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Improving English Speaking Proficiency for Secretarial Purposes through Task-Based Learning

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Abstract: *This qualitative study explored how Task-Based Learning (TBL) improves English speaking skills among secretarial students with limited English proficiency at Pamulang University. Thirty fourth-semester students participated through classroom observations, interviews, and reflective journals. The research focused on real-life task simulations such as telephone conversations, appointment scheduling, meetings, and business presentations. Findings show that TBL created meaningful and realistic speaking opportunities that enhanced students' professional communicative competence including fluency, accuracy, and the appropriate use of language in workplace situations. By performing job-related tasks, students learned to communicate clearly, use polite and formal expressions, and handle professional interactions effectively. Collaboration during tasks also encouraged problem-solving and negotiation in English, which are essential skills in the secretarial field. Additionally, authentic and relevant tasks increased students' motivation, confidence, and participation in class. The study emphasizes that ESP courses should focus on professional communication rather than isolated grammar drills. In conclusion, integrating TBL into ESP instruction can help bridge the gap between classroom learning and real workplace communication. ESP instructors are encouraged to design authentic, performance-based tasks and reflective activities to prepare students to use English confidently and effectively in their future professional settings.*

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INTRODUCTION

English proficiency, particularly in speaking, is a critical skill for individuals pursuing a career in secretarial work. Secretaries are often required to communicate effectively with international clients, answer phone calls, write and deliver presentations, and attend meetings conducted in English. However, many students in vocational or applied university programs in Indonesia still struggle with developing their English speaking skills, which directly affects their career readiness and confidence in the workplace.

At Pamulang University, particularly among students in the Secretary Program in their fourth semester, English speaking proficiency has been identified as a major challenge. Despite having taken general English courses in earlier semesters, many students are unable to communicate fluently or appropriately in professional settings. Their difficulties often include limited vocabulary,poor pronunciation, grammatical errors, and a lack of confidence when speaking in front of others.

Several factors contribute to this lack of proficiency, such as limited exposure to real-life communication tasks, reliance on traditional grammar-based teaching, and lack of

opportunities to practice speaking in authentic contexts. Additionally, many learners are passive participants in the classroom due to fear of making mistakes, resulting in minimal language production. These conditions demand a more engaging and practical approach to teaching English.

Task-Based Learning (TBL) is a learner-centered approach that focuses on using language as a tool for communication rather than merely as a set of rules (Muharramxon, 2025). It provides students with tasks that mimic real-world situations, allowing them to learn English through meaningful interaction. For secretarial students, TBL can be especially beneficial, as it simulates workplace communication scenarios, such as making phone calls, scheduling meetings, or writing memos (Tamayo, 2024).

According to (Arroyave, 2024), TBL encourages learners to engage in language use that is purposeful and contextually grounded. TBL enhances both fluency and accuracy by placing learners in situations where language is used as a means to an end (Milon, 2023). In the Indonesian context, studies by (Rao Howji, 2021) had shown that TBL significantly improves speaking skills in vocational and professional education settings.

While TBL has been widely discussed in general ESL/EFL settings, few studies have investigated its impact on students preparing for professional roles, such as secretaries. Moreover, there is a lack of qualitative data that explores students' experiences and perspectives regarding TBL in developing speaking proficiency. This study aims to fill that gap by focusing on the specific needs of secretary students at Pamulang University.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

(1) How does Task-Based Learning influence the English speaking proficiency of secretary program students at Pamulang University?

(2) What types of speaking challenges do the students face before and after the implementation of TBL?

(3) What are students' perceptions of the effectiveness of Task-Based Learning in improving their speaking skills for secretarial purposes?

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to gain in-depth insights into students' speaking development and their experiences with Task-Based Learning. Data were collected from 30 students from fourth-semester students in the Secretary Program at Pamulang University who were identified as having low English speaking proficiency. Data collection methods included classroom observations, speaking performance tasks, reflective journals, and semi-structured interviews (Ruslin, 2022).

