

Improving Speaking Fluency in a Task-Based Language Teaching Approach: The Case of EFL Learners at PUNIV-Cazenga

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Abstract

This study was an attempt to assess how learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) improved their speaking fluency in a task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach used with ninth-grade learners at PUNIV-Cazenga, a high school in Luanda. In a case study design that used picture-description tasks, learners' speeches were audio recorded before and after the teaching, in which recasts and prompts were utilized as feedback tools for 8 weeks. The findings indicated that learners improved in terms of their speaking fluency by maximizing their speed of speech production, increasing grammatical accuracy, elaborating on their utterances, and developing interactional language. Furthermore, learners' opinions on being taught with the TBLT approach were sought, and the findings indicated that the learners felt encouraged to speak, believed in their potentials to use the target language, expanded their vocabulary, and recognized the relevance of the TBLT approach. The implications of the findings are discussed for teaching practice and future research.

Keywords

tasks, TBLT approach, speaking fluency, PUNIV-Cazenga

Introduction

In the English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts, EFL learners have few opportunities to practice English outside of a classroom (Samaranayake, 2016). They may have books to read, CDs to listen to, and television programs to watch, but they may not always have English users with whom to practice the speaking. EFL learners' speaking fluency, therefore, needs to be the focus of attention in the EFL teaching contexts.

In fact, many studies have been conducted in EFL contexts to find ways of helping learners improve their speaking problems (Brand & Götz, 2011; Crowther, Trofimovich, Isaacs, & Saito, 2015; Kessler, 2010; Lam, 2007; Nakatani, 2010; Rohani, 2011). In these studies, tasks of various types (Ellis, 2009; Long & Crookes, 1992; Prabhu, 1987; Skehan, 1998) have been used as main or secondary tools for gathering data. Results have been illuminating concerning the strategies that EFL learners utilize to cope with speaking problems (Lam, 2007; Nakatani, 2010), and the characteristics of tasks that can help EFL learners in improving speech comprehensibility (Crowther et al., 2015). The literature, therefore, could be used as a source of reference on understanding how EFL learners overcome their speaking problems in a task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach.

However, English language is widely spread around the world (Kakru & Nelson, 2001), and EFL teaching contexts are also ubiquitous, so that more studies are needed to investigate how EFL learners can overcome their speaking problems in a TBLT approach in different contexts (Samaranayake, 2016). The purpose of this study, therefore, was to investigate how the EFL learners studying at PUNIV-Cazenga could improve their speaking fluency based on a TBLT approach (Ellis, 2009; Long & Crookes, 1992).

PUNIV-Cazenga is a high school in Luanda, Republic of Angola, in which learners are taught general subjects such as biology, chemistry, history, mathematics, and physics, including English and French as foreign languages. Although learners are taught only general subjects, they are enabled to seek employment in state and private sectors. Private sectors, such as multinational companies, require their employees to communicate in English. At PUNIV-Cazenga, therefore, learners are provided with the knowledge of English to help them succeed in establishing communication.

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Regarding the teaching of English, at PUNIV-Cazenga, a structural syllabus is used (see the appendix). The linguistic items in the syllabus are taught discretely for the purpose of examination. Although learners pass their examination, their oral communication has been a concern to the teachers at PUNIV-Cazenga. Lack of enough vocabulary and the ability to utter clear sentences are among the concerns that teachers and learners express for the speaking ability. Thus, in the present study, the TBLT approach is tried as a new teaching tool to the Angolan context (Ellis, 2004; Najjari, 2014), to assess how learners can improve their speaking fluency. Learners are asked to describe a picture (Harper, 2002), and their speeches are recorded before and after utilizing the TBLT approach (Ellis, 2009; Long & Crookes, 1992). The implications of the findings are discussed for teaching practice and future research.

Literature Review

Speaking proficiency has been widely investigated in EFL contexts (Brand & Götz, 2011; Kessler, 2010; Lam, 2007; Nakatani, 2010; Rohani, 2011). However, investigations are rare on how learners progress in terms of their speaking fluency in a TBLT approach, particularly in the Angolan context. This study, therefore, aims to contribute to our understanding of how EFL learners at PUNIV-Cazenga, in Luanda, can improve their speaking fluency in a TBLT approach. In this section, first, the term speaking fluency is defined and discussed. Second, the studies that focus on how learners cope with their speaking problems are reviewed, and third, the feasibility of the TBLT approach in helping EFL learners improve their speaking fluency is examined. Finally, the research questions that guide the present study are presented.

Speaking Fluency

The term “speaking fluency” is linked to the meaning of “communication” (Harmer, 2007, p. 142). For example, in a conversation, a learner can make a grammatical error, such as *Maria live in Cazenga* [live vs. lives], but the learner can still speak the sentence with some fluency (Crowther et al., 2015). The learner can speak without searching for words, so that his or her speech is quickly understood. In fact, speaking fluency has been defined as the “automaticity and speed of speech production” (Brand & Götz, 2011, p. 256). However, automaticity and speed of speech production may not always make a speech comprehensible, comprehensibility being “a measure of listeners’ perceived ease or difficulty of understanding L2 speech” (Crowther et al., 2015, p. 81).

