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THE TASK BASED APPROACH TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' SPEAKING SKILLS

by  
HIBA DAOUD

B.A., English Language, Lebanese American University, 2006

Project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of  
Education/ Emphasis: Teaching English for Students of other Language (TESOL)

Department of Education

LEBANESE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

June 2009

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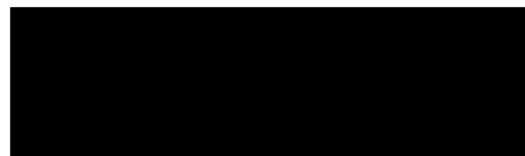
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Project Title: The Task Based Approach to Improve Students' Speaking Skills  
Program: M.A. in Education  
Division/Dept: Education  
School: Arts and Sciences- Beirut

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Date: June, 2009

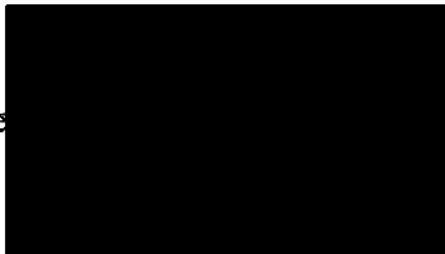
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## Effects of task based approach on speaking skills

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Running Head: THE EFFECTS OF TASK BASED APPROACH

**The Task Based Approach**  
**To Improve Students' English Speaking Skills**

A project presented to the Faculty of

The Department of Education

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

**Masters of Arts in Education**

Emphasis: Teaching of English to Students of Other Languages (TESOL)

By

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**Hiba Mohammad Kheir Daoud**

Under the direction of

**Dr. Rima Bahous**

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June, 2009

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to thank all people including my family, my fiancé, colleagues, professors, and friends who supported me and had faith in my potentials to reach this level of success.

I would like to express my gratitude to those who showed me love, support, and encouragement. Without these people on my side, achieving success would have been more difficult.

Special thanks and deep gratefulness are extended to Dr. Rima Bahous who encouraged me and guided my success. I really appreciate her patience, her positive criticism, and advice that she provided me throughout the past six years. Her assistance has been valuable to me during these years.

I would like to present all my sincere appreciation to my mother and father, my role models who taught me that through willingness, determination, and faith in my abilities I can experience success. I am so lucky to have you as my parents!

I will always thank my father whose desire in finishing my higher education was the motive behind my success and my achievement.

Most of all I owe an enormous gratitude for my mother who always had exerted a striving effort to provide me with all the care and inspiration that any person needs to develop herself.

I would like to show my appreciation to every person at Ahliah School especially my students who were active participants in my project.

## ABSTRACT

Most students find speaking a second language such as English difficult and challenging. Their problem is that they cannot speak English fluently and correctly. This problem can be strongly related to the facts that teachers are not encouraging students to speak freely and not engaging them in natural and real life situation tasks. In fact a large number of teachers is not aware of the importance of giving students the chance to express themselves and help them enrich their vocabulary repertoire. The purpose of this study was to implement a task based approach in grade six class to help students become fluent speakers of English and overcome their shyness and hesitation when speaking a second language .When applied consistently, the strategy showed considerable improvement in speaking English as a second language in a grade six class. Students displayed desirable feedback and interest in the language, and they were motivated to express themselves and use new vocabulary words in their speaking tasks. Recommendations included using task based approach in all grades at the elementary level, and even applying such approach at the intermediate and secondary levels for the benefits it conveys.

**Key words:** Task, task based approach, cooperative learning, action research, speaking a second language.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Most people think that speaking is the most essential aspect of learning a second language, and its success is determined by their abilities to engage in conversations in the target language (Nunan, 1995). However, many learners who study a second language find difficulties expressing themselves fluently in the target language. As a result, I came to the conclusion that students need extensive help and exposure to the English language. My sixth graders in a private English medium school in Beirut encounter many challenges when speaking a second language efficiently. They have developed poor speaking skills throughout the previous years because they were not used to use the language in real life situations.

Therefore, and because of my concern and interest to help students acquire an adequate spoken proficiency, I designed this project to guide them and provide them with suitable and stimulating tasks to improve their English speaking skills.

A number of research studies had been conducted on speaking skills in the second/ foreign class. Results of such studies showed that task based proved its success and efficiency in changing students' attitudes towards speaking a second language. According to research, students' inability to speak fluently is related to the fact that some teachers fail to implement authentic activities that enhance speaking a second language naturally (Nunan, 1999).

As a result, I implemented a variety of tasks to encourage students to communicate in the target language.

This study looks at the factors that prohibit sixth graders in a private school in Lebanon from speaking English fluently and correctly. It will investigate the effects of task based approach on improving speaking skills. I will also explore if a task based approach can motivate students to speak freely. The study will provide information and guidance for English teachers who plan to teach English speaking skills in a motivating way.

### **Purpose and Rationale**

Researchers and scholars have been searching for an efficient teaching strategy, which can help learners improve their language skills by using communication in foreign / second language classrooms. The task based approach seems to be the most effective method to satisfy the above need. It provides learners with the opportunity to experiment the spoken and written aspects of the language.

Thus the purpose of the study was to identify the factors that lead to students' inability to speak English fluently and study the strengths of the task based approach which is aimed to improve the quality of students' speaking skills.

The rationale behind this study was to improve teaching of speaking, design natural communication settings, and motivate students to speak naturally and fluently.

### **Research Context**

The research is conducted in a sixth grade classroom at an English medium private school in Beirut Lebanon. The sample includes eighteen students of the two genders studying in one section (6 girls and 12 boys). Their ages range between eleven and twelve. Four students are capable of speaking English fluently and spontaneously with no significant errors as two of them spent their first school years in the United States, and the other two students enjoy learning the

language and work seriously in class and at home. Three students have different learning problems which affect their progress to speak English fluently. Most of the students are from a middle socio- economic status background. Some of their parents are educated and foster speaking English in different contexts, while other parents don't know English and can't engage with their children in everyday life conversations. Some of them receive tutoring and follow up, while the others do not, and it is reflected in their performance.

The composition of the classroom includes the following:

Gender	Below	Average	Above average	Students with behavioral problems	Students with learning difficulties
11Boys	4	4	3	2	3
7Girls	0	4	3	0	0

### Research Question:

In this study, I attempt to answer the following question in one English medium Lebanese private school in Lebanon.

How does the implementation of task based approach improve six graders English speaking skills?

### **Definitions of variables:**

With the advent of the communicative theory, speaking a language has become a central part of the language. **Speaking a language** is an activity that requires the integration of all subsystems that make speaking a second language a formidable task (Lazaraton, 2001). The **Task based approach** is a foreign language method that has evolved since the 1980s. The task based approach emphasizes the fact that teaching should be conducted with real life tasks (Lin, 2009). Ellis (2003) defined a **task** as an activity in which learners use the language emphasizing meaning to obtain an objective. Lee (2000) defined a **task** as a classroom activity that has an objective that can be attained by the interaction among participants, a mechanism for structuring interactions, and a focus on meaning exchange. Prabhu (1987) emphasized the cognitive process involved in the tasks. For him a **task** should involve learners in reasoning and engage learners in using language pragmatically rather than displaying the language (Ellis, 2003).

**Task based approach** consists of an integrated set of processes that involves the specification of both what and how. In other words the methodology is highly emphasized in the task based pedagogy. Designing a task based approach involves making decisions about what tasks learners will do and then the order in which they will perform the tasks. Skehan (1996) suggests that these can be organized in terms of pre task, during task, and after task choice. In **task based approach** learners have to participate, communicate, and cooperate when carrying out the task. In order for students to work cooperatively they have to learn the skills of how to **learn cooperatively**. These skills include apologizing, offering suggestions, asking for help, encouraging others to participate, speaking quietly, and checking if others understood (Janney &

Snell, 2002). A person's ability to work cooperatively, be responsible and respected, have self-control should be taught and practiced in school.

**Action research** combines research and action in a series of cycles that involves the collection of data about the topic of investigation, analysis and interpretation of the data, planning and introduction of action strategies that lead to positive changes, and finally an evaluation of those changes to come up with an intervention in this process in order to publish its outcomes (Somekh, 2006). **Action research** focuses on learning in and through action and reflection, and it is conducted in different contexts. Since action research is related to learning, and learning is interrelated with education and growth, many researchers consider it as form of educational research (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002).

This chapter introduced the topic under scrutiny and the purpose of investigating it. It also described the research context where the study was conducted. This chapter presented clear definitions of the variables that will be discussed in the paper.

