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Teachers' Beliefs as to whether or not Authentic Tasks Can Enhance Learners' Speaking Performance

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Abstract

This paper reports a descriptive study which explored teachers' beliefs as to whether or not authentic tasks can help foster learners' speaking performance in a private university in Vietnam. The author of this study conducted an interview to five lecturers to collect the data. The findings of this study indicate that these participating teachers believed that the authentic tasks are able to enhance learners' speaking performance. Findings also reveal that the tasks should be designed based on the theoretical framework and the tasks designed in this study have met such a requirement.

Keywords: authentic tasks, speaking performance, teachers' beliefs

1. Introduction

As a result of globalization, people around the world need to be able to communicate with each other for business, social, and academic purposes. Trade, ideas, knowledge, and technology flow from place to place, and a common language is essential to maintaining and improving the stream of communication. Proficiency in the English language has been a mark of learning, social status, and success (Kim, 2002) ^[21].

As the majority of Asian countries, English in Vietnam is taught in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes where it is treated as a subject to be studied rather than as means to communication. The lack of a surrounding community of English speakers outside the classroom increases the challenge for EFL instructors immensely. Therefore, it is suggested that the opportunity for communication in authentic situations and settings is a major factor for second-language acquisition by adults. This may explain why so many popular EFL programs and foreign language teaching methods developed over the past half century have tried to replicate the target language environment through immersion camps and programs or bilingual school curricula.

In addition, with a view to providing second language learners with learning situations which embrace the complexities of the nature of language and language learning, *authenticity has been routinely called for in English Language Teaching* for creating a communicative language environment (Amor 2002; Nunan 2004; Mishan 2005; Harding 2007) ^[1, 28, 27, 15] – in order that learners are exposed to 'real English' with 'intrinsically communicative quality' (Lee, 1995) and rehearse the real-world target communication tasks they will have to perform in their future workplace.

Harding (2007) ^[15] stresses the importance for teachers to make use of authentic materials, make tasks as authentic as possible and 'bring the classroom into the real world and bring the real world into the classroom'. Theories of language acquisition emphasize the need for practice in the context of 'real operating condition' (Johnson, 1988), i.e. 'learners need the opportunity to practice language in the same conditions that apply in real-life situations' (Ellis, 2003) ^[9]. It is suggested that 'authenticity is the link between the classroom and the outside reality' (Canado & Esteban, 2005) ^[7], and that 'the more authentically the classroom mirrors the real world, the more real the rehearsal will be and the better the learning and transfer will be' (Arnold, 1991).

From the previous studies, the author realized that authentic tasks are very important for developing learners' language performance. Authentic tasks are learning activities designed to provide real-world relevance and utility while enabling learners to make meaningful connections (Andersson & Andersson, 2005)^[2]. Authentic tasks consist of multifaceted activities requiring the student to scrutinize the task from a variety of angles (Herrington *et al.*, 2006)^[16].

Several studies show that oral language development is improved when the practice incorporates authentic materials (Bacon & Finneman, 1990; Miller, 2005; Otte, 2006; Thanajaro, 2000)^[4, 26, 29, 34].

The author of the study worked in a private university in Vietnam. The university's requirements are that the students have to get TOEIC certificate with the minimum score of 450 and that they are able to speak English fluently. However, the students' background is rather disappointing because they do not have a good basis in English language competence as well as performance. Therefore, in order to achieve that goal, it requires the teachers to make a great effort. Searching for a teaching methodology or an approach to improve the students' English is an essential thing to do.

Supported from the previous studies about authentic tasks, the author believes that teachers can help the students develop their English with the authentic tasks. In reality, the constant concern of the author is the teachers' perceptions of the contributions of authentic tasks. He really would like to investigate whether the tasks designed are authentic and the teachers' perceptions about the relationship between authentic tasks and learners' speaking performance. For that reason, the author would like to conduct this study.

