# Evaluating the Speaking Exercises in *Straightforward (Level 2B)* in terms of Task Types

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**Abstract**

Making judgments about textbooks and teaching materials which are used as instructional materials is becoming important to create a successful classroom dynamics. The aim of the study was to evaluate speaking exercises in the course book of '*Straightforward' (Level 2B)* currently taught in Myanmar Arts and Science Universities in terms of its tasks according to Willis and Willis (2007) framework. It was evident that "Sharing personal experiences" and "Projects and Creative tasks" are the most frequent and affective, and "Matching" is the least common tasks presented in the textbook. Moreover, only two task types are mostly employed in the speaking exercises. It was also found that the distribution of exercises is contradicted to the "Simple to complex" criteria in determining the scope and sequence of syllabus design. The results of this study would be helpful for English teachers to assist them to become more aware of different task types used in Straightforward (Level 2B) textbook. This might offer some insights for material developers in order to develop and enrich the presented ELT materials in terms of the taxonomy of tasks.

**Keywords:** taxonomy of tasks, speaking exercises, *Straightforward* (Level 2B)

## Introduction

Course books are the most widely employed materials and play a central role next to teachers in Language Teaching, which are the outcomes from curriculum developing process including developing aims to sequencing units. Apart from these processes, there have been two concerns: choosing input and sources, and selecting exercise types. Choosing the types of exercises is one of the most difficult decisions in material designing. It is also important to relate between exercises and specific language teaching objectives. (Richards, 2002) Scholars like Crandall, Richards, and Grellet (mentioned in Richards, 2002) make suggestions on designing exercises for language skills like listening and reading based on the concept of taxonomy. Reviewing published materials for information of this kind is a good way to get a sense of the range of possible exercise types that can be used in materials (Richards, 2002).

The role of English Language in Myanmar is that of the Foreign Language because Spoken English is used seldomly outside of the classroom settings. Speaking skill is usually used less than any other skills, except in the centers of international relations like hotels, business meetings and protocols. The majority of the Students in Myanmar are not quite accustomed to this particular skill. However, under the communicative practice, speaking skill is essential. This skill must be promoted among the learners of English for job readiness. Communicative Language Teaching and Task-based Language Teaching are the latest methods in English Language Teaching context and mostly employed to engage students with speaking at classroom settings.

### Task-based Language Teaching

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) builds teaching and learning around tasks, particularly real-life tasks (Prabhu, 1987).According to this method,

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students may learn more effectively when their minds are focused on the task, rather than on the language they are using. This approach of language teaching deals with series of communicative tasks that are directlylinked to the curricular aims and goals. Littlewood (2004) considers Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) as a development within the communicative approach, in which the crucial feature is that communicative tasks serve not only as major components of the methodology but also as units around which a course may be organized.

## Literature Review

The extensive taxonomy of exercises, skills and processes related to specific language teaching objectives could be one of the influential factors on how to create exercises for teaching language skills, (Richards, 2002). Nunan (1989) defines "task" as a piece of classroom work involving learners in understanding, directing, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is on the meaning rather than the form.Language was generally approached as a system of rules and the task of the language learners was to internalize these rules (Nunan, 1999). The following taxonomy helps the curriculum developers and teachers to think up and build a set of different kinds of tasks based on the topics in the textbooks.

Willis and Willis (2007) developed a taxonomy of task types called task generator.

1. Listing- Brainstorming things, qualities, people, places, features, things to do, reasons.

2. Ordering and sorting -Sequencing, ranking, classifying e.g. sequencing story pictures, ranking items according to cost, popularity, negative or positive.

3. Matching - Listen and identify, listen and do (TPR: Total Physical Response), match phrases/descriptions to pictures, match directions to maps.

4. Comparing: finding similarities or differences -e.g. comparing ways of greetings or local customs, playing 'Spot the difference', contrasting two different pictures.

5. Problem-solving: logic puzzles, real-life problems, case studies, incomplete texts e.g. logic problems, giving advice, proposing and evaluating solutions, predicting a story ending.

6. Projects and creative tasks: culminating in a specified end-product that can be shown to others, displayed, made public in some way, for others to appreciate e.g. doing and reporting a survey, producing a class newspaper, planning a radio show, designing a brochure.

7. Sharing personal experiences: story-telling, anecdotes, reminiscences, opinions, reactions e.g. early schooldays, terrible journeys, embarrassing moments, personality quizzes.

