



*Enfoque basado en tareas para promover las habilidades orales en la enseñanza en línea de inglés como lengua extranjera*

*Task Based Approach to promote speaking skills in EFL online teaching*

*Abordagem Baseada em Tarefas para promover habilidades de fala no ensino online de EFL*

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Artículo de Investigación

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## Resumen

El idioma dominante en la comunicación es el inglés. Aquí radica la importancia de que los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL – por sus siglas en inglés) dominen todas sus habilidades, principalmente la oral, ya que será la más utilizada en situaciones de la vida real. Este artículo analiza el enfoque de aprendizaje basado en tareas (TBL – por sus siglas en inglés), el cual enfatiza las tareas y la comunicación precisa. Esto podría ayudar a fortalecer las habilidades de habla del idioma inglés.

Utilizando métodos mixtos, principalmente cualitativos, el investigador compara las percepciones de los estudiantes sobre las clases en línea (TBL) en contraste con una clase tradicional. Después de analizar los datos recopilados de la muestra de 150 estudiantes, las conclusiones y recomendaciones de la implementación de este enfoque finalizarán este artículo académico.

**Palabras claves:** inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL); enfoque de aprendizaje basado en tareas (TBL); clases online; destreza oral

## Abstract

English is the dominant communication language. Here lies the importance for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students to become proficient in all its skills, mainly on the speaking one, since it will be the most used one in real-life situations. This article analyses the Task-Based Learning Approach (TBL), which emphasizes tasks and accurate communication, to help strengthen speaking skills.

Using mixed methods, primarily qualitative instruments, the researcher compares student perceptions of online classes with a Task-Based Learning Approach in contrast with a traditional, book-guided online class. After analysing the collected data from the chosen 150-student sample, conclusions, and recommendations of the implementation of this approach will finish this academic article.

**Keywords:** English as a Foreign Language (EFL); task-based approach; online classes; speaking skills.

## Resumo

O idioma dominante na comunicação é o inglês. Aqui radica a importância de que os estudantes de inglês como língua estrangeira (EFL – por suas siglas em inglês) dominem todas as suas habilidades,

principalmente a oral, você será o mais utilizado em situações da vida real. Este artigo analisa o enfoque de aprendizagem baseado em tarefas (TBL – por suas siglas em inglês), o qual enfatiza as tarefas e a comunicação precisa. Isto podría ayudar um intensificador das habilidades de fala do idioma inglês.

Usando métodos mistos, principalmente cualitativos, o investigador compara as percepções dos estudantes sobre as classes em linha (TBL) em contraste com uma classe tradicional. Depois de analisar os dados recopilados da mostra de 150 estudantes, as conclusões e recomendações da implementação deste enfoque finalizando este artigo acadêmico.

**Palavras-chave:** inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL); enfoque de aprendizagem baseado em tareas (TBL); aulas on-line; destreza oral

## Introducción

English is a language considered very important because of its global reach in many countries, where speaking it fluently is a social challenge for many people who wish to put it into practice. That is why educational institutions put a lot of emphasis on students learning, mastering, and practicing this non-native language.

In this project, a study was made about an approach to promote speaking skills in the online teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL), since it is essential for students at higher levels to communicate in their future professional environment. That is why teaching English in online classes allows the application of different approaches according to the needs of the students.

This research consists of four chapters, which detail the literature review of the issues addressed; the material and methods to conduct the research with A2 level students from the University of Guayaquil, during the first and part of the second term of the academic period from November 2021 to April 2022 ; the results of the research reflected in graphs; and finally the conclusion and recommendation of this work.

As English serves the purpose of international communication, most foreign language learners try to learn it. (Rao, 2019). Brown and Yuke (1983) say, "Speaking is the skill by which students will be most judged in real-life situations."

Teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) involves four skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. Each of these has its importance because the combination of all of them gives the student the understanding he or she needs to learn the language. Listening and reading are passive skills or

receptive skills, while speaking and writing are active skills or productive skills (Rao, 2019) and all of them need good grammar and vocabulary to develop.