2. Literature review

2.1. Authentic tasks

2.1.1. Some concepts of authentic tasks

According to Tom Gram (2009)^[35], authentic learning tasks are whole-task experiences based on real life (work) tasks that integrate skills, knowledge attitude and social context. Instruction is organized around the whole task, usually in an easy to difficult progression, which "scaffolds" learning support from "lots to little" as learners' progress.

Nunan (1988:4)^[28] defines authentic tasks are the ones that take real-world behavior and learner's need into consideration: "tasks which replicate or rehearse the communicative behaviors which will be required of them in real world". However, learners may have different expectations of classroom activities and their real-world parallels. So what makes a task authentic? Guariento & Morley (2001)^[14] note the importance of student "engagement" in a task as essential in determining task authenticity. For example, when students are given the task of reading a short text, sharing the contents with a partner, listening to an explanation of what their partner has read about the same topic and then consolidating that information to share with a larger group of students, a variety of skills are activated and engaged to communicate a specific outcome ensuring task authenticity. Authentic tasks can be contrasted with pedagogic tasks (e.g. controlled grammar practice activities such as gap-filling or transformation exercises), which focus on the development of accuracy rather than language using. What is the difference and similarity between the two mentioned authors?

Guariento & Morley (2001)^[14] argues that the issue of task

authenticity is in fact far more complex than Ellis' rather vague reference to "real operating conditions" and so it might be possible to identify principles to make tasks more authentic:

- **Authenticity through a genuine purpose:** One of the crucial aspects of task authenticity is whether real communication takes place and whether the language has been used for a genuine purpose.
- **Authenticity through real world targets:** A task might be said to be authentic if it has a clear relationship with real world needs.
- **Authenticity through classroom interaction:** All of the everyday procedures, the learning tasks, types of data, and the materials to be selected and worked on the actual needs, interests and preferred ways of working of all the people gathered in the classroom all provide sufficient authentic potential for communication.
- **Authenticity through engagement:** Authenticity of task might be said to depend on whether or not a student is engaged by the task. Unless students are genuinely interested in its topic and purpose and they understand its relevance then they are somehow engaged by the task, authenticity may count for the most. It suggests that students should be given a role in task selection; learning tasks should be the product of negotiation.

In Sasse's (1997) qualitative research study of authentic learning tasks in the classroom, the author concluded authentic tasks must go beyond simply simulating real-life situations. The authentic task must require students to take ownership of their learning experience including making sense of the classroom assignments in terms of their real world jobs. In addition, authentic tasks will foster informal, non-task specific collaboration and discourse (Sasse). In another qualitative study of incorporating authentic learning experiences within a university course, Stein and colleagues (2004) identified three key features of authentic learning tasks. The first is group interactions, which in this study consisted of weekly informal meetings, to discuss, analyze, synthesize, and critique ideas relative to the assignments and the project. The second key feature is the authentic project that required the students to engage with a real community of practice and apply the theoretical principles from earlier course work. The project provided the opportunity for students to make the experience individually meaningful while the mentor and group peers provided structure and direction. The third key feature of authentic learning was the inclusion of reflective tasks in which the students reflected on the assignments, discussions, and project and made connections with their own understandings (Stein *et al.*).

In summary, many concepts about authentic tasks have been given by researchers and authors so far. Their concepts have some things in common. All of the authors think that authentic tasks are the activities or assignments based on the real life. However, the factors that determine the authenticity of tasks are not similar among the authors' concepts. Tom Gram (2009)^[35] states that there must be the integration of skills, knowledge attitude and social context in order for a task to be authentic. Unlike Tom Gram (2009)^[35], Nunan (1988)^[28] thinks that real world behavior and learners' need will determine the authenticity of tasks. Guariento & Morley (2001)^[14] consider "engagement" in a task as essential in determining task authenticity. Also, Guariento & Morley (

2001)^[14] give the principles to make tasks more authentic such as *authenticity through a genuine purpose, authenticity through real world targets, authenticity through classroom interaction and authenticity through engagement*. Like Guariento & Morley (2001)^[14], Stein and his colleagues (2004) give key features of authentic learning tasks such as group interactions, including weekly informal meetings, to discuss, analyze, synthesize, and critique ideas relative to the assignments and the project, the authentic project that required the students to engage with a real community of practice and apply the theoretical principles from earlier course work and the inclusion of reflective tasks in which the students reflected on the assignments, discussions, and project and made connections with their own understandings.