The findings of this research are expected to provide valuable input for English language instructors, curriculum designers, and policy makers in vocational education. By examining how TBL can be used to improve speaking proficiency for secretarial work, this study aims to support the development of more effective teaching practices that address real-world communication needs. Ultimately, it contributes to preparing students more adequately for the demands of professional life.

LITERATUR REVIEW

Task-Based Learning (TBL) has gained considerable attention in English for Specific Purposes (ESP), particularly for learners who require practical communication skills in professional contexts such as secretarial work (Georgy, 2023). TBL emphasizes meaning-focused activities where learners complete real-world tasks, fostering both fluency and accuracy (Bouadjaj, 2024). For secretarial purposes, this approach is highly relevant, as it aligns with the authentic language functions secretaries need, such as making phone calls,

arranging meetings, writing memos, and handling client inquiries (Imam, 2024). Research shows that engaging students in authentic tasks increases motivation and confidence, especially in oral communication (Jendli, 2024; Karnchanachari, 2020).

In the context of improving speaking proficiency, TBL supports active participation and provides opportunities for learners to practice interaction in meaningful ways (Burgess A. a., 2020). (Hains-Wesson, 2023) highlights that tasks such as role-playing meetings, simulating phone conversations, or preparing oral reports can mirror real secretarial duties, thereby bridging the gap between classroom practice and workplace communication. Studies also suggest that learners benefit from scaffolding and peer collaboration during tasks, as these elements promote negotiation of meaning and corrective feedback (Shin, 2020). Such activities not only develop linguistic competence but also strengthen pragmatic skills essential for professional communication (Suraganova, 2024).

Furthermore, the adaptability of TBL allows instructors to design task sequences that gradually increase in complexity, helping students develop communicative competence systematically (Alasal, 2025). For secretarial English, tasks can be sequenced from simple greetings and information exchanges to more complex tasks like managing schedules and handling complaints (Whittaker, 2024). Recent findings by Nguyen and Pham (2023) indicate that learners in ESP contexts show significant improvement in speaking fluency and confidence when exposed to TBL-based instruction. This evidence reinforces the effectiveness of TBL in preparing secretarial students with the oral communication skills required for professional success.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of how Task-Based Learning (TBL) influences students' speaking development in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) context. A qualitative design is particularly suited for exploring learners' experiences, perceptions, and behavioral changes in a natural classroom setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through qualitative inquiry, the research aims not only to examine the linguistic improvements in students' speaking abilities but also to uncover the cognitive, emotional, and motivational aspects related to their learning process. This methodological choice allows for a deeper exploration of how learners construct meaning and navigate communicative tasks in English.

The participants of this study were 30 fourth-semester students enrolled in the Secretary Program at Pamulang University, who were selected based on diagnostic assessments indicating low English-speaking proficiency. These students represent a population that often struggles with communicative competence due to limited exposure to authentic language use. Students in ESP contexts such as secretarial studies benefit significantly from task-based instruction, as it mirrors real-life communication relevant to their future workplace roles (Kun, 2010). By targeting students with basic proficiency, the study seeks to document how task-based activities can scaffold their development through meaningful use of language rather than rote memorization of grammar rules.

To ensure the credibility and richness of the data, the study employed multiple data collection methods, including classroom observations, speaking performance tasks, reflective journals, and semi-structured interviews. The use of triangulated sources

enhances the validity of the findings and allows for cross-verification of students' progress (Nikolaeva, 2021). Classroom observations captured the natural interactions and task engagement patterns during lessons, while speaking tasks provided concrete evidence of linguistic development over time (Sholeh, 2024). Reflective journals offered insights into students' personal experiences, challenges, and self-evaluations throughout the learning process (Wei, 2024).