Our new reality is that online teaching has become the main way of education after the closure of face-to-face activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which closed the world in March 2020 (Ecuadorian time-based estimate). This generated many challenges in teaching different subjects, specifically in EFL (English as a foreign language) due to the fact that there is a lack of direct interaction and attention from students. Little by little, both teachers and students have been adapting to this new way of teaching, but there is still a lot to discover on how to improve and follow better methods that will be accepted by this new generation of forced online students.

Teachers all over the world, including the local ones like the University of Guayaquil, have noticed the lack of oral participation in class, and this is causing students to develop their speaking skills at a slower pace, and for some of them, not developing them at all due to other factors such as not participating in class, connectivity issues, shyness or fear of speaking. The author of this article also felt this in all her courses, and believes that different strategies should be done, depending on the level, to improve speaking skills. For this research, the three assigned second level courses, were taken as a sample, with the aim of investigating a particular learning approach, the Task Based Learning Approach (TBL), knowing that students at this level already have some basis on oral exposition in English language, which needs to be improved.

This research is focused on the development of speaking skills in online classes of A2 University of Guayaquil students from the academic term November 2021 to April 2022, using the task-based learning approach.

The following questions have been formulated in order to solve this problem.

1. How are the English teachers dealing with this problem? Use one of the different learning approaches.

The task-based learning approach, to try to answer the following question:

2. What is the likelihood of improving students' speaking skills using a task-based learning approach?

Peña (2017) indicates that "English is a language that is present in the most important activities carried out on a global scale. Among these are: industrial, scientific, biological and chemical projects, as well as cultural projects". English is the language that has become the universal means of communication in different aspects, given that many people acquire the skills to be able to put

it into practice in their daily lives.

The oral expression according to Cardona & Celis (2011) cited by Ferro et al., (2017) states that "it is a series of techniques that establish general guidelines to follow to execute the most effective oral communication, that is, to express what we think and feel, without going overboard or causing harm to third parties". When you want to develop English speaking skills, you want to reach the expression of people's desires and thoughts. Oral communication is fundamental for rapprochement and even social acceptance in the environment you are in.

Speaking is considered the first way of communication. According to Medina, A. (2006), communicative competence is a configuration of abilities, knowledge, skills and linguistic and extralinguistic habits that are manifested during the communicative act in the foreign language through the appropriate use of this to meet individual and collective communicative needs, with adjustment to the linguistic, sociolinguistic, discursive and strategic rules that are required; and, evidencing both in the content and in the form of the message the high moral values both universal and those of every citizen of the world. Quoted by (Peña J. C., 2010)

The communicative approach promotes the integration of communicative skills as linguistic skills, so that the characteristics of the communicative approach can be summarized as indicated by Meza & Turci (2007), which are presented below:

- It is a student-centered approach
- The teacher is a facilitator of learning and not the leader of the instructional process.
- Seeks to develop the student's communicative competence.
- Insists on the use of authentic language.
- It gives greater importance to the content of the message than to the form in which it is expressed, that is to say, it emphasizes the what and not the how.
- Gives the teacher freedom to use oral or written language that is above the student's linguistic level.
- The program contents are presented in a cyclical manner.
- It is more flexible in terms of the use of the mother tongue.
- Speakers demonstrate their communicative competence not only in speaking and listening but also in reading and writing.

For many students there is a need for new methods that make learning a new language more admissible. The communicative approach offers techniques for the execution of English language

learning and can be used in online classes, since it is a basic approach that teachers can adapt to students according to their different study requirements.

However, it must be taken into account that it has never been easy (in some cases) to learn something new, even more so if it is a new language. According to Salas et al. (2011), this is nothing more than "an element that slows down the student's development, which arises in those who learn a foreign language, except for children, and can take various forms such as inhibition to participate in classes, rejection, lack of attention, among others".

This means that students must feel comfortable when acquiring knowledge in the new language, since if they develop the psychological barrier to learning, it will be much more difficult for them to begin to develop skills to communicate orally in English.

Richards & Rodgers (2001) states that Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) refers to an approach based on the use of tasks as the core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching. TBLT proposes the notion of 'task' as a central unit of planning and teaching. Moreover, Peña (2009) explains that the focus is on the tasks to be done, and language is seen as the instrument necessary to carry them out.

