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Task-Based Language Teaching in Academic English Higher Education: A Case of Low-Proficiency Learners in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

Amid the rising interest in task-based language teaching (TBLT) adoption within higher education, scant attention has been paid to its implications for students with low English proficiency who are enrolled in academic English courses. Therefore, employing a mixed-method research design, this study implemented and assessed the impact of TBLT in an academic English curriculum, with a specific focus on speaking skills, over a 12-week duration. The research involved 205 first-year university students in Thailand, representing diverse academic disciplines (22% male, 78% female). Quantitative data encompassed in-class TBLT participation scores, final speaking test results, and course grades, while qualitative insights were drawn from reflective essays. The quantitative data underwent both descriptive and inferential statistical analysis, whereas thematic analysis was applied to the qualitative data. The quantitative analysis disclosed noteworthy outcomes: 1) a moderate level of engagement among low-proficiency participants; 2) a robust correlation between classroom engagement, communicative proficiency, and academic performance, with engagement emerging as a significant predictor; and 3) superior progress among highly and moderately engaged students compared to their less-engaged peers. Qualitative analysis unveiled four pivotal themes, aligning with prevailing language acquisition theories, highlighting the pivotal role of speaking exercises in enhancing fluency and self-assurance, promoting active learner involvement, fostering an enriching learning environment, and enhancing language applicability to real-world contexts. In summation, these findings advocate for augmented incorporation of speaking exercises in language pedagogy, emphasising the interconnected dimensions of linguistic, cognitive, emotional, and social facets within the language learning journey.

Keywords: Classroom participation; communicative competence; course achievement; task-based language teaching; low-proficiency students

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, research has highlighted the unique approach of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), which employs tasks to foster language activities and enhance learners' communication skills (Panduwangi, 2021; Ulla & Perales, 2021), including fluency (Masuram & Sripada, 2020). TBLT has gained prominence in English Language Teaching (ELT) due to its capacity to create interactive group learning environments, expose learners to target language usage, simulate real-life language situations, and promote independent learning (McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007). This methodology emphasises the regular use of the target language in both individual and group learning settings (Jeon & Hahn, 2006). Through tasks, teachers can create meaningful language practice opportunities, particularly beneficial for students studying English as a second or foreign language (Douglas & Kim, 2015).

The task-based approach has captured the attention of researchers, who have explored its influence on enhancing students' oral communication skills. For example, Waluyo (2019) investigated the impact of theme-based role plays on EFL students' communicative competence in Thailand, finding that these role plays predicted students' speaking abilities in final exams. Similarly, Albino (2017) introduced picture-description activities with teacher feedback into an English class in Luanda, discovering that this task improved students' speaking fluency, speech production, grammatical accuracy, elaboration ability, and interactional language skills. Recent research has also delved into various TBLT activities, such as spontaneous speaking tasks, e-portfolios, picture-based discussions, and private and public speaking tasks (Kusuma & Waluyo, 2023; Newton & Nguyen, 2019; Uchihara & Clenton, 2020). Additionally, some studies have explored TBLT in virtual 3D environments, encouraging students to communicate on various themes (Chen, 2016).

However, it is worth noting that limited research has explicitly addressed low-proficiency students in the context of TBLT. The effectiveness of TBLT depends significantly on how students interact with each other, and Prediger et al. (2019) found that low-language students often hesitate to engage in conversations due to their limited linguistic resources and lack of confidence. Early research has highlighted the pivotal role of student participation in learning outcomes and speaking development (e.g., Delfino, 2019; Nambiar et al., 2017; Onoda, 2022; Tsou, 2005). Kang (2014) observed that students' speaking abilities were closely linked to their in-class interactive participation in an English class taught by a native-English speaker. Surprisingly, this preceding research on TBLT has not extensively explored the concept of student participation. Therefore, this study aims to address these gaps by investigating how TBLT impacts the in-class participation and communicative competence of low-proficiency students. Unlike prior research, this study examines the effects of tasks through the lens of student participation and aligns them with the development of students' communicative competence, offering valuable insights into how task-based learning can contribute to the speaking development of low-proficiency students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING

Historically, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) was a less well-known teaching approach until the mid-to-late 1980s. It came to light when Prabhu (1987) and Nunan (1989) published books on TBLT; the former focused on task-based teaching, while the latter was concerned with designing tasks for the communicative classroom. TBLT is one of the most innovative teaching approaches known to date and is intended to help learners acquire language through meaningful communication and interaction (Harris, 2016). It is essentially a revamped teaching and learning approach based on constructivism theory and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Moore, 2018). Willis (1996), however, pointed out that TBLT emerged in the "Presentation, Practice, Production (PPP)" approach, which was focused on grammatical forms and started getting criticism over the failure of language acquisition. PPP, in contrast to TBLT, has been heavily criticised for a lack of second language learning theories on its development (Harris, 2016). In other words, TBLT can be perceived as a learning model wherein learners prepare tasks in the classroom, report the tasks to the class and teacher, analyse and comprehend the meaning behind the tasks, and draw out the knowledge from the tasks and other learning materials (Anwar & Arifani, 2016).