Although a grammatical error may not impede communication, as was stated above (*Maria live in Cazenga* as opposed to *Maria lives in Cazenga*), some grammatical errors can be distracting, and therefore, they can detract from fluency. In the following example, taken from a learner’s

speech before the teaching was implemented in the present study, the speech was rapidly produced: “I’m see here two friends, is ready to give order or the food” (see Table 2, Clauses 1 and 2). Here, the learner intends to say *I can see two friends who are ready to order the food*, but the way the learner speaks the sentence may not be very comprehensible to the listener. This probability is supported by the argument that “accuracy and fluency do not operate in complete independence from each other” (Housen & Kuiken, 2009, p. 469), but they work in a complementary manner to maximize EFL learners’ speaking proficiency.

However, most studies have treated fluency and accuracy as separate components. In their study, in which they assessed the effects of different tasks on speech comprehensibility, Crowther et al. (2015) mentioned solely “segmentals, word stress, rhythm, and speech rate” as examples of fluency categories (p. 80). Similarly, in assessing the correlation between speaking fluency and accuracy, Brand and Götz (2011) used only temporal variables of fluency such as “speech rate, length of speech runs or the number and length of filled and unfilled pauses” (p. 257).

Speaking fluency is determined by several components such as speech rate or number of filled and unfilled pauses, number of errors, and use of formulaic language (Bøhn, 2015; Gut, 2009; Housen & Kuiken, 2009). A broader definition of speaking fluency, therefore, is needed in exploratory studies. That is, speaking fluency should be more broadly defined as the learners’ ability to produce a speech that is rapid and comprehensible (Brand & Götz, 2011; Crowther et al., 2015). In such a broad definition, searching for words is not observable. Furthermore, the grammar allows the listener to get information without ambiguities, and performance aspects of speech—such as *er*, *erm*, and *ah*—are used to maintain the flow of discourse (Brand & Götz, 2011; Nakatani, 2010).

Coping With Speaking Problems

How learners cope with their speaking problems has been widely studied (Lam, 2007; Nakatani, 2010; Rohani, 2011), but few or none of the studies have been conducted in the Angolan context. In the study by Lam (2007), the strategies that learners used to cope with their speaking problems were investigated in a Hong Kong high school when learners were engaged in a speaking task. Through the use of a stimulated recall method, which consisted of requesting learners to elaborate on the strategies they had just utilized, learners were found to request clarifications, simplify their speeches, plan their ideas in advance, and monitor other learners’ contributions. The stimulated recall method, therefore, was considered as an essential research tool because it enabled the researcher to gain understanding of learners’ strategies that were still found in their “short-term memory” (Lam, 2007, p. 58).

According to Lam (2007), when a long time has elapsed, after the learners have used the strategies, the strategies

become routinized and move into the long-term memory. Consequently, the learners cannot remember the strategies, and the strategies become inaccessible to the teacher, who loses an opportunity to develop learners' oral language (Gass & Mackey, 2000; Lam, 2007).

It has been suggested that once the strategies are identified, their effectiveness should be investigated (Lam, 2007). This suggestion was taken by Nakatani (2010), who investigated whether the use of specific strategies enhanced 62 college students' oral communicative abilities in communicative tasks in Japan. In a 12-week experiment, the students were taught the oral communicative strategies, such as "paraphrasing, using gestures, and asking questions for clarification" (Nakatani, 2010, p. 117), and the findings indicated that the strategies for maintaining the flow of discourse and those for negotiating meaning were more conducive to the development of oral proficiency. However, little progress was noticeable in terms of language development, and, according to Nakatani, the little development probably occurred because the students did not have enough opportunity to improve the form.

In another study, complementing the study by Lam (2007), Rohani (2011) aimed to find the strategies that 23 EFL learners utilized for coping with oral communication in Indonesia. In particular, focus was placed on the understanding of whether the learners improved the strategies over time. By using a pre- and postinstruction questionnaire, as well as interviews with the learners, Rohani found that between the strategies for coping with speaking difficulties and the ones for coping with listening difficulties, learners made more positive changes in their strategies for coping with speaking difficulties; at the beginning of the instruction, learners tended to use more strategies for coping with listening difficulties, and therefore, they were more passive participants in the oral interactions. At the end of the instruction, however, learners reported that they had maximized their vocabulary and had reduced the use of gestures, with only a few learners reporting that they had maximized the use of gestures to overcome problems with anxiety. Overall, Rohani (2011) noticed that, in the instruction, learners were helped to gain "a more balanced use of strategies for coping with speaking and listening problems" (p. 94).