Chapter two reviews the literature available on the topic. It also presents some of the early and recent studies investigated by prominent researchers. The literature review sheds light on students' speaking skills in a second language, the difficulties they encounter when speaking, grammatical structures, accuracy, and fluency, task based approach, and action research. Furthermore, chapter two presents some studies that have been taken place in the field of speaking a second language.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### **Introduction:**

This section reviews the literature available on the topic of investigation. It discusses speaking English as a second/foreign language, action research, and task based approach. Moreover, it presents some of the studies that investigate the factors that cause speaking deficiencies in the second/ foreign language (ESL, EFL). Moreover, it presents different arguments related to teaching grammar in communicative classrooms, fluency and accuracy of speaking, and tasks implemented to promote speaking ESL/ EFL.

Speaking is the process of building and communicating meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols in different contexts (Kayi, 2006). The ability to function in another language is characterized in terms of speaking and communicating in the target language (Nunan, 1999). Speaking is an important part of teaching and learning a language since the learner's end product of learning a language is speaking the target language fluently (Chuang, 2009). Speaking a second or foreign language specifically has been considered the most demanding of the four skills namely, listening, reading, and writing. Nevertheless, speaking has been undervalued, and English language teachers follow a traditional approach to teaching speaking i.e. as repetition of drills or memorization of dialogues (Kayi, 2006). As a result, there has been an increase in research into the learning strategy of second language (Nunan, 2004). Many studies have been conducted to investigate why students have speaking deficiencies and



what teachers can do to help students improve their speaking skills. Nunan (2004) described one of the earliest investigations into task difficulty conducted by Brown, Anderson, Shilcock and Yule (1984). These researchers scrutinized the factors that made speaking difficult and proposed two dimensional –framework (Nunan, 2004). The first dimension is concerned with the type of information that is communicated, while the second dimension is related to the scale of the task and the interrelationships among the different elements involved (Nunan, 2004). Researchers found out that static tasks such as describing a diagram were easier than dynamic task such as describing a certain situation because elements change relative to each other (Nunan, 2004). Most difficult tasks among all were abstract ones such as expressing an opinion or giving feedback, in which the elements involved are abstract (Nunan, 2004). Of all these issues, cognitive/ complexity/ demand grabbed most attention from researchers. Skehan (1998) had researched the concept of cognitive complexity, drawing on earlier work by Candlin (1987). Skehan (1998) developed a scheme that would make complexity criteria and actual tasks transparent. In his model, Skehan distinguished between code complexity that is related to the language required, cognitive complexity that has to do with the thinking process, and the communicative stress which is related to the performance conditions required by the tasks (Nunan, 2004). Lazaraton (2001) indicated that in a survey that foreign language English teachers filled, students' main speaking deficiencies arose because of the lack of motivation and the use of the first language. In addition, the challenge of speaking may arise if the curriculum does not foster speaking skills. Today's world requires that teachers should enhance students' communicative skills since only in that way students can express themselves in any communicative circumstances (Kayi, 2006). Recently, the teaching of oral communication skills has become the central point in many classes. However, teaching speaking and communications

in a second language is still challenging. Oral skills pedagogy has developed as a result of theory which states that teaching oral skills does not only focus on grammar competence (Lazaraton, 2001). Research has suggested many reasons why students exhibit speaking deficiencies. Some studies for example indicated that Asian students have high anxiety when learning English since most of them do not practice the language inside and outside their classrooms (Na, 2007, Tsai, 2003). Nunan (1999) reported that limited background knowledge and the degree of abstraction and grammar accuracy significantly determine speaking difficulty.

In addition, Wang (2003) carried out a survey of Taiwanese students in an English medium school and found out that students have speaking deficiencies.

### **Speaking a second language:**

Language is one of the human symbol systems as Gardner (1983) describes it .Language serves as a vehicle for thoughts and a tool for communication (Huang, 1998). As a result, speaking is the central part of the language which is viewed by many learners as challenging and difficult. Brown (1994) explains a number of reasons that interact to make speaking a challenging skill. One of the aspects is related to fluent speech which contains reduced forms, such as contractions, and vowel reductions. Therefore, learners who are not exposed to the language, or who do not get adequate practice with reduced speech will certainly not speak fluently. The same is true for the use of idioms and slang in speech. Without practice with using these features of spoken language learners sound bookish. Perhaps the most difficult aspect of spoken English is that interactions are always carried with more than one speaker (Lazaraton, 2001). The speaker has to carry on more than one responsibility such as monitoring and understanding the other speaker, thinking about one' s contribution, producing that contribution,

and examining its effect. This is why people are disappointed when speaking the second language. In fact, they are not ready for natural communications and could not handle all of its simultaneous demands. Brown and Yule (1983) distinguished monologues and dialogues. Giving an uninterrupted oral presentation is different than interacting with more than one speaker for transactional and interactional purposes (Nunan, 2004). That is, speaking is an activity that integrates many subsystems which make speaking a second language a difficult task for language learners. However, through interactions, learners can attain the needed range of discourse to manage their own conversations, and to control the level and kind of input they receive (Willis, 1996). Some people learn to speak a foreign language such as English fluently without lessons. This is mainly because they are willing to communicate and send their messages. They acquire the language through excessive exposure and choose the expressions they need (Willis, 1996). On the other hand, some people learn a language naturally without classroom instructions. This is not to deny that classroom instructions are not useful; indeed there is evidence that instructions are effective. However, most classroom activities involve students producing a given form of patterns, or expressing a given function, rather than saying what they feel or want to say (Willis, 1996). However, in order for students to speak a second language, they have to use the language freely even if they make a lot of errors (Willis, 1996). In fact, the best way for students to learn to speak is to acquire the language naturally. In other words, free use of the language enables students to experiment the language in a supporting environment without feeling threatened. Students can speak a second/ foreign language fluently when they are engaged in real life tasks and have the opportunities to cooperate and communicate using the target language (Nunan, 2004). In reality, learners who are encouraged to speak acquire speaking proficiency faster and more effectively. Students of all ages are encouraged and motivated to speak a second

language in authentic situations that provide tangible results (Beckett, Nevin, Serena, Romero, & Bergquist, 2002). Nunan (2004) proposed that language can be taught through bottom –up or top-down views. The bottom up approach emphasizes that learning a language is based on the processing of small units of language and then developing larger units (Nunan, 2004).

Accordingly, the bottom –up view proposes that learners learn phonemes, words, clauses to reach complete texts. On the other hand, top- down views that the learner understands the language by making use of the existing knowledge and contextual information (Ellis, 2003). Ellis (1984) supports this view by referring to evidence derived from classrooms. He suggests that learners can use “expansion strategy” to convey their messages discursively rather than structurally (Nunan, 1995). Ellis proposes some strategies through which discourse extension can be developed. The speaker can emulate part of another’s speaker’s utterance and add to it. Another way is to build on one’s own previous utterance (Nunan, 1995).

### **Fluency/accuracy/complexity**

Skehan and Foster (1999) explained that language procedures can be analyzed in terms of accuracy, fluency, and complexity. Today teachers focus on accuracy as well as on fluency which as Hedge (1993) explained is “natural language use.” Fluency is attained when speaking activities focus on meaning and its negotiation, when speaking strategies are used, and correction of errors is minimized. Bygate (1996) reported on a study of a learner who had to retell a story from Tom and Jerry cartoon after watching it on two occasions, three days apart. Bygate (1996) found that the student improved the accuracy and fluency of the language after watching Tom and Jerry two times. Bygate (1996) also reported that the learner did not make significant errors and used a more complex language. Furthermore, fluency is promoted when learners are encouraged to contribute and communicate with others, and even evaluate their own learning

process (Lazaraton, 2001). In order to achieve the above principles and teach learners how to speak a second language fluently in the best way possible, implementing the task based approach can be an effective method. Skehan and Foster (1999) stated that different types of tasks generate different degrees of accuracy, fluency, and complexity. Skehan (1998) cleared that fluency is achieved by learners depending on their memory based system, accessing and developing ready made chunks of the language and thus require semantic processing rather than syntactic. However, accuracy and complexity require learners to draw on their rule based system and thus engage them in syntactic processing. Skehan and Foster (1997) looked at three kinds of tasks, two planning conditions and two post-task conditions. Dependent variables were accuracy, fluency, and complexity. The researchers gave students three task types. The first task was the personal information exchange in which students had to tell their partners what surprised them about living in the UK. The second task was the narrative exchange in which students had to describe a cartoon. Finally, the researchers gave them a decision task based on giving advice. The two planning conditions provided students with two minutes planning and no minutes to plan. The post- task conditions were knowledge of the final task and repetition of the task in front of the class. Results indicated that planning increased fluency, accuracy for the personal and narrative tasks and complexity for the personal and decision making tasks (Skehan & Foster, 1997). In fact, task types made a difference in the results. The most significant results were for fluency. Knowledge that there is a post-task did not increase fluency, but neither did it clearly increase accuracy. In conclusion planning time pushed students to more complex language, but did not increase accuracy (Foster & Skehan, 1997).