Characteristics of authentic tasks

According to Reeves, T. C., Herrington, J., & Oliver, R. (2002)^[30], authentic tasks have the following characteristics.

1. Authentic tasks have real-world relevance

Activities match as nearly as possible the real-world tasks of professionals in practice rather than decontextualised or classroom-based tasks.

2. Authentic tasks are ill-defined, requiring students to define the tasks and sub-tasks needed to complete the activity

Problems inherent in the tasks are ill-defined and open to multiple interpretations rather than easily solved by the application of existing algorithms¹. Learners must identify their own unique tasks and sub-tasks in order to complete the major task.

3. Authentic tasks comprise complex tasks to be investigated by students over a sustained period of time

Tasks are completed in days, weeks and months rather than minutes or hours, requiring significant investment of time and intellectual resources.

4. Authentic tasks provide the opportunity for students to examine the task from different perspectives, using a variety of resources

The task affords to examine the problem from a variety of theoretical and practical perspectives, rather than a single perspective that learners must imitate to be successful. The use of a variety of resources rather than a limited number of preselected references requires students to detect relevant from irrelevant information^[1].

5. Authentic tasks provide the opportunity to collaborate

Collaboration is integral to the task, both within the course and the real world, rather than achievable by an individual learner.

6. Authentic tasks provide the opportunity to reflect

Tasks need to enable learners to make choices and reflect on their learning both individually and socially.

7. Authentic tasks can be integrated and applied across different subject areas and lead beyond domain-specific outcomes

Tasks encourage interdisciplinary perspectives and enable diverse roles and expertise rather than a single well-defined field or domain.

8. Authentic tasks are seamlessly integrated with assessment

Assessment of tasks is seamlessly integrated with the major task in a manner that reflects real world assessment, rather than separate artificial assessment removed from the nature of the task.

9. Authentic tasks create polished products valuable in their own right rather than as preparation for something else

Tasks culminate in the creation of a whole product rather than an exercise or sub-step in preparation for something else.

10. Authentic tasks allow competing solutions and diversity of outcome

Tasks allow a range and diversity of outcomes open to multiple solutions of an original nature, rather than a single correct response obtained by the application of rules and procedures.

From the concepts about authentic tasks (Tom Gram, 2009; Nunan, 1988; Guariento & Morley, 2001; Sasse, 1997; Stein *et al.*, 2004)^[28] as well as the characteristics of authentic tasks (Reeves, T. C., Herrington, J., & Oliver, R. (2002)^[30], the researcher proposes a working definition of authentic tasks which are used as a theoretical framework for this study.

Working definition of authentic tasks

Authentic tasks are the ones that require learners to integrate the knowledge of language and real-life experiences to implement them as naturally as in real life.

The characteristics of authentic tasks are also categorized as the following.

- Authentic tasks have real-world relevance.
- Authentic tasks create polished products, requiring students to define the tasks and sub-tasks needed to complete the activity over a sustained period of time.
- Authentic tasks can be integrated and applied across different subject areas, providing the opportunity for students to examine the task from different perspectives.
- Authentic tasks provide the opportunity to collaborate and reflect on learning individually and socially.

2.1.2. The relationship between using authentic tasks and the ability to enhance learners' speaking performance

Several studies show that oral language development is improved when the practice incorporates authentic materials (Bacon & Finneman, 1990; Miller, 2005; Otte, 2006; Thanajaro, 2000)^[4, 26, 29, 34].

McNeil (1994) and Kilickaya (2004) indicate that the use of authentic texts is now considered to be one way for increasing students' motivation for learning since they give the learner the feeling that he or she is learning the real language—the target language as it is used by the community.