Feasibility of the TBLT Approach for Speaking Fluency

All the studies discussed in the subsection above (Lam, 2007; Nakatani, 2010; Rohani, 2011) have used tasks to elicit research data on the aspects of speaking proficiency. However, except Rohani (2011), no study has underscored the relevance of task and the use of TBLT approach. Task is a teaching tool that can enhance EFL learners' development of speaking fluency. According to Rohani (2011), tasks are worth using because they help learners in focusing on meaning, learning real language, and stimulating natural acquisition process.

This statement is supported by Hismanoglu and Hismanoglu (2011), who have stated that "the type of discourse emerging from task is aimed to be similar to the one that emerges naturally in the real world" (p. 48). In a similar manner, Ellis (2009) has argued that "*all* tasks are designed to instigate the same kind of interactional processes [. . .] that arise in naturally occurring language use" (p. 227).

From the perspective of supporting learners in a real-like environment, Buriro and Hayat (2010) conducted a study in Pakistan, in which they aimed to help EFL learners maximize their use of the target language and gain speaking fluency. After being instructed with role-play tasks, learners made subjective evaluation of the instruction, and perceived that they had made significant progress with their speaking fluency. According to Buriro and Hayat (2010), the findings served as a springboard for English language teacher's future development.

Although the learners' subjective evaluations of their speaking fluency provided insights into how beneficial the TBLT approach was, lack of learners' actual speeches to assess the development of speaking fluency, as was done in the study by Nakatani (2010), might have enhanced the findings. Thus, besides seeking learners' opinions, future studies in different contexts should obtain learners' actual speeches before and after the instruction to assess how the progress with speaking fluency is made in the TBLT approach.

In summary, TBLT approach, as conceived by Long and Crookes (1992) and Ellis (2009), builds on situations in which learners use language as if they were using it outside the classroom. During classroom interactions, learners practice speaking by focusing "primarily on meaning," conveying "information," relying on "their linguistic and non-linguistic resources," and utilizing language to achieve communicative purposes, as opposed to primarily focusing on linguistic forms (Ellis, 2009, p. 223). The TBLT approach also grants learners an opportunity to improve their use of linguistic forms because, as stated by Ellis (2009), the approach "need not be seen as an alternative to more traditional, form-focused approach but can be used alongside them" (p. 221). This position is different from the one taken in the task version by Prabhu (1987), in which tasks are not focused on linguistic forms, but the linguistic forms are expected to be learned by osmosis (Knight, 2001).

Because learners in EFL contexts need to learn linguistic forms, particularly for examination purposes in schools (Zheng & Borg, 2014), they can have a full benefit from the use of a TBLT approach that focuses on meaning and form. Learners can be supported in expressing meanings and can be helped in improving linguistic forms by using "recasts" and "prompts" (Guchte, Braaksma, Rijaalsdam, & Bimmel, 2015).

Recasts have been defined as ways of providing corrective feedback, in which the teacher reformulates the learner's speech in the correct form (Guchte et al., 2015; Lyster & Ranta, 1997). In this corrective feedback, the learner is not

required to pause to notice the correct form. According to Guchte et al. (2015), recasts are “implicit” strategies for supporting learners in improving linguistic forms (p. 248). In the TBLT approach, these corrective-feedback strategies are appropriate when learners are engaged in the meaning-making phase of a task. Prompts, however, require learners to pause to notice the correct form, and they are appropriate when learners are in the form-focus phase of a task in the TBLT approach. What remains to be known, however, is the empirical evidence of how learners in EFL contexts, particularly in the Angolan context, can improve their speaking fluency in a TBLT approach that focuses on meaning and form. Therefore, the following research questions are answered in the present study.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: How can the EFL learners, at PUNIV-Cazenga, improve their speaking fluency in the TBLT approach?

Research Question 2: What are the learners’ perspectives on being taught with the TBLT approach?

The first research question is the core of this study because it helps in assessing how learners progress in terms of their speaking fluency from different perspectives. First, the question provides support in assessing the progress in terms of word frequency before and after the instruction, and second, it aids to evaluate the extent to which learners’ utterances exhibit clarity in terms of grammatical accuracy. Third, the question helps in exploring more general aspects of face-to-face interactions, such as the strategies that learners utilize when learners are engaged in a task (Lam, 2007; Nakatani, 2010).

The second research question is complementary to the first research question. It is used to assess how the learners perceive their learning English in general, and how they have improved their speaking fluency in particular, after being taught with the TBLT approach. The second research question replicates the previous studies that were conducted in other contexts such as in Japan and Pakistan, by Nakatani (2010) and Buriro and Hayat (2010), respectively.

Method

Participants

The participants were a group of 40 learners who had been randomly selected from the 360 learners attending ninth grade at PUNIV-Cazenga. Twenty-two of them were male and 18 were female, and their ages ranged from 16 to 18 years. After being selected, learners were requested for voluntary participation, and, because they were teenagers, their parents were also contacted to gain informed consent, as required by the American Psychological Association (2010).

