How to Teach Speaking Skill?

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Abstract

One of main concern of the most language teachers is how to help language learners to develop satisfying language proficiency. In this regard, speaking proficiency has received the greatest attention among both the language teachers as well as the language learners. This is because speaking is a crucial part of the language learning process. The major goal of teaching speaking skill is communicative efficiency. Language learners should be able to make themselves understood by using their current proficiency. They should try to avoid confusion in the message because of the faulty pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary. In the same line, a common characteristic of many language classes is a heavy focus on the language system. Vocabulary and grammar seem to gain far more attention than the skills needed to use this vocabulary and grammar. To help students develop communicative efficiency in speaking, instructors can use activities that combine language input and communicative output. To this end, the present paper tries to take a closer look at the type of activities that language teachers can utilize to promote speaking proficiency. Accordingly, effective instructors can teach students speaking strategies by using minimal responses, recognizing scripts, and language to talk about language. These instructors help students learn to speak so that the students can use speaking to learn.

Key words: Teach, Language proficiency, Speaking skill

1. Introduction

One of the main concerns of most of the language learners in both EFL and ESL contexts is how to improve their speaking skill. However, a common characteristic of many language classes particularly in EFL contexts is a heavy focus on the language system. Teaching vocabulary and grammar seem to earn more attention than the skills needed to use this vocabulary and grammar. Skills are of course an essential part of communicative competence; however, skills themselves are often not explicitly taught but rather left to the language learners to pick up with practice and language use. The default position in most EFL contexts is that skills will just be acquired implicitly. This seems especially true of many classes. According to Lightbrown and Spada (1999), classroom data from a number of researches offer support for the view that form-focused instruction and corrective feedback provided within the context of communicative programs are more effective.

Another argument for explicit language teaching, a focus on form, comes from Schmidt (1995). Accordingly, language first needs to be noticed to be acquired. In other words, when language learners have noticed something, they are more likely to acquire it if they meet it again. There is support in the literature for the hypothesis that attention is required for all learning. Learners need to pay attention to input and pay particular attention to whatever aspect of the input (phonology, morphology, pragmatics, discourse, etc.) that you are concerned to learn (Schmidt, 1995).

Many students equate being able to speak a language as knowing the language and therefore view learning the language as learning how to speak the language. According to Nunan (1991), a success in language learning is measured in terms of the ability to carry out a conversation in the (target) language. Hence, if the language learners fail to learn how to speak or do not get any opportunity to speak in the language classroom, they may soon get de-motivated and lose interest in learning the language. This problem is common in EFL contexts where language learners have less chance to speak English. In fact, language learners in EFL context can only have limited speaking activities inside the classrooms. However, if the

right activities are taught in the right way, speaking in class can be a lot of fun. This can also raise language learners' motivation.

In our daily lives most of us speak more than we write, yet many English teachers still spend the majority of class time on reading and writing practice almost ignoring speaking skill. However, if the goal of your language course is truly to enable your students to communicate in English, then speaking skill should be taught and practiced in the language classroom. In the same line, it should be mentioned that speaking has three functions. Accordingly, Brown and Yule (1983) made a useful distinction between the interactional functions of speaking, in which it serves to establish and maintain social relations, and the transactional functions, which focus on the exchange of information. Following them, Jones (1996) and Burns (1998) added performance as another function of speaking. However, discussing the functions of speaking is out of the scope of the present paper. In fact, the focus of this paper is on the practical aspect of teaching speaking skill.

2. Language learners do not talk!

A common argument among language teachers who are dealing with conversation courses is that the students do not talk at all. One way to tackle this problem is to find the root of the problem and start from there. If the problem is cultural, that is in your culture it is unusual for students to talk out loud in class, or if students feel really shy about talking in front of other students then one way to go about breaking this cultural barrier is to create and establish your own classroom culture where speaking out loud in English is the norm.

One way to do this is to distinguish your classroom from other classrooms by arranging the classroom desks differently, in groups instead of lines etc. or by decorating the walls in English language and culture posters. From day one teach your students classroom language and keep on teaching it and encourage your students to ask for things and to ask questions in English. Giving positive feedback also helps to encourage and relax shy students to speak more. Another way to get students motivated to speak more is to allocate a percentage of their final grade to speaking skill and let the students know they are being assessed continually on their speaking practice in class throughout the term.

However, a completely different reason for student silence may simply be that the class activities are boring or are pitched at the wrong level. Very often our interesting communicative speaking activities are not quite as interesting or as communicative as we think they are and all the students are really required to do is answer 'yes' or 'no' which they do quickly and then just sit in silence or worse talking noisily in their first language. So maybe you need to take a closer look at the type of speaking activities you are using and see if they really capture student interest and create a real need for communication.

It is equally important to make sure you give the students all the tools and language they need to be able to complete the task. If the language is pitched too high they may revert to their first language, likewise if the task is too easy they may get bored and revert to their first language. Also, be aware of the fact that some students especially beginners, will often use their first language as an emotional support at first, translating everything word for word to check they have understood the task before attempting to speak. In the case of these students simply be patient as most likely once their confidence grows in using English their dependence on using their first language will begin to disappear.

3. Language input and communicative output

To help students develop communicative efficiency in speaking, instructors can use activities approach combine language input and communicative output.

Language input comes in the form of teacher talk, listening activities, reading passages, and the language heard and read outside of class. It gives learners the material they need to begin producing language themselves. Language input may be content oriented or form oriented. Content-oriented input focuses on information, whether it is a simple weather report or an extended lecture on an academic topic. It may also include descriptions of learning strategies and examples of their use. On the other hand, form-oriented input focuses on ways of using the language: guidance from the teacher or another source on vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar (linguistic competence); appropriate things to say in specific contexts (discourse competence); expectations for rate of speech, pause length, turn-taking, and other social aspects of language use (sociolinguistic competence); and explicit instruction in phrases to use to ask for clarification and repair miscommunication (strategic competence).

