information. Students, as the core of the learning process, engage in problem solving and do interactive activities which will make them actively and productively participate, while the teachers are the coaches and facilitators of the learning process (Mascolo, 2009; Allen, 2004; Huba and Freed, 2000). In relation to language teaching and putting the students at the center of the learning process in the classroom, where students should do some communicative activities in learning a language, task-based learning and cooperative learning are highlighted in this study based on previous research. Both approaches were recommended for they give attention to giving opportunities to students to use the target language in the classroom and were found out to be effective in second language acquisition (Colorado, 2015; Xue, 2013; Dincer, 2012; Alam and Uddin, 2003; Grundman, 2002). In order to highlight the differences between the two approaches, we will explore their main features below.

Task-based teaching has seven principles: scaffolding, task dependency, recycling, active learning, integration of form and function, reproductive and creative language use, and the place of reflective learning. These principles allow the teacher to pre-teach some useful items to students before they do tasks that give them an opportunity to be active in the learning process, particularly in using language in communicative activities. Meanwhile, the use of language focuses more on meaning than form; however, form is learned subconsciously. This is done by students reproducing the language model handed by the teacher. After the task, students have the chance to reflect on what they have done (Nunan, 2009). This is rooted in the theory of comprehensible input of Krashen and comprehensible output hypothesis of Swain (cited in Nunan, 2009).

Cooperative learning, on the other hand, has the key features when implemented in the classroom. These are positive interdependence, individual and group accountability, promote interaction, appropriate use of social skills, and group processing (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2013). This approach is rooted in Kurt Koffka's social interdependence theory (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2013). Cooperative learning constitutes the class into small groups where students work together to accomplish a task by being dependent to the group's success. The member's success is the group's success (SERC, 2012). This is recommended as advantageous in second language learning also in higher education because of teamwork or group discussion in language learning through activities where students are more confident in expressing themselves and those group members who have higher competence help other members (Colorado, 2015; Xue, 2013; Grundman, 2002).

In this study, cooperative learning had provided greater improvements to the speaking fluency of the students. The positive interdependence which is an element of cooperative learning as well as the collaboration of the members had been proven to be more effective in enhancing the speaking fluency of the students.

Methods

This study aimed to determine the effect of learner-centred approaches: of task-based learning and the cooperative learning on the oral/speaking fluency of the students. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What is the level of speaking fluency of second year students in the experimental group exposed to task-based and cooperative learning before the intervention?
- 2) What is the level of speaking fluency of the second year students under the experimental group exposed to task-based and cooperative learning after the intervention?
- 3) Are there significant differences in the level of speaking fluency of the second year students in the experimental group exposed to task-based and cooperative learning approaches before and after the intervention?
- 4) What approach is more effective in improving speaking fluency of second year students?

Tools

The study employed a quasi-experimental research design to investigate the effectiveness of an intervention (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002).

Specifically, it used the pre-test and post-test (see Appendices B and C) experimental group design on two groups. This is a type of quasi-experimental research which does not require a control group. The pre-test was given to the experimental groups, each group was exposed to a treatment and then both groups were given a post-test to measure the effect of the treatment (Sekaran, 2003). Accordingly, this study used nonprobability sampling or the non-random assignment. Specifically, purposive sampling, a type of nonprobability sampling, was utilized because the subjects are the specific target of this study. The subjects conformed to the standards set by the researcher. In particular, the type of purposive sampling that was used was judgement sampling wherein the subjects were the specific people that the researcher wanted to study with a particular treatment (learner-centered approach).

The study was done through conducting an oral test which is describing a picture (pre-test and post-test) before and after the intervention was implemented. The data gathered were recorded and computed. The results were analyzed and interpreted with the use of T-test of independent sample and paired T-test.

Participants

The subjects of the study were second year students taking English 202 – Communicative English in academic year 2014-2015 at University of Mindanao Panabo College. The total number of the participants in the first experimental group was twenty-five (25), while the second experimental group was also twenty-five (25). Each group composed of both females and males. Their ages range from 18-30 years old.