TBLT assists teachers in developing a needs-based approach to course content selection, emphasising learning to communicate in the target language through interaction and connecting classroom language learning with language use outside the classroom (Nunan, 2006). Therefore, there are two types of tasks in TBLT: real-world or target tasks and pedagogical tasks. Target tasks are activities that accommodate uses of the target language outside of the classroom; pedagogical tasks are those that occur in the classroom. In terms of conceptualisation, tasks can be understood as an imposed piece of work, a job responsibility, an exercise, an outcome of course instruction, or a behavioural framework for classroom learning and research (Oxford, 2006). In the implementation, to distinguish TBLT tasks from other instructional activities, Skehan (1998) underlines that task-based instruction focuses on meaning primarily with a designated goal to be achieved and the activity is outcome-evaluated with a real-world relationship. As explained by Willis (1996), the sequence of task-based activities involves three stages: pre-task, task cycle, and language focus, as shown in Figure 1. The first stage introduces what students need to say to transact the task, and the following stages involve planning, drafting, and rehearsing together with the teachers' support on the target language's clarity, organisation, and accuracy. The last stage contains a process of reflection that can create awareness regarding language use in the assigned tasks and evaluate students' language development through the assigned task activities. Figure 1 illustrates the sequence of task-based activities.

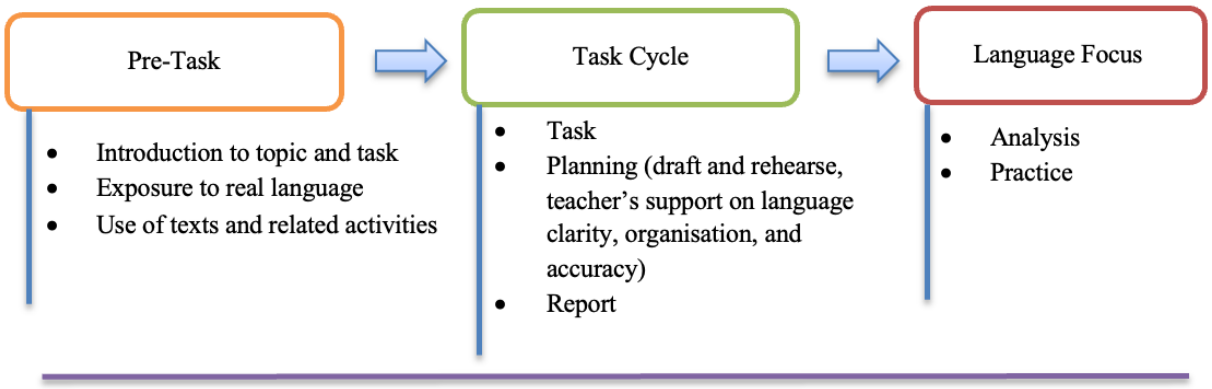

FIGURE 1. The sequence of task-based activities (Willis, 1996)

STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING

Robinson (2011) and Lai and Li (2011) outline the theoretical rationale for task-based learning research. One of the rationales is named "The Cognition Hypothesis," elucidating that pedagogic tasks in task-based syllabi should be arranged sequentially following increases in the task's cognitive complexity so that students will be able to meet the cognitive demands of the assigned tasks at the level needed to meet real-life target task demands. In this hypothesis, Robinson (2006) includes student participation in the interactional criteria for classifying second/foreign language tasks. He argues that both participation variables and participant variables would determine the amount and quality of interaction for the designated tasks. The participation variables involve information exchange (e.g., one-way or two-way), agreement (convergent) and disagreement (divergent), few or many participants in the interaction, individual or group contribution to the interaction, and less or extensive negotiation required during the interaction. Meanwhile,

participant variables in the assigned tasks include differences in proficiency, familiarity, shared knowledge, role and status, and cultural knowledge. These two types of variables, as shown in Figure 2, are considered interactive factors in a task in TBLT. To put it simply, the quantity and quality of classroom interaction generated by the assigned task would be influenced by these variables.

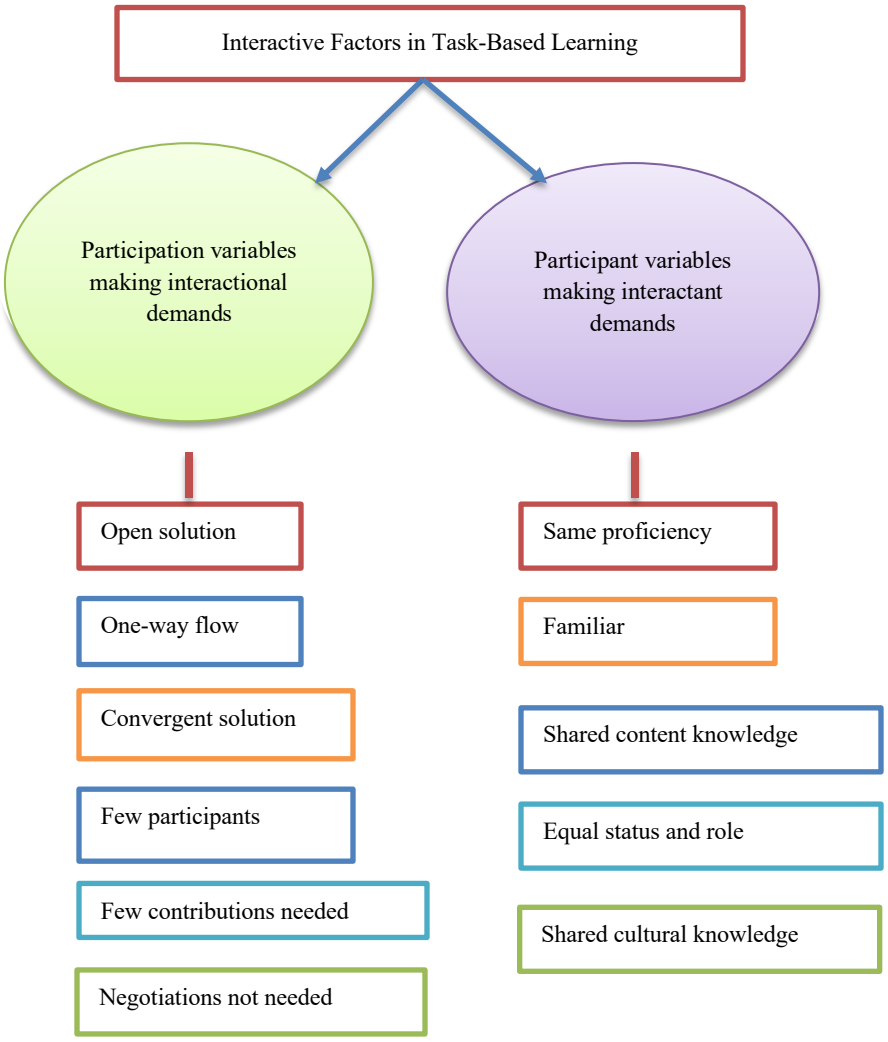

FIGURE 2. Interactive factors in task-based learning (based on Robinson, 2006)