### **Form-focused Vs. Meaning focused tasks**

Language is best acquired when it is being used as a means for transmitting messages and not when it is solely taught for conscious learning (Krashen & Terrel, 1983). Proponents of task based language teaching argued that speaking a second language should be practiced in an environment that stimulates natural process of acquisition, and that form-focused exercises are unnecessary (Nunan, 2004). One of the main concerns in teaching a second language is grammar. Teaching grammar during speaking is one of the controversial issues that linguists argued for and against. To what extent does grammar teaching affect students' speaking skills?

Savignon (2001) argued that teaching grammar does not only rely on the ability to state rules of usage, but it focuses on using the rules in expression, communication, and negotiation of meaning. Krashen (1982-1983) argued that learning grammar does not fuel the acquisition process. Literally, students seem to master grammar concepts and answer questions correctly, but often fail to use grammatical concepts when expressing themselves freely. It is known that a language is more than a system of rules; it is understood that it is a resource for the creation of meaning (Nunan, 2004). In terms of learning, one has to distinguish between knowing various grammatical rules and being able to use them effectively in spoken discourse (Nunan, 2004).

Some linguists such as Loschky and Bley- Vroman value tasks which require learners to focus on form (Nunan, 2004). These linguists believe that certain grammatical forms can be essential to facilitate the completion of any task (Nunan, 2004). Doughty and Williams (1998) and Long and Robinson (1998) claimed that learners at the early stage of learning can benefit from the focus on form. However, sometimes students master grammar concepts and even can reproduce them in a test, but often fail to use them when expressing themselves orally (Willis, 1996). This results because they are paying attention to the form. However, this could not happen if learners were paying attention to meaning as they are communicating (Willis, 1996). Interesting enough

is that learners have learnt the target grammatical concepts, and they could use them in controlled situations; nonetheless, they have not been part of their internalized language. Teachers should train students to focus on both the function and the forms of the language. Mc Carthy (2001) and McCarthy and Carter (2001) suggested a description of spoken grammar and vocabulary based on the evidence of spoken corpora, and not only presented as a list of deviations from written norms (Mc Carthy & O'Keffe, 2004). It is accepted that grammar is a crucial aspect in using language communicatively (Nunan, 1989). This can be easily achieved if learners were given grammar tasks which they can solve interactively (Ellis, 1999). Regarding vocabulary, Willis (1999) argued that teachers should spend less time on practicing isolated patterns and employ more time for vocabulary development tasks. Recently, researchers have recognized that vocabulary development is a major aspect of learning a language (Ellis, 1999). Obviously, a comprehensive theory of language learning emphasizes that learners should develop vocabulary knowledge (Ellis, 1999). Some learners have adequate knowledge of vocabulary, yet they can only recognize the words in contexts and fail to make use of them. As a result, teaching speaking should focus on vocabulary teaching. If learners coped with speaking by studying rules of grammar and memorizing vocabulary, then speaking here is said to be interactional. On the other hand, if learners treat the language as a tool for communicating messages in reception and production, then acquisition is incidental. Practice activities such as acting dialogues can be an insufficient method to teach speaking because these activities are not meaning- focused and their main aim is only to practice specific forms and functions of the language (Nunan, 1995). Teachers should design some tasks that provide opportunities for genuine communication and interaction using the target language (Nunan, 2004).

Learners need language for real life purposes which is a main principle in the communicative approach (Luoman, 2004). Hunston (2002) studied lexicogrammatical patterns and suggested that sequence such as verb complementation patterns, if learned holistically, can lead to fluency, producing pattern flow (McCarthy & O'Keffe, 2004).

### **Speaking and motivation**

Furthermore, for students to speak a second language correctly, teachers should engage them in motivational tasks and help them develop their self confidence. Some studies conducted by Brodkey and Shore (1976), Gardner and Lamber (1972), Watkin et al. (1991) revealed that self esteem seems to be a very important factor in language acquisition (Brown, 2000). Many researchers investigated the effects of self esteem on performance of oral production and concluded that self esteem influences oral production (Brown, 2000). MacIntyre, Dornyei, Clement, and Noels (1998) indicated that the effect of self confidence was significant in the model "willingness to communicate in a foreign language". MacIntyre et al. (1998) implied a number of factors that correlate with students' willingness to communicate. These factors underlie motivation, intergroup climate, and two levels of self-confidence. The latter are described as situational self confidence which is one's self appraisals in specific situations on particular trait such as communicative ability and state communicative self confidence (Brown, 2000). As Brown (2000) explained, both types of self confidence play important roles in shaping one's willingness to communicate. In short, in addition to other factors related to the aspect of language, learners should have self confidence and overcome their anxiety in order to speak a second language. Willis (1996) explained that students feel anxious mostly when they feel that they are making mistakes. If teachers attempted to frequently correct her / his students' mistakes, the latter would become demotivated and would not risk speaking (Willis, 1996). Students need



to use the foreign/ second language freely in a supportive atmosphere without feeling threatened (Willis, 1996). Many students admit that they often avoid speaking inside our outside class because they fear making mistakes or are afraid of being corrected in public (Willis, 1996). Moreover, there is a lot of evidence that drilling a particular language does not enhance communication. Students need supportive and low stress atmospheres to encourage creativity and communication. Many learners hesitate when speaking a second language. Tsui (1996) collected data that revealed the factors why second language learner of English in Hong Kong are reluctant to speak fluently (Tsui, 1996). These factors include lack of confidence, unwillingness to take risks, and a perception that they have poor command of English. Bygate (1987) argued that "our learners often need to speak with confidence in order to carry out many of their transactions" (Gutierrez, 2005).

### **Task Based Approach:**

Nunan (1995) suggests that teachers should start with the whole text or whole language rather than teaching discrete elements. Further, students in class should be exposed to types of interactional opportunity that they may encounter outside (Nunan, 1995). In short, there should be a link between the learning opportunities provided in class and the real life interactions that students will encounter outside. This clearly means that learners can't develop their conversational skills if they are just relying on monologues to acquire speaking skills (Nunan, 1995). Therefore, teachers should implement methodologies that acquaint students with the opportunities to explore the generic structures of spoken language. With this view, a task based approach provides advantages through the designed communicative tasks that develop and improve students' oral skills (Gutierrez, 2005). Hunston (2002) supports the task based approach to this aspect of fluency to raise awareness of features of speaking as a whole (Mc

Carthy & O'Keffe, 2004). Ellis (2003) explained that learners should give primary attention to meaning and to make use of their linguistic resources. He added that a task is designed to result in a language that bears a direct or indirect resemblance to the language used in the real world. Thomson (2003) conducted a study to investigate what hinders the progress of bilingual students' learning English. Results revealed that parents' lack of English proficiency limits the interaction with their children; hence they rarely speak English in real situations. In task based approach, learners learn by doing. Most teachers believe that learners need grammar knowledge before they commence certain tasks. However, when they speak they need more words, not a knowledge of grammar. Learners can speak fluently if they have a good vocabulary repertoire (Willis, 1996). Task based teaching seems certain to remain an important aspect of oral skills pedagogy. Tarone and Kuehn (2000) in their study of Non Native speaker (NNS) performance in a social services oral intake interview found that the NNs used little or no back channeling and fewer responses, indicating lack of understanding and self confidence. Consequently, they designed teaching materials for specific context, which consisted of a description of the purpose and the interview, audiotapes, and exercises based on these materials (Lazaraton, 2001). A task based approach aims to provide opportunities for learners to experiment, both spoken and written language. Task based approach requires students to learn about the skills they need through a process of discovery rather than telling (Waters & Waters, 1995). In task based approach, teachers emphasize language in use in communicative contexts (Mann, 2006). Ellis believes that task requires the participants to engage in communicative processes as those involved in real world (Ellis, 2003). Despite advances in technology, scripted dialogues are still used in speaking classrooms. Burns (2001) notes that scripted dialogues rarely reflect the natural spoken discourse and that students who are only exposed to the scripted dialogues cannot extend their repertoire

