Developing Effective Language Learning Strategies to Solve Learners' Difficulties in the Use of the Target Language

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Abstract

Even with the most communicative approach, the foreign language classroom is limited in its ability to develop learner's communicative competence in the target language. This is due to the restriction of exposure to the variety of functions and discourse types occurring inside the classroom. Given such limitation to develop their competence and the constraint time the learners' interest to speak up may become low. Having seen these phenomena, a responsible teacher should maximize opportunities for learner's participation outside the classroom such as interview and chat in natural communication tasks. To improve learners' speaking skill, this research is carried out to find out the problems of natural communication using the target language in oral interview and written chat messaging. And the appropriate research for teachers is an action research. By following a four-part process, teachers can use conversation and discourse analytic techniques to analyze the difficulties of communication in the language. The data are analyzed under the scope of grammatical, sociolinguistics, strategic and discourse competence. Meanwhile, the chat data are analyzed on the basis of turn-taking, sequencing and repairing. Finally, the mapping of the learners' speaking proficiency is attributed as intermediate-low, and relevant materials such as CCU are recommended.

Key words: Developing, Effective, Language Learning Strategies, and Difficulties in the Use of the Target Language

INTRODUCTION

This page presents the rationale why learners are reluctant to speak up in the target language in the classroom or some occasions in the institute. When they are given time to ask questions after the teacher explains the teaching materials, they just keep quiet. When a personnel of company makes a presentation about the profile of a company and the learners are given time to ask any question, they act as if they had no words to say. Even when an interview held by a foreign company willing to recruit them, they make 'bargain' by saying: *May I use Indonesian language?* In fact, performance assessment, where learners have to demonstrate practical command of skills acquired, is rapidly replacing more traditional test formats such as pencil-and-paper tests involving multiple-choice questions.

Due to this kind of test, language belonging to scientific society is considered as the lesson which needs the capacity of memorizing rather than thinking or proving. As a result learners may master the theory, but they are poor in applying it. In fact, speaking is a creative act. Besides, a conversation can be held by any language user, yet reading, writing, preparing speeches and even listening to speeches are far from universal skills. Moreover, even with the most communicative approaches, the second or foreign language classroom is limited in its ability to develop learner's communicative competence in the target language. This is due to the restricted number of exposure to the variety of functions, genres, speech events, and discourse types that occur outside the classroom.

Given the limited time, such as once a week, available for learners to practice the target language in the classroom, teachers should also maximize opportunities for learner's participation outside the classroom. These extra activities are like practicing interview, doing chats, and reading simplified novels. Action research is one way for teachers to monitor both the quantity and quality of learners' output. By following a four-part process of Plan-Action-Observation-Reflection, foreign language teachers can use conversation and discourse analytic techniques to investigate the problems of practicing the target language. These problems are seen under the perspectives of four communicative competences. This process allows language teachers to see the mapping of learners' language competence and make a plan of recommended improvement.

A. Background of the Study

In terms of policy, Electronic Engineering Polytechnic Institute of Surabaya (PENS) requires the learners to master the skills of communication when they graduate. They should master the language skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing. Among the four language skills, speaking should get much more attention than the others since they usually take parts in the oral interview done by electronic companies, mostly belonging to foreigners, which insist to recruit their forthcoming workers. An example of event showing their weak speaking is that when being interviewed they make 'bargaining' by saying: *May I use Indonesian language?* As a matter of fact, the curriculum just provides the learners one class-room session in a week. So there is a time

constraint to improve their weak speaking that should be overcome by the English teachers. And this is the reason why an action research is a need for the teachers before taking the right action.

In speaking, people from different cultures usually organize their ideas differently when they are viewed by contrastive expression. In fact, most research in this field gives attention to **a text analysis** rather than spoken analysis. The research areas are usually done in **descriptive way** on the characteristics at the surface level. So English teachers get benefits from the contrastive expression for pedagogic notions. With insight into the important cultural assumptions of international communication, that is, how students from one country express their thought to different people from another country and how the thought is expressed and written in different way. So what thinking assumptions cause them to speak or write differently from native English speakers? So thinking elements in non-native speakers becomes the main concern areas which influence the formation of culturally embedded expression styles that may be explored and then introduced to English teachers.

Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which implicates the relation among **language, thought, and culture,** only provides most contrastive expression research with cultural support from one of the contrasting cultures, that of English. But theory building research in contrastive expression should look at the expression styles from every culture covered by the study. It is easy to deduce that when writing is not formally taught, people write in the way they speak. This activity seems to happen when one is **chatting**. And when people express their thought, either in speech like in **interview** or in writing like in **chatting**, they reflect their culturally coded belief systems. Further it is important to remember that speaking usually does fall in the category of an everyday activity.

Many English teachers have good command of the various techniques of teaching, but the students simply do not know how to go about learning the language. This is due to the fact that learning a language is often outside their experiences; first, because learning one's native language was simply a natural part of growing up and second, because normally the study of English takes place only with the goal of passing tee entrance exams and hence the "paper test phenomenon" of concentrating on grammar. Therefore, teachers teaching conversation in Indonesia should first focus on helping the students become **better language users.**

B. Problems of the Study

Having willingness to improve learners' speaking skill, this research investigation is, in general, directed to find out the difficulties of natural setting communication using the target language in oral interview and written chat messaging. The main problem which will be solved through the operation of action research in this study is that the learners are reluctant or unmotivated to speak up with the target language. The learners are not interested to communicate by using the target language. Meanwhile, the research questions which can appear from the problem of communication can be derived as follows.
1. What kinds of speaking difficulties can learners solve in making interviews with foreigners using the target language?
2. How does the interview develop the learners' language communication?
3. What kinds of chatting difficulties do learners have to become language users?
4. How do their chats solve the existing communication problem in the interview?
5. Why do they find problems in the communication?
To confirm the problem of the action research, a preliminary study is firstly done to ensure the problem of making communication. This study is executed through a peer assessment test. This confirmation of problem is also supported by the scores of their TOEFL section test. The finding of conversation problems are then followed up by giving **authentic tasks** which are in the form of natural **interview** and **chatting** to foreigners using the target language. Apart from these five questions, it is expected that some additional issues may come out of this study, such as **culture values** and **motivation factors** in relation to strategy used in communication.

C. Purpose of the Study

The common practice of setting up communication activities in which learners spend large amounts of class time speaking to one another and which is preceded or followed by language input from the course book ignores the fact that learners can do this perfectly well in their own time with some friends and a grammar book. It would be obvious that **a good language teacher** is one who can create an environment in which their learners communicate naturally in the language and are provided with help on how to express what they want to say**.** In order to aid real communication then, teachers must understand the real problems of the learners when they are interacting with the target language on the authentic setting. Therefore, this study is 'to listen' to their difficulties they are facing in the two language learning strategies. So the main purpose of this study is to develop the two learning strategies that can effectively cope with their natural problems of communication using the target language. In other words, **this research is done to increase learners' communication in the use of the target language.** Finally, this research may also permit performance data to be interpreted to shed light a **mapping** of the operation of the competence system. Thus learners' speaking proficiency is identified and relevant teaching materials are made as recommended improvement in the future.

D. Scope and Limitation of the Study

This study just explores the data from a peer assessment test, a self-assessment test, and the way how the learners cope with their difficulties of communication in the target language of interview and chat. The scope of study lies on the result of peer assessment test, a self-assessment test, and the texts of oral interview and the chatting, printouts **of** mediated computer communication. It does not analyze the meta-language as it does not become major materials in the language teaching. In fact, most research in the field of speaking gives attention to **a text analysis** rather than spoken styles. Two language learning strategies executed by using the target language are studied in this research. These research areas are completely done in **descriptive way** on the characteristics of target language at the surface level. The analysis which is of natural conversation is to discover what the linguistic characteristics are. The interview and chat are supposed to be effective learning language strategies for using the target language since they are employed as extra activities which are assumed to enable the students to be more active in speaking. They can improve their speaking skill by making more practices in real communication. Besides, the tasks are chosen because of some reasons. (a) The learners, not majoring in English, get the English class only once a week; (b). They need more practice outside their class activity; and (c). They are quite familiar and fun to operate computers.

E. Assumption

How language began was not known. But all people who are not disabled have ability to speak. Language developed very slowly from sounds because the simple system of vocal communication became more complex as the human brain and speech organs evolved. No one knows all the reasons why languages change, but they continue to do so as long as people speak them. In a few cases, the changes can be explained. For example, words are added to a vocabulary to refer to new ideas or objects. Speakers of different language may **make c**ontacts which cause words from one language to enter to another language.

