

IMPACT OF USING SELECTED ORAL ACTIVITIES IN PROMOTING THE SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS' SPEAKING ABILITY

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ABSTRACT

English language ability is represented by four basic categories of skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing. In a modern society all these skills are interrelated as they are all needed in one way or another for communication. The skill of speaking is more crucial and fundamental than others as it helps to mnemonically maintain a strong command of the relevant language that can be readily utilized in any communicative situation arising in an emergency. Even, psycho-linguistically, its indispensability is recognized as the ideas for communication are produced in the mind in a process of conceptualizing various objects in the life world and formulating various thoughts about them in terms of spoken expressions. Moreover, the skill of speaking is a significant part of the speaker's consciousness. Yet, very unfortunately, in the educational system of Sri Lanka, the development of spoken skills in English is taken for granted. As a result there is no emphasis on teaching or assessing the skill of speaking English. Coming from a school system where the skill of speaking English is blatantly undermined, the majority of the university students suffer from a severe handicap in the context of English language ability. During university education they are faced with a great demand for achieving the relevant speaking skills as they are supposed to carry out numerous activities in English; attend English-medium lectures, gather information from a variety of sources available only in English, produce assignments in English, take part in presentations and discussions conducted in English, and visit various places where the general command is English. The main objective of this research is to investigate a method of promoting spoken skills among the undergraduate through a mechanism implemented by means of twelve types of oral activities that are used as teaching materials as well as test batteries namely, group discussion, role play, simulation, information gap, brainstorming, story-telling, interviews, story completion, reporting, playing cards, picture narrating & describing and finding the differences in pictures. Further this research tests how effective the selected oral activities are in promoting spoken skill, investigates the best activities to enhance speaking ability and provides some suggestions to promote it. The quantitative and qualitative method was conducted to reach these objectives. A questionnaire was distributed among twenty teachers of English to identify the effectiveness of selected twelve oral activities prescribed by language teaching professionals. And an informal interview was conducted to derive those teachers' suggestions to improve speaking ability. The results show that four oral activities namely group discussion, role play, interviews and story-telling are more effective activities to increase student talk time and oral performance. Some suggestions and implications to teach oral language were taken from the informal interviews with the teachers.

Keywords: *speaking skills, interaction, oral activities, methods, pedagogy*

INTRODUCTION

Speaking, listening, reading and writing are the four skills needed to be enhanced in both first and second language learning contexts. As means of effective communication, speaking is one of the most important skills to be developed. As English is universally used as a mode of communication, especially in the world of internet, media, mass communication and education, English speaking ability should be developed along with the other skills. Hence, these integrated skills will increase interaction both with native and non-native speakers of English internationally.

However, it is observed that most of the Sri Lankan students are not able to communicate in English fluently for many reasons. It is known that many students in the Faculty of Arts and Culture of the SEUSL expressed their views with the researcher during pre-observation that 'Speaking is the most difficult skill to master.' At the same time the same fact was mentioned by most of the teachers in the informal interview that teaching speaking is not easy. Because teaching speaking requires not only knowledge in terms of mastering vocabulary and grammar, but also willingness and confidence in speaking English. In reality speaking has to be practiced rather than learning.

Therefore the question how to increase speaking competence and confidence of undergraduate students becomes very important in the pedagogical environment. This concern led the researcher to conduct the current research. The research problem can be formulated as follows; (1) How to promote student speaking ability? (2) How successful are the selected oral activities in promoting spoken skill?(3) Which are the best activities to enhance speaking ability? (4) What are the suggestions to promote it?

The research aims to promote spoken ability. On literary background twelve oral activities have been selected by the researcher to test how effective the selected oral activities are in promoting spoken skill, investigate the best activities to enhance speaking ability and to give some suggestions to promote it.

Harmer (2012), Goh (2007), Kayi (2006), and Bailey (2005) have proposed methods to enhance speaking skills by means of syllabus design, teaching principles, types of tasks and materials, and speaking assessment. Based on the above mentioned experienced English language teaching material designers' and researchers' views; twelve selected oral activities have been examined. Though there are number of oral activities in practice, group discussion, role play, simulation, information gap, brainstorming, story-telling, interviews, story completion, reporting, playing cards, picture narrating & describing and finding the differences in pictures are the common used twelve activities elaborated by language teachers, material designers and researchers. These twelve activities were examined through a questionnaire to find out their effectiveness in improving speaking skills.