Method

A case study design was used, in which audio-recorded picture descriptions and audio-recorded interviews served as research instruments (Gerring, 2007; Samaranayake, 2016). These instruments were used to gain insights into how learners improved their speaking fluency and what their perspectives were on being taught with the TBLT approach. Regarding audio-recorded picture descriptions, three learners (the case studies) were randomly selected from the 40 learners, and their speeches were analyzed to evaluate how the learners improved their speaking fluency in the TBLT approach.

The picture-description instrument was similar to the “photo elicitation,” which was defined by Harper (2002) as “based on the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview” (p. 13). According to Harper, “Photo elicitation evokes information, feelings, and memories that are due to the photo-graph’s particular form of representation” (p. 13). On the basis of this statement, in this study, pictures were thought to provide information to which learners referred in producing their speeches. The pictures were also deemed to help learners express their feelings of what they saw and felt when looking at the pictures (Eggs, 2004).

A reservation concerning the use of pictures for eliciting speech was expressed by Crowther et al. (2015), who stated that tasks based on such tools were “not reflective of real world contexts [. . .]” (p. 82). In particular, Crowther et al. (2015) referred to examples of real-world language tasks, such as the ones that are part of IELTS and TOEFL iBT tests, which learners may complete for entering university.

From the perspective of TBLT approach, the reservation by Crowther et al. (2015) is legitimate. That is, as was stated in the “Introduction” section of this article, learners should be exposed to real-world language in the TBLT approach (Ellis, 2009; Long & Crookes, 1992; Skehan, 1998). However, pictures may also focus on learners’ real-world language (Harper, 2002), as was the case in the present study (see Soars & Soars, 2011). Therefore, for the present study, which was exploratory in nature, the use of pictures to elicit learners’ speeches was appropriate. The instruments used to collect data are described in more detail next.

Instruments

Audio-recorded picture descriptions. Picture descriptions consisted of the learners’ description of a picture in the *New Headway Elementary* course book, fourth edition, by Soars and Soars (2011), on two occasions. That is, the recording was performed before and after the teaching, in which the TBLT approach was utilized. Learners were given two pictures: the one on page 63 and the other one on page 64 (Soars & Soars, 2011), from which they chose one to describe. As the learners described the picture, their speeches were

recorded by the author of this study (hereafter referred to as *the author*), utilizing the iPhone 4S, and making the learners aware of the recordings. The audio recordings were then transcribed, and, in alignment with the procedure utilized by Brand and Götz (2011), the data entailed all the words that learners uttered, including filled pauses, self-corrections, and hesitations such as “eh” and “erm,” but excluding “non-verbal sounds” such as coughing and sighing (p. 261).

Audio-recorded interviews. Audio-recorded interviews were conducted to gain insights into how the learners perceived the importance of the TBLT approach in helping them improve speaking fluency. For that purpose, 15 learners were randomly selected from the class and were requested for voluntary participation. However, eight of them did not feel comfortable being recorded, and therefore, the interviews were conducted with only seven learners.

The interviews were unstructured and were conducted in the teachers’ classroom for 30 min (total time for the seven learners). The unstructured interviews were chosen, rather than structured and semistructured interviews (Bøhn, 2015; Samaranayake, 2016), to give learners the freedom to express any perspectives on being taught with the TBLT approach (Bryman, 2008). More specifically, the interviews commenced with the following question: *How do you compare your learning in these lessons with your previous learning?* Then the other questions followed up from this question as the learners made the comparisons. The follow-up questions will be illustrated in the excerpts from the interviews in the “Results” section.

Furthermore, the interviews were conducted in Portuguese, so that the learners could express themselves confidently in the language they speak better (compared with English). The interview transcripts were then translated into English for the purpose of analysis in this study.

As well as in the audio-recorded picture descriptions, the audio-recorded interviews were made by the author, utilizing the iPhone 4S, and making the learners aware of the recordings. The learners were called individually to the teachers’ classroom, which was not noisy and offered favorable environment for audio recording.

Treatment

The TBLT approach class. A week after making the first picture descriptions, learners were taught with the TBLT approach. Throughout the teaching, tasks were organized into meaning-making and form-focused phases, so that learners first engaged in oral-fluency practice and then focused their attention on linguistic forms. During the tasks, recasts and prompts were used to provide feedback on learners’ performance (Guchte et al., 2015). The teaching lasted for 8 weeks and in each week, lessons were taught on Fridays for 60 min. The following seven topics were used:

- Shopping,
- Ordering a meal,
- Locating a line on an underground map,
- Buying tickets for travel,
- Booking a hotel,
- Eating in a restaurant, and
- Calling a taxi.