Supporting this idea, Nunan (2004), maintains that tasks should have a sense of completeness and should be able to stand on their own as a form of communication and learning. But what is a task? Prabhu (1987) defined task as an activity that makes the learners to reach an outcome with the help of given information through thinking strategies. The instructors are expected to control and organize the learning process in this learning environment.

According to Peña, (2009) figure 1 is used to represent the basic steps of TBL highlights the learners' role in the process. In the first phase, the pre-task, they get acquainted with rich input about elements they will need later. Then in the phase called task cycle, learners start their first trials by observing the way the elements previously presented work in contextualized tasks. In the final task they will have the teacher's support, but it will be their own decisions and efforts that will make it possible to move forward. This is basically how the class should be structured, so, the lesson plan must be created around this model.

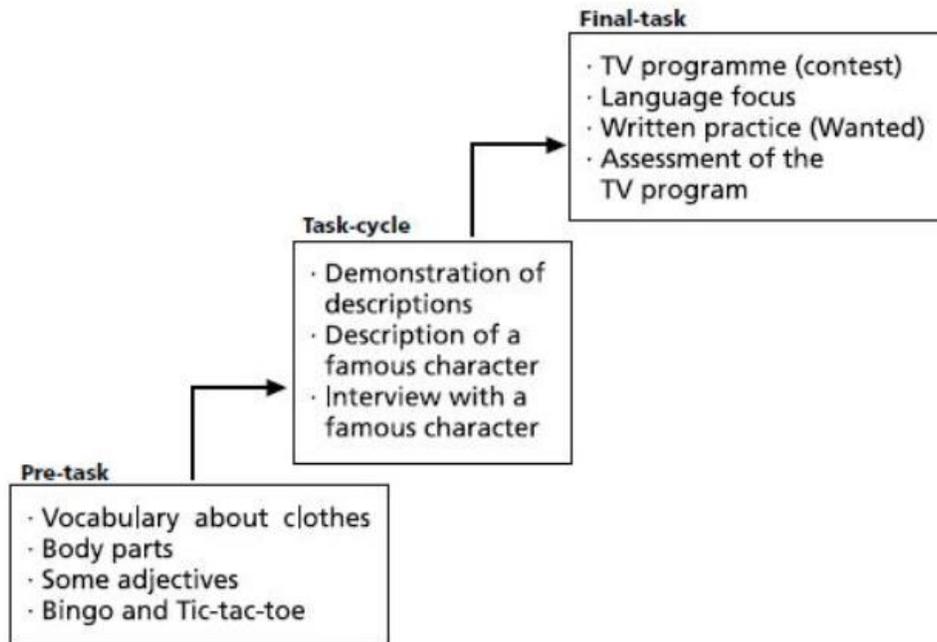


Figure 1. Pedagogical design based on TBL principles (Sample unit summary)

Figure 1, Peña (2009)

The micro-skills facilitate the work with the skills in that they allow the planning, organization, execution and control of both the actions and the operations that the student undertakes according to the objectives outlined. These micro-skills will give way to the development of skills in oral expression, according to the work of (Góngora Perdomo & Velasco Sosa, 2017) the following strategies can be considered:

- Apply strategies to accomplish the oriented task independently;
- Understand the message emitted by the interlocutor;
- Express diverse intentions, emotions and attitudes in different contexts;
- Relate context, function and form; identify and use an adequate number of lexical units to fulfill a pragmatic purpose;
- Identify and use an appropriate register according to the context of the communication;
- Identify and use cohesive resources in the construction of the message;
- Understand and convey messages with various grammatical forms; and

- produce fluent and coherent speech; recognize and use patterns of sentence stress, word stress, intonation, and rhythmic structures.

Skills, and by extension habits, cannot exist without the system of knowledge, since these are the basis for their formation and development. Knowledge is first learned and then taught to operate with it in a given practice and reality. This implies that skills are given in interdependence with the acquired knowledge and based on this knowledge, they are modeled and developed. That is to say that from experience the ability for the skills of something new is obtained (Ceballos Bauta & Olivé Iglesias, 2017).