and interact outside the classroom (McCarthy & O’Keeffe, 2004). Learning is more controlled when instructions involve a focus on “topic” rather than on “activity” (Ellis, 1999). There are many different types’ tasks that can be conducted in task based approach such as reciprocal tasks, non reciprocal, planned tasks, closed tasks, and convergent tasks. Long (1989) proposed four different points regarding the effectiveness of these tasks .Learners can negotiate meaning when the tasks maintain information exchange (Fotos & Ellis, 1999). Tasks can be categorized into reciprocal and non reciprocal tasks. Reciprocal tasks are based on one way flow of information from the speaker to the listener; whereas, non reciprocal tasks are considered listening tasks since the listener functions just as a listener. Long (1989) adds that reciprocal tasks produce exchange in meaning more than non reciprocal tasks. Planned tasks in which learners prepare their speech beforehand encourage negotiation in meaning in contrast to unplanned tasks. Closed tasks, in which there is a definite ending, produce more negotiation than open tasks which produce no clear resolution. Last but not least, convergent tasks enable the learners to suggest different views and promote more negotiation in meaning than divergent tasks (Ellis, 1999). In task based approach, the use of pair/group work is fostered. A survey of conducted by Long and Porter (1985) indicates that students produce more in pair/group work and use longer sentences. However, Foster (1998) found that the level of talk and negotiation may be low in group work because students do not take tasks seriously. Task based language teaching can be carried out by teachers interacting in lock-step with the whole class, According to Prabhu (1987), lockstep helps student have access to the teacher’s better samples of the target language. Ernest (1994) and Tsui (1996) suggested some ways to conduct lockstep task based teaching in a way that it creates the interactional conditions believed to facilitate language acquisition ( Ellis, 2003). Tsui (1996) suggested that learners should be prepared to advance their

ideas in an opinion-gap task and thus more able to take control of the discourse. Based on research, Tsui claimed that Chinese learners were more likely participating in tasks when they had the opportunity to plan what they say. Another way for fostering learner control of the discourse is by allocating a specific time for a "talking circle."

Learners of a second language display passive attitudes in class. It is essential to create a positive atmosphere that encourages learners' interactions in the second language (Gutierrez, 2005).

Learners should use the English language freely to learn how to speak even if they make a lot of errors. Willis (1996) declared that creating a low stress environment and using the language for real life purposes enable students to engage in communications and acquire discourse skills (Gutierrez, 2005). In fact, this is how learners learn to speak a second language naturally. Using language for real purposes gives learners chances to recall and use the language efficiently.

Current debates are questioning whether speaking materials do or should truly reflect naturally occurring speaking language (McCarthy & O'Keeffe, 2004). Based on survey responses from university faculty, Ferris and Tagg (1996) suggest that learners who are learning English as a second language need extensive authentic practice in classroom participation such as taking part in discussions. It is recommended to implement activities that have purpose and are structured

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because de-contextualized tasks don't make for best performance (Brown & Yule, 1983).

Language use varies by context and purpose, so task design is very important in developing assessment (Luoman, 2004). When teaching speaking skills, teachers who teach English as a foreign language (EFL) need to organize authentic and motivating activities. Usually when students are upset they use the stoplight technique to dissolve their emotional situations. This is the process in which students stop, calm down, and think before they act (Rivan & Weber, 1999). In task based lessons, the teacher acts as a facilitator who encourages students to use the

language and interact spontaneously in appropriate circumstances. Also, when students carry out the tasks cooperatively in the classroom, there is better student participation, increased learning, enhanced student self-esteem, and a more positive classroom environment. Cooperation is a necessary factor in the curriculum since it helps students improve their communication skills such as speaking, listening, and writing (Rivan & Weber, 1999). Strahan, Hamilton-Cope, Hundley, and Faircloth (2005) found that students are more likely to succeed when they feel connected and care about the school (Fetissoff, Kry, & Skilling, 2008). Task based approach consists of three phases; the pre-task phase, the during-task phase, and the post-phase task (Ellis, 2003, Willis, 1996). The purpose of the pre-task is to prepare students to acquire the language effectively (Ellis, 2003). In this phase, it is essential to explain to students the utility and purpose of the tasks (Dornyei, 2001). In the during-phase task, there are many task performance options. One of these options is related to whether students are required to work under time pressure or not (Lee, 2000). This option is worth considering because it affects the quality of the work performed by students (Ellis, 2003). A group of students who had an unlimited time to finish an assigned task resulted in an accurate and more complex language in comprehension than the control group that was asked to do the task under time pressure (Yuan & Ellis, 2003). Students used the extra time to check their words. Many teachers mislead their classrooms; however they can achieve success if they frequently improve their performances and reduce the achievement gap through action research (Sagor, 2005).

A Task based framework for beginners and young learners (Willis, 1996)

<b>Pre-task</b>
Introduction to the topic and task.  Use of picture, demonstrations, and songs.
<b>Task Cycle</b>
Sets of short tasks.  Emphasis o Planning and reporting.
<b>Language focus</b>
Finding, identifying, and classifying common words and phrases.
Practicing of classroom language and social phrases.

### Action research

Learners of a foreign language usually need training in oral skills to enable them to communicate and interact in a meaningful and correct form that emphasizes exchanging information, negotiating meaning, and supporting ideas (Gutierrez, 2005). However, in many

a form of practice in which teachers identify the problem, decide on investigative procedures, determine data collection techniques, analyze and interpret data, and develop plans to deal with the problem (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002). In the first stage, the researcher examines the situation and identifies the problem. Once the problem is identified, the researcher collects data using any of the methodologies such as experiments, surveys, observations, and interviews. It is also important to interview the participants. Data collected through observations can help the researcher come up with some questions to be asked in the interview. Analyzing data is considered the easiest step in action research. After fulfilling all the steps of action research, the researcher is ready to develop an action plan to implement changes based on the findings (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). Monitoring one's self is essential when carrying out an action research. This includes keeping records of one's thoughts and actions as they relate to his/her intentions and purposes. Sagor (2005) claimed that students' achievement increases when teachers use action research in their teaching including questioning, collecting data, analyzing it, and acting which all the mentioned become part of the habit of the mind and daily practices (Beckett, Nevin, Serena, Romero, & Bergquist, 2002). There are many reasons behind the use of action research. Action research is associated with curricular innovations that lead to immediate and specific changes in classrooms which are related to teachers' practices (Nunan, 1994). Since action research has always to do with learning, and learning is related to education and growth, many researchers regard it as a form of educational research (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002). A review of literature on action research suggests that teachers are advised to use action research since it enables them to find out what happens when they teach and when students learn. Furthermore, action research helps teachers assess and improve teaching practices and keep an eye on innovations in teaching. Last but not least, action research is useful because it helps

teachers investigate problems that occur in classrooms (Troudy & Riley, 1996). Moore and Fetterolf, (1997) conducted an action research project to improve Hispanic fifth graders' limited oral English skills. The results showed positive outcomes which emphasize the positive effects of action research (Moore & Fetterolf, 1997). Authentic assessment showed that students' oral proficiency improved significantly within six months. Implications related to the study prove the importance of teacher generated action research in improving students' oral skills. When teachers undertake action research, they aim to improve their understanding of their work, and consequently their work (Mc Niff & Whitehead, 2002). Action research can help teachers enhance their teaching because it involves reflexivity and sensitivity to the role of the self in mediating the process (Somekh, 2006). This approach to existing information is essential, and this should not be implemented without questioning (Somekh, 2006). Action research tests the data gained from the situation under study (Somekh, 2006). The purpose of action research is to make some changes in our performances. Characteristics that lead to high quality programs to improve students' English speaking skills include trained teachers, clearly planned goals, systematic assessment, and opportunities for students to practice the language (Shaul, 2001). As a result, action research enables teachers to assess the quality of their teaching for the sake of improvement. The intentional language teacher evaluates students' speaking skills in order to determine the objectives and interventions for language development that extend the content of every lesson (Beckett, et al., 2002).

This section reviewed the literature related to the teaching of speaking skills in schools. Action research and the task based approach are also discussed in details. Chapter three discusses the methodology followed to collect the data for this study.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Methodology

Chapter two presented the literature review and studies available on the topic under investigation. Early and recent research suggested that second/ foreign language learners face many challenge; however, they can improve their speaking proficiency if they engage in real life tasks. The issue of teaching grammar in communicative classrooms is controversial and there are many opposing ideas.

The following section introduces that methodology that I used in my study to collect and analyze my data. I will describe the sample and talk about action research, research instruments, validity, and reliability.