As an illustration of how the lessons were taught, the first topic is presented below in three parts. Parts 1 and 2 correspond to the first lesson, and Part 3 corresponds to the second lesson.

Part 1 (first lesson). The class was divided into small groups of four learners each, and the following instructions were given:

Group A. Imagine that you are going shopping in a supermarket. Prepare a list of 15 items that you want to buy.

Group B. Imagine that you work in a supermarket. Write 20 of the items that you have in the supermarket.

Groups A and B (comparing the items). Are the items prepared by Group A on the list of the items prepared by Group B?

Part 2 (Lesson 1 continued)

Group A. You have realized that you do not have enough money to buy all the items on your list, so you need to eliminate five items. Choose the items that you think are the least important. Discuss in your group.

Group B. Include all the items from Group A’s list on your list. All the items that you now have on your list do not have prices as they have just been delivered to the supermarket. Work in your group and determine the price of each item.

Part 3 (Lesson 2). Each member of Group A addressed a member of Group B to purchase the items on their list. Some items already had tagged prices, but the other items did not have tagged prices. For those items that had no tagged prices, members of Group A had to ask, *How much is/are . . . ?* Then, they addressed a member of Group B, who asked, *How would you like to pay? Cash or credit card?* Each of the other topics presented above corresponded to one lesson, and a total of eight TBLT lessons were taught.

Methods of Data Analysis

The two data sets were qualitatively analyzed. In the first data set, learners’ speeches were transcribed, and the words in each transcript (before and after the teaching) were counted. This word count helped in assessing how learners improved their speaking fluency in terms of speed production. Because speed production may not always guarantee comprehensibility, as exemplified in the “Literature Review” section, learners’

Table 1. Transcript of Learner 1 Picture Descriptions Before and After the Teaching.

Learner 1	
Before teaching	After teaching
1. This picture, eh, had two persons.	1. The picture is showing us two people talking,
2. One is eh make eh prepare	2. eh one of them eh is writing,
3. or making the breakfast, and take notes, from, the cooking book	3. so ah it means that he is taking some, eh some,
4. and another one is see the another person is do.	4. he is taking the pictures of the book,
5. In, there are in, cook in kitchen,	5. eh, maybe he is preparing something to drink
6. I think so. (43 words)	6. because we can
	7. we can see fruits and some,
	8. I can't see it.
	9. We call it "bidon" (Portuguese for "bottle") and some recipients,
	10. eh we don't know
	11. if, she will,
	12. ah, yeah the other person is so very surprised
	13. and saying what his friend is doing eh maybe. (87 words)

Note. Picture Source: Soars and Soars (2011, p. 64).

Table 2. Transcript of Learner 2 Picture Descriptions Before and After the Teaching.

Learner 2	
Before teaching	After teaching
1. I'm see here two friends,	1. Eh in this picture I can see two friends, two boys
2. is ready to give order or the food,	2. and they are trying to make, one recipe,
3. and ah . . . , I don't know the name;	3. eh there are some ingredients erm like potato, tomato, onions,
4. people working,	4. butter,
5. he writing for,	4. eh I think it's milk,
6. he listening to other,	5. eh and maybe olive oil,
7. they are they are asking for	6. and they are trying to looking this recipe on the book.
8. and they are sitting,	7. I don't know which recipe will be.
9. and one looking on the menu	8. I think this is the ingredients for the recipe;
10. maybe to choose what which food will take	9. they are in the kitchen;
11. and they have four ah that's all. (60 words)	10. eh I think that's all. (77 words)

Note. Picture Source: Soars and Soars (2011, p. 64).

transcripts were assessed in terms of grammatical accuracy. The comparison of word counts and the assessment of grammatical accuracy provided some insights into how learners improved in terms of their speaking fluency.

In the second data set (the interviews), the learners' utterances were also manually transcribed and shared with the learners, to check that the texts conformed to what had been stated. The transcripts were then translated into English for the purpose of analysis. After being translated, the transcripts were repeatedly read to identify themes (Bøhn, 2015; Evans, 2012; Yayli, 2011), and some utterances were chosen to illustrate the learners' perspectives about being taught with the TBLT approach.

Results

A TBLT approach was used to teach ninth-grade learners at PUNIV-Cazenga, a high school in Luanda, Angola, and to assess how the learners improved their speaking fluency.

In a case study design, learners described a picture before and after the teaching, and they expressed their views about being taught with the TBLT approach. Three learners' picture-description transcripts have been presented in Tables 1 to 3 below to demonstrate how improvements were made. The transcripts have been split into clauses, and the clauses have been numbered for referencing. The improvement was first assessed in terms of rapid speech production (word count), and then it was assessed in terms of grammatical accuracy and other aspects of oral interactions such as fillers (eh, erm; Nakatani, 2010). The assessment of grammatical accuracy was made to check that not only did the learners improve their rapid speech production but they also improved comprehensibility (Crowther et al., 2015).