Finally, Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather in-depth perspectives on students' learning journeys. This method allowed for flexibility in exploring students' feelings about the tasks, their confidence levels, and their perceptions of the usefulness of task-based activities (Putri, 2023). The interview provided rich insight into learner's experience capturing nuanced ways in which they engaged with and responded to the task learning based process, an important aspect in applied linguistics research. The integration of these qualitative tools aligns with the research objective to explore not only what changes occur in speaking proficiency but also how and why these changes are experienced by learners in the context of their academic and professional preparation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. The Influence of TBL

Influence the English speaking proficiency. Task-Based Learning (TBL) has shown a positive influence on the English speaking proficiency of secretary program students at Pamulang University. By focusing on real-world tasks such as taking minutes, handling telephone conversations, and giving formal presentations, TBL allows students to practice language in meaningful and relevant contexts. As a result, students develop greater fluency, vocabulary range, and confidence in using English for professional purposes. Moreover, the emphasis on communication rather than form encourages spontaneous language use, which is crucial for secretarial tasks. Task-Based Learning (TBL) is a learner-centered approach that emphasizes the use of authentic language through meaningful tasks such as meetings, interviews, and presentations (Molnar, 2024). For secretary program students at Pamulang University, whose future careers demand a high level of oral communication in English, TBL presents a practical and effective method for improving speaking proficiency. This approach allows learners to engage in realistic communicative situations that mimic their future professional environments (Riyawi, 2025).

One of the most significant impacts of TBL is the enhancement of fluency and confidence. Students participating in task-based sessions often report improved ability to speak without hesitation (Masuram, 2020). This is largely due to the nature of tasks, which encourage extended speaking turns and real-time thinking (Al-Tamimi, 2020). According to a study by Ranjbar & Ghonsooly (2021), TBL significantly improves learners' fluency because students are more engaged and less anxious when completing meaningful tasks (Arroyave, 2024) . In the context of secretary students, confidence is essential in managing phone calls, attending meetings, and addressing clients.

TBL also contributes to the development of a wider range of vocabulary, particularly functional and domain-specific language. For secretarial students, this means learning phrases such as "Please hold the line," "I'll take a message," or "Could you repeat that, please?" Through tasks like role-plays and simulations, learners acquire vocabulary

in context, enhancing retention and appropriate usage (Soori, 2023). A study by (Bondarchuk, 2024) confirmed that TBL enables students to expand their lexical resources effectively, particularly in professional and workplace communication scenarios. TBL's strength lies in its emphasis on authentic communication. By using tasks that resemble real secretarial duties, students see a direct link between classroom activities and workplace requirements (Silva, 2022). This relevance increases motivation and investment in learning. A study (Clarke, 2018) highlights that learners are more motivated and perform better when tasks are contextually meaningful. At Pamulang University, incorporating tasks such as minute-taking and scheduling meetings simulates real office interactions, preparing students for practical communication challenges.

Speaking anxiety is a common barrier to language proficiency, especially in high-stakes professional contexts. TBL helps reduce this anxiety by focusing on meaning rather than form and promoting peer collaboration. In group tasks, students feel less pressure and more supported, which helps build a positive speaking environment (Arroyave, 2024). Research by (Nguyen, 2024) found that students in TBL-based classrooms showed lower levels of speaking anxiety compared to those in traditional instruction settings. For secretary students, this psychological readiness is crucial for handling real-world interactions. Despite its benefits, TBL does not fully eliminate all language challenges. Some students may still struggle with grammar accuracy, pronunciation, and coherence, especially without focused language instruction. Teachers must balance tasks with language support, such as pre-task vocabulary input or post-task correction. According to (Nurhadi, 2024), combining TBL with occasional form-focused instruction produces better speaking outcomes than using TBL alone. Therefore, a hybrid approach may be most effective for vocational learners like secretary students.

In conclusion, Task-Based Learning significantly improves English speaking proficiency for secretary program students at Pamulang University by enhancing fluency, building relevant vocabulary, promoting confidence, and lowering anxiety. The alignment of tasks with professional secretarial functions adds to its effectiveness, making students more workplace-ready. However, to maximize impact, educators should integrate supportive strategies to address remaining linguistic weaknesses. Overall, TBL offers a powerful pedagogical framework for developing practical communication skills in vocational education settings.