#### Research Design

**The research design** used in this study is exploratory and experimental at the same time. According to Fraenkel and Wallen (2006), this method is unique and powerful because it tries to affect a specific variable, and it is the best process to establish and test cause effect relationships.

In experimental research, the researcher can use a research question, which is the question that will be answered in the study and/or research hypotheses, which are the claims that experimental research might support or disapprove (Brown & Rodgers, 2002).

In this study, the scheme involves one group of students which received training of task based approach method.

The sampling method used in this study is the **purposive sampling**. The reason behind my choice is the following:

I think my sample is a representative sampling since I know the speaking level of my students. In other similar studies, researchers may use random sampling (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006); however, in my case it was impossible to choose random sampling because I only have eighteen students in sixth grade. The class composition does not maintain an accurate distribution of gender, academic level, and conduct. I cannot generalize the results on the population of sixth graders who speak English as a second language because the sample is not representative of the whole population of sixth graders who speak English as a second language. However, if we can replicate the study on a wider population of sixth graders, the results might be more significant.

### **Action Research**

I used **action research**. First, I identified the problem that led to students' inability to speak fluently. I investigated the classroom during the English period and obtained a record of what was going on. I collected the information through observations, pre-post survey, and interviews. The findings supported my assumption that students' speaking deficiencies are related to many factors. I analyzed the data through document analysis. I concluded that traditional speaking activities did not stimulate students' interests, and that their awareness of making grammar mistakes and their limited readings had influenced their speaking abilities. Finally, I developed a plan of action which was the implementation of task based approach that focuses on authentic activities to improve students' performances.

## **Instruments**

My research examined the following data:

Students' reaction to task based activities

Students' choice of words

Students' grammatical structures

Students' fluency

Students' pronunciation of the words

Observational notes and journal entries

I collected data as students were working and interacting. I used a variety of methods to increase the reliability and validity of the study. The instruments are comprehensive and assure collective evidence that is expected consistent with the inferences described at the beginning of the study. I developed all the instruments.

I used action research which integrates research and action that lead to improvement. If action research is used properly in which one has a significant degree of control, improvement can be highly expected (Sagor, 2005). In fact, action research is a cycle of gathering data, thinking, reflecting, analyzing, theorizing, and finally acting (Willis, Garcia, Barrera, & Harris).

Problem identification:

I identified the problem of students which is their deficiency in speaking English as a second language.

Preliminary investigation:

I decided that I will investigate the classroom and obtain a record of what is going on. I observed my students and recorded all the incidents in class that are useful for my study.

### **Observations**

Classroom observations were strongly highlighted in my study. Overt participant observations engage the researcher in the situations he or she is observing (O'Reily, 2005). It is overt because the researcher identifies herself or himself as a researcher and the participants know that they are observed which makes the observations more ethical (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). During class discussions, I observed students' interactions and speaking skills as I was working with them in some tasks. I used an observation checklist to record my findings (Appendix A). I used simulations in which I created situations and asked the participants to act out certain roles. This permitted me to observe what happened in certain kinds of situations (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). I kept observational notes in my notebook. I analyzed the notes each week to see if students' speaking skills and ability to speak fluently and expressly in English had improved.

In my study I relied on reflective journals which provide a valuable approach to teaching and researching ( Franklen & Wallen, 2006). Moreover, journals have been widely used in teacher education as an approach to enhance reflection (Clarke, 2003). As part of my methodology, I kept reflective journals which include all the occurrences that happened in grade six. The purpose of these journals were to clarify the manner in which students were engaging in the speaking tasks and activities, to think about what occurred, to analyze what it meant, and to think of change in the lessons as part of my research. The occurrences are mostly students'

speaking mistakes and some of their questions regarding speaking English as well as students' interactions and cooperative work.

### **Pre-post survey**

To assure the reliability and validity of my findings I designed a purposeful pre-post survey for my study (See appendix B). The survey was administered to gain students' perspectives on speaking. The purpose of using a survey is to describe students speaking skills and how the principles of task based approach influenced their proficiency. As a result, I developed a longitudinal survey where information was collected at different points in time to observe changes over time. It is a panel study since the same participants were surveyed over a period of time, and I was studying the changes and the reasons for these changes (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). The survey targeted the eighteen participants at the beginning of the study and at the end of it. The questions in the survey were close ended and open ended questions and were intended to investigate students' attitudes towards speaking before and after the implementation of task based approach. The participants had the freedom to choose how often the statements were used: Always, sometimes, or never. I informed them that the survey is anonymous and I won't be able to identify the participants from their responses.

### **Interviews**

In addition to the mentioned instruments, I conducted an informal interview with three English teachers who teach English at the elementary level. I tried to meet the ethics requirements by respecting my interviewee's privacy. Before conducting the interview, I tried to establish a comfortable atmosphere shaped by trust and mutual respect. For ethical concerns, I did not tape record the interview since my interviewees objected to this (Oliver, 2004). The interviewees

were introduced to the purpose of the interview, and I asked them the questions naturally. The questions targeted their backgrounds, knowledge, and opinions regarding speaking a second language. Informal interviews are the most common type of interviews in qualitative research. They do not involve any sequence or form of the questions. The purpose of the informal interview is to find out how people think about a certain topic and how their views are compared with one another (Fraenklen & Wallen, 2006). See appendix c

On the basis of the review, I decided that the type of activities designed for speaking purposes are not stimulating, thus not motivating students to speak, in addition to their lack of knowledge about certain topics and poor vocabulary repertoire which are the results of inconsistent reading.

Plan intervention:

In this stage I created a plan to implement changes based on the findings of my research. I implemented task based approach and studied its effect on students' speaking skills. Before I implemented the tasks, I provided an explanation of what the students were required to accomplish and the purpose and outcomes of the task (Lee, 2000). I set time limit for each task because my purpose was to emphasize fluency rather than complexity of the language. Planning time as Nunan (1999) had explained can increase the level of accuracy and fluency.

I encouraged cooperative work and raised students' self confidence in their abilities through praises which positively influenced their performance.

Outcome:

The implementation of the task based approach reveals that students are capable of improving their speaking skills and that they can speak fluently only if they were provided with support

through natural and authentic tasks. I noticed more involvement and participation. There is more student- student interaction. Furthermore students developed a language that is more complex syntactically.

### **Validity and Reliability**

Validity and reliability controls in this study are the content -related evidence of validity. According to Fraenkel and Wallen (2006), the content related evidence of validity refers to the appropriateness and comprehensiveness of the content, adequacy of questions, and consistency of format and content. Content validity indeed determines if the content of the instruments contains is an adequate sample of the domain of content it is supposed to represent.

The variety of instruments assures the validity and reliability of the results of the study. Validity can be defined as the degree to which the results can be accurate and general. Validity is assured through honesty, scope of data attained, the participants approached, and the objectivity of the researcher (Winter, 2000). Cohen et al (2000) view validity as a degree rather than an absolute state. The aim is reduction in contamination of data collection and analysis such as bias and standard error. Internal validity is the degree to which the results can be accurate, while external validity is the degree to which the findings are generalized (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). Reliability refers to the level of accuracy and comprehensiveness of coverage (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). As a researcher, I tried to control the internal validity threats such as collector bias threats, location, and instrumentation. Sometimes the collector might unconsciously distort the data to have more likely outcome in his or her research (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). Hence, to control this threat I tried to treat all students fairly and allocated the same time for every group to carry on the assigned tasks. However, attitude of subjects is viewed

as a threat of internal validity. It is claimed that the participants who receive experimental treatment may perform better because the treatment is novice rather than the specific nature of it (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). It was questioned that my participants showed improvement because they knew that they were part of the study and that they were receiving attention. Since students were not tested, I was able to control threats such as testing, history, maturation, and regression (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007).

### **Ethics:**

Oliver (2004) emphasizes the importance of being ethical when conducting research. In my research I was aware of various ethical issues related to my study, and I tried to cope with them carefully. Before conducting my research, I obtained a verbal consent from our school's principal who allowed me to implement task based approach as part of my study to improve students' speaking skills. Also, the principal did not prohibit me to ask students to fill in a survey throughout my study (Oliver, 2004).

Abiding by the ethical code, the school did not pay any expenses related to my study (photocopies and other materials)

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My participants were informed about the purpose of the study and methods used. Bell (2005) explained that confidentiality and anonymity are important in the ethical code of any research. For this reason, I did not include the names of the participants and interviewees and only pseudonyms were used. All of the participants were treated respectfully and all had the chances to cooperate in the tasks (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). I tried not to hurt their feelings and underestimate their speaking proficiency. On the contrary, I motivated them to promote their



abilities especially that it was inevitable that they felt anxious and self conscious when they knew they were observed and studied.