As the data indicate in Tables 1 to 3, learners have made progress in the speed of speech production. That is, they all have increased the number of words they uttered before the teaching (word count is indicated at the end of each

Table 3. Transcript of Learner 3 Picture Descriptions Before and After the Teaching.

Learner 3	
Before teaching	After teaching
1. Eh three person they are in restaurant	1. What I can see here in this picture eh I can see two two boys
2. eh . . . two customer one water eh is doing what	2. ah I guess they are ah trying to to make ah to make ah a dish or a food
3. eh . . . and no no teacher	3. and they are eh take the the ingredients from the book
4. and . . . what is is writing	4. to make the the food
5. eh . . . writing eh factor no teacher? (33 words)	5. I can see here some potato and three bottles of
	6. eh I don't know
	7. if it is a milk
	8. or other thing
	9. or another things
	10. and I can see here tomatoes. (81 words)

Note. Picture Source: Soars and Soars (2011, p. 64).

transcript). This outcome suggests that the task interactions probably helped learners in gaining some automaticity in speech production (Rohani, 2011), and they may be more fluent when speaking in real-life interactions outside the classroom.

An inspection of the data indicates that learners also made some progress with respect to their grammatical accuracy. For example, in the first description (Table 1, before teaching, Clause 1)), the learner said *This picture, eh, had two persons*, when he meant *The picture has two people*. The learner improved this statement in the second description by saying, *The picture is showing us two people taking* (Table 1, Clause 1). The improvement in the second description was seen in the three transcripts (Tables 1-3). In some instances, before the teaching, it was hard to understand what the learner was saying, as seen in this statement, *in, there in, cook in kitchen* (Table 1, Clause 5). By contrast, after the teaching, all the clauses flowed clearly despite some grammatical inaccuracies. From the perspective of accuracy and, consequently, easier understanding, the improvement of clauses from the *before teaching* to the *after teaching* is apparent in the three tables above. In the *after teaching*, the clauses are more accurate and consequently are easier to understand.

Besides making the statement more grammatically accurate, the learners were able to elaborate on their statements. One of such elaborations was made by the learner in Table 1 (after teaching, Clause 1), by using the word *talking* (*the picture is showing us two people talking*). Similar elaboration was made by the learner in Table 2 (after teaching, Clause 1), who said *two boys*, to elaborate on *two friends* (*eh in this picture I can see two friends, two boys*).

Another component that is apparent in the speeches produced after teaching is the use of fillers as the strategies to maintain the flow of discourse (Crowther et al., 2015; Rohani, 2011). Whereas in the first description, the fillers (eh, ah) were used as long pauses (indicated by three dots in the tables); in the second description, they were used as short pauses to maintain the flow of speech.

A notable progress was noticeable in the use of mental processes (Eggs, 2004) in the expressions such as *it means* (after teaching, Table 1, Clause 3), *I think* (after teaching, Table 2, Clauses 4, 8, and 10), and *I guess* (after teaching, Table 3, Clause 2). According to Eggs (2004), mental processes are used to express “mental reactions: about thoughts, feelings, perceptions” (p. 225). The use of these verbs, then, suggests that, during task interactions, learners gained abilities to express their thoughts, feelings, and reactions, which could be relevant for daily, oral interactions.

Thus, the findings indicate that, when engaged in tasks, learners tended to develop their speaking fluency by maximizing their speed of speech production, increasing grammatical accuracy, elaborating on their utterances, and developing interactional language. These findings suggest that if learners are supported with the TBLT approach, they might develop the speaking fluency further.

This conclusion is enhanced by the themes that were observable in the learners' opinions about being taught with the TBLT approach. The opinions are analyzed below by looking at the extracts from the interview transcripts. The first extract is presented in full, in which the lines are numbered to facilitate referencing.

As depicted in the extract below, first the learners noticed that the approach encouraged them to speak (Line 2) and made them believe in their ability to interact in the real word (Line 6).

Interview extract: Illustration of students' opinions of the TBLT approach

1. Teacher: How do you compare your learning in these lessons with your previous learning?
2. Student 1: Teacher, I cannot compare my previous lessons with these lessons. These lessons encouraged me to talk. I hardly said things in English before, but in a very short time, I can already say something.
3. T: What are some of the things that you can say?

4. S1: I know how to buy travel tickets in English, order food in a restaurant, etc.
5. T: Have you ever been to a restaurant where you had to speak English?
6. S1: Yes, teacher. But I was not alone; I went with my father. I did not say anything, but the next time I think I will be able to talk. These classes really prepared me.
7. T: Speak a little about your previous classes.
8. S1: That is what I said in the beginning, teacher. In my past classes, we practiced very little speaking. We learned grammar, which helped us get good grades, but in terms of speaking, we are really behind.