Literature Review

Literature on hand deals with two main topics: importance of speaking and commonly applied oral activities which were examined in this research to promote oral performance.

a) Speaking

Speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing and receiving and processing information (Brown, 1994). Its form and meaning are dependent on the context in which it occurs, including the participants themselves, their collective experiences, the physical environment, and the purposes for speaking.

Chaney (1998) states that speaking is "...the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts".

Burkart (1998) gives a broad view that speaking is an activity which involves the areas of knowledge, they are the mechanics (pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary); it is the use of the right words in the right order with the right pronunciation.

Speaking is an important part of second language learning and teaching (Keyi, 2006). Of the four macro English skills, speaking seems to be the most important skill required for communication (Zaremba, 2006 & Zhang, 2009).

In speaking, we build words and phrases with individual sounds, and we also use pitch change, intonation, and stress to convey different meanings (Harmer, 2007). Therefore, speakers have to interpret not only the message that other speakers try to convey, but also consider other possibilities like the above. And also in a face to face interaction the speaker can use a whole range of facial expressions, gestures and general body language to help to convey the message (Harmer, 2007).

Brown (1994) labels speaking as the most challenging skill for students. Because oral discourse is characterized by contractions of vowels, the use of slang and idioms, stress, rhythm and intonation and the need to interact with at least one other speaker. Therefore, as students who study English as a foreign language usually have limited opportunities to speak English outside the classroom (Zhang, 2009) they face difficulties to speak English.

To conclude that speaking is an oral expression of an interactive process of constructing meaning which involves phonological and grammatical system. It is a challenging factor among second language learners.

b) Oral Activities

Lisa in her article 'Oral Language and Vocabulary Development Activities: For Student-Student Interaction' listed around 48 interactive activities alphabetically. Among them more than twenty activities help to develop oral competencies. Likewise Morozova (2013) mentions a suggested list of fifteen oral activities to help to increase speaking skill. Kayi (2006) lists twelve oral activities to promote speaking. Harmer (2012) points out six activities in detail to promote oral performance of the students. However the present research identifies twelve activities which were hypothesized the most commonly practiced activities by L2 teachers. Group discussion, role play, simulation, information

gap, brainstorming, story-telling, interviews, story completion, reporting, playing cards, picture narrating & describing and finding the differences in pictures are the selected oral tasks.

Group discussion

Discussion is an obvious way to promote interactions. Discussion is the process of talking things over among two or more persons, preferably face to face. It is a cooperative effort on the part of a number of individuals to work together as a group, through the exchange of thought orally, toward some group objectives (Hastoy, 2010). Ur (1994) states that thinking out some problems and situations together through verbal interchange of ideas are simply called as to discuss. From those definitions, it can be shortened that discussion is the exchange of information, opinions, and ideas.

A teacher can divide students into small groups of 4 or 5 to talk about almost anything, from cultural issues, education, learning English, to current events and “hot” topics. Though to set up discussions seem easy, but they require preparation and thought so that they run smoothly and learners get the most out of the exchange of ideas. The purpose of the discussion should be made very clear to the learners. When a discussion is going on the teacher should observe whether the students are speaking on the given topic and they use English to discuss. It is better to select a group leader and the teacher must make sure that all the group members are participating in the discussion. To help students the teacher can give the vocabulary beforehand. To select the group members the teacher can ask the students to count from 1 to 5 or other relevant methods, but groups should be rearranged in every discussion so that students can work with various people and learn to be open to different ideas. In group discussions, whatever the aim is, the students should be motivated to ask questions, paraphrase ideas, express support, check for clarification, and so on. At the end one or all members (sharing the different stages of presentation) of a group has to produce their report on a given topic.

Interviews

Students among themselves or with people can conduct interviews on selected topics. The teacher gives guided instructions to the students so that they know what role they are going to perform, what type of questions they can ask or what path to follow, but students should prepare their own interview questions. By conducting interviews with people gives students a chance to practice their speaking ability not only in class but also outside and helps them becoming socialized (Kayi, 2006). Moreover, students can interview their classmate about his/her life or they can practice job interview or celebrity interview. After interviews, each student can present his or her study to the class.