It is necessary that in order to increase fluency in a foreign language, oral expression must be practiced in the classroom. However, this practice is conditioned by the learners' willingness to participate. Students have three options when it comes to participate in classroom speaking activities: to stand aside and refuse to speak, to speak because the teacher asks them to, or to speak because they really want to. Littlewood (1992) cited by (Portugal, 2016).

Therefore, it is important to consider that in many occasions students are embarrassed when making their oral participations, both in the classroom and in more open spaces, since they do not feel confident in their interpretation and even in their pronunciation. In addition, the teacher, according to the comments he/she makes to the student, can make the student feel more comfortable or not. That is why Gutierrez & Miquelena (2009) indicate that "the learning of a foreign language is subject to factors such as the student's disposition and attitude towards the language, the activities developed by the teacher and the feedback generated between the two".

Furthermore, to master speaking is the ultimate goal of learning a foreign language and the rest of the skills are devalued (McCarthy, 1998; Nunan, 2001). In support of this, Aliakbari and Jamalvandi (2010) point out that speaking is the medium through which much of the language is learned; hence it is considered a fundamental element in learning any language. Richards and Rodgers (1986) also believe that conversation is the primary element of language and the cornerstone of language learning. Teng (2007), in the same vein, states that the primary goal of language learning is to acquire the ability to communicate orally in the target language. (Portugal, 2016).

Lastly, it is important to mention that the most influential framework in the field of second language teaching and assessment in Western Europe (Fleckenstein et al., 2020) is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). It describes foreign language

competences in three broad stages which can be divided into six proficiency levels (A1/A2 = basic user; B1/B2 = independent user; C1/C2 = proficient user). For each level, its descriptors express what learners can do at different levels of proficiency in reading, listening, speaking, writing as well as a range of communicative competences (Council of Europe, 2001). Following to this concepts, let's remember that language proficiency is the ability to use a language spontaneously for real-world purposes (Supeni & Fauziah 2020), which is aligned with the idea of Carter and Nunan, (2001) who define proficiency as the ability to apply the second language for communicative purposes, which is the main goal of teachers, to form more proficient students.

The *e-learning* modality as a different approach in the teaching-learning of English, it is shown that it is the type of learning that takes advantage of the different didactic resources that the Internet offers to make the teaching an interactive and easy to follow instance. In this modality, the teacher acts as an online tutor, because he/she solves doubts, corrects the tasks, proposes activities, etc. (Ferreira et al., 2015).

This modality of online classes creates a different approach to teaching, since different technological resources can be used in a didactic way for a better understanding and development of oral expression in students. In this sense, the interaction that takes place between teachers and students generates the idea of dialogue, using a means of communication such as a videoconferencing platform that allows activity, synergy, positivism and constructivism (Moore, 1983; 2019). Thus emotional support through teacher-student communication is important, as is student-to-student interaction, which allows mutual collaboration. In addition to having technological teaching platforms or LMS (Learning Management System) for asynchronous communication, then the interaction will be equivalent to the amount of didactic dialogue between teacher and student, between student to student and between student and educational content. (Morán et al., 2021)

The types of research that were used were the following: descriptive and combined research, between quantitative and qualitative, because there should be a measurement of both individual student experience and groups as a whole to get a result from the sample group that used the TBL approach (Wongdaeng, 2020).

This research also used an explanatory method because it focused on a cause-and-effect relationship between the idea of the implementation of hybrid classrooms as a methodological learning strategy in the subject of English and the human and pedagogical resources of the

university in sample. In addition, all data analysis and graphical results were obtained in this research using Excel statistical software

The sample for this research was a group of students with English level A2, who were in level 2 of their degree courses at the University of Guayaquil. They were divided into 3 groups of 50 students each, with a total of 150. The time in which this research was conducted was in the first and part of second term of the CII 2021- 2022 semester, from November 2021 to January 2022.

Data was collected at the beginning and end of this period and was processed and analyzed during the following weeks of February 2022 to continue with this research process.