2. Challenges Before and After TBL

Speaking Challenges Faced Before and After TBL Implementation. Before the implementation of TBL, many students struggled with anxiety, limited vocabulary, and grammatical accuracy, which hindered their ability to communicate effectively in English. They often relied on memorized phrases and lacked opportunities to engage in real conversational practice. After TBL was introduced, some challenges persisted, such as pronunciation difficulties and occasional hesitation, but overall, students began to show improvements in interactional competence and response speed. The shift from a grammar-focused approach to a communication-centered method helped reduce fear of making mistakes and fostered a more supportive learning environment (Seo, 2020).

Before the adoption of Task-Based Learning, one of the most significant obstacles students faced was speaking anxiety. Many students felt nervous or fearful when required to speak in English, especially in front of peers or instructors. This anxiety often led to silence, avoidance, or minimal responses. According to (Mustamir, 2024), speaking anxiety among Indonesian EFL learners is typically caused by fear of negative evaluation, lack of confidence, and insufficient speaking opportunities. In a secretarial context, such anxiety is problematic, as the profession demands confident and clear oral communication in real time.

Another issue before TBL implementation was students' limited vocabulary, particularly the lack of job-specific and functional expressions needed in secretarial tasks. Many relied on memorized phrases without fully understanding their use in varied contexts. This made spontaneous communication difficult and often resulted in awkward or incomplete responses. As noted by (Susanto, 2025), Indonesian vocational students often struggle to use vocabulary flexibly because their previous learning focused on rote learning rather than usage. This made it hard for students to handle unexpected changes in conversation or switch topics smoothly. A heavy emphasis on grammatical correctness also hindered students' spoken fluency. Many students prioritized form over meaning, leading to hesitation, pauses, or abandonment of speech. While grammar is essential, overcorrecting or focusing too much on rules can obstruct communicative flow. Research by (Molnar, 2024) emphasizes that language learners benefit more when grammatical accuracy is balanced with meaningful use in context. In the traditional classroom before TBL, students often feared making grammar mistakes, which discouraged experimentation with language during speaking activities.

Following the implementation of TBL, students demonstrated noticeable progress in interactional competence, which refers to the ability to manage conversations effectively, including turn-taking, asking for clarification, and responding appropriately. Tasks like role-plays, meetings, and simulated calls gave students a structured yet authentic context to practice these skills. A study by (Burgess, 2020) found that TBL significantly enhances learners' ability to engage in interactive communication, particularly in professional scenarios. This was evident in Pamulang University's secretary students, who became more responsive and engaged in discussions. Despite the improvements, some challenges persisted post-TBL, notably pronunciation difficulties and occasional hesitation. These issues can stem from interference from the first language (L1), lack of phonetic training, and nervousness during real-time speech. Although TBL encourages more speaking practice, it does not always address specific pronunciation problems unless explicitly integrated into the tasks. As mentioned by (Tiwari, 2023), pronunciation remains one of the hardest skills to improve without targeted feedback, even in communicative learning environments.

One of the most valuable changes brought about by TBL was a shift in classroom culture from error-focused correction to communication-focused learning. This transformation helped reduce students' fear of making mistakes and fostered a more supportive and collaborative environment. Peer interaction and task collaboration allowed students to take risks, make errors, and self-correct in a low-pressure setting. Learners in TBL classrooms report higher motivation and lower anxiety, especially when tasks are

relevant and cooperative. This cultural shift is essential for secretarial students, who must develop the confidence to communicate effectively in dynamic workplace situations.

3. Students' Perception of TBL

Students' Perceptions of TBL Effectiveness. Most students perceived Task-Based Learning as an effective and engaging method for improving their English speaking skills, especially in relation to their future roles as secretaries. They appreciated the practical nature of the tasks, which mirrored real office situations and enhanced their ability to use English in specific work contexts. Students also reported increased motivation and a sense of achievement, as they could see the direct application of their learning. While some suggested that TBL sessions could be supplemented with explicit grammar instruction, the overall feedback was positive, highlighting TBL as a valuable tool in developing professional. Students' perceptions play a crucial role in the success of any instructional approach. At Pamulang University, secretary program students generally viewed Task-Based Learning (TBL) as an effective strategy for developing their English speaking skills. Their positive perception was grounded in the method's practicality and relevance to workplace communication. Learners are more likely to engage with and benefit from pedagogical approaches they find meaningful and connected to real-life use.