Procedure

First, I designed two sets of four lessons for the two experimental groups (task-based teaching group and the cooperative learning group). These lesson plans

(see Appendix D) were checked and approved by the three professors. Second, a variety of pictures (see Appendices B and C) was prepared for the participants to describe, interpret or explain through speaking as their oral fluency test. Third, there was pilot testing with a different class to determine the rater’s reliability. Fourth, a pre-test on oral fluency was conducted in the class. There was a different picture for every participant and each participant was given three minutes to speak about the picture. Their voices were recorded. Fifth, the participants’ oral fluency was assessed using the researcher-made rubric validated by the three professors (see Appendix A). The rubric was an integration of the theories of Schulz and Bartz in describing fluency as cited by Linder (1977) in her book and also cited by Ascione (1993) and other related studies on oral fluency, such as Wood (2007) on fluency development. The sixth step was the intervention. The lesson plans were used in the class of fifty students for each group. One set of lesson plans for one group that used task-based teaching and another set for the other group that used cooperative learning. Seventh, the post-test on oral fluency was conducted with the same process in the pre-test with different pictures. Finally, three professors assessed the recorded voices of the participants using the researcher-made rubric.

Results and Discussion

The statistical test was conducted to assess and compare the speaking fluency of students before the interventions. The results reveal the participants from the two experimental groups had the same level of speaking fluency as there was no significant difference between their average scores on the speed, pause, repetition/hesitation and, most significantly, the average overall score of their speaking fluency before the intervention or the experiment (See Table 1).

The data suggests that the level of speaking fluency

Table 1
Speaking Fluency of Students before the Exposure to Task-based Teaching and Cooperative Learning Approaches

Indicator	Group	Mean	t	df	p	Remarks
Speed	Task-based	2.25	-1.106	48	.274	Not significant
	Cooperative	2.43				
Pause	Task-based	1.93	-.838	48	.406	Not significant
	Cooperative	2.07				
Hesitation	Task-based	1.87	-.572	48	.570	Not significant
	Cooperative	1.95				
Overall	Task-based	6.04	-1.003	48	.321	Not significant
	Cooperative	6.45				

Note: t-value is significant if p<.05

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of the two groups of students was statistically similar before the intervention. Their speed of speech, pause in the speech, and their repetitions/hesitations in the speech were statistically similar before the exposure to the intervention.

After the intervention, the cooperative learning approach had a greater impact on the oral fluency of the participants in terms of speed, pause, and repetition/hesitation in speech using the second language. The data clearly shows that the participants from the cooperative learning group had a greater increase in their average scores compared to the participants from the task-based learning group (Table 2).

This suggests that the students' performance in speaking fluency improved greatly when using cooperative learning approach. Compared to the task based learning, cooperative learning has shown greater improvements on lessening the repetition/hesitation in speech, reducing unnecessary/unnatural pauses in speech and enhancing the speed of speech.

Both teaching approaches have given a positive gain or advantage to the students; however, the cooperative learning approach appeared to provide greater statistical advantage (Table 3).

The data could suggest that collaborative work

between members in the group with a communicative activity, which was the difference between the two approaches, helped the participants to confidently practice their speaking skills using the second language inside the classroom that contributed to the improvement of their oral fluency.

For further analysis of the data, a paired-test was used to determine the effectiveness of the teaching approaches in enhancing the speaking fluency of the students. It demonstrates that there is a significant difference in the speaking fluency scores in the pre-test and post-test of the students treated with cooperative learning approach (Table 4).

This implies that cooperative learning approach is more effective in enhancing the speaking fluency of the students.

Conclusion and Implication

The cooperative learning approach and the task based approach were effective in improving the level of speaking fluency of the students. However, the students exposed to the cooperative learning

Table 2

Speaking Fluency of the Students after the Exposure to Task-based Teaching and Cooperative Learning Approaches

Indicator	Group	Mean	t	df	p	Remarks
Speed	Task-based	2.37	-3.594	48	.001	Significant
	Cooperative	2.85				
Pause	Task-based	1.96	-3.121	48	.003	Significant
	Cooperative	2.36				
Hesitation	Task-based	1.79	-3.455	48	.001	Significant
	Cooperative	2.23				
Overall	Task-based	6.12	-3.802	48	.000	Significant
	Cooperative	7.44				