Different data collection techniques were used due to the different research methods. The mixed methods study design combines the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative approaches to answer research questions. This design includes quantitative and qualitative phases, and each phase is undertaken independently, followed by combining quantitative results and qualitative findings for a broader purpose and in-depth understanding of the research questions and phenomena (Johnson et al., 2007). Data from both quantitative and qualitative phases are integrated into one mixed methods research design (Timans et al., 2019). Some examples of these are: Quantitative: experiments, interviews and surveys. Qualitative: field observation and recording.

The teacher implemented as an experiment, a synchronic class following a TBL structured lesson plan and compare the results with the traditional way of teaching speaking, this is, the normal structure given in the syllabus and analytic plan of the subject.

Since this research is about speaking skills, some of evidence was recorded in audio documents. According to Lankshear & Knobel (2004), audio recordings represent a good tool for "revisiting" scenes and "finding" more "stuff" in them. An audio recording and subsequent transcription of the lessons provided us with valuable information about students' attitudes and speech characteristics that we had not noticed during the lessons Peña (2009).

The expected quantitative and qualitative data collected gave the researcher information about the emotions and reactions of the group of students and measurable outcomes as individuals and as a group to answer the main research question. The data was collected on a class-by-class basis in the first and part of second term of an academic semester

To begin with the analysis and findings of this research project, the following evaluation instruments were developed: observation and recording, surveys and interviews.

Normal classes were recorder as usual and, on some of them, the Task-based method was applied.

Sometimes the researcher will indicate to students that on that class, the structure would be a little different but that it would still cover all the information. It has to be mentioned that the contents of the syllabus weren't affected, just the way the information was delivered. For these specific task-based classes, a detailed lesson plan was designed and explained to students, in a language that they could understand.

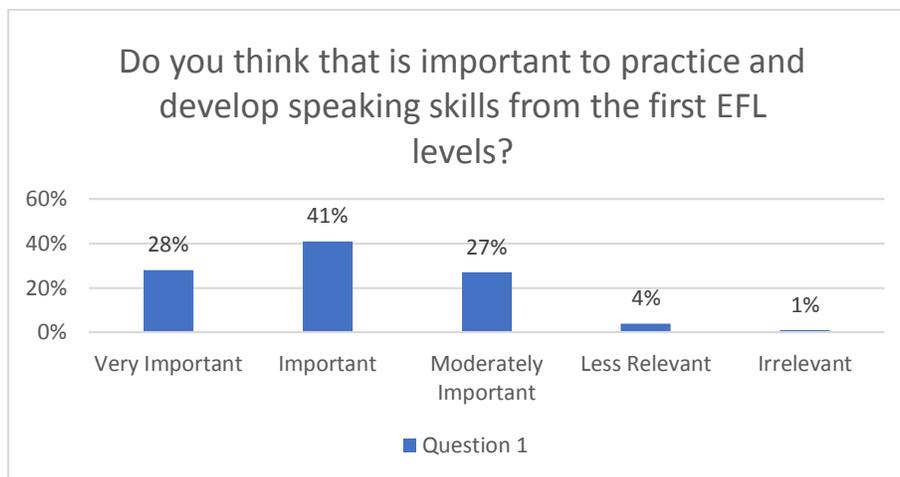
Observation with a checklist and recording the field work were done during determined speaking normal classes and the assigned task-based classes. After these classes were done, the researcher would make surveys to collect information from the students concerning the different types of classes. Furthermore, the researcher also would interview randomly a few students to ask them about their personal perceptions and reactions towards these two approaches.

## **Results**

This section is to show the results of the surveys, contrast them with interviews and class observation data of the 150 university students of level two, who are currently receiving online classes in the academic period from November 2021 to March 2022 and were tested from November 2021 to January 2022.

First, the next chart will show the tabulation of the surveys taken to them after the experienced both classes – the traditional book-based class and the task-based structured class. Both classes complied with the analytic plan and didn't affect the macro contents of the lesson. Following the description of the survey results, the research will addition the qualitative information obtained from the interviews to students to interpret in a deeper way the survey answers. At last, the researcher will exhibit the data obtained from class observation.

The following graphs will show the different answers that were taken from the survey, among which the most relevant ones will be shown



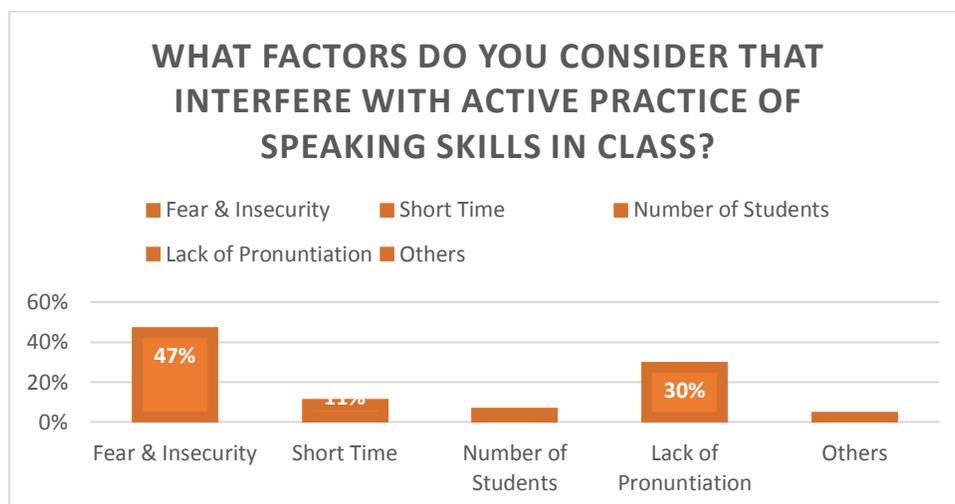
**Table 1:** Do you think that is important to practice and develop speaking skills from the first EFL levels?

**Note:** Data obtained from the survey to students of the second level A2 (2021).

**Prepared by:** María Freire Benítez.

Of the total respondents 28% indicated that it would be very important to practice and develop speaking skills from the first EFL levels; 41% stated that is important; 27% of respondents mentioned moderately important; 4% indicated of little importance; and 1% felt it would be unimportant.

This question was later asked again on the interviews with the aim that students would acknowledge the importance of this specific skill.

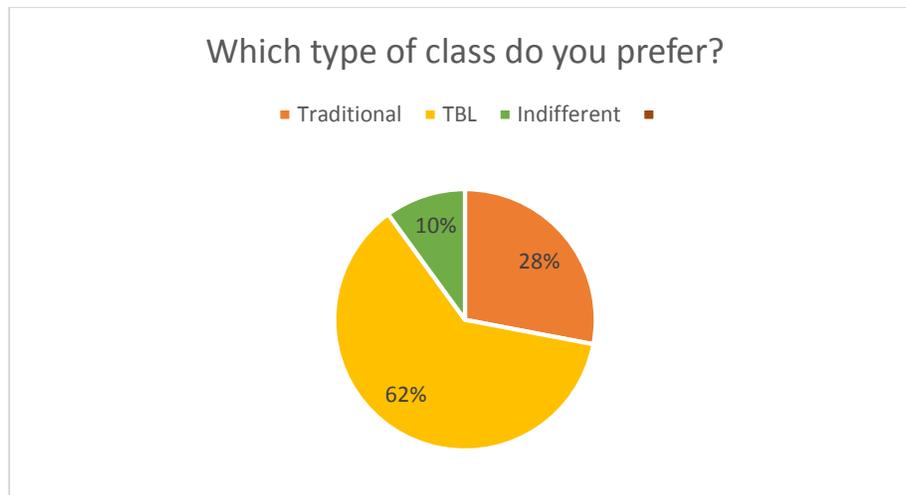


**Graphic 2:** What factors do you consider that interfere with active practice of speaking skills in class?

**Note:** Data obtained from the survey to students of the second level A2 (201).

**Prepared by:** María Freire Benítez.

In graphic 2, students were asked about the factors that might interfere with their active practice of speaking skills in class. 47% students considered that fear & insecurity is the main factor; 11% consider the time is short for all of them to participate; 7% thought that the number of students interferes; 30% said their lack of pronunciation is a factor and 5% marked the box “others” and wrote that sometimes they can’t attend to speaking classes so they miss the participation.



