



## DEVELOPING THE ORAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN ARABIC THROUGH TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING

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**Abstract.** Speaking is the skill in which Uzbek students of Arabic most often feel least confident. Many students with a solid knowledge of grammar remain silent in real communication because of limited practice, fear of grammatical errors and the absence of an Arabic-speaking environment. This article analyses the structure of oral communicative competence, identifies the main linguistic, psychological and methodological barriers to speaking among Uzbek-speaking learners, and proposes the use of task-based language teaching as a framework for developing speaking skills. A lesson cycle consisting of pre-task, task cycle and language focus stages is described, examples of tasks for different levels are given, and principles of error correction are discussed. An analytic rubric for assessing speaking based on fluency, accuracy, complexity, pronunciation and interaction is also proposed.

**Keywords:** Arabic language teaching, speaking skills, oral communicative competence, task-based language teaching, foreign language anxiety, error correction, speaking assessment, teaching methodology.

### INTRODUCTION

A common situation in Arabic classrooms in Uzbekistan is the student who can perform a full grammatical analysis of a Qur'ānic verse but cannot introduce himself fluently to an Arab guest. This gap between knowledge about the language and the ability to use it is one of the main problems of Arabic teaching today (Richards & Rodgers, 2014:22).

The demand for spoken Arabic in Uzbekistan is growing. Tourism, pilgrimage services, business ties with Arab countries, diplomacy and academic exchange all require specialists who can speak Arabic with confidence. Traditional methods, which

focus on reading and grammar, do not prepare students for these needs (Goh & Burns, 2012:15).

In foreign language methodology, the communicative approach shifted the aim of teaching from knowledge of the system to the ability to communicate (Richards & Rodgers, 2014:83). One of its most developed forms is task-based language teaching. In this approach the central unit of the lesson is a task: a meaningful activity in which learners use the language to achieve a real outcome, such as solving a problem, planning a trip or reaching an agreement (Ellis, 2003:9-10; Nunan, 2004:4). Language forms are studied, but they are studied in connection with their use.

Speaking in a foreign language is a complex skill. According to psycholinguistic models, the speaker must conceptualise the message, formulate it in words and grammatical structures, and articulate it, all under time pressure (Levelt, 1989:9). For a learner, each of these steps requires conscious effort, so speaking quickly becomes overloaded (Skehan, 1998:44). Speaking is also affected by emotions: anxiety can block a learner who knows the language well (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986:127).

The purpose of this article is to identify the barriers that prevent Uzbek-speaking students from speaking Arabic and to propose a task-based framework for developing their oral communicative competence. The study is theoretical and methodological. It uses analysis of research on speaking pedagogy and task-based teaching (Ellis, 2003:243; Willis, 1996:52; Goh & Burns, 2012:52), analysis of the sociolinguistic situation of Arabic (Al-Batal, 2018:3), and pedagogical modelling of a lesson cycle and an assessment rubric.

## **MAIN PART**

Speaking ability is not a single skill. Goh and Burns describe it as a combination of three groups of components: knowledge of language and discourse, core speaking skills such as pronunciation, fluency and turn-taking, and communication strategies that help the speaker overcome gaps (Goh & Burns, 2012:52-57). For teaching purposes, speaking performance is often described through three dimensions: fluency, accuracy and complexity (Skehan, 1998:5). These dimensions compete for the learner's limited attention. A lesson that focuses only on accuracy develops careful but slow speakers. A lesson that focuses only on fluency may allow errors to become fixed. Effective teaching balances all three (Skehan, 1998:112).

The barriers to speaking among Uzbek-speaking students can be grouped into three types. The first are linguistic barriers: students lack ready-made functional phrases for greeting, asking, agreeing, disagreeing and expressing opinions, and they try to build every sentence from grammar rules, which makes their speech slow; the pronunciation of pharyngeal and emphatic sounds is also difficult (Goh & Burns, 2012:38). The second are psychological barriers: the grammar-centred tradition makes students afraid of errors, especially errors in the case endings (i' rāb), and many students prefer to remain silent rather than make a mistake, which is a typical form of foreign language classroom anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986:128). The third are methodological and environmental barriers: classes are often teacher-centred, so that each student speaks for only a few minutes per lesson, and outside the classroom there is almost no Arabic-speaking environment; in addition, students are confused by diglossia, since they learn Modern Standard Arabic but hear dialects from native speakers, and many teachers now recommend teaching a spoken form close to the standard while gradually familiarising students with common dialect features (Al-Batal, 2018:12).