Although the literature lacks an exact definition of students' participation, Chapman (2003) defined it as students' willingness to participate in any given classroom activity that may include the submission of homework and assignments on time, regularity in classroom attendance, and adherence to teachers' instruction. While Andy-Wali and Wali (2018) have defined students' participation as the active involvement of students in classroom activities in the development of knowledge through two-way communication between teachers and students, Tatar (2005) noted that students' participation is the number of turns taken to answer and question teachers in the classroom. Besides a slight difference in the way earlier studies have defined students' classroom participation, it should be noted that many earlier studies have discussed student participation

within the framework of classroom interaction, negotiated interaction, and comprehension of second/foreign language input because of performing the assigned task. This study defines students' participation as the amount of contribution made in completing the assigned tasks in a group through questions and answers, reasoning, and the student's ability to use the content knowledge taught by teachers, such as lexical resources and vocabulary, grammatical range and accuracy, pronunciation, and comprehensibility. Furthermore, it should be noted that this study employed a collaborative mode of classroom participation (Bean & Peterson, 1998), where students were put into small groups to achieve the given tasks. In this context, Pica (1991) conducted a study in which the teacher assigned the students to perform a classroom task. One of the study objectives was to observe how student participation affected classroom interaction and facilitated comprehension of the target language input. The study disclosed that "low interaction may be a sign of low comprehension and therefore an inability to understand questions addressed to the entire class, and may not always be due to social, psychological, or culturally based reluctance toward classroom participation" (Pica, 1991, p. 449). To stimulate classroom participation, the assigned task should be communicative, where the students are required to comprehend, manipulate, produce, and interact in the target language, focusing primarily on meaning instead of form (Nunan, 1989). However, Nobuyoshi and Ellis (1993) underline that some students may not benefit from being "pushed" to participate during classroom interaction. On the question of whether those who have active classroom participation would have better achievement in second/foreign language learning, Ellis et al. (1994) found that "… learners who actively participated in negotiating meaning did not understand any better than those simply exposed to modified interaction, and… the active participators did not learn more new words" (p. 449).

Furthermore, recent studies have found that TBLT has been helpful in improving student classroom participation. Bao and Du (2015) carried out a qualitative study examining the effects of TBLT on beginner learners of Chinese as a foreign language in Denmark. In their study, the learners reported that TBLT had increased the levels of their classroom participation since it created more opportunities for speaking, eased learning anxiety, and enhanced learning enjoyment. Similar results were obtained by a study conducted by Khotimah (2018) in the context of learning English as a foreign language. TBLT not only enhances student participation but can also spur students' interest in the learning process (Ellis et al., 2020). Nonetheless, it should be noted that effective implementation of TBLT entails mutual agreements between teachers and students on the learning goals, employed methods, and designated engagement in task performance. Jeon and Hahn (2006) discovered that when students are not used to being involved in task-based learning, they might avoid active participation in classroom task activities due to a lack of confidence.

LOW-PROFICIENCY STUDENTS' CLASSROOM PARTICIPATION

The latest study from Park (2021) showed that when given a task in class, low-proficiency students were only focused on task completion, which kept their participation and interaction (e.g., turns and sequences) to a minimum. When performing extended conversations in role plays, low-proficiency students were less likely to provide additional explanations other than what they had been assigned to say, signalling a need for assistance and collaboration during the conversation (Al-Gahtani & Roever, 2013). Comparable findings were also attained by Gan (2010), who concluded that lower-level students generally lack content development of topical talk and that preparing pre-set prompts may cause lower-level students to restrict their performance. Correspondingly, Galaczi (2014), who explored interactional competence across proficiency

levels, argues about the role of the assigned task and its influence on students' classroom participation. Galaczi advises that the more concrete and less abstract nature of the task topics may lead to lower interactivity; conversely, the more abstract and cognitively thought-provoking nature of the task prompt may lead to more engaged interaction. From a pragmatic point of view, students' proficiency determines the levels of students' recognition and use of conventional expressions in the target language, which ultimately influences the levels of participation and interaction (Bardovi-Harlig & Bastos, 2011).

CLASSROOM PARTICIPATION AND COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

The results of previous studies concerning the impact of high levels of students' classroom participation as a response to the assigned tasks on the development of students' communicative competence have been varied. Sarıçoban and Karakurt (2016), who integrated task-based activities into listening and speaking material, recognised a positive impact of students' classroom participation on their speaking test results, and the levels of participation were closely associated with their perceptions of the task-based activities. Another study by Namaziandost et al. (2019) compared the effects of students' participation in performing opinion-gap, reasoning-gap, and information-gap tasks on students' speaking fluency; the analysis revealed that students' final speaking test results in the experimental group outperformed those in the control group who did not receive any special task to stimulate participation. Nonetheless, Delaney (2012), who investigated the relationships between the quality and quantity of oral participation and English proficiency gains, showed more varied results. The findings showed that the quality of students' participation in the target language was positively correlated with their proficiency gains in the target language, but the quantity was not. Delaney's findings have long been confirmed by Day's study (1984). Also, an early study by Tsou (2005) found that increased oral classroom participation led to an improvement in students' speaking fluency among Tawainese students.