Kim (2000)^[20] argues that authentic materials make a major contribution to overcoming certain cultural barriers to language learning.

¹ Algorithm is a set of mathematical instructions that must be followed in a fixed order, and that, especially if given to a computer, will help to calculate an answer to a mathematical problem

Authentic input has long been perceived as too difficult for students to understand. Martinez (2002) mentions that authentic materials may be too culturally biased and difficult to understand outside the language community. Learners may experience extreme frustration when confronted by an authentic text, especially lower level students, as found by McNeil (1994). Schmidt (1994) argues that authentic discourse may panic learners who find themselves faced with the speed of delivery coupled with a mixture of known and unknown vocabulary and structures; instead, he prefers using simplified texts that have communicative value rather than using authentic input. However, Guariento & Morley (2001)^[14] assert that such difficulties can be overcome by designing tasks that require only partial comprehension.

In conclusion, the benefits that authentic materials bring to the FL classroom greatly outweigh the challenges. In addition, it is possible to overcome the challenges through task design. Thus, integrating authentic materials will merit the extra time and effort required of FL teachers. In other words, using authentic tasks designed from authentic materials brings many benefits to learners' language development, especially oral language development or speaking performance.

3. Speaking performance

3.1. Definition of speaking performance

It is widely accepted that speaking performance is a difficult concept to define. However, speaking which is one of the crucial skills in language learning and teaching has received significant concern, so the definitions of speaking performance have changed throughout the years. Speaking performance refers to "the capacity of a speaker to tell something well to other persons as his listeners in speaking, thereby the listeners can catch or understand his message or what he says and then gives response as the evidence of the oral communication could run smoothly. The speaker expresses his need and communicates information at least in short bursts". (Brown & Yule, 1983, p.19). This definition puts much emphasis on the information or the message the speakers say and the listeners' responses. Moreover, Bachman & Palmer (1996) define speaking performance as an interaction between language ability and the context in which language is used. Similarly, Chapelle, Grabe and Berns (1997) and Chapelle (1999) argue that language ability must be described in relation to the characteristics of the situation in which communication takes place. Therefore, speaking performance in this study means students' ability to interact with the listeners accurately and fluently in communicative context.

3.2. Components of good speaking performance

Learners' speaking performance is considered to be in relation to accounts of communicative competence. Communicative competence refers to learners' ability to use grammatical rules and produce appropriate speech in social contexts. Hymes (1972) defines communicative competence as "the capacities of a person, a competence which is "dependent upon both tacit knowledge and ability for use" (p.22). It means that communicative competence consists of not only grammatical competence but also pragmatic competence (the ability to use language in various contexts).

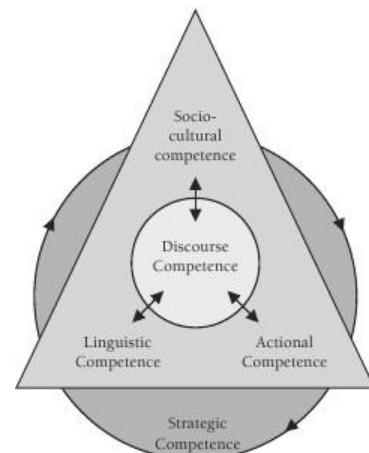


Fig 1: Components of speaking performance

The components of communicative competence are concerned with different points of view by many linguists. Canale and Swain (1980) took communicative competence to be the appropriate ability or set of ability to describe. They offered a model of this ability in terms of three elements: (1) grammatical competence, (2) sociolinguistic competence, (3) strategic competence.