Ebadi and Hasan (2016) conducted a research entitled " A Critical Analysis of Tasks in EFL Textbook: A Case Study of *Sunrise 12*" to extract and classify the type of tasks included in *Sunrise 12* English instruction textbook currently taught to school students in Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). The results werethat

linguistic and creative tasks were the most frequent and affective, while interpersonal, and cognitive tasks, respectively, were the least common pedagogical tasks presented in *Sunrise 12*.

Currently, there have been a few literatures related to evaluating pedagogic factors of course books namely, evaluating the task types of exercises in ELT textbooks especially speaking skills. Realizing the types of tasks employed in course books will surely benefit not only teachers but also curriculum developers as well as material writers. In curriculum developing, it is apparently crucial to design the materials which are guaranteed to fulfill the needs of the students. The teachers could adjust the exercises to engage with students' aims and proficiency, and researchers devoted to curriculum developing may attain some insights and implications from this kind of research.

In order to fill the gap mentioned above, the aim of this study is to evaluatespeaking exercises in the course book of 'Straightforward' (Level 2B) currently taught in Myanmar Arts and Science Universities in terms of its tasks according to Willis and Willis (2007) framework. To this end, the research posed the following objectives:

1. To find out the most and least kinds of task types employed in designing the speaking exercises in Straightforward (Level 2B) textbook
2. To explore the distribution pattern of speaking exercises according to task types in each lesson

## Materials and Methods

### Instrument

The data to be analyzed were collected from the textbook of Straightforward (Second edition) (Level 2B), published byMacMillian, which are employed to teach English as a minor discipline at Arts and Science Universities in Myanmar. The Common European Framework (CEFR) level of this book is B1 prescribed for the term of second year, second semester English course. Six lessons contain eight sub-categories of learning areas: Grammar, Vocabulary, Functional language, Pronunciation, Reading skill, Listening skill, Speaking skill and Writing skill.

### Data Collection

In this research, taxonomy of tasks by Willis and Willis (2007) was employed to collect the required data from 66 speaking exercises of six lessons.

### Data Analysis

The research method in this study is descriptive content analysis.In this type of research method, written or visual materials are analyzed for the purpose of identifying specified characteristics of the material. All speaking exercises were categorized according to task types. The categorized data is tabulated according to the lessons and overall textbook.
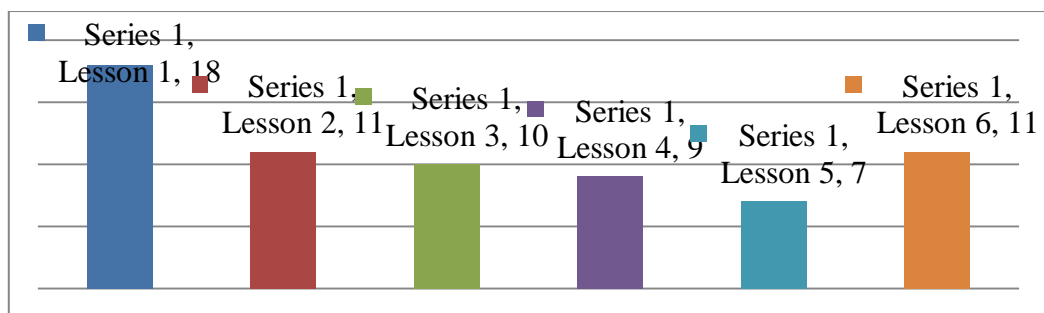
**Figure (1): Number of Speaking Exercises in Lessons**

As shown in Figure (1), the maximum number of exercises belongs to Lesson 1 whilst the least is Lesson 5 with just only 7 exercises. Both Lesson 2 and 6 share the same proportions which have merely one exercise more exceeded than Lesson 4.