So speaking using a language becomes the basis history of language development. Therefore, choosing naturally relevant speaking activities of the target language as well as using it are assumed to enable learners to acquire better communicative competence. And this idea is in relevance to the expression of Celce-Murcia and Olstain (2000:22) saying: "It is only skillully combined linguistic and pragmatic knowledge that can lead to communicative competence in the second language."

REVIEW OF RELATED THEORIES

This section presents some related theories which underline the implementation of this language-use study. The first theory provides studies that focuses on language problems in relation to the state of the human brain, The second theory presents linguistic background that highlights the harms of critical period, pragmatic competence, models of language acquisition, components and acquisition of communicative competence, and communication accommodation theory. The third theory deals with the background to teaching including the application and the technique. Then methodological perspectives are described to explore the difficulties in speaking. Finally, the language learning strategies are employed to accommodate the management activities of language use.

The Neuro-Linguistic Background

Studies involving sophisticated brain imaging technologies called functional magnetic resonance imaging, fMRI, have also revealed some intriguing patterns in the way human brains process first and second languages. Joy Hirsch and her colleagues[1] at Cornell University used fMRI to determine how multiple languages are represented in the human brain. They found that native and second languages are spatially separated in **Broca's area** that is responsible for the motor parts of language-movement of the mouth, tongue, and palate. In contrast, the two languages show very little separation in the activation of Wernicke's area which is responsible for comprehension of language.

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[1] http://www.brainconnection.com/topics/?main=fa/second-language3

Fig.1   Brain Anatomy: Lateral brain showing primary visual cortex, Broca's area, and Wernicke's area.
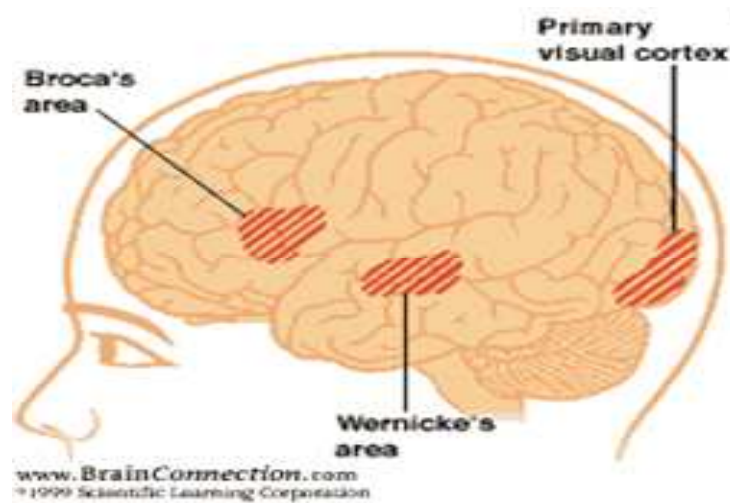
The fMRI studies suggest that **the difficulty adult learners** of a second language may have is not with understanding the words of the second language, but with the motor skills of forming the words with the mouth and tongue. This may explain why learners of a second language can often comprehend a question asked in the new language, but are not always able to form a quick response.

Thus, for adult English language learners, techniques that emphasize speaking may be more successful than methods that focus more on reading and listening. For example, rather than lecturing to a class about vocabulary and grammar, an instructor perhaps should encourage his adult students to have conversations in English, or to act out short comedies incorporating the day's lesson, which would more closely link the students' abilities to understand and speak the new language. Speaking would thus equal understanding. The Cornell researchers also studied the brains of people who were bilingual from a very early age. This group of people is able to speak the two languages as easily as they can comprehend both languages spoken to them. The researchers found that these subjects showed no spatial separation in either Broca's or Wernicke's areas for the two languages, indicating that in terms of brain activation, the same regions of the brain controlled their ability to process both languages.

The idea that second languages learned early in childhood are **not separately processed** in the brain is supported by fMRI studies of brain development in children. Researchers at UCLA report that the language areas of the brain seem to go through the most dynamic period of growth between the ages of 6 and 13. However, the nerve maturation of child development receives so much press in the first three years.

RESEARCH METHOD

Preliminary
Research ⟶

- Assign learners to evaluate their oral communication through peer assessment.
- Ask learners to do the section of TOEFL.
- Identify the problems of communication.
- Determine the problems of action research.
- Formulate the hypothesis

Findings
Learners get courage and interest to communicate but weak in discourse making the communication does not last long

PLAN
- Inform learners to do a task of communication using the TL.
- It is a recorded interview with foreigners done in pair.