The other learners also believed in their ability to speak English outside the classroom. For example, the second learner stated that “in my last vacation, I went to Namibia with my mother, and I did not speak, but I am sure I will speak next time.” Similarly, the third learner said that

the lessons that we have just had encouraged me to speak; I learned how to order food in a restaurant, and I believe that one day when I go to the United States again with my mother, I will ask for food for myself in a restaurant.

When learners are encouraged to speak, their anxiety will be reduced and, therefore, speak more fluently (Kessler, 2010). As seen in the learners’ statements, they also ended up believing in their knowledge and were willing to speak in any situation.

Another support that learners probably received for improving their speaking fluency was the expansion of vocabulary when engaged in tasks. In particular, one learner stated the following:

I have to say that these classes were very useful. Eh mainly in the development of vocabulary. Before, I was afraid of speaking because my vocabulary was very limited. At this time, I do not talk much, but these classes gave me a lot of improvement and encouragement to speak. (S3)

This statement is reminiscent of the feeling by Crowther et al. (2015), who have stated that the narrative of pictures requires learners to make description of objects and related actions in each image, and learners’ perceived lack of speaking fluency may be attributable to the unfamiliar words. The learners’ opinions about vocabulary increase, therefore, reinforce the findings on the speed production of speech, as was seen in the word count increases in Tables 1 to 3.

The learners also recognized the relevance of the focus on form during the TBLT classes (see Extract 1 above, Line 8). However, as stated by a learner, they suggested a balance of writing and speaking practices to help them have a more robust knowledge of the target language: “and teacher, the

previous classes were also good because I always had good grades, but the speaking is a problem, teacher” (S5). More important, the fifth learner concluded as follows: “I think all of the teachers in this school should use this system of classes.” Thus, the learners’ opinions on being taught with the TBLT approach (Ellis, 2009; Long & Crookes, 1992) shed some light on the findings obtained in the first data set and on the fact that the TBLT approach might be a promising teaching tool in helping EFL learners at PUNIV-Cazenga.

Discussion and Implications for Teaching Practice and Future Research

Discussion

This study assessed how the EFL learners at PUNIV-Cazenga improved their speaking fluency in the TBLT approach. Through picture descriptions, learners’ speeches were audio recorded before and after the teaching that utilized the TBLT approach. During the teaching, the learners were engaged in tasks that promoted meaning making and focus on linguistic forms through the use of “recasts” and “prompting” (Guchte et al., 2015, p. 248). The findings indicated that learners improved their speaking fluency by maximizing the speed of speech production, improving grammatical accuracy, elaborating on their utterances, and developing interactional language.

An inspection of the data (Tables 1-3) also indicates that the learners’ utterances were overall better in terms of comprehensibility than they were before the teaching was implemented. This improvement appeared to result from the use of the tasks that focused on meaning and linguistics forms, and served as a support for the argument made by Housen and Kuiken (2009) that fluency and accuracy are not independent of each other, but they are complementary.

Furthermore, in the present study, learners increased their use of the strategies to maintain the flow of discourse. For example, as was stated earlier, before teaching, the learners used fillers as long pauses, whereas after teaching, they used fillers as short pauses, indicating the flow of speech. Another example was the use of mental processes such as think and guess, which helped learners to express their thoughts, feelings, and reactions. Those strategies were deemed to maximize speaking fluency. In fact, the findings were similar to those identified by Nakatani (2010), who observed that, among many strategies, the strategies for maintaining the flow of discourse were most conducive to the development of oral proficiency.

However, whereas in the study by Nakatani (2010) learners exhibited little progress in learning linguistic forms, in the present study, the learners made progress in terms of both the speed of speech production and linguistic forms. According to Nakatani (2010), as was stated in the “Literature Review” section, learners exhibited little progress with language development due to few opportunities to develop the

form. In the present study, therefore, the different result may be attributed to the use of the TBLT approach that placed equal emphasis on meaning and linguistic forms.

Learners' opinions on being taught with the TBLT were sought, and the results indicated that the approach might be used with success at PUNIV-Cazenga in particular, and in the Angolan context in general. After being taught with the TBLT approach, learners felt encouraged to speak, and that encouragement could be thought to make learners speak in any situation. In fact, learners believed that they were ready to participate in any communicative event outside the classroom. The focus on meaning and form, in the TBLT approach, was seen by the learners as an advantage from the standpoint of their examinations at school. However, they suggested a balance between the learning of linguistic forms and the practice of speaking fluency. One notable comment was made by a learner who suggested that all the teachers at PUNIV-Cazenga should adopt the TBLT approach.

The learners' opinions on the usefulness of the TBLT approach are not new. In their study, in which they aimed to help EFL learners in maximizing their use of the target language and gaining speaking fluency, Buriro and Hayat (2010) found that learners were satisfied with the approach. The findings on the learner's opinions in the present study, therefore, positively replicate the findings in the previous one. Thus, the findings on the learners' opinions and the transcripts of the picture descriptions have considerable implications for teaching practice and future research.