CLASSROOM PARTICIPATION AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Another objective of this study is to examine whether low-proficiency students' participation in task-based activities can lead to better academic achievement in terms of the course grade. Involving 354 Taiwanese university freshmen, Hsu (2015) delved into oral participation in the EFL classroom and uncovered that students' oral participation in class was positively related to their course achievement. The study suggested that "limited verbal contributions to class discussion among EFL students may signal an evolving desire for learner autonomy and active participation deterred by a complex mix of linguistic and non-linguistic variables" (Hsu, 2015, p. 61). The students specified that being prepared for class, feeling sure of their responses before speaking, and engaging in task-based activities encourage participation. In Galyon et al.'s (2012) study, there was a significant relationship between academic self-efficacy and classroom participation, leading to better course exam performance. There is still a limited number of studies examining the effect of classroom participation in task-based activities on English course grades; therefore, the present study seeks to address such a need.

THE STUDY

Having conducted a comprehensive review of prior research, this study posits the following research questions:

1. To what extent do low-proficiency students engage in an academic English course that incorporates a range of speaking tasks?
2. How does the extent of low-proficiency student engagement in an academic English course featuring a variety of speaking tasks align with and impact their communicative proficiency and overall course performance?
3. What implications do the levels of engagement among low-proficiency students have on their communicative competence and course outcomes?

METHODS

RESEARCH DESIGN, CONTEXT, AND PARTICIPANT

This study used a sequential explanatory mixed-methods research design (Ivankova et al., 2006), which included both quantitative (in-class participation scores, final speaking scores, final grades) and qualitative data (students' short reflection essays) to examine the impact of TBLT in an academic English curriculum, with a specific focus on speaking skills. Mixed methods were used because quantitative and qualitative data complement each other (Riazi & Candlin, 2014), increasing the reliability and validity of the findings. To this end, this study was undertaken at a prominent university in southern Thailand, involving 205 first-year undergraduates. The gender distribution comprised 22% males (45 students) and 78% females (160 students), and these participants hailed from diverse academic disciplines, including Multimedia Technology and Animation (MTA), Physical Therapy, Thai Language, Environmental Health, Business Administration, Digital Marketing and Branding, Marine Science, and Law. The focal course for this study was a General English (GE) module entitled "Academic Listening and Speaking," offered during the first term of the 2019-2020 academic year. This course aimed to enhance students' English listening and speaking competencies and incorporated various pedagogical strategies such as group discussions, presentations, listening comprehension exercises, and role-playing activities.

According to the university's placement test, administered in August 2019, these participants demonstrated a proficiency below the A1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Consequently, they were enrolled in a 12-week remedial English program to bolster foundational language skills before transitioning to the standard GE modules. Based on faculty observations, students at this proficiency level typically managed only fragmented communication, frequently reverting to their native Thai language. This limited proficiency often resulted in their reticence and diminished participation during English lessons. Considering these challenges, the present research sought to assess a specific GE class populated with such low-proficiency learners to determine if the introduction of regular speaking assignments could augment in-class engagement, enhance speaking competencies, and potentially improve course outcomes.

TASK DESIGN

In TBLT, a task is a goal-oriented activity created to attain a real outcome by using the target language for interactive communication (Willis, 1996). It is the main unit of the language design program and individual lesson plan (Ellis, 2009), in which learners are engaged through a communicative language task (Oxford, 2006). TBLT offers the opportunity to engage learners in a specifically designed task (Lai & Li, 2011). Therefore, the selected tasks play crucial roles in the learning process (Nunan, 1991). Referring to the concept of a task in TBLT, this study designed weekly English-speaking tasks to engage learners, which were expected to improve students' in-class participation and enhance their speaking performance, leading to better learning outcomes. Eight different tasks were created, and the task topic followed the lesson that students were learning each week in class. Each task mainly encouraged students to participate actively, which required them to communicate using English. It involved both individual and group participation conducted over different weeks. The tasks were implemented for eight weeks.

Most of the present tasks were designed based on types categorised by Ellis (2003). The tasks involved: 1) unfocused and sharing personal experience tasks, for example, the task topics for task 2 is Daily Routine, Task 5 is future, etc., which encourage students to use English freely, 2) focused tasks, for instance, the task topics for tasks 3 is Festival and four is Travelling,—which provide a means of teaching specific language features through communication; and real-world tasks; the example tasks 6 – history, which helps students experience real-life situations.

As illustrated in Figure 3 below, the research design contained 12 weeks of implementation. Specific weekly English-speaking tasks were given to the students from week 2 to week 9. The tasks were designed to promote the students' in-class participation. Then, the students had final speaking tests in weeks 11 and 12. Weeks 1 and 10 were spared for the course introduction and other quizzes and assessments, respectively.