Cycle 1

ACTION
- Learners do interview on site such as mall, tourist destination or offices.
- The results are submitted.

REFLECTION
- Reflect the difficulties on the 4 components of Com.Competence
- [Findings   roblem which needs further treatment.

OBSERVATION
- Transcribe the recorded interview
- Observe the difficulties of the interview communication.

Learners can make long communication though there are problems in their four components of communicative competence

Learners' discourse competence become the main problem on cycle 2

PLAN
- Note-taking of Academic Skills is taught to the learners.
- Prepare them to do the second interview

REFLECTION
- Reflect the difficulties based on components of com. competence.
- The communication can last long

Cycle 2

ACTION
- Teaching the skill of Note - taking .
- The learners do the interview.

OBSERVATION
- Transcribe the recorded interview
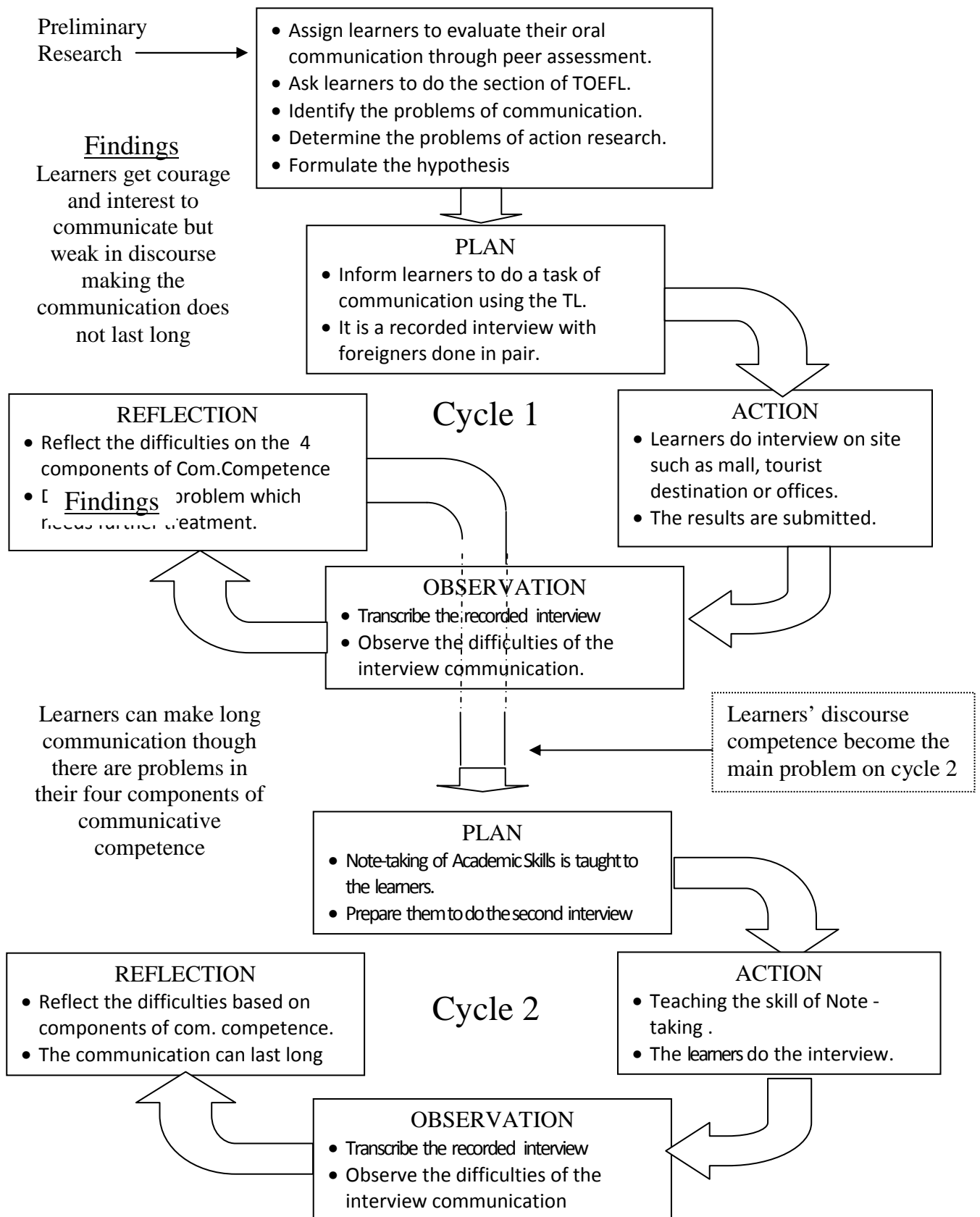- Observe the difficulties of the interview communication