Note: t-value is significant if $p < .05$

Table 3

Mean Gained Scores of the Students on Speaking Fluency Test before and after the Exposure to Task-based and Cooperative Learning Approaches

Indicator	Group	Mean	t	df	p	Remarks
Speed	Task-based	.12	-1.962	48	.056	Not significant
	Cooperative	.43				
Pause	Task-based	.03	-1.811	48	.076	Not significant
	Cooperative	.29				
Hesitation	Task-based	-.08	-2.719	48	.009	Significant
	Cooperative	.28				
Overall	Task-based	.08	-2.530	48	.015	Significant
	Cooperative	0.99				

Note: t-value is significant if $p < .05$

Table 4

Paired T-test between Pre-test and Post-test Scores of the Students on Speaking Fluency in Task-based and Cooperative Learning Approaches

	Pre-test Mean	SD	Post test Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Cooperative						
Speed	2.43	0.77	2.85	0.43	5.58	0.003*
Pause	2.07	0.76	2.36	0.61	2.83	0.002*
Hesitation	1.95	0.80	2.23	0.67	2.62	0.010*
Overall	6.45	2.34	7.44	1.70	3.42	0.024*
Task-Based						
Speed	2.25	0.84	2.37	0.77	1.19	0.230
Pause	1.93	0.74	1.96	0.60	0.33	0.740
Hesitation	1.87	0.76	1.79	0.68	-1.02	0.300
Overall	6.04	2.34	6.12	2.05	1.04	0.439

Note: t-value is significant if $p < .05$ as indicated with *

approach had performed better than those exposed to the task-based learning approach. The former had gained significantly higher than the participants exposed to task-based teaching. The participants exposed to cooperative learning had improved significantly higher in their repetition/hesitation in speech than the participants exposed to task-based teaching. Statistically, the mean level of speaking fluency of the participants exposed to the cooperative learning approach improved more than the students exposed to the task-based learning approach. The study shows that there is a statistical improvement in the speaking fluency scores of the students treated with the cooperative learning approach. The result of this study could be employed by language teachers and curriculum developers, especially in higher education to enhance speaking fluency through collaborative tasks and this could also be further considered for experimental studies with random sampling.

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Appendix A

Second Language Speaking Fluency Rubric

	4 Very Good	3 Good	2 Fair	1 Needs Improvement
Speed	All throughout the speech, the speed is natural and the thoughts were expressed clearly and effectively.	In a very few instances in the speech, the speed is unnatural but the thoughts were still expressed clearly and effectively.	In several instances in the speech, speed is unnatural that made the thoughts unclear and expressed ineffectively.	Almost all throughout the speech, the speed is unnatural--- very slow or very fast that made the thoughts unclear and expressed ineffectively.
Pause	All throughout the speech, the pauses are natural. Their occurrence is necessary to facilitate comprehensibility of the meaning conveyed.	Only very few of the pauses are unnatural. Their occurrence makes loss for words a bit obvious but still they do not affect the comprehensibility of the meaning conveyed.	Several of the pauses are unnatural. Their occurrence makes loss for words and thoughts very obvious thus negatively affecting the comprehensibility of the meaning conveyed.	All of the pauses are unnatural. Their occurrence makes loss for words and thoughts take a very long time thereby making the speech incomprehensible.
Repetition/ Hesitation	Almost all of the repetitions are necessary to emphasize a point. Hesitations are not obvious.	A very few of the repetitions are not necessary to emphasize a point and in effect utterances are not an ear sore. Hesitations are a bit obvious but they are not bothersome.	Several of the repetitions are not necessary to emphasize a point and in effect utterances are an ear sore. Hesitations are obvious but not bothersome.	All of the repetitions are not necessary to emphasize a point and in effect utterances are an ear sore. Hesitations are obvious and bothersome.

Appendix B

Pre-test pictures



Figure 1. A man sitting at the back row (Geronimo, 2013).