Implications for Teaching Practice

The results of the present study imply that, at PUNIV-Cazenga, teachers should begin implementing the TBLT approach in their classes. This implication does not mean that the teachers should abandon the current syllabus (see the appendix), but rather they should incorporate task components (Ellis, 2009; Long & Crookes, 1992), so that the students learn English the way they are expected to use it outside the classroom. The use of the TBLT approach can provide teachers with an advantage from the standpoint of helping learners with their school examinations (Zheng & Borg, 2014) and with their use of the target language outside the classroom.

The results of the present study may also apply to other secondary schools in the Angolan context and to other countries in which English is learned as a foreign language. The use of the TBLT approach in such contexts may also be helpful in supporting learners with their examinations (Zheng & Borg, 2014) as well as with the language that is needed for daily communication outside the classroom.

Implications for Future Research

The present study has been an attempt to assess how EFL learners improve their speaking fluency at PUNIV-Cazenga

and what opinions learners express on being taught with the approach. This study has complemented many studies that have thus far been conducted to investigate the way EFL learners can be helped in improving their speaking proficiency (Crowther et al., 2015; Lam, 2007; Nakatani, 2010; Rohani, 2011). These studies have focused on the strategies that learners utilize in coping with their speaking problems (Lam, 2007), how learners improve the strategies over time (Nakatani, 2010), and what types of tasks can probably help learners in coping with their speaking problems. From the perspective of finding ways of helping EFL learners with their speaking problems, the present study is similar to those undertaken in previous research.

However, the present study has been conducted in the Angolan context, in which findings on how learners can improve their speaking proficiency, in a TBLT approach, are underrepresented. Furthermore, in the present study, the term speaking fluency has been used in broad sense to explore several components that might contribute to the EFL learners' improvement of speaking fluency. A notable contribution was to gather data not only from the learners' utterances in an interview but also from the learners' transcripts of their picture descriptions.

Many features were identified in the learners' discourses when transcribing the pictures such as the development of vocabulary, improvement of grammatical accuracy, the use of interactional language, and elaboration of speech. According to Lam (2007), when features such as these are identified, it is necessary to investigate how they change when learners are helped with the speaking proficiency. Therefore, future studies in the Angolan context, and probably elsewhere, should investigate how the features change over time in the TBLT approach that is used to help learners in improving their speaking fluency.

Although this study has not aimed to assess the effects of the TBLT approach, the findings indicate that learners have exhibited better speaking fluency than they did before the teaching was implemented. This study used the TBLT approach as conceived by Long and Crookes (1992) and Ellis (2009), which focuses on meaning and linguistic form. Because there are other TBLT approaches that do not focus on linguistic forms, such as that of Prabhu (1987), future studies in the Angolan context, and probably elsewhere, might consider comparing the effects of different task types in developing speaking fluency.

Limitations and Conclusion

This study has two limitations that need to be considered. First, the analysis has focused on only three cases. Future studies should increase the number of cases to provide more insights into how learners improve their speaking fluency. Second, because the same pictures were described twice, the learners might have memorized some aspects of

the pictures. This might have contributed to the perceived improvement in terms of word count. Future studies should use different pictures on different occasions. Third, the learners' picture-description transcripts have been analyzed only by the author. Future studies should include views of other researchers, preferably the English native speaker's view on the speaking fluency.

In conclusion, the present study was an attempt to gain some insights into how learners could improve their speaking fluency in the TBLT approach. The features that were identified indicated that the TBLT approach might be successfully used to help the EFL learners at PUNIV-Cazenga in improving their speaking fluency not only in the classroom but also outside of it.

Appendix

UNIVERSITARIO
DO CAZENGA
Pedagogia

CENTRO PRE-UNIVERSITARIO DO CAZENGA

**MAIN GRAMMAR POINTS
GRADE 9**

FIRST TERM
1- Introduction / Greeting / farewells 2- Personal Pre./ Verb to be 3- Cardinal Numbers 4- Demonstrative Pronouns 5- Possessive adjective+ Possessive case 6- Plural of Nouns 7- Articles 8- Preposition of Place 9- Verb to do as auxiliary 10- He, She, It. The days of the week/ months of the year
SECOND TERM
1- Frequency adverbs 2- Countable and Uncountable Nouns. 3- Impersonal verb there to be 4- Deference between have and have got 5- Noun Plural 6- Present Continuous 7- Simple past tense (there to be) 8- Simple past tense to have, to do 9- Prepositic,, of time. 10- Ordinal Numbers
THIRD TERM
1- The simple past-tense / Regular, Irregular 2- Like and Would like 3- When – Clauses (past Continuous) 4- Say and Tell-Lend and Borrow 5- Be with ages and measures 6- Simple past + ago 7- Introduction to Comparative and superlative.

The structural syllabus used at PUNIV-Cazenga.

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