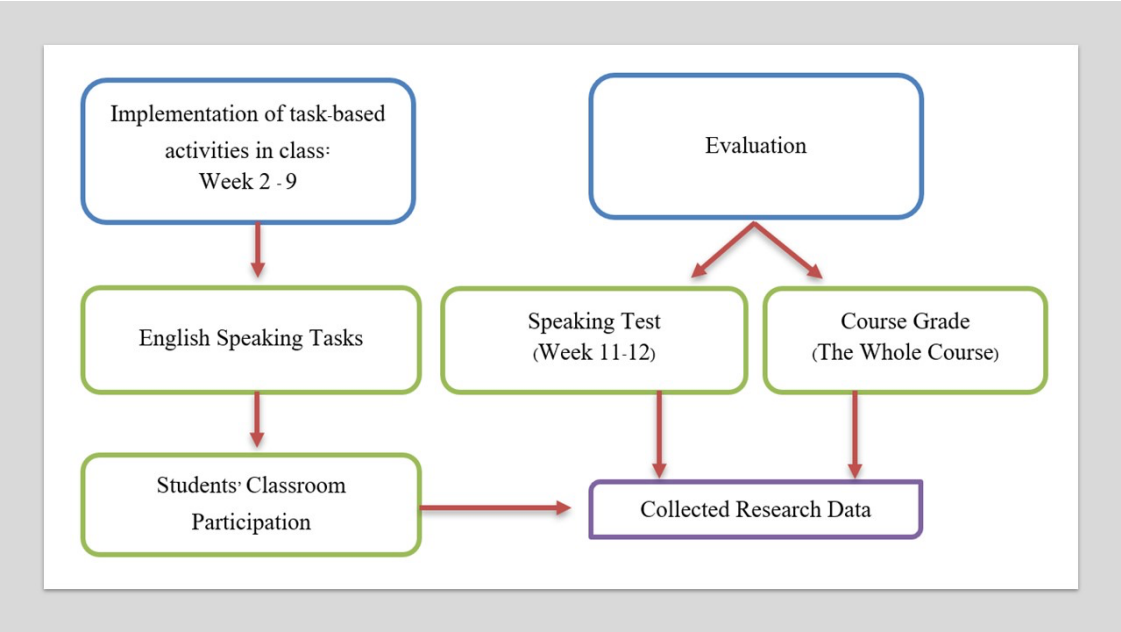

FIGURE 3. The illustration of the research design

INSTRUMENT AND MEASURE

IN-CLASS PARTICIPATION SCORES

Before the semester began, all teachers who were responsible for teaching this course attended a course orientation where they were instructed in detail about the tasks involved in this course, along with scoring rubrics to establish the reliability of given scores. Each of the speaking tasks, elaborated earlier, was given to the students in class every week. Before the task, students were taught elements such as contextual, semantic, syntactic, and lexical knowledge associated with the task. After students had performed each task for 10 minutes, the teachers assessed each student's participation in the assigned tasks for their sections. The assessment of students' participation followed five levels: 1 = 0, 2 = 25, 3 = 50, 4 = 75, and 5 = 100. The task assessment was done based on the scoring rubrics, which included components such as lexical resources and vocabulary, grammatical range and accuracy, pronunciation, and comprehensibility.

FINAL SPEAKING TEST

In weeks 11 and 12, after the students finished all the in-class speaking tasks, a final speaking test was held by the teachers for the students in their sections. The objective of the test was to assess students' speaking skills, and the criteria involved assessments of fluency, lexical resource/vocabulary, grammatical range and accuracy, pronunciation, and comprehensibility. The scores for each criterion ranged from 0.5 (Fair) to 2 (Excellent), which made a total point of 10. The detailed descriptions for each score range were provided in the assessment rubrics for the teacher. Moreover, the speaking test adopted an interview format, where the teacher talked with each student for 3 to 5 minutes. The interview questions covered topics that the students studied throughout the course. Among the questions are: "How important are computers to your studies?" and "Do you play a sport? If so, which sports do you play? " and" What do you think of online shopping?" "How was your last holiday?" and so forth. In th” speaking test, the students would introduce themselves, talk about a topic, and have a question-and-answer session with the teacher.

FINAL COURSE GRADE

The final course grade was the combined scores of the formative (60%) and summative (40%) assessments. Throughout the course, students were rigorously trained and assessed on different language skills. The course assessment consisted of ten sets of vocabulary (10%), homework (10%), a role-play (10%), four sets of listening quizzes (20%), two sets of grammar quizzes (5%), classroom participation (5%), a final project on listening and speaking (20%), an individual interview (10%), and a final examination (10%). The present study was interested in seeing if students’ weekly in-class participation contributed to their course grades. The course grades ranged from 0 to 100, in which 80-100 (A), 70-79 (B), 60-69 (C), 50-59 (D), and 0-49 (F).

SHORT ESSAYS

To obtain valuable qualitative insights, students were tasked with composing concise reflective essays detailing their learning experiences related to the speaking assignments. They had the option to express themselves in either the Thai or English language. To maintain anonymity, each participant was assigned a unique code, such as S1, S2, S3, and so on.

DATA ANALYSIS

The quantitative data were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics, whereas the qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To answer the first research question, descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation were used to determine the levels of participation in the study. To answer the second research question, bivariate Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis were used to examine the relationship between students' participation levels and speaking test scores and to assess their predictive ability on speaking test scores. Finally, to investigate the relationships between different levels of student participation and their speaking test scores and course grades, one-way ANOVA was used.

RESULTS

QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

LEVELS OF PARTICIPATION BY TASKS

The first research question was explored by using descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation. To interpret the means, three levels of participation were created based on the classroom participation scoring level 2: Low (26 to 50), Moderate (51-75), and High (76 to 100). Overall, the low-proficiency students had a moderate level of classroom participation ($M = 60.55$, $SD = 11.93$). The value of the standard deviation was high, implying a wide range of differences in students' participation. Some scored very low, while others scored very high. 38% (78) of the students had a low level ($M = 37.50–50$), 60.6% (124) had a moderate level ($M = 53.13–75$), and 1.5% (3) had a high level ($M = 78.13–87.50$) of classroom participation. From week 2 to week 8, the students' levels of classroom participation were consistently at a moderate level, as illustrated in Figure 4. The detailed means, as seen in Figure 4, also showed that the students had the lowest participation in the first task, then gradually increased in the second and third tasks. Fluctuations of participation occurred from the fourth to the seventh tasks before it reached its peak in the last classroom task.