**Table 1: Distribution of Seven Task Types over the Textbook**

| No | Lesson | Listing | Ordering and Sorting | Matching | Comparing | Problem-solving | Projects and creative tasks | Sharing personal experiences | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 1 | 1 (6%) | 2 (11%) | | 1 (6%) | 3 (16%) | 2 (11%) | 9 (50%) | 18 |
| 2 | 2 | | | | | | 4 (36%) | 7 (64%) | 11 |
| 3 | 3 | | | 1 (10%) | | | 3 (30%) | 6 (60%) | 10 |
| 4 | 4 | | 1 (11%) | | | 2 (22%) | 1 (11%) | 5 (56%) | 9 |
| 5 | 5 | | | | | | 6 (86%) | 1 (14%) | 7 |
| 6 | 6 | 2 (18%) | | | 2 (18%) | | 4 (36%) | 3 (28%) | 11 |

The given table indicates the data on how seven task types are distributed throughout the textbook. It is noticeable that two task types namely,"Projects and creative tasks" and "Sharing personal experiences"are obviously outweighed than the rest. In Lesson 2 and 5, the exercises are only those two categories. "Matching" is the least task type with just one exercise.
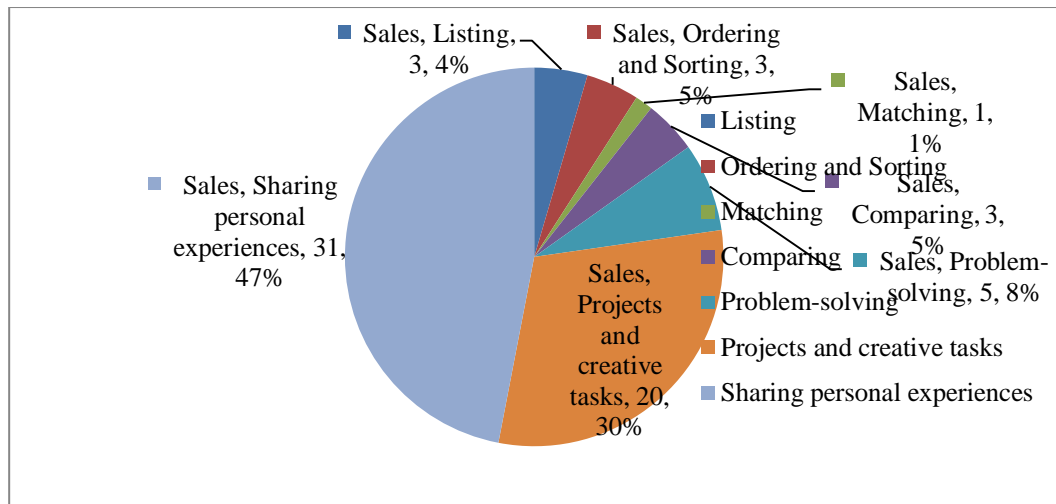
**Figure (2): Breakdown of Seven Task Types**

The pie chart describes the statistics of seven task types in the textbook. "Sharing personal experiences" is the most overwhelming task type with 31 followed by "Project and creative tasks" at 20. The number for the rest five task types varied between 1 and 5.
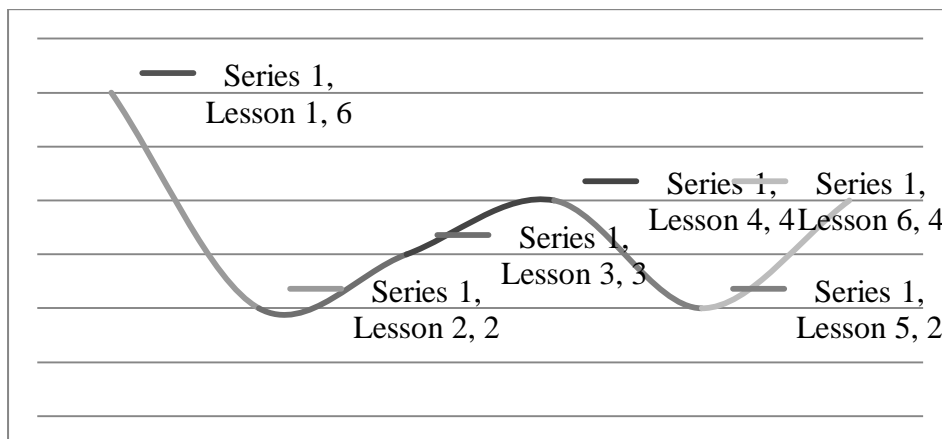


**Figure (3): Involvement of Seven Task Types Lesson by Lesson**

The line graph shows the involvement of seven task types Lesson by Lesson. The data starts at 6 task types in Lesson 1 followed by a dramatic decrease in Lesson 2. There is a gradual increase since then and reached a peak in Lesson 4 with 4 task types which is the same with Lesson 6. Lesson 5 is another lowest involvement of task types in Lesson.