Grammatical competence emphasizes the knowledge of the grammatical rules. Sociolinguistic competence refers to the knowledge of use and rules of discourse. Strategic competence focuses on the knowledge of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies. Furthermore, Canale (1983) extended this model to one with four dimensions which include linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. In this version of the model, Canale distinguished knowledge of sociolinguistic rules of use, affecting such matters as formality and appropriateness to contexts, from knowledge of rules of discourse, which is related to more textual considerations of cohesion and coherence. In brief, communicative competence mentions learners' ability to apply grammatical rules and produce language accurately and appropriately. In other words, communicative competence is a linguistic term referring to learners' ability to use language including speaking or writing ability. Also, it can be concluded that learners are advised to train different kinds of communicative competence in order to have good speaking performance. If learners have sufficient linguistic knowledge of language and the appropriate use of language in particular social contexts, they will have good speaking performance or good communicative competence.

4. Methods

4.1. Research questions

In order to investigate teachers' perceptions of using authentic tasks to develop learners' speaking performance, the author attempted to find out the answers for the following questions:

1. Are the tasks designed by the researcher authentic?
2. Could the authentic tasks be able to enhance learners' speaking performance?

- What components of the tasks designed can contribute to learners' fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, and pronunciation?

4.2. Participants

The subjects involved in my study were five English teachers at a private university in Vietnam. One participant is male, and the rest are female. The teachers were invited to participate in the interview. Most of the participants have been teaching in the university for at least 3 years. Among them, there is one teacher who has five years of teaching experience. Their average age is 25.5. Generally speaking, the participants are young teachers but are very enthusiastic in teaching and very willing to approach the new methodology in English teaching.

4.3. Research instruments

To answer the two research questions of the study, the author used two major instruments: designed tasks and the interview questions.

5. Results

5.1. Participants' evaluation as to whether the tasks designed are authentic or not.

All of the participants evaluated the tasks designed in light of the theoretical framework of authentic tasks. They agree that the tasks designed are authentic. To support their opinion, they gave very detailed explanation as to the activities or assignments involved in the tasks. They drew out how the tasks designed meet the characteristics of authentic tasks in the theoretical framework. These participants stated.

In relation to the theoretical framework of authentic tasks, I strongly agree that the tasks designed are authentic because it is easy for me to find that the tasks designed meet the characteristics of authentic tasks presented in the literature review chapter.

They continued to give clear explanation about why they think that the tasks designed are authentic by giving examples to prove that the tasks meet the characteristics.

I would like to give an example to prove that the tasks designed are authentic. First of all, I think that the tasks designed are authentic because they have real-world relevance. For example, in task 1, students are required to look for the information of companies or businesses and write a business profile. The information is real. Second, the tasks designed have the final products – that is the business profile. In order to create these polished products, students have to experience many activities and sub-tasks needed over a sustained period of time such as looking for the information on the Internet, watching a video clip, reading sample business profiles, etc. Third, the tasks designed are an integration of skills. Within a task, the students can have the opportunity to listen, speak, read, and write through the activities such as discussion, presentation, reading the sample business profiles and write journals. Finally, the tasks designed really provide the opportunity for learners to collaborate and reflect on learning individually and socially through group work, pair work and reflective journals.

For the other tasks, the participants also agree that they are authentic and give similar examples to prove their authenticity.

5.2. Participants' evaluation as to whether the tasks are able to contribute to the enhancement of learners' speaking performance

As noted in the literature review chapter, authentic tasks are able to enhance learners' language development, especially their speaking performance. From the interview data, five out of five participants showed that the tasks designed are able to enhance learners' speaking performance. Together with their opinion are the examples and the detailed analysis of the tasks designed to prove that the tasks really contribute to the enhancement of learners' speaking performance. These participants evaluated that the tasks give many opportunities for learners to practice speaking; therefore they can make a contribution to the enhancement of learners' speaking performance. These participants said

I found that the tasks are designed based on the characteristics of authentic tasks.

The tasks have many activities and assignments which give learners chances to develop skills, and the focus of the tasks is speaking practice. In fact, learners can practice speaking through presentations, discussions, and interviews. Furthermore, the topics of the tasks designed as well as the activities involved are real, so learners find it easy to follow and motivated to participate in. I believe that the more motivated, the more progress they can make. In short, I do agree that the tasks designed can enhance learners' speaking performance.