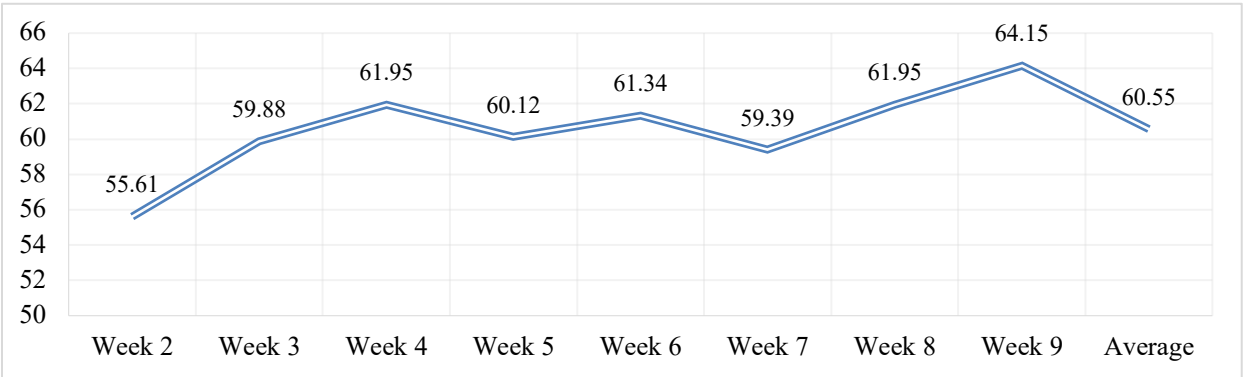

FIGURE 4. Means of the students' participation

The second research question was investigated by using bivariate (*Pearson*'s) correlation and multiple regression analyses. The correlational analyses exposed positive relationships between overall students' classroom participation (IV) and their speaking test scores (DV) (r (205) =.473, p < .001) and between overall students' classroom participation and their academic English course grades (r (205) =.429, p < .001). In these two relationships, *Pearson*'s coefficient indicated a moderate strength. The relationships between students' classroom participation in each task every week, as well as speaking test scores and course grades, were also inspected. For the relationships with speaking test scores, only students' participation in the first task was not significant (r (205) =.082, p = 242). The strongest one was visible in students' participation in the eighth task (r (205) =.513, p < .001). Student's participation in the eighth task also had the highest coefficient (r (205) =.306, p .001, and in the first task had the lowest coefficient (r (205) =.261, p < .001); all the relationships from task 1 to task 8 with course grades were significantly positive. Meanwhile, students' speaking test scores were closely related to their academic English course grades (r (205) =.240, p < .001).

Furthermore, the results of the multiple linear regression analyses showed that students' overall classroom participation (IV) could predict 22% (R^2 =.224) of the total variance in the speaking test scores (DV) (F (1, 204) = 58.63, p < .001) and could predict 18% (R^2 =.184) of the total variance in course grades (F (1, 204) = 45.75, p < .001). One unit increase in students' classroom participation would likely result in a .473 increase in their speaking test scores and a .429 increase in their course grades. Based on the values of R^2, the effect size (Cohen's *f2)* was calculated. The outcomes indicated a medium effect size for both regressing classroom participation on speaking test scores (f^2 =.289) and classroom participation on course grades (f^2 =.225). For students' participation in each weekly task, their participation in the eighth task contributed 26% (R^2 =.263) of the variance in their speaking tests, the highest of their participation in other tasks. In contrast, it was their participation in the seventh task that contributed the most to their course grades, about 15% (R^2 =.148). Their participation in the first task was the lowest, which contributed to their speaking test scores and course grades being less than 1%.

EFFECTS OF DIFFERENT LEVELS OF CLASSROOM PARTICIPATION ON SPEAKING SKILL DEVELOPMENT

The third research question was examined by using one-way ANOVA. Based on the results of the first research questions, there were three levels of student participation overall: low, moderate, and high. Initially, this study ran a one-way ANOVA for levels of students' participation and their speaking test scores to see if different levels of classroom participation resulted in different speaking test scores. In other words, it was interesting to prove whether a higher level of classroom participants could lead to better communicative competence in terms of speaking skills. The results showed significant differences in students' speaking test scores because of different levels of classroom participation (F (204) = 11.92, p < .001). Students with a higher level of participation outperformed those with a lower level of participation by 14.10 (p < .001). Those with a moderate level of participation had 4.68 (p <.001) higher scores than those with a low level of participation. Nonetheless, there was no statistically significant difference in speaking test scores between students with high and moderate participation levels (p = .095). The effect size, Cohen's *f,* was

calculated by using between and within-group variances in which the results were designated a medium effect size **(*f* =.**344**).**

The examination continued with the exploration of differences in academic English course grades by different levels of participation**.** The findings also revealed that different levels of participation resulted in different course grades (F (204) = 21.84, p < .001). Students with a high level of participation obtained course grades that were 7**.**04 higher than those with a low level of participation, while students with a moderate level of participation obtained course grades that were 3**.**28 higher**.** However, a non-significant difference was noted in course grades between those with high and moderate levels of participation**.** These ANOVA results had a large effect size *(f* =.465).

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

The thematic analysis revealed four prominent themes that emerged from the students' responses regarding their classroom participation and communicative competence resulting from speaking activities.

THEME 1: ENHANCED FLUENCY AND CONFIDENCE

The theme of enhanced fluency and confidence stemming from speaking activities is a pivotal aspect of language acquisition. This theme aligns seamlessly with the 'output hypothesis,' a well-established theory in the realm of language acquisition. According to this hypothesis, language learners benefit significantly from producing language themselves, as it necessitates active engagement with the language. The responses from students, such as S2 stating, "Yes, because it makes me speak more fluently," reaffirm the concept that speaking activities require learners to actively produce language, providing invaluable practice that contributes to fluency.