Fig. 2 Cycles of Action Research (adapted from Mac Isaac, 1995)

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The exploration of communication complexities has been discussed comprehensively at the two learning strategies, interview and chatting. As task-based interactions, there are open-ended questions, which are broadly relevant to real life so that the learners could integrate issues to their own experiences and lives. The learners get nervous and reluctant to interact with strangers using the target language as they do not have any experience of real communication. It is understood that the English language, the target language, is as a foreign language for the learners and they are bound to make mistakes in the initial stage of learning.

Since communication is an integrated process, there are many factors involved in its success in getting the message through to the receiver. This is true when two are native speakers or the same language (L1). The advantage in this situation is that both the speaker and the hearer usually share a common background to some extent. This helps them comprehend more easily. However, the ability to comprehend information in the cross-cultural context such as the communication done by the learners in interview and chat is far more complex. The communication which takes place between the learners and people who have different cultural backgrounds using the Target Language shows various dynamics that result some findings about the problems in the Interviews and Chats in the conclusion and suggestion below.

A. Conclusion

Speaking difficulties that the learners face in making interviews with foreigners using the TL are inter-language, the grammatical problem and making private questions. However, the interview develops the learners' language communication in the way that they are more initiatively courageous to ask new topics and persistent to ask when they do not understand. The foreigners never laugh at the language problems made by the learners. The foreigners even offer the learner to ask further and try to improve the learners' language by answering grammatically wrong questions with appropriate answers. They are psychologically encouraged and interesting; though, in the beginning they are afraid and nervous. Chatting difficulties, that the learners have in using the target language, are **not** developed in well-organized interaction. The learners just move from one topic to another to keep the interaction moving. They cannot develop the answer of question given by the partner of interaction.

Their chat texts differ from interview text in organizing communication in the way that learners can imitate the utterances of foreigners; but, in interview the learners cannot do.

Communication in the chatting can go on though there is interruption, such as there is someone knocking the door or a need to feed the dog. In the interview, they cannot extend the interaction when they do not have any idea to talk; though, the foreigner offers the learner to be asked further. Besides, the chats provide more practices for functional expression rather than the interviews. They find problems in the communication since their level of speaking proficiency is still at intermediate-low. They never have any experience in natural communication using TL. In other words, they are lack of using the language into context or pragmatic and discourse competence. Therefore, they do not gain understanding of the cultures that use the language. Consequently, they often choose private matters as their topics of communication.

B. Suggestion

Learners should get rid of their nervousness and reluctance. They must understand that English is a foreign language and a person is not free from making mistakes in the initial stage of learning. The learners are recommended to have more activities in using English language. The choices of activities should accommodate on the interests of the learners and the existing facilities that can be employed.

Learners must make use of the language as much as possible, as it will make them more courageous, familiar and comfortable with the language and with foreigners who understand the target language. Besides, the interview must not be understood as speaking only. It requires the participants to cooperate to make it moving. In becoming consciously aware of fundamental characteristics of this cooperation, learners will be able to participate more easily in the interaction in English. They should learn to notice the strategies and behaviors used in English and become aware of similarities and differences in the interview in their own language and in English.

The data of chat in turn-taking patterns shows that learners get difficulty when the partner has different interest. When the partner has gained what he needs, the interaction soon ends. When they have the same interest, equal ages, and different sex the interaction can be extended straight through to relatively long.

The communication in interview and chat which shows differences in the idea organization provides effective learning strategies implemented for the learners. When their communication in interview cannot be extended due to the poor discourse competence, such as they have no more idea to talk about, the learner can be assigned with chatting, the other task-based activity, which provides them the skills to extend the communication. In the chat the learner can extend the interaction by imitating the idea or the utterance of the partner.

The intermediate-low learners need the help that they can get from the skills taught in Reading, Pronunciation, Grammar and Writing classes so that the learners' attributed level can improve. However, the urgent skills suggested toward the goal of successful communication between different cultures should increase both the

accommodation of **discourse competence,** language beyond the sentence, CCU (Cross Cultural Understanding) and the **development of English task-based activities** supporting the language mastery in communication skills for ESP at higher education.

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