Source: Geronimo, J. (2013). Aman sitting at the back row. Retrieved from <https://www.rappler.com/move-ph/issues/education/44146-asean-2015-philippine-higher-education> or Geronimo, J. (2013). The road to ASEAN 2015: Why are PH colleges lagging behind? Retrieved from <https://www.rappler.com/move-ph/issues/education/44146-asean-2015-philippine-higher-education>



Figure 3. Running with Tigers at the 51st PMAP Annual Conference (Thenewsguy, 2014).

Source: Thenewsguy. (2014). Running with tigers at the 51st annual conference. Retrieved from <http://thenewsmakers.info/2014/08/running-with-tigers-at-the-51st-pmap-annual-conference/>

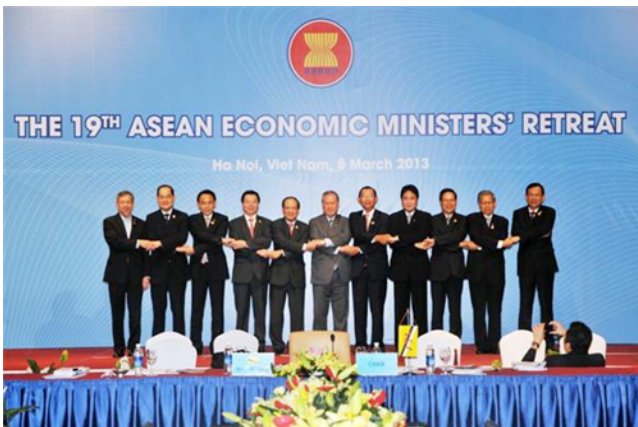


Figure 2. ASEAN is making efforts to build up the ASEAN Community by 2015. In the photo, ASEAN Economic Ministers meet at their 19th Retreat in Ha Noi, March 8, 2013 (Hanh, 2013).

Source: Hanh, H. (2013). ASEAN is making efforts to build up the ASEAN Community by 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.mpi.gov.vn/en/pages/tinbai.aspx?idTin=21672&idcm=133> or Hanh, H. (2013). AEM19 speeds up construction of ASEAN Community. Retrieved from <http://www.mpi.gov.vn/en/pages/tinbai.aspx?idTin=21672&idcm=133>

Appendix C

Post-test pictures



Figure 4. Businessman and businesswoman standing chatting (k6713068 Fotosearch Stock Images Photograph Royalty Free, 2017).
Source: Fotosearch Stock Images Photograph Royalty Free. (2017). Businessman and businesswoman standing chatting. Retrieved from <http://www.fotosearch.com/CSP671/k6713068/>



Figure 6. Small group (Synchronoose, 2014).
Source: Synchronoose. (2014). Small group. Retrieved from <http://synchronoose.blogspot.com/2014/04/chapter-11-12-13-leaders-in-small-group.html>



Figure 5. Operations (Nybbles and Bytes, 2017).
Source: Nybbles and Bytes. (2017). Operations. Retrieved from <http://nybblesandbytes.ca/2017/06/02/operations/>

Appendix D

Lesson Plan: Cooperative Learning

Lesson 1: A Good Conversationalist

Introduction

The art of conversation takes practice and is not as hard as one might think. It will take some knowledge, practice and patience, and one can learn to relax and enjoy a great conversation. Here are the tips that a good conversationalist should follow:

1. Listen
2. Find out what the other person is interested in.
3. Ask questions
4. Forget yourself
5. Practice active listening skills
6. Ask clarifying questions
7. Paraphrase what you have heard, using your own words.
8. Consider your response before disagreeing
9. Consider playing devil's advocate - which requires care.
10. Do not panic over lulls.
11. Know when the conversation is over.
12. Make a good first impression.

Objectives:

At the end of the lesson, the students will be able to:

- Create closed-ended and open-ended questions for a conversation.
- Converse using the English language comprehensively.
- Perform a public presentation in a form of a talk show with the group using the English language.

Procedure:

Group Size: 4

Method Used to Group Assignments:

Informal group selected at random

Roles:

Director, Scriptwriter, Timekeeper, Checker

Room Assignments:

The students will sit closer to each other forming a circle.

Materials:

Pen and Paper, Reference Book, Criteria for Rating

Activity:

The group will discuss and plan making a talk show focusing on a good and meaningful conversation.