Students appreciated the realistic nature of TBL tasks, such as scheduling meetings, handling phone conversations, and writing reports. These tasks reflected their future duties as secretaries, making the learning process directly applicable and career-focused. When learners see a clear connection between classroom activities and their professional goals, their motivation increases, and learning becomes more internalized. This relevance is a major contributor to the students' positive perception of TBL. TBL was also perceived as a confidence booster. By encouraging communication in realistic scenarios, TBL reduced the fear of speaking and built self-assurance among students. Tasks such as role-playing receptionist duties or conducting mock meetings allowed them to practice English in low-pressure environments before facing real-world situations. Research by (Meiklejohn, 2024) found that vocational students reported significantly higher motivation and speaking confidence after participating in TBL-oriented classes, especially in fields that demand public interaction.

Unlike traditional grammar-focused methods, TBL emphasizes active participation, which students found engaging and enjoyable. They appreciated the shift from passive listening and note-taking to dynamic speaking tasks that required teamwork, decision-making, and negotiation. A study by (Mughal, 2024) supports this, showing that learners in TBL environments exhibit higher classroom engagement and better retention of language skills due to the active nature of task completion. During and after task performance, many students became more aware of their language limitations, such as vocabulary gaps or pronunciation issues. Rather than being discouraged, they viewed this awareness as an opportunity to improve. This reflective element of TBL where students revise and improve their speech after feedback was considered beneficial. As stated by (Sultan, 2025), TBL promotes metacognitive awareness in language learners, making them more autonomous and proactive in addressing their weaknesses.

While students generally supported TBL, some suggested that it should be supplemented with explicit grammar instruction, particularly for writing or formal oral communication. This highlights the importance of balance between fluency-based and accuracy-based instruction. According to Yuliana & Maulidina (2024), students in ESP (English for Specific Purposes) programs benefit most from hybrid approaches where communicative tasks are reinforced with periodic grammar input to ensure linguistic accuracy in professional contexts. Another highly valued aspect of TBL was the opportunity for collaborative learning. Students expressed that working in pairs or groups improved their social interaction skills and made learning more enjoyable. Peer support during tasks lowered anxiety and fostered a sense of community in the classroom. In vocational education, where soft skills are as important as technical knowledge, TBL's group-based structure was seen as a double benefit (Deep, 2020).

In conclusion, secretary program students at Pamulang University perceived TBL as a practical, motivating, and effective method for improving their English speaking skills. The method's focus on real-life tasks, active engagement, and professional relevance aligned well with their career aspirations. While they recognized the need for occasional grammar-focused support, their overall perception was that TBL is a highly beneficial approach in developing workplace communication skills. These findings reinforce the importance of task-based instruction in vocational language programs, particularly when tailored to the learners' specific professional

CONCLUSION

This research concludes that Task-Based Learning (TBL) is an effective and practical instructional method for improving English speaking proficiency among secretary program students at Pamulang University. By engaging learners in authentic, task-oriented activities such as handling business calls, conducting meetings, and drafting minutes, TBL bridges the gap between academic language learning and real-world secretarial communication needs.

The implementation of TBL resulted in noticeable improvements in fluency, vocabulary use, confidence, and interactional competence. Students not only became more capable in spontaneous speaking but also developed better awareness of professional language use in office contexts. Furthermore, students perceived TBL as an engaging, motivating, and relevant approach that helped them prepare for real secretarial roles.

However, the findings also suggest that while TBL enhances communicative competence, it should be supplemented with targeted grammar instruction and pronunciation support to ensure accuracy in professional communication. Overall, TBL is a valuable pedagogical strategy for vocational language education, particularly when adapted to the specific communicative demands of the secretarial profession.

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