## Results and Discussion

Understanding the nature of exercises and their underlying task types are crucial not only for teachers but also for curriculum developers. In terms of distribution of speaking exercises, the trend shows a dip in the middle lessons though its numbers are not much different in most of the lessons.

Not all the lessons employed all the seven types of tasks. Moreover, the proportion of task types in each lesson is a little erratic. In fact, Lesson 1 includes six types: Lesson 4 and 6 belong to four types: and Lesson 3 has three types: and Lesson 2 and 5 deploy 2 types respectively. This pattern should be graded one Lesson after another. From this information, what teachers can do is making

additional task types for speaking skill. One of the commonest ways of sequencing material is by difficulty level. Content presented earlier is thought to be simpler or fewer than later items (Richards, 2002). The task types distribution for speaking exercises is the opposite of the normal and common way of determining the scope and sequence of the curriculum: "Simple to Complex". According to the common sequence of the curriculum, it should start from Lesson 2, Lesson 5, Lesson 3, Lesson 4, Lesson 6, and Lesson 1 ranging from 2 task types to 6 ones. This suggestive pattern may be optional improvement to the curriculum depending on the needs of the students.

Since the most prevalent task type is "Sharing personal experiences", students are apparently required to express their background knowledge related with specific topics. The one who do not have sufficient knowledge may not be likely to follow the trend of speaking exercises. Apart from this, teachers should emphasize on students' target language proficiency, the mechanism to discuss this kind of tasks successfully, before they are engaged in the tasks assigned. According to Willis and Willis (2007), this task may possibly contain a mix of listing, ordering and sorting.

"Projects and creative tasks" like reporting and doing a survey which mainly encourage the student-centered learning community arealsocommon type of tasks. According to the Bloom's taxonomy, such kinds of tasks are in the level of creating that stood at the highest at Higher Order Thinking Skills. Teachers should be aware of the shortcomings in conducting these tasks while the students can only deal with easier ones and their levels have limitations to perform such kinds of tasks. According to Krashen's (1988) Input hypothesis (level 'i+1"),  the learner improves and progresses when he/she receives second language 'input' that is one step beyond his/her current stage of linguistic competence. Teachers' insights and scaffolding modes (Lead-in) play a vital role not to fail in performing these tasks.

"Matching" which is suitable for all levels of students and a teacher-led classroom activity is the least frequent task types. Especially when the proficiency of students is real beginners, this kind of task type is actually required for them before they engage in speaking (Willis and Willis (2007)). Most of the textbooks employ this task type, and "Comparing" as well. Spiral sequencing of task types cannot find for "Matching".

It is sure not all of the students will be pleased with the two prevalent task types: "Sharing personal experiences" and "Projects and creative tasks" since there are different kinds of learners depending on various background factors. Teachers could develop extraexercises that are in line with the students' preferences.

It is suggested that the number of speaking exercises developed based on the task type "Problem-solving" should be promoted since this kind of task could well involve some of all of the cognitive processes (Willis and Willis (2007).

Teachers may generate new kinds of speaking activities in their lesson plans in terms of the rest five task types (Listing, Ordering and Sorting, Matching, Comparing, and Problem-solving)since their proportions are relatively low compared to the above two types. This will reinforce the skill of material development of the teachers. Creating the most suitable task types for the students is recommended depending on the students' levels and needs. Furthermore, the

lower chance of students' engagement with the aforementioned five task types would impact on their job performance and job readiness skills.

It is noticeable that task types are linked to the topics. "Understanding of curriculum and materials" is one of the areas of professional development of the teachers. (Richards, 2015)The limitation of this study is lack of sufficient literatures about material evaluation, and previous researches in this area.

## Conclusion

This current study examines the (66) speaking exercises in Straightforward (Level 2B) from the point of task analysis developed by Willis and Willis (2007). Distribution of seven task types are varied throughout the lessons;"Sharing personal experiences" and "Projects and creative tasks" are the most common ones, whilst "Matching" is the most ignorant task type. This research will provide a range of insights and implications for curriculum developers, especially material writers who are novices in this area, as well as teachers who are making practical use of this course book in classroom. Further studies should be carried out in order to cover all four textbooks not only in terms of speaking skill but also in terms of other language skills in textbooks.

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