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Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Oral Fluency: Effects of Information-Gap Activities on the Speaking Rate and Pause Frequency of Secondary ESL Learners

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effects of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) utilizing paired information-gap activities on the temporal oral fluency of Grade 11 English as a Second Language (ESL) learners at Hilabaan National High School, Dolores, Eastern Samar. A quantitative quasi-experimental pre-test–post-test non-equivalent control group design involved 60 learners selected through purposive cluster sampling and assigned to experimental and control groups of 30 participants each. The experimental group received eight weeks of TBLT instruction, while the control group received conventional Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) instruction. Speaking rate and pause frequency were measured through picture-sequencing narration tasks using Praat acoustic analysis software. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, paired-samples and independent-samples t-tests, and analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). Results revealed that the experimental group achieved a 33.55% increase in speaking rate and a 44.05% reduction in pause frequency, compared with 8.88% and 12.61%, respectively, in the control group. Between-group differences remained statistically significant after controlling for baseline performance ($p < .001$). The study concluded that TBLT information-gap activities were more effective than conventional PPP instruction in improving temporal oral fluency within the study context. Accordingly, English teachers are encouraged to integrate contextualized information-gap activities into regular speaking instruction. The study was limited to two intact classes within one rural secondary school, an eight-week intervention, and monologic fluency assessments. These findings provide empirical support for accessible, context-sensitive communicative instruction and offer an evidence-based pedagogical approach to improving English oral fluency in rural multilingual educational settings.

Keywords: *Acoustic Analysis, Information-Gap Activities, Oral Fluency, Pause Frequency, Secondary ESL Learners, Speaking Rate, Task-Based Language Teaching*

1. INTRODUCTION

English oral proficiency is essential for academic mobility, cross-cultural communication, and workforce participation. Temporal oral fluency is a key indicator of communicative competence (Kahng, 2026; Segalowitz, 2010; Tavakoli et al., 2020), requiring simultaneous conceptualization, lexical retrieval, syntactic encoding, and articulation (Kormos, 2006; Levelt, 1989). However, conventional form-focused instruction often limits spontaneous speaking development (East, 2023). Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) promotes communicative automaticity through meaningful information exchange (East, 2023, 2024; Lambert et al., 2023). Unlike Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP), TBLT prioritizes communication before linguistic analysis (East, 2024), particularly through two-way information-gap activities (East, 2023). Lambert et al. (2017) demonstrated that repeated tasks improve speaking rates and reduce pauses, while Thai and Boers (2016) emphasized the benefits of time-bound communication. Bui and Huang (2018) highlighted the importance of culturally familiar content and strategic planning. However, studies by Lambert et al. (2017), Thai and Boers (2016), and Bui and Huang (2018) predominantly involved university learners in controlled settings. This study investigated the effects of an eight-week TBLT information-gap intervention on the temporal oral fluency of Grade 11 ESL learners at Hilabaan National High School, Dolores, Eastern Samar.

Research Problem

The Philippine K to 12 curriculum emphasizes functional oral communication (Department of Education [DepEd], 2016), yet conventional teacher-centered instruction limits spontaneous speaking opportunities (Tupas & Martin, 2017). Tupas and Martin (2017) identified institutional and sociolinguistic barriers to communicative instruction. Despite the requirements of the DepEd (2016) curriculum, rural schools often lack contextualized speaking materials. At Hilabaan National High School, limited English exposure and structural differences between Waray-Waray and English contribute to slow speech delivery and frequent hesitation. Although contemporary research supports task-based speech development (East, 2023, 2024; Lambert et al., 2023), particularly through familiar, time-bound communicative activities (Abdi Tabari et al., 2025; Bui & Huang, 2018; Hanzawa et al., 2026; Lambert et al., 2017; Thai & Boers, 2016), Philippine classroom studies (Tupas & Martin, 2017) have largely relied on qualitative observations or general proficiency assessments. This study addressed the limited acoustic evidence regarding information-gap activities and temporal oral fluency among rural secondary ESL learners.

Assumptions of the Study

The study assumed that repeated information-gap activities facilitate lexical retrieval, promote speaking automaticity, and reduce hesitation. Oral fluency encompasses speed, breakdown, and repair dimensions (Kahng, 2026; Suzuki & Kormos, 2026; Tavakoli et al., 2020). According to de Jong (2016), silent pauses lasting at least 250 milliseconds indicate potential speech formulation difficulties, while Kahng (2018) emphasized the negative influence of mid-clause pauses on perceived fluency. Saito et al. (2018) identified increased speaking rates and reduced pauses as indicators of fluency development. Similarly, Suzuki and Kormos (2020) and Tavakoli et al. (2020) established their predictive value in oral proficiency assessment. These acoustic indicators provide a basis for objectively measuring speech formulation efficiency (de Jong, 2016; Kahng, 2018, 2024, 2026; Suzuki & Kormos, 2026; Tavakoli et al., 2020). The study was limited to temporal fluency in monologic speech among learners from two intact classes.

Objectives of the Study

The study aimed to determine the effects of TBLT information-gap activities on the temporal oral fluency of Grade 11 ESL learners at Hilabaan National High School during the First Semester of

School Year 2025–2026. Specifically, it sought to assess the pre-test and post-test performance of the experimental and control groups in terms of speaking rate (pruned syllables per minute) and pause frequency (silent pauses lasting at least 250 milliseconds per minute), determine statistically significant differences in oral fluency performance within each group, and examine significant differences in fluency gain scores and covariate-adjusted post-test scores between the two groups.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The study was anchored in three complementary SLA theories. The Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996, 2015) emphasizes interaction and negotiation of meaning in language development. The L2 Speech Production Model (Levelt, 1989; adapted for L2 by Kormos, 2006) explains how repeated communicative practice facilitates conceptualization, formulation, and articulation. The Skill Acquisition Theory (DeKeyser, 2007) highlights the transformation of declarative knowledge into automatic procedural skills through sustained practice. The instructional framework was adapted from Willis (1996), comprising pre-task priming, task cycle, and post-task language focus through paired information-gap activities. Conceptually, the study employed a quasi-experimental pre-test–post-test non-equivalent control group design involving 60 Grade 11 learners. The independent variable was the instructional approach (TBLT versus conventional PPP), while the dependent variables were speaking rate and pause frequency, measured using Praat (Version 6.4). Gain-score comparisons and analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) evaluated instructional effects while controlling for baseline performance.

Sustainable Development Goal and Multidisciplinary Sustainability Relevance

The study aligns with SDG 4 (Quality Education) by promoting inclusive and equitable education through accessible, contextualized, and evidence-based speaking instruction for rural ESL learners, and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) by developing English oral communication competencies relevant to academic advancement and future employment. In terms of educational and socio-economic sustainability, the study promotes reusable, zero-cost instructional materials, teacher professional development, and accessible language learning opportunities, thereby supporting sustainable instructional improvement and potentially reducing educational disparities among rural learners.

2. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study utilized a quantitative quasi-experimental pre-test–post-test non-equivalent control group design (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Two intact Grade 11 classes were randomly assigned to either the experimental group receiving TBLT information-gap activities or the control group receiving conventional Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) instruction. Pre-test scores served as baseline measures and statistical covariates in evaluating the effects of the eight-week intervention.

Research Locale or Study Setting

The study was conducted at Hilabaan National High School – Senior High School Department, Barangay Hilabaan, Dolores, Eastern Samar, under the DepEd Schools Division of Eastern Samar. The school serves rural coastal and agricultural communities where Waray-Waray is the predominant language and English exposure occurs primarily through formal classroom instruction.

Participants or Data Sources

The participants comprised 60 Grade 11 learners aged 16–18 enrolled in Oral Communication in Context during the First Semester of School Year 2025–2026. Through purposive cluster sampling, two intact sections with comparable demographic characteristics and academic performance were selected. Random assignment through a coin toss designated 30 learners to the experimental group and 30 to the control group. Both groups were taught by the same English teacher to minimize instructor variability.

Research Instruments or Materials

The study utilized standardized oral fluency assessment tasks and TBLT information-gap instructional modules. Adapted from Tavakoli and Skehan's (2005) narrative picture-sequencing protocol, the pre-test and post-test consisted of parallel two-minute monologic narration tasks with 60 seconds of preparation time The eight instructional modules followed Willis's (1996) three-phase TBLT framework, comprising pre-task priming, task cycle, and post-task language focus. Activities included split-map navigation, spot-the-difference visuals, jigsaw story reconstruction, and schedule-matching problem-solving tasks. Three ELT specialists validated the modules using a relevance checklist adapted from Lynn (1986) and Polit and Beck (2006), yielding a Scale-Level Content Validity Index (S-CVI/Ave) of 0.93. Task equivalence was established following Tavakoli and Skehan (2005) through comparable narrative structures, visual density, contextual familiarity, and lexical demands. Pilot testing involving 10 non-participating Grade 11 learners confirmed comparable narration durations and lexical accessibility.

Data Gathering Procedure

Following ethical and administrative approval, parental consent and student assent were obtained. During Week 1, participants completed individually recorded pre-test narration tasks. From Weeks 2 to 9, both groups received weekly 60-minute speaking lessons covering identical curriculum competencies. The experimental group performed paired information-gap activities, while the control group received conventional PPP instruction involving grammar presentation, controlled drills, and scripted dialogues. Instructional fidelity was monitored through verified lesson logs. During Week 10, participants completed parallel post-test tasks under identical recording conditions. Temporal oral fluency was measured using Praat (Version 6.4; Boersma & Weenink, 2023), following established acoustic measurement procedures (de Jong, 2016; Tavakoli et al., 2020). Speaking rate was calculated using pruned syllables per minute, while pause frequency was measured through silent intervals lasting at least 250 milliseconds. The operational procedures were adapted from de Jong (2016) and Tavakoli et al. (2020). Filled pauses, false starts, abandoned words, and exact repetitions were excluded from syllable counts, while leading and trailing recording silences were removed.

Data Analysis

The 120 audio recordings were analyzed using Praat (Version 6.4) through automated silence detection and manual acoustic verification. Two trained raters independently assessed 20% of the recordings, yielding inter-rater reliability coefficients of 0.96 for speaking rate and 0.95 for pause frequency, with an intraclass correlation coefficient of 0.96. Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS (Version 28) at a 0.05 significance level. Means and standard deviations summarized oral fluency performance. Paired-samples t-tests assessed within-group differences, while independent-samples t-tests examined baseline equivalence and between-group gain scores. One-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) evaluated post-test differences while controlling for baseline performance. Confidence intervals, Cohen's d, and partial eta-squared were reported to establish statistical precision and effect sizes.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval was obtained from the Eastern Samar State University Research Ethics Committee, alongside administrative permission from relevant school authorities. Written parental consent and student assent were secured before participation. Participation was voluntary, and learners were assured that participation or withdrawal would not affect their academic grades. Confidentiality was maintained through anonymized participant codes, encrypted data storage, and permanent deletion of audio recordings following acoustic verification.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Temporal Oral Fluency Performance

3.1.1 Pre-Test and Post-Test Speaking Rate and Pause Frequency

At baseline, the experimental and control groups demonstrated comparable speaking rates of 84.20 and 83.85 syllables per minute, respectively, with no significant difference ($p = .871$). Similarly, pause frequencies were 16.80 and 17.05 pauses per minute ($p = .708$). Following the eight-week intervention, the experimental group's speaking rate increased to 112.45 syllables per minute, representing a 33.55% improvement, while the control group reached 91.30 syllables per minute, representing an 8.88% improvement. Pause frequency decreased by 44.05% in the experimental group and 12.61% in the control group. The baseline performance reflected limited English exposure and conscious Waray-Waray-to-English translation. The greater improvement among experimental learners suggests that information-gap activities facilitated spontaneous speech formulation and reduced hesitation. These findings are consistent with Levelt's (1989) and Kormos's (2006) speech production models and DeKeyser's (2007) Skill Acquisition Theory, which explain how repeated communicative practice promotes automatic lexical retrieval and linguistic processing.

3.1.2 Within-Group Oral Fluency Improvements

Paired-samples t-tests revealed significant improvements in the experimental group's speaking rate ($MD = 28.25$, $t(29) = -14.62$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.67$) and pause frequency ($MD = -7.40$, $t(29) = 12.18$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.22$). The control group also demonstrated significant improvements in speaking rate ($MD = 7.45$, $t(29) = -4.12$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.75$) and pause frequency ($MD = -2.15$, $t(29) = 3.89$, $p = .001$, $d = 0.71$). However, the experimental group exhibited substantially larger improvements. Although conventional PPP instruction provided vocabulary exposure and structured speaking practice, TBLT generated greater fluency improvements through meaningful and time-bound communication. These findings support Lambert et al. (2017) and Thai and Boers (2016), who demonstrated that communicative task performance accelerates lexical retrieval and reduces speech formulation breakdowns (Abdi Tabari et al., 2025).

3.1.3 Between-Group Differences in Oral Fluency

Independent-samples t-tests revealed significantly greater speaking rate gains in the experimental group ($MD = 20.80$, $t(58) = 8.94$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.31$) and greater reductions in pause frequency ($MD = -5.25$, $t(58) = -7.85$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.03$). After controlling for baseline performance, ANCOVA confirmed significant between-group differences in speaking rate ($F(1, 57) = 90.05$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .612$) and pause frequency ($F(1, 57) = 86.50$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .603$). The substantial effect sizes indicate that TBLT information-gap activities were more effective than conventional PPP instruction in improving temporal oral fluency. These findings

support Kahng (2018) and Tavakoli et al. (2020), who emphasized the importance of pause reduction in fluency development. Furthermore, the covariance-adjusted results demonstrate that group differences persisted after accounting for baseline performance.

3.2 Linguistic, Cognitive, and Pedagogical Implications

Classroom observations revealed that learners initially experienced frequent hesitation due to conscious Waray-Waray-to-English translation and grammatical monitoring. During the intervention, experimental learners increasingly utilized recurring linguistic structures through contextualized information-gap activities. Classroom implementation also demonstrated the practical benefits of folder barriers, time-bound speaking activities, strategic pairing, role reversal, and progressively challenging communicative tasks. These observations suggest that contextualized information-gap activities reduce cognitive processing demands while encouraging spontaneous communication. The findings align with Bui and Huang (2018) regarding the facilitative role of familiar content in reducing conceptualization demands and improving linguistic formulation (Suzuki & Kormos, 2026). Unlike previous laboratory-based investigations involving university learners, the present study demonstrates the effectiveness of interactive information-gap activities in a rural Philippine secondary classroom, highlighting their potential for improving communicative English instruction in multilingual educational settings.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concluded that Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) utilizing paired information-gap activities was more effective than conventional Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) instruction in improving the temporal oral fluency of Grade 11 ESL learners at Hilabaan National High School. Although both groups demonstrated significant improvements, learners exposed to TBLT achieved substantially greater increases in speaking rate and reductions in pause frequency. These differences remained statistically significant after controlling for baseline performance. The findings suggest that sustained engagement in meaningful, time-bound, and contextually familiar communicative activities facilitates speech formulation, promotes automatic lexical retrieval, and reduces hesitation associated with conscious first-language translation. Furthermore, progressively structured information-gap activities supported learners' transition from guided communication to spontaneous oral production. Within the study context, these findings provide empirical evidence supporting TBLT as a practical instructional approach for developing temporal oral fluency among rural Waray-Waray-speaking secondary ESL learners with limited exposure to spoken English.

Senior High School English teachers at Hilabaan National High School and across the DepEd Division of Eastern Samar should integrate weekly paired information-gap activities into Oral Communication in Context instruction. Teachers should utilize locally contextualized materials, strategic learner pairing, mandatory role reversal, visual barriers, and time-bound speaking activities to encourage equitable participation and manage classroom noise. Instruction should progressively move from visually supported information exchanges to independent speaking tasks to strengthen spontaneous oral production. School heads and English department coordinators should conduct School Learning Action Cell (SLAC) workshops focusing on the development of contextualized instructional materials and the implementation of Willis's (1996) three-phase TBLT framework without requiring costly laboratory equipment. Future researchers should replicate the study across urban and rural secondary schools in Eastern Visayas, incorporate delayed post-tests to examine long-term fluency retention, and include dialogic

speaking assessments, grammatical accuracy, and syntactic complexity to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of oral language development.

The study was limited to 60 Grade 11 ESL learners from two intact classes within a single rural public secondary school, restricting the generalizability of the findings. Its quasi-experimental design and eight-week intervention also limit broader causal interpretations and conclusions regarding long-term fluency retention. Oral fluency assessment focused exclusively on speaking rate and silent pause frequency through monologic picture-sequencing tasks, excluding interactive turn-taking, grammatical accuracy, syntactic complexity, lexical diversity, and pronunciation. Future studies may address these limitations through larger, multi-site samples, longitudinal assessments, dialogic speaking tasks, and additional linguistic measures to strengthen the generalizability and comprehensiveness of the findings.

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