Role play

Role-playing clearly promotes effective interpersonal relations and social transactions among participants. In role play each learner acquires a personality or interprets a character. Students pretend they are in various social contexts and have a variety of social roles. In these activities, the teacher gives the information to the learners such as who they are and what they think or feel. For example the teacher can tell a student "You are a motorist who thinks that parking restrictions are unnecessary or You are Michelle and you want Robin to notice you,..." (Harmer, 2012). To fulfill their role responsibilities, students must relate to others in the simulation, utilizing effective social skills. So role play can improve learners' speaking skills in any situation, and helps learners to interact (Dwiana, 2015).

Simulation

Harmer (2012) mentions simulation and role play together as classroom speaking activities. but what makes simulations different than role plays is that they are more elaborate. In simulations, students can bring items to the class to create a realistic environment. For example, to act as a king, you should wear a crown and carry a sword in your waist.

Role plays and simulations have many advantages. First, since they are entertaining, they motivate the students. Second, as Harmer (1984) suggests, they increase the self-

confidence of hesitant students, because in role play and simulation activities, they will have a different role and do not have to speak for themselves, which means they do not have to take the same responsibility.

Information gap

According to Kayi (2006) in this activity, students are supposed to be working in pairs. One student will have the information that other partner does not have and the partners will share their information. Information gap activities serve many purposes such as solving a problem or collecting information. For example, to warm up the class the teacher can provide a task sheet which has some questions to identify the partner's ability or like the same to two students and instruct one student to collect information about his partner. In this case, each partner plays an important role because the task cannot be completed if the partners do not provide the information the others need. These activities are effective because everybody has the opportunity to talk extensively in the target language.

Brainstorming

Students can produce ideas on a given topic in a limited time, depending on the context, either individual or group. This activity is effective and learners generate ideas quickly and freely. The good characteristic of brainstorming is that the students are not criticized for their ideas so students will be open to share new ideas.

Story-telling

“Students can briefly summarize a tale or story they heard from somebody beforehand, or they may create their own stories to tell their classmates. Story telling fosters creative thinking” (Kayi, 2006). Students can express ideas in the format of beginning, development, and ending a story including the characters and setting a story has to have. Students also can tell riddles or jokes. For instance, at the very beginning of each class session, the teacher may call a few students to tell short riddles or jokes as an

opening. In this way, not only will the teacher address students' speaking ability, but also get the attention of the class.

Story completion

According to Kayi (2006) it is a very enjoyable, whole-class, free-speaking activity for which, students sit in a circle. Teacher can make it as a group activity or as a whole class, for example, teacher can give the beginning of a story and make each student of the classroom to develop that story, at the end the classroom will get a very creative story. In this activity each student should be very attentive because, he or she has to start to narrate from the point where the previous student stops. A student is supposed to add from four to ten sentences. Students can add new characters, events, descriptions and so on. If the English lesson is after lunch, this sort of activity will be more effective.

Reporting

Teacher can instruct the students to bring the most interesting news to class by reading a newspaper or magazine or listening to the electronic media to the class and they have to report it to their friends. They can report an incident they experienced or heard in front of the class.

Playing cards

According to Kayi (2006), students should form groups of four. Each suit will represent a topic. For instance: **Diamonds:** Earning money, **Hearts:** Love and relationships, **Spades:** An unforgettable memory and **Clubs:** Best teacher are the four topics. Each student in a group will choose a card which has a topic. Then, each student will write 4-5 questions about that topic to ask the other people in the group. For example: If the topic "Diamonds: Earning Money" is selected, here are some possible questions: Is money important in your life? Why? What is the easiest way of earning money? What do you think about lottery? Etc. Kayi mentions that the teacher should state at the very beginning of the activity that students are not allowed to prepare yes-no questions, because by saying yes or no students get little practice in spoken language production. Rather,

students ask open-ended questions to each other so that they reply in complete sentences.