Explaining Task and Cooperative Goal Structure:

1. Task:

Each group will discuss and plan on producing a talk show, demonstrating a good and meaningful conversation. They will come up with a script that should be submitted to the teacher.

2. Criteria for Success:

Each group will have a talk show presentation in the class after the discussion and planning. The talk show should present a good and meaningful conversation based on the criteria for rating.

3. Positive Interdependence:

Each group will have a director, scriptwriter, checker and timekeeper.

- Director- assigns roles of the members in the talk show, organizes the presentation of the show, formulates the concept.
- Scriptwriter - writes the script for the talk show.
- Checker - checks the script to see if there is any confusing idea or grammar mistakes, asks the teacher if there are any concerns.
- Timekeeper - checks the time and reminds everyone to be aware of the time.

4. Individual Accountability:

All members of the group must do and focus on their responsibility in the task. They will also be responsible for learning the topic.

5. Inter-group Cooperation:

The members will ask questions and listen to each other. They will also cooperate to achieve the objective.

6. Expected Behaviors:

The members will cooperate, contribute, and master the language that they are going to use for the activity.

Monitoring and Intervening:

The teacher will observe each group while discussing and planning. The teacher will answer questions and check the script.

Assessment:

The group will have the talk show presented in the class without the script. The group will be rated with the criteria:

Meaningfulness of the topic	-----	30%
Attitude and Behavior of the Speakers (Every member has to speak)	-----	20%
Correctness of the constructed sentences	-----	30%
Smoothness of the conversation	-----	<u>20%</u>
Total		100%

LESSON PLAN: Tasked-Based Learning

Lesson 1: A Good Conversationalist

Introduction

The art of conversation takes practice, and is not as hard as one might think. It will take some knowledge, practice, and patience, and one can learn to relax and enjoy a great conversation. Here are the tips that a good conversationalist should do:

1. Listen
2. Find out what the other person is interested in.
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7. Paraphrase what you have heard, using your own words.
8. Consider your response before disagreeing
9. Consider playing devil's advocate—which requires care.
10. Do not panic over lulls.
11. Know when the conversation is over.
12. Make a good first impression.

Objectives:

At the end of the lesson, the students will be able to:

- Create closed-ended and open-ended questions for a conversation.
- Converse using the English language comprehensively.
- Perform a public presentation of a conversation with a partner using the English language.

Pre-Task

Teaching aid: White board and marker, textbook, sample questions

Directions:

- a. The teacher will ask the students for ideas on “good and meaningful conversation”.
- d. The teacher and the students will discuss on how a good and meaningful conversation can be realized using the target language.
- c. The teacher will ask the students for some samples of language phrases or sentences in constructing a

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question (open-ended and closed-ended). The teacher will check the grammar whether it is correct or not.

- d. The teacher will tell the students to find a partner to have a conversation with. The topic of the conversation must be meaningful. The teacher will also remind the students to be careful in noting past forms and present forms of the verbs.
- e. The teacher will tell the students to prepare for public presentation of their conversation. The teacher will provide criteria for rating the public presentation of the conversation.

During Task

Teaching aid: teacher's close observation of the conversation partners, paper and pencil (optional to the students)

Directions:

- a. The students will find a partner and plan the conversation they are going to have. The students will submit a sheet of paper with their names on it to the teacher.
- b. The students will construct sentences for the conversation they are going to have.
- c. The students will have their conversation practice on their seats and prepare for the public presentation.
- d. The teacher will observe the students while doing the task.
- e. The teacher will answer questions that the students may ask.

Post Task:

Materials: Microphones, chairs for the conversation partners

Directions:

- a. The teacher will collect the sheets of paper from the students with their names on it.
- b. The teacher will call each pair to come in front of the class and show the class their good and meaningful conversation. The students will use microphones for their conversation.
- c. The teacher will give feedback to the students through the criteria for rating.
- d. The teacher will pose some erratic sentences or phrases from the conversations and correct them.

Assessment:

Criteria for Rating the Conversation

Meaningfulness of the topic	-----	30%
Attitude and Behavior of the Speakers	-----	20%
Correctness of the constructed sentences	-----	30%
Smoothness of the conversation	-----	20%
Total		100%