5.3. The possible contribution of tasks designed and learners' speaking performance

As presented in the previous section, the tasks designed are able to contribute to the enhancement of learners' speaking performance. In this section, the participants tell us what components of the tasks designed can contribute to learners' fluency and coherence, grammatical range and accuracy, lexical resource, and pronunciation. Each participant could find out the examples to prove that the components of the tasks can make such a contribution. The tasks designed consist of many activities, and each activity can help develop many skills. In other words, the skills are integrated within a task and within the minor activities involved in the task as well. This integration really supports learners' enhancement of the components of speaking performance such as fluency and coherence, grammatical range and accuracy, lexical resource, and pronunciation. These participants stated

I think that all the tasks designed are able to enhance learners' speaking performance. I really like the components of the tasks designed because there is an integration of skills. For example, in task 3, the main task is to make a video report about the student life and write an article about it. However, there are many minor activities involved, which helps learners develop the components of speaking performance. Besides, learners can improve other skills such as listening while watching a video report, reading while sharing the article with each other, speaking while participating in discussions,

interviews and writing while they are required to write an article. The integration of skills give learners chances to develop the components of speaking performance. In reality, when learners write the script for the video report, they can develop coherence and grammatical range, which is important for their speaking competence. Also, when discussing in groups, learners can develop fluency and pronunciation. Besides, writing an article, they can develop vocabulary, especially word choice. In summary, all the skills and language elements learners can develop from the sub-tasks contribute to their speaking performance.

In summary, the results from the interview showed that the participants agree that the tasks designed are authentic in light of the theoretical framework presented in the literature review. Besides, the tasks designed are able to enhance learners' speaking performance with the contribution of the components of the tasks designed.

6. Discussions

6.1. The tasks designed by the researcher are authentic

Some researchers of the previous studies (Nunan, 1988; Sasse, 1997; Guariento & Morley, 2001; Stein *et al.*, 2004; Tom Gram, 2009) [28, 14, 9] gave many definitions about authentic tasks. From the definitions, the researcher drew out his own definition about authentic tasks. Besides, the researcher also based on the characteristics of the authentic tasks by Reeves, T.C., Herrington, J., & Oliver, R. (2002) [30] to design the tasks.

Through the interviews, five out of five respondents claimed that the tasks designed by the researcher are authentic.

6.2. Contributions of the authentic tasks to learners' speaking performance

The finding from the interview data showed that authentic tasks are able to enhance learners' speaking performance. As shown in the interview, five out of five respondents think that learners are able to enhance learners' speaking performance with the authentic tasks. This finding incorporates with many previous studies (Bacon & Finneman, 1990; Miller, 2005; Otte, 2006; Thanajaro, 2000) [4, 26, 29, 34]. Furthermore, the participants also found out the components of the tasks designed which can contribute to the components of learners' speaking performance.

7. Suggested further research

It could be noticed from the literature review in the field and the current research findings that Authenticity has been viewed as an important issue for ELT in creating a communicative language environment (e. g. Breen 1997; Lee 1995; Mishan 2005; Dudley-Evan and St John 1998; Harding 2007) [27, 15] – in order that learners are exposed to 'real English' with 'intrinsically communicative quality' (Lee 1995) and rehearse the real-world target communication tasks they will have to perform in their future workplace (Nunan 2004:20) [28]. Besides, the current research has a lot of limitations. Specifically, the relationship between authentic tasks and learners' speaking performance should be more clarified. Therefore, the further research should also focus on this field; however there should be some changes. First of all, the further research should be an experimental one in which there is the participation of a certain group of learners and teachers. The learners should be given a real teaching with

the authentic tasks designed by the researcher and they are investigated whether using authentic tasks can enhance learners' speaking performance through a questionnaire. In addition, the further research should include a pre-test and post-test to measure whether or not learners can enhance their speaking performance with the designed authentic tasks. Apart from the above directions for the further research, the future research can also remain the descriptive format of the study; However, there should be a larger number of teachers involved in the study so that the data can ensure more validity.

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