Furthermore, the boost in confidence reported by students (S9, S16, S17, S22) is in line with the 'affective filter hypothesis.' According to this theory, learners who are more self-assured and relaxed are better positioned to absorb and retain language input. Positive experiences, such as successful participation in speaking activities, lower the affective filter, creating a more conducive environment for language acquisition. These responses underscore the intricate connection between cognitive and affective elements in the language learning process, where increased confidence plays a pivotal role in more effective language acquisition. Below are the sample excerpts:

> Definitely more because it uses English speaking skills. It is a good starting point for activities. (S9)

> Even though I am already studying English liberal arts, this subject has helped me increase my confidence. Made me dare to speak even more. (S22)

THEME 2: ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

Active participation stands out as a fundamental theme, emphasising the importance of engagement in speaking activities for effective language acquisition. This theme closely aligns with the 'interaction hypothesis' in language acquisition research, which posits that language acquisition is optimised when learners engage in meaningful interactions with speakers of the

target language. The students' expressions of appreciation for the requirement of active class participation (S11, S12, S19) highlight the value of opportunities provided by speaking activities to actively engage with the language, interact with peers, and communicate effectively (S7, S12).

Scientifically, the interaction hypothesis suggests that speaking activities, by encouraging students to actively participate and interact with their peers (S7, S12), create opportunities for genuine communication. This aligns with contemporary language teaching methodologies that emphasise the importance of communicative competence and the use of language as a tool for meaningful interaction rather than a mere subject of study. The following are the sample excerpts:

> Yes, because the teacher makes us speak every time in class. During class time, we will be able to participate both as speakers and as listeners, including role-playing. Everyone participates in class. (S11)

> Moreover, participating in class is like a way of practising speaking and thinking. In addition, there are friends who study in the Faculty of English who are there to give advice as well. (S19)

THEME 3: EFFECTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The theme of creating an effective learning environment within the classroom context is pivotal for language acquisition. Scientifically, this theme aligns with theories such as 'input enhancement' and 'comprehensible input.' Input enhancement posits that language learners are more likely to acquire linguistic features when they are highlighted in the input they receive, making them more noticeable and accessible. The positive classroom atmosphere (S3, S17), supportive teachers (S3, S17), and engaging content (S3, S17) highlighted by students in their responses contribute to providing 'comprehensible input.'

Furthermore, 'comprehensible input' is a cornerstone of language acquisition theory, stating that learners need input that is slightly beyond their current proficiency level but still understandable with some effort. In the context of speaking activities, teachers often scaffold language input to match the students' proficiency levels, aiding in gradual language acquisition and comprehension. The sample excerpts are presented below:

> Yes, the atmosphere, the teachers, the friends, and the content all make this subject very fun. So we were able to study fully. (S3)

> Of course, more participation. Everything that I did in the classroom or activities that I did with my friends from different fields, I was happy, and everything came out lovely with the teachers who were lovely with us. (S17)

THEME 4: RELEVANCE TO DAILY LIFE

The theme of relevance to daily life underscores the practicality of speaking activities and their direct application in real-world scenarios. This theme aligns closely with 'task-based language teaching,' an approach that emphasises the importance of language tasks mirroring real-life situations, where learners use language as a tool to achieve specific communicative goals. Many students noted that these activities enabled them to apply English in practical, everyday situations (S6, S20). This aligns with the idea that task-based activities prepare learners to use language meaningfully and effectively in their daily lives, reinforcing the concept that language is a tool for communication rather than a mere academic subject. Below are the sample excerpts:

> There is a part because you have learned how to use English words in your daily life in the future. (S6)

> Yes, because it is very useful for me to use English in everyday life. Because sometimes I meet foreigners at university restaurants. They let me order. (S20)

These four prominent themes offer a comprehensive understanding of the impact of speaking activities on students' language learning experiences. These themes align with established theories in language acquisition, demonstrating the significant role of speaking activities in enhancing fluency and confidence, promoting active participation, creating an effective learning environment, and increasing language relevance to daily life. This holistic perspective underscores the importance of integrating speaking activities into language education to optimise communicative competence and highlights the dynamic interplay between linguistic, cognitive, affective, and social factors in language learning.

DISCUSSION

The main objective of this study was to examine how the implementation of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in an academic English course impacts low-proficiency students' classroom participation and communicative competence. Besides it also delved into the impact of students' participation in task-based activities on their course grades. The first findings of this study confirmed that, in general, the students had a moderate level of classroom participation. However, the detailed distribution calculations indicated a wide range of differences in the participation of the students. In the breakdowns, about 38% of the students had a low level of participation, although 60.6% of the total number of students participated moderately. Despite the small percentage, it may be worth mentioning that 1.5% of the students participated highly in task-based activities over the eight weeks of classroom task implementation. The weekly means of students' classroom participation was similar to the overall means of students' classroom participation, which was at a medium level. Qualitative insights, especially from the theme of Enhanced Fluency and Confidence, elucidate these findings. In line with Masuram and Sripada (2020), many students, such as S2, reported improved fluency due to speaking activities, supporting the quantitative data. Participation was initially muted during the first task but grew incrementally, peaking in the final task. This pattern hints at a possible initial unfamiliarity with TBLT, which the qualitative theme of Active Participation further unpacks. As noted by S11, the consistent opportunity to speak in class was appreciated, highlighting that students value active engagement.