In the presentation part of a lesson, an instructor combines content-oriented and form-oriented input. The amount of input that is actually provided in the target language depends on students' proficiency level and also on the situation. For students at lower levels, or in situations where a quick explanation on a grammar topic is needed, an explanation in English may be more appropriate than one in the target language.

In communicative output, language learners' main purpose is to complete a task, such as obtaining information, developing a travel plan, or creating a video. To complete the task, they may use the language that the instructor has just presented, but they also may draw on any other vocabulary, grammar, and communication strategies that they know. In communicative output activities, the criterion of success is whether the learner gets the message across. In everyday communication, spoken exchanges take place because there is some sort of information gap between the participants. Communicative output activities involve a similar real information gap. In order to complete the task, students must reduce or eliminate the information gap. In these activities, language is a tool, not an end in itself. Accordingly, it is essential for the teachers to know what strategies to use to develop speaking skill.

4. Strategies for Developing Speaking Skills

Language learners who lack confidence in their ability to participate successfully in oral interaction often listen in silence while others do the talking. One way to encourage such learners to begin to participate is to help them build up a stock of minimal responses that they can use in different types of exchanges. Such responses can be especially useful for beginners. Minimal responses are predictable, often idiomatic phrases that conversation participants use to indicate understanding, agreement, doubt, and other responses to what another speaker is saying. Having a stock of such responses enables a learner to focus on what the other participant is saying, without having to simultaneously plan a response.

Some communication situations are associated with a predictable set of spoken exchanges which are called script. Greetings, apologies, compliments, invitations, and other functions that are influenced by social and cultural norms often follow patterns or scripts. So do the transactional exchanges involved in activities such as obtaining information and making a purchase. In these scripts, the relationship between a speaker's turn and the one that follows it can often be anticipated. Instructors can help students develop speaking ability by making them aware of the scripts for different situations so that they can predict what they will hear and what they will need to say in response. Through interactive activities, instructors can give students practice in managing and varying the language that different scripts contain.

Language learners are often too embarrassed or shy to say anything when they do not understand another speaker or when they realize that a conversation partner has not understood them. Instructors can help students overcome this reticence by assuring them that misunderstanding and the need for clarification can occur in any type of interaction, whatever the participants' language skill levels. Instructors can also give students strategies and phrases to use for clarification and comprehension check. By encouraging students to use clarification phrases in class when misunderstanding occurs, and by responding positively when they do, instructors can create an authentic practice environment within the classroom itself. As they develop control of various clarification strategies, students will gain confidence in their ability to manage the various communication situations that they may encounter outside the classroom.

Many language learners regard speaking ability as the measure of knowing a language. These learners define fluency as the ability to converse with others, much more than the ability to read, write, or comprehend oral language. They regard speaking as the most important skill they can acquire, and they assess their progress in terms of their accomplishments in spoken communication. In the same line, instructors are required to help their students develop this body of knowledge by providing authentic practice that prepares students for real-life communication situations. They help their students develop the ability to produce grammatically correct, logically connected sentences that are appropriate to specific contexts, and to do so using acceptable (that is, comprehensible) pronunciation.

5. Speaking activities

Traditional classroom speaking practice often takes the form of drills in which one person asks a question and another gives an answer. The question and the answer are structured and predictable, and often there is only one correct, predetermined answer. The purpose of asking and answering the question is to demonstrate the ability to ask and answer the question. In contrast, the purpose of real communication is to

accomplish a task, such as conveying a telephone message, obtaining information, or expressing an opinion. In real communication, participants must manage uncertainty about what the other person will say. Authentic communication involves an information gap; each participant has information that the other does not have. In addition, to achieve their purpose, participants may have to clarify their meaning or ask for confirmation of their own understanding. To create classroom speaking activities that will develop communicative competence, instructors need to incorporate a purpose and an information gap and allow for multiple forms of expression.

5.1. Structured output activities and communicative output activities
Two common kinds of structured output activities are *information gap* and *jigsaw* activities. In both these types of activities, students complete a task by obtaining missing information, a feature the activities have in common with real communication. However, information gap and jigsaw activities also set up practice on specific items of language. In this respect they are more like drills than like communication.
These activities may be set up so that the partners must practice more than just grammatical and lexical features. For example, the timetable activity gains a social dimension when one partner assumes the role of a student trying to make an appointment with a partner who takes the role of a professor. Each partner has pages from an appointment book in which certain dates and times are already filled in and other times are still available for an appointment. Of course, the open times don't match exactly, so there must be some polite negotiation to arrive at a mutually convenient time for a meeting or a conference.
Jigsaw activities are more elaborate information gap activities that can be done with several partners. In a jigsaw activity, each partner has one or a few pieces of the "puzzle," and the partners must cooperate to fit all the pieces into a whole picture. The puzzle piece may take one of several forms.
With information gap and jigsaw activities, instructors need to be conscious of the language demands they place on their students. If an activity calls for language your students have not already practiced, you can brainstorm with them when setting up the activity to preview the language they will need, eliciting what they already know and supplementing what they are able to produce themselves.
Structured output activities can form an effective bridge between instructor modeling and communicative output because they are partly authentic and partly artificial. Like authentic communication, they feature information gaps that must be bridged for successful completion of the task. However, where authentic communication allows speakers to use all of the language they know, structured output activities lead students to practice specific features of language and to practice only in brief sentences, not in extended discourse. Also, structured output situations are contrived and more like