In my study, I did not exclude any of the students that I teach in grade six B and all participated in the study. All the students who participated in the study benefited from the implementation of the task based approach and had the opportunity to use the language in very real and natural situations. The participants were informed about the new strategy of teaching speaking in natural situations. Besides, I informed students about my observations and the data I revealed.

For ethical reasons, I could not force students who have ADHD to work seriously because students have the right to participate in the study or drop (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS and RESULTS

#### DISCUSSION

Chapter four discussed the research methods I used in my study and highlighted the advantages of action research in improving one's teaching. I discussed the validity and reliability of my study and focused on various ethical issues. To get valid and reliable data, I used a variety of instruments such as interview, observations, and survey.

The following chapter will analyze the findings of my study and introduces all the tasks that were carried out in grade six in an English medium school in Lebanon. In this section, I analyzed students' speaking skills prior to the implementation of the task based approach, during the implementation, and after it. Moreover, students reported on their work and gave their feedback.

#### **Observation prior task based approach implementation:**

The ability to function in another language is characterized in terms of having the ability to speak that language accurately (Nunan, 1999). Since I agree with what Nunan had claimed and I believe that observing students in natural settings is essential to assess their speaking abilities and development, I decided to observe sixth graders for two consecutive months to identify their speaking level. The results of my observation revealed that sixth graders have speaking problems related to many factors such as the nature of speaking tasks and their insufficient practice of the language in real life situations. My observation proved my point that my students do not read excessively and are not appropriately exposed to the language. In addition, some know how to

manipulate structures that they build up a repertoire of structures but do not know to put these structures into discourse. For example, they learned some signal words that introduce cause and effects, yet they did not use them successfully in their conversations. For instance, "The rabbit is generous and the king is selfish". In this example, the student did not use while or but though he knows that these words express contrast. They also learned subject verb agreement rules but used to make mistakes in their spoken language. For example, whom do your mother invite?

On the other hand, in most of the discussions and conversations, some students were motivated to participate and were able to use their schemata and prior knowledge; however, they permanently could not express themselves. In one of the lessons, they were able to describe the pictures, but they could not find the correct terms to explain how people can save endangered species. In fact, their inability to speak English did not prevent them from trying to use simple words to send their messages. The problem was that most of the students have poor vocabulary repertoire. They rarely used challenging words, yet they tried to use the new vocabulary words they study but not frequently. For example, many students used rummaged, a new vocabulary word, instead of searched, yet when the lesson was over, few of them used it again. Also, when they were asked to describe Bingham in one of their reading stories "The Discovery of Machu Picchu", most of them said that he did not give up, while three used the word determined. I also noticed that these students had never used idioms in their discussions. Another significant problem is that they do not use synonyms when speaking. For example, Charlie was crying was repeated more than five times in one of the discussions. Their acquisition of the vocabulary words was inadequate, so without an extensive vocabulary practice, they would be unable to use the structures and functions they have learned for comprehensible communication. This goes back to their backgrounds and social level. Most of these students come from a middle socio

economic level, and most their parents are not English educated, so they don't speak English with them. This was clearly reflected in their speaking skills because students confronted difficulties to express their thoughts. Six students used to stutter a lot while speaking because they were afraid of making mistakes. Most students used to speak monotonously, while four of them spoke fluently and clearly and were self confident. In most of the reading discussions, I found out that students tended to memorize the answers of the comprehension questions to avoid embarrassment or inability to use appropriate expressions. When analyzing their conversations, I found out that the latter are characterized in terms of information routine that is they focus on description, prediction, and explanation. Students were able to successfully describe a picture, "The boy is removing the hook from the whale's body". On the other hand, my students rarely focused on interaction routine that is social discussions among each other. More specifically, students tended to avoid conversations among each other, and they only used to describe pictures and predicted the events of the stories. In most of the time, they code switched and translated from Arabic to English because they encountered difficulties finding the appropriate terms. For example, "Miss, did you correct the tests aw ba3da Miss Nassar 3am betshofon"? I do not want to 2tsajal bel scout, ana I'm in the scout barat madrasse, and freight is sha7en". I attribute these problems to many factors. Throughout my observation, I speculated that my sixth graders are not good listeners. We know that prior experience as a "hearer might facilitate being a speaker (Nunan, 1995). My students had not developed the habit of listening, and they rarely listened to each other and learned from each other mistakes. Second, they do not practice the English language in real life situations, so they are not accustomed to authentic conversations. In one of the role plays, students had to take the roles of Sarah, Charlie, and Joe and had to act out the scene when Sarah started searching for Charlie; however, the three actors were not able to speak

spontaneously and were repeating the same sentences, "Charlie, where are you? I am sad because I did not find Charlie. Don't worry we will find him".

One of the drastic problems that made the situation worse was their grammatical mistakes. Students learned the structures and rules but did not know how to put it in discourse. They had problems with subject verb agreement. For example, "Do you give Ali a warning because he misbehaved? Sara is a responsible girl because she take care of Charlie. The boy help Bingham find the lost city. The customer bargain with the seller". Obviously, students unconsciously forgot to add the (s) to the verb in the present tense with the third singular person. Also, I noticed that more than four students made mistakes when using the past tense of irregular verbs. For example, the rabbit losed his magic gourd. Before they selled the car, the customer bargained the seller". Seven students had problems with word order. For example, Daniele *feel* at the end of the story happy. Bingham *think* of the boy he is brave. As we notice, students used simple words to describe the characters, made subject verb agreement mistakes, and followed the wrong order of words.

Moreover, since these students are not trained to communicate using English, they rarely used discourse markers and fillers in their conversations. Learners need to develop their abilities to acquire an acceptable degree of fluency and appropriate conversational fillers (Nunan, 1995). As I noted before, students hesitated to speak and answer any unexpected question. On the other hand, they only raised their hands to answer low level questions and prepared ones.

Finally, my observation revealed that my participants have speaking problems that should be solved to help them enjoy learning the second language. If students do not learn how to speak or do not get any opportunity to speak in the language classroom, they may soon get de-motivated

and lose interest in learning. On the other hand, if the right activities are taught in the right way, speaking in class can be a lot of fun. Another factor that affects students' speaking is that some of them mind if their classmates laugh at them, so they are conscious of themselves when they speak. On the other hand, some try out new words and structures, and when they make mistakes they try to use them to learn about the language. Last possible cause for students' inadequate speaking problem is poor family follow up and guidance. In fact, students' achievement is influenced if students lacked supervision doing constructive activities at home ( Rivan & Weber, 1999). This can be one of the causes in my study since most of my students' parents are uneducated or French educated, so it is hard or even impossible for them to engage them in conversations.

### **Pre- survey:**

The data collected from the pre- survey revealed that students are aware of their speaking problems. Some students acknowledged that they do not enjoy the speaking activities carried out in class, while others found that these activities are not motivational. Most students admitted that they *sometimes* do not speak English fluently. They also agreed that they *always* shift to Arabic when they speak because they cannot express themselves fluently in English. The majority confessed that they do not speak fluently and pause because of their fear of making pronunciation mistakes and grammatical errors. Since students are frightened of peer pressure critique, they avoid speaking during discussions. In order for students to function in class, they have to know that what they say is respected and highly valued, and that any criticism they receive should be given a constructivist way (Norris, 2003). As a result, I agree that caring

relationships among students is important to make everyone valued and encourage everyone to speak fluently (Fetissoff, Kry, & Skilling, 2008). Furthermore, students admitted that they *sometimes* read English stories which explain why they have poor vocabulary repertoire and why they cannot speak fluently. Rivers (1983) has claimed that acquisition of an adequate vocabulary is crucial for successful second language use because if students have limited vocabulary knowledge, they will be unable to use the structures and functions learned for comprehensible communication. In short, data revealed that students' speaking problems are related to their inadequate exposure to the language and to the improper practice of it. Students lack the communicative competence because they rarely practice the language in real life situations and they have no self confidence in their speaking abilities. Finally, most students agreed that they speak naturally and fluently when they have information about the topic, when they only have to give short answers, and when they are speaking with people who are not proficient. This in fact emphasizes that students' lack of vocabulary words and poor self confidence affect students' speaking proficiency.