Nevertheless, this study noticed that the lowest point of students' participation was in the first task before it gradually increased in the next two tasks; fluctuations in the level of participation happened in the mid-week of implementation before it reached its peak in the last task. These results suggest that low-proficiency students might not show active classroom participation in the early task-based activities; perhaps they needed time to adapt to the task-based activities that required them to act and speak more than they used to do with traditional teaching approaches. The fluctuations in the mid-weeks implied the influence of the types of activities that might affect the students' motivation to participate. This assumption emerged because the students' participation was very high in the last task; in other words, if it were not due to the types of activities, the students' participation should have decreased due to, for example, boredom. It also

resonates with Galaczi (2014), who argues the role of the assigned task and its influence on student classroom participation. Qualitative feedback from students like S9 and S22, who experienced boosted confidence from successful participation, complements this idea.

These first findings partly sustain the findings from previous studies. This study only observed minimum participation in the first task, which was not totally the same as what Park's study (2021) found. Al-Gahtani and Roever (2013) and Gan (2010) brought up the issue of content development lacking among low-proficiency students when performing a task. In the present study, the students were given "open" tasks in which they could be creative in their oral responses in the target language. Such a type of task may be an alternative solution to the concern that preparing pre-set prompts may cause lower-level students to restrict their performance (Gan, 2010). This notion finds further support in the Effective Learning Environment theme, where students like S3 highlighted the positive classroom ambience and supportive teachers, contributing to a conducive environment for language learning (cf. Wangdi & Shimray, 2022). The task implementation in this study followed the sequence from Willis (1996) in which the students were given the necessary language features prior to the task activities; at this point, Bardovi-Harlig and Bastos (2011) contend that students' recognition of the featured language expression needed in the task performance would determine their levels of participation and interaction. Looking at the trends of weekly participation in the eight tasks, this study sustains the findings from previous studies that identified the usefulness of TBLT in improving student classroom participation (Bao & Du, 2015; Ellis et al., 2020; Khotimah, 2018).

Next, the second finding revealed positive correlations and significant predictions between 1) students' levels of classroom participation and the development of communicative competence and 2) students' levels of classroom participation and learning outcomes measured by course grades. These findings correspond with Hsu (2015), who explored oral participation in the EFL classroom in Taiwan and noted a positive correlation between students' oral participation and course achievement. The theme of Relevance to Daily Life emphasises this, as students like S6 and S20 indicated the practical utility of English beyond academic confines. Following Galyon et al. (2012) and Tsou (2005), such positive and significant results may indicate that the task-based activities have facilitated low-proficiency students' speaking fluency improvement, which also results in a better level of academic self-efficacy, leading to better exam performance. In the current study, the positive alignments of students' levels of classroom participation were visible in the results of their speaking tests and course grades. These findings are consistent with Namaziandost et al. (2019) and Sarıçoban and Karakurt (2016) in terms of the effects of participation level on communicative competence. Waluyo and Bakoko (2022) made a similar claim, asserting that students' willingness to communicate was positively related to their speaking performance.

The last findings reveal that different levels of classroom participation generate different outcomes in terms of communicative competence and course grades. The effect sizes of these findings were medium and large, respectively, indicating the practical significance of these findings. Recent studies in TBLT have not explored these areas yet. Possible explanations may relate to the findings of early studies within the framework of classroom interaction, negotiated interaction, and comprehension of second/foreign language input as a result of performing the assigned task. In essence, less participative students may signal that they do not comprehend the task materials, including the target language features, as much as those who are more participative (Pica, 1991). Frequent implementations of task-based activities that require students to comprehend, manipulate, produce, and interact in the target language can potentially increase

students' participation (Nunan, 1989), which, as presented in these last findings, can lead to better learning outcomes. Implementing weekly tasks may have the potential to help shape students' cognitive complexity of the tasks to meet the cognitive demands of performing the tasks as elaborated in the Cognition Hypothesis (Robinson, 2006, 2011). Such a cognitive shaping process was visible in the fact that the students in this study participated less in early tasks than in later ones.

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATION, AND LIMITATION

This study concludes that TBLT is an appropriate approach for low-proficiency students who are learning English as a second/foreign language. Pedagogically, this research urges English teachers to include TBLT with various speaking tasks in course design and instruction. Most people assume low-proficiency students are inactive in class. The present research argues that weekly classroom tasks may assist students in learning the essential language elements to complete the tasks, which improves their classroom involvement. Nobuyoshi and Ellis (1993) and Ellis et al. (1994) stated that "forced" engagement may not help students learn. Open tasks that include individual and group engagement can enhance classroom participation. Teachers may start by creating a needs-based strategy for students, which will help them choose learning goals, results, and course materials (Nunan, 2006). Then, teachers can decide the language features that will be included in the task. In this case, teachers should accommodate the two types of tasks elaborated by Nunan (2006), i.e., target tasks and pedagogical tasks, meaning the language features should accommodate target language use that is meaningful for in-class practice and applicable in real-life situations. In other words, teachers should know how to select tasks that are interesting to students and increase their enjoyment of learning (Wangdi & Zimik, 2024). When students enjoy their tasks, they are more likely to participate because it helps them reduce their anxiety (Bao & Du, 2015) and classroom boredom (Shimray & Wangdi, 2023). After that, teachers may follow Willis' sequence of task-based activities and Robinson's elements impacting task-based learning interaction (1996).

It is acknowledged that this research has limitations. The design was quantitative; hence, the data could not reveal individual students' emotions and experiences related to TBLT. This was deliberate owing to linguistic limitations among researchers and COVID-19. Therefore, for future studies, a mixed-method design and an experimental study design are advised because they may produce additional insight regarding how a task-based approach might benefit low-proficiency students. Comparative research involving low- and high-proficiency students is also recommended.

ETHICAL CLEARANCE

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Walailak University (Certificat of Approval No. WUEC-21-063-01)

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