Picture narrating & describing

Morozova (2013) in her research 'Methods of Enhancing Speaking Skills' mentions that picture description is one of the important methods to enhance speaking ability. Students are asked to describe what happens in the picture or to tell the story taking place in the sequential pictures by paying attention to the criteria provided by the teacher as a rubric. Rubrics can include the vocabulary or structures they need to use while narrating

Finding the differences in pictures

For this activity students can work in pairs and each couple is given two different pictures, for example, picture of boys playing football and another picture of girls playing tennis. Students in pairs discuss the similarities and/or differences in the pictures (Kayi,2006).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present research was done through qualitative and quantitative method. Selected twelve activities were examined by the researcher through a questionnaire distributed among 20 teachers of English involved in university teaching. Among the samples four are permanent lecturers in English with much experience in teaching English for undergraduates in different faculties, six are assistant lecturers and ten are visiting lecturers who have much experience in school teaching. To analyse the primary data received from the questionnaire SPSS statistical package was used. The five point likert scale questionnaire ranking from 1 to 5 corresponding to strongly disagree to strongly agree was applied in the research.

Further an informal interview was conducted among those teachers to bring out some common suggestions to improve students' speaking skills. So, the current research was carried out through a mixed method of qualitative and quantitative.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The results of the research show that the maximum mean value of 4.35 was reached by four oral activities namely group discussion, role play, interviews and story-telling.

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Group discussion	20	4	5	4.35	.489
Role play	20	3	5	4.35	.587
Simulation	20	3	5	3.65	.745
Information gap	20	2	5	3.95	.759
Brainstorming	20	2	5	3.85	.671
Story telling	20	3	5	4.35	.671
Interviews	20	2	5	4.35	.933
Story Completion	20	3	5	4.10	.553
Reporting	20	3	5	3.80	.616
Playing Cards	20	2	5	3.20	.894
Picture narration	20	1	5	4.30	1.031
Finding differences in pictures	20	3	5	4.15	.671
Valid N (list wise)	20				

Table 1

The above table shows the result of the SPSS analysis. According to this table, all the spoken activities scored an average mean value of 4 beside playing cards which scored the mean value of 3.20 which is the minimum mean of the data. It shows that most of the teachers are nearly to strongly agree that the above mentioned four activities are very important in enhancing the students' speaking ability. The qualitative data help the researcher to give some suggestions to improve speaking ability effectively on a pedagogical view. According to the informal interview providing rich environment to speak, increasing student talk time, continuous teacher's observation and early identification of slow learners are found out some of the effective factors to influence a successful speaking classroom. Therefore, the researcher's own suggestions along with teachers' views give strength to the implications. Group discussion, role play, interviews and story-telling can be suggested as successful activities to teach speaking interestingly.

Suggestions to improve speaking

Generally to improve the speaking ability of students, the following steps should be taken into consideration:

1. provide maximum opportunity to students to speak the target language by providing a rich environment that contains collaborative work, authentic materials and tasks, and shared knowledge.
2. select interesting and well-known topics for group discussion to try to involve each student in every speaking activity; for this aim, practice different ways of student participation.
3. provide a friendly environment by giving awards and motivation for students without scolding for errors, do not correct students' pronunciation mistakes very often while they are speaking, correction should not distract student from his or her speech,
4. place more emphasis on the quality of study books at the basic level,
5. reduce teacher speaking time in class while increasing student speaking time, step back and observe students, use practical and applicable strategies for students while speaking in English most of the time,
6. develop boldness and confidence in students to ask questions of their teachers,
7. maintain limited crowd of students in the classes,
8. encourage listening to English radio channel, CNN, or BBC to keep up-to-date news,
9. use the best oral activities but do not retain only on the same activities always.
10. give enough time to speaking and phonetic drill of students,
11. provide the vocabulary beforehand that students need in speaking activities,
12. diagnose problems faced by students who have difficulty in expressing themselves in the target language and provide more opportunities to practice the spoken language.

Teachers will be able to build ESL speakers' communicative competence and improve their speaking ability when they practice these rules in their classroom.

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE

Language learning and teaching without focusing the oral performance is not completed. So teaching speaking should be given equal opportunities along with other integrated skills. To have a successful speaking classroom recommended activities to teach speaking

should be identified. The current research focuses on twelve selected oral activities to promote speaking ability. By practising group discussion, role play, interviews and story-telling we can improve speaking ability. The implications of the research help the language teachers, material designers, policy makers and researchers in promoting students' speaking ability. Further research is suggested to have a classroom action research to examine the factors mentioned in this present study.

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