### **The implementation of the Task based Approach**

After observing students' speaking level, I implemented the task based approach that consisted of real life situation activities. At first, students were confused, and they found it hard to work cooperatively though they are used to group work. Instructions were explicitly given, and all students had the chance to participate. Some of them declared that they do not mind if their classmates laugh at them, and others claimed that they are not overly conscious when they speak. The four task listed below were implemented over a period of time. Students were asked to work in groups, and they were given the chance to repeat the task at home. Research has focused on the negotiation of meaning. As well as group work. As Nunan (1995) explained, students exploit

a greater range of language functions when working in small groups opposed to teacher-fronted tasks. Before I implemented the tasks I explained to students that I was interested in the way I was teaching them and how they were learning and that I hoped that by my research , I'll be able to help them.

**Task One:** Giving directions (one way task)

Your tutor had an appointment with your English teacher, and she/he does not know your school's address. You have to give your tutor the correct directions to help her/him reach the place.

**Pre-task:** I divided students into pairs and explained that they have to pretend that they are giving directions on the phone. We brainstormed some words and phrases such as turn right after the Japanese Restaurant / go down the street.

**Planning:** I allocated twenty five minutes for this task. Students were asked to be clear and direct. They planned what directions to give and how to divide the work between them.

**Report:** Each pair acted out its parts without a paper. Some students did not seem comfortable and found it a difficult task. They reported that it was difficult for them to give directions in the second language and were not sure of the use of prepositions. After they finished, they evaluated their performance and attempted to identify their errors.

**Language focus:** We focused on the vocabulary words that are best used when giving directions.

**Students' comments:** It was the first task, so students found it too difficult. They admitted that it was the first time they give directions in English, and that they do not know the terms in English.



**My observation:** I noticed that they sounded too formal in their dialogs. Some of the students translated the directions from Arabic to English, and others could not express themselves at all, so they were too brief and missed many steps. They did not give detailed information about the location of the route. Most of the students did not have adequate vocabulary and overused words such as move straight and turn right or left. It was noticeable that the task was linguistically beyond their resources, so they found it difficult.

Task two: Listing and sequencing task (One way task)

**Listening:** List the ingredients and recipe to prepare delicious pizza.

**Sequencing:** Discuss the steps of the process in sequence.

#### **Steps of the tasks:**

**Pre-task:** I introduced the task to students and divided them to work in groups of three. I explained the instructions clearly and modeled how to make cookies to explain to them how they are supposed to prepare the recipe.

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We brainstormed some phrases and words Example: chop the walnut/ shred the cheese

**Planning stage:** I encouraged students to work in groups. I allocated twenty minutes to finish this task. As they were working, they asked some question, but I intended not to answer. I stayed far away. Some reverted to Arabic; others did not work cooperatively. Some students translated some phrases from Arabic to English. On the other hand, some made errors of forms. My jobs were to keep track of time and guide their work.

**Report stage:** Each group chose a presenter to report what his/her group prepared. The speakers spoke about their groups' work, and how all worked together to have it done. The speakers spoke about the difficulties they faced in addition to the steps they followed to prepare the recipe. The others had to listen attentively because they had to evaluate their classmates' work.

**Language Focus:** I wrote on the board some of the sentences such as we chopped the tomatoes and cutted the pepper. We reviewed the past tense of some irregular verbs and synonyms of words such as chop and cut, stir and mix.

**Students' comments:** They enjoyed the activity, but it was hard for them to find the suitable words to express their ideas. They were interested to present their work. They complained that some group members were not taking their work seriously. They declared that they did better than in the first task.

**My observation:** I noticed that students listed the steps successfully and in chronological order; however, they faced difficulties using a variety of words to describe their steps. Most of them used the verb (cut) and (put) to describe more than one step. For example, we cut the tomatoes, we cut the cheese, and we cut the hot dogs, and we put them on the dough. The lack of a variety of vocabulary words and synonyms is clearly related to the fact that students do not read and they do not use the language in real life situations. To encourage students to do better and because they were excited to search for the synonyms of the verbs, I asked them to re do the work at home and permitted them to seek help. I explained that I gave them a chance to improve the quality of their work. Students found this activity very useful because they learned new vocabulary words such as sprinkle the cheese, stir the tomato sauce, spread the ingredients, and slice the hot dog. They used logical and sequenced explanation. The task seemed easier because

background knowledge was used. Students' performance was better compared to that in other tasks.

Task three: Comparing (open task)

Compare your recipe to any of that your friends. State the similarities and differences between them.

**Pre –task:** I explained the instructions and gave an example. Samar's group prepared a more detailed recipe than Nada's group.

Moreover, we brainstormed some of the words and phrases that we use when evaluating someone's work such as redundancy of ideas, elaboration is needed, and steps are not clear.

**Planning:** I gave students 10 minutes to compare and contrast their recipes. They had to be objective and evaluate the quality of their classmates' work. I encouraged them to use compare and contrast clue words such as while, but, unlike, like, and both.

**Report:** Each group selected another presenter to report its final work. The speakers tried to evaluate the presentations objectively. In order to work successfully, students had to listen carefully to each other. Students' prior experiences as "Hearers" can enhance their speaking skills (Nunan, 1995).

**Language Focus:** We wrote some sentences that had grammatical mistakes such as Tarek's group used more richer vocabulary words than Houssam's group.

We corrected the grammatical form of the word richer and selected some words and wrote better synonyms.

**Students' comments:** It was hard for students to critique the presentations objectively. Some groups provided brief evaluation and used the words "good" and "not good" as a description, while others compared the choice of the vocabulary words and steps clearly.

**My observation:** Students were interested to evaluate their work, and they worked cooperatively. If I want to critique their spoken language, I can say that they were trying to exert effort to improve it because they were interested in the task itself.

Task Four: Vendor and customer dialog (two way task)

**Pre-task:** I divided students into pairs and gave them clear instructions of the task. I modeled a sample. Students had to conduct a spontaneous dialog between a vendor and customer at the school's cafeteria. The customer had to ask the vendor for something to buy.

**Planning:** I allocated 5 minutes for students to decide on the scenario for their dialogs. After that, I asked each pair to present its dialog.

**Report:** Each pair presented its dialog with no paper, and apparently they did a good job.

**Language Focus:** We worked on imperative sentences. For example, give me orange juice.

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**Students' comments:** Students enjoyed the nature of this task and were too eager to present their work. They enjoyed acting the roles of the vendor and customer. They commented that they found it easy though they did not read from the papers.

**My observation:** Since the content is concrete in relation to students' experiences and the task is meaningful and relevant, most of the students presented good dialogs because they got used to such tasks. I noticed that they were too direct in their questions and too brief. For example, I want croissant. I want juice. However, they spoke fluently and naturally, and my observation

reveals that students improved and learned through these tasks. Some of them sounded formal. For example; would you please give me cheese makoushe? Students were aware of code switching when they speak, so they intended to search for the meaning of makoushe in English.

### **Observation during the implementation of Task based Approach:**

Students were able to develop active roles in their work. The tasks encouraged genuine communicative interactions among students, and they successfully developed interactional skills. They communicated directly with each other, rather than exclusively with me. After that had got used to the nature of the tasks, some students were able to use the grammatical concepts they mastered in their communication. However, students were making effort to speak well formed sentences and were aware of grammar mistakes because they do not know the differences between spoken and written language. This is the teachers' job to draw attention to the differences between the two forms of language. While written texts consist of well structured sentences, spoken language is characterized by short sentences, fragmentary utterances, and repetition (Nunan, 1995). Students were self conscious of their spoken utterances because they were aware that they were part of my study. Their reactions were predictable since I am their teacher and I know how they act in similar situations especially when they are observed.

In conclusion, speaking performances were enhanced by rehearsal of the task and the opportunity to review and reflect on the tasks. Students had the chance to reflect critically on one's performance as language users which is considered an importance skill, and should be incorporated into any language program (Nunan, 1995).

### **Post-survey and observation after the implementation of the task based approach**

Since students were familiar with the purpose of my study, I felt that they were more confident speaking fluently. Students were encouraged to speak and interact when they knew that my purpose was not to assess their pronunciation and grammatical mistakes. Working in groups and engaging in real life situation conversations motivated them to speak. Furthermore, some of them were motivated to search for vocabulary words that can be used in certain tasks. Some were focused, while others were not. Students with learning disabilities were reluctant to work in groups. They were easily distracted and not focused on the tasks because they were making fun of the work. Students started to exhibit communication skills that are needed in second language classrooms. For example, they started initiating conversations and were not aware of their grammatical and pronunciation mistakes. However, despite their attempt to speak, they displayed fluency problems. Students need more practice in school and at home to improve their speaking skills. After the implementation of the tasks, students succeeded to take parts in more extended speaking turns. They were able to speak complete sentences, yet they were too short. They were able to clarify what their classmates say and use discourse markers in their conversations. They still have poor knowledge of slangs and idioms. In addition, they still speak in a slow pace because they think of what to say, though they successfully correct their mistakes. However, students did not develop an ability to widen their vocabulary knowledge which needs more than three months to get richer. Students need to read more in order to acquire a rich vocabulary bank.