The proposed framework follows the task-based lesson structure developed by Willis, adapted to Arabic teaching (Willis, 1996:52). It consists of three stages. In the pre-task stage the teacher introduces the topic and the task, activates relevant vocabulary and functional phrases, and may show a model, for example a short video of native speakers doing a similar task; students receive a short time to plan what they will say, and planning time is important because it reduces cognitive load and improves both the fluency and the complexity of speech (Ellis, 2003:247). In the task cycle students perform the task in pairs or small groups, focusing on meaning and on achieving the outcome, then prepare a short report on how they did the task and what they decided, and finally present their reports to the class; the report stage pushes students to speak more carefully and accurately, because they speak in front of others (Willis, 1996:58). In the language focus stage attention turns to form: the teacher draws students' attention to useful phrases from the model and to common errors heard during the task, and students practise these forms in short controlled exercises, so that grammar is studied after students have felt the need for it in communication (Ellis, 2003:252).

Tasks should be real in their purpose and suited to students' level and interests (Nunan, 2004:35). Table 1 gives examples.

*Table 1. Examples of speaking tasks for different levels*

| Level                       | Task type                | Example task                                                                                                                     | Expected outcome                           |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| <b>Elementary (A2)</b>      | Information gap          | Student A has a timetable of a university, student B has gaps in it; they ask each other questions to complete it                | A completed timetable                      |
| <b>Elementary (A2)</b>      | Role play                | A pilgrim asks a hotel receptionist in Makkah for directions and services                                                        | A solved request                           |
| <b>Intermediate (B1)</b>    | Problem solving          | The group plans a three-day programme for Arab guests visiting Samarkand and Bukhara with a fixed budget                         | An agreed programme presented to the class |
| <b>Intermediate (B1-B2)</b> | Opinion exchange         | Students discuss whether students should use artificial intelligence tools for homework                                          | A group position with reasons              |
| <b>Advanced (C1)</b>        | Project and presentation | Students prepare and present a short talk on a Central Asian scholar, such as al-Bukhārī or al-Zamakhsharī, and answer questions | A presentation and discussion              |

Tasks connected with the cultural and religious interests of students, such as pilgrimage, hosting guests or presenting national heritage, are especially motivating. They also prepare students for the real situations in which they are most likely to use Arabic (Nunan, 2004:40).

Error correction must support speaking, not stop it. During the task cycle, when the focus is on fluency, the teacher should avoid interrupting students; instead, the teacher notes typical errors and deals with them in the language focus stage (Willis, 1996:60). During controlled practice, immediate correction is appropriate. Recasts, in which the teacher repeats the student's sentence in a correct form without explicit comment, can be used during conversation because they do not break communication (Lyster & Ranta, 1997:46). It is also important to explain to students that errors are a natural part of learning, which reduces anxiety and encourages participation (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986:131).

Since there is little Arabic-speaking environment in Uzbekistan, the teacher should create opportunities for practice. Possible forms include an Arabic speaking club, online exchanges with students from Arab universities, recorded voice messages as homework, and participation in events with Arab guests (Goh & Burns, 2012:198).

Recording tasks are especially useful: students can listen to their own speech, notice errors and record an improved version (Goh & Burns, 2012:203).

Speaking should be assessed with an analytic rubric so that students receive clear feedback on each component (Goh & Burns, 2012:243). A rubric with five criteria is proposed, each scored from 1 to 5: fluency, that is, the speed of speech, the length of pauses and the ability to continue without long hesitation; accuracy, that is, the correctness of grammar, including verb forms, agreement and the most important case endings; complexity, that is, the range of vocabulary and the use of varied sentence structures; pronunciation, that is, the clarity of Arabic sounds, especially the pharyngeal and emphatic consonants and vowel length; and interaction, that is, the ability to ask questions, respond, take turns and use communication strategies (Skehan, 1998:5).

The rubric can be used for teacher assessment, peer assessment and self-assessment. To evaluate the effectiveness of the task-based framework, an experimental group and a control group can be compared using recorded speaking tests scored with this rubric at the beginning and at the end of a semester, together with a measure of speaking anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986:129; Ellis, 2003:296).

## CONCLUSION

The weak speaking skills of many Uzbek students of Arabic are caused not by a lack of grammatical knowledge but by linguistic, psychological and methodological barriers: a shortage of functional phrases, fear of errors, limited speaking time in class, the absence of an Arabic-speaking environment and the confusion caused by diglossia (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986:128; Al-Batal, 2018:12).

Task-based language teaching offers a coherent framework for overcoming these barriers. The three-stage cycle of pre-task, task cycle and language focus gives students meaningful reasons to speak, time to plan, opportunities to speak in groups and in public, and a focus on form that grows out of real communication (Willis, 1996:52; Ellis, 2003:247). Tasks connected to students' cultural and religious interests increase motivation, and delayed, supportive error correction reduces anxiety (Lyster & Ranta, 1997:46). The proposed analytic rubric makes it possible to assess fluency, accuracy, complexity, pronunciation and interaction separately and to give students clear feedback (Goh & Burns, 2012:243).

Further research should test the framework through a pedagogical experiment and develop a bank of Arabic speaking tasks graded by level and adapted to the professional needs of graduates in Uzbekistan (Nunan, 2004:35; Skehan, 1998:112).

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