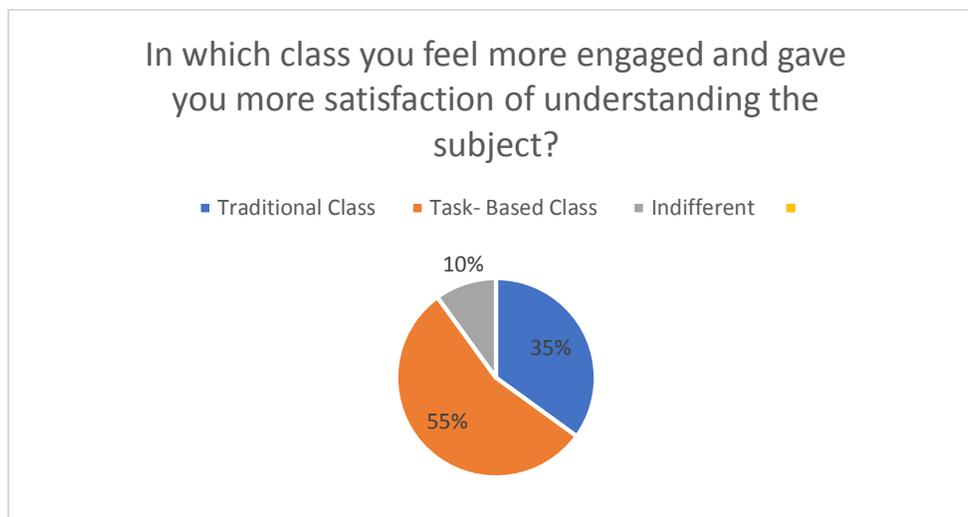
**Graphic 3: Which type of class do you prefer?**

**Note:** Data obtained from the survey to students of the second level A2 (2021).

**Prepared by:** María Freire Benítez.

This graphic shows the results of the survey given to level two students after they had experienced the two types of classes. The following was determined: 62% of the students replied that they preferred the Task-based class; 28% chose the traditional class and 10% reported it was indifferent to them.

On the interviews, the following information about this survey question was obtained. Students who chose for the traditional class said that they preferred to stick to the book so they wouldn't miss any important information written there. Students who replied that they preferred the TBL class said that they liked how the theory from the book and tasks were combined. Students who replied that it was indifferent said that they can learn both ways.



**Graphic 4:** *In which class you feel more engaged and gave you more satisfaction of understanding the subject?*

**Note:** Data obtained from the survey to students of the second level A2 (2021).

**Prepared by:** María Freire Benítez.

When students were asked to compare the two types of class, in terms of engagement and satisfaction, they replied the following: 35% stated that they felt more engaged and satisfied with the traditional class; 55% considered there were more engaged and satisfied with the task-based class and 10% said it was indifferent to them the type of class.

Furthermore, the researcher, by class observation, noted that students got more engaged with activities given in the Task- Based Learning Approach. They would participate more in the class chat or with spoken comments. They would raise their hands and try to guess the answers. They would also share some comments in their native tongue (Spanish) but this would be immediately corrected by the teacher.

The teacher could witness that when students were challenged as individuals in a group, they will make their best effort to be on the first places of the online synchronic practice, having a minor level of lack of interest of the practice. The teacher would check with them the correct answers of the practice and they would start asking clarifying questions about the subject that would clear their doubts in that moment.

## Conclusion

The main factor that makes EFL students avoid speaking in public is that they are afraid of making mistakes or even of their pronunciation, since they feel they have not obtained the skills to express

their sentences out loud. This has often led to delays in learning English despite they are aware that this is an essential skill to develop from the A1 level, according to the CEFR.

Online classes have come to stay, and the teacher and student community have to make the most out of it. Here is when other technological and didactic resources can be used to enhance speaking skills in EFL learners.

The Task- Based Learning approach combines technological resources with traditional book-based teaching and centers the class in synchronic and asynchronic activities that enhances student engagement in the class, due to different factor like the spirit of personal and group challenge.

Students notice and prefer a class where they actively participate and are asked to perform different activities that are all connected to the main subject. This might reinforce student interest and lead to meet the learning objectives with total satisfaction.

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