### **Interview**

The data collected from interviewing teachers revealed that they were aware of the problems that students encounter in their English classrooms. They are conscious that students' exhibit

speaking problems that result from different factors such as the ones mentioned in the literature review. They all agreed that students are not initiated to improve their speaking deficiencies. The three teachers believe that students are encountering speaking problems though they are exposed to the English language through media. However, the three of them related this deficiency to different factors. Teacher one believes that students' lack of interest to read is directly influencing their speaking skills. She thinks that the more students read, the more they enrich their vocabulary bank. However, since they are not interested to read, students have poor vocabulary repertoire, as a result, it is challenging for them to find the suitable words to express themselves in English. However, the second teacher related students' poor speaking skills to the fact that students are afraid of peer pressure and have fear of criticism by the teacher and friends. She quoted "self confidence hinders their improvement." The third teacher suggest that students who are learning English as a second language face speaking problems because of cultural differences and improper teaching of speaking. She stated that students' cultures that are different than the ones of the target language, students' different backgrounds, previous instructions, and traditional instructions can all prohibit students from developing good communication and speaking skills.

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As for the third question, the three teachers agreed that reading and speaking are interrelated. Reading enriches students' backgrounds and knowledge, and provides them with knowledge that they refer to when speaking. The three teachers explained that through readings students can acquire new vocabulary words that they can retrieve later when they speak. Regarding the fourth question, the teacher proposed different methods that foster speaking. Teacher one declared that she does not teach speaking directly and that she promotes it through natural discussions. Teacher two suggested "show and tell" activities to enhance students' speaking skills. However,

teacher three gave a thorough method which focuses on encouraging students to speak and developing their interest to speak. She declared that she gives her students a chance to choose the topic of what they want to talk about—this boosts their interest in speaking. She also focuses on a lot of group discussion on the topic that they are learning about in class. Sometimes she designs a debate day in which they choose a topic and debate about it. This gives the chance of not only speaking but listening also. Listening has been considered the most frequent activity that students need to develop their speaking skills. To communicate, we exchange thoughts and information through listening and speaking (Rivan & Weber, 1999). Not to mention they get the chance to express their own opinion that makes them feel important. For creative thinking, she gives them a topic and let them use their creativity to express what they feel.

Last but not least, the teachers think that motivating students to speak through praise and minimum error correction in addition to developing listening and reading skills will help second language learners become better speakers and overcome all their problems.

Generally all what the three teacher stated and proposed is convincing and realistic. Their ideas emphasize my results and reveal that students' speaking skills were problematic. Students' deficiencies are related to the facts that they do not read, are not exposed to real speaking situations, and lack motivation and interest.

Chapter four focused on the analysis of the data that resulted from the implementation of task based approach. The results indicated that students were able to show improvement in their speaking proficiency after the implementation of the speaking tasks. However, more practice is needed to develop their speaking ability as well as motivation and praise.



Chapter five will provide a conclusion of the research that was conducted in an English medium school in Lebanon in addition to the limitations that I encountered throughout my study, reflexivity, and further research.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusion

In the previous chapter, I analyzed the data provided throughout the research and I generalized that most students have speaking deficiencies. These deficits can contribute to many factors that were emphasized in the paper such as lack of motivation, anxiety, fear of making mistakes, insufficient exposure of the target language, and traditional approach of teaching.

Chapter five provides a conclusion of the study, limitations that I faced throughout my research, my reflections, and some suggestions that can be helpful for further research.

The purpose of my study was to help students in grade sixth in a private English medium school in Beirut improve their speaking skills through the implementation of the task based approach.

The results of the study reveal that the implementation of the task based approach and the real situation tasks enabled students to be on the road to becoming successful speakers. As a teacher researcher, I felt that my class was very successful in performing the different tasks. I achieved what I planned to do which was to improve the quality of learning experience of my students through critically reflecting on my own practice. Monitoring the action was part of evaluating it. I involved the shadow teacher to look my data and make suggestions about how I can interpret and modify.

My study has affected the quality of professional learning in my classroom. Students now are more aware of the importance of reading in relation to improving their speaking. After

implementing the task based approach, students were more encouraged to express themselves through speaking though they still face speaking problems that cannot be overcome in a short period of time. Cooperative work and encouragement increased their self confidence and motivated them to speak freely. I am sure that my students benefited from this intervention and its application. They really seemed to enjoy the various tasks, and I found that their speaking skills have slightly improved. Students improved because they felt what they said was respected and not judged. In fact, I believe that if we can give people hope when dealing with a particular problem and show them the practical way to deal with it, they can successfully solve it. As a result, I advise second language teachers to become familiar with the task based approach and regard its effectiveness in improving students' speaking skills. I recommend to teachers to implement the task based approach over a long period of time in order to receive very valid results.

In this project I tried to answer the following questions:

1. How can a task based approach improve students' speaking skills?
2. Do motivation, reading, and cooperative work increase motivational level in speaking English?

In short, the study enabled me to discover my educational values and beliefs and rethink the relationship between learning and teaching.

**Limitations of the study:**

The study has several limitations. First, the sample that participated in my study is too small. Eighteen students are not enough to generalize results. To have a more valid result, the number of participants should be more (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). Second, it was impossible to choose a random sample since I had a limited number of students in grade 6. If the sample is randomly selected and is large, the researcher could get accurate results of the larger group (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). In addition, I could conduct my study in controlled group and experimental group. Furthermore, the time allocated for the study is insufficient. More tasks are needed to enhance students' speaking skills and this requires more time. The problem was that I had to devote special time to train students to work cooperatively.

**Reflexivity:**

. Becoming a researcher of my own teaching was overwhelming at first because of the overload work involved and the new concepts and research methods I had to implement. However, my research has personal and professional implications for me. Although I was pleased by the procedure I passed through to implement the task based approach and was satisfied by the results, I may think of some changes if I were to repeat it. First, before conducting the study, I will ask for a revised vision of curricular goals that include communication skills.

It would have been better and more reliable if I had implemented the approach over a longer period of time. My students needed more time to get accustomed to the new strategy and exhibit acceptable speaking skills. It would have been interesting if we implemented the task based approach throughout the elementary level during English classrooms and not only grade six.

Designing a survey that involves parents and involving a larger sample in my study would have been great ideas in my research.

In short, I look forward to using the same teaching strategy in my future teaching.

**Further research:**

Further research should aim to investigate the factors that lead to students speaking problems thoroughly. Additional research is appreciated if researchers study the effects of parental involvement and follow up on students' speaking proficiency.

In addition teachers should be made to design appropriate tasks according to students' levels and interests to improve their speaking skills. More effort should be paid to monitor the use of English at school. Additional research should be made to study the relationship between speaking and listening.

Last but not least, researchers should investigate how effective praise and peer are to motivate students and enable them speak confidently.

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### Appendix B

Dear Student,

The following questions are part of a study that I am conducting about the factors that affect speaking English as a second language. Please answer all the questions honestly.

Your answers will be treated with confidentiality and will be only used for research purposes.

Thank you

Grade level

Number of students: 18

Age:

Read each question carefully and answer honestly. Circle a number that corresponds to the statement in the answer key.

3=Always 2= sometimes 1 = never

1. I speak English fluently and naturally.	3	2	1
2. I shift to Arabic while I am speaking English.	3	2	1
3. I hesitate when I speak English because I make pronunciation mistakes.	3	2	1
4. I pause when I speak English because I'm worried of my grammatical mistakes.	3	2	1
5. I find difficulties finding the correct vocabulary words when I speak English.	3	2	1
6. I sound bookish and formal when I speak English.	3	2	1
7. I enjoy the English speaking activities designed in class.	3	2	1

8. I read English stories and listen to English programs. .	3	2	1
9. I do not feel confident when I speak English	3	2	1

10. What is the best way to improve your speaking ability in English?

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11. When do you speak English naturally and fluently? Why?

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## Appendix C

**Grade level:**

**Subject:**

1. How do you see students' ability to speak a second language?
2. What factors (s) affect their speaking proficiency?
3. How do reading and vocabulary knowledge affect students' speaking skills?
4. How do you teach speaking? What activities do you implement in class to promote speaking?
5. In your opinion what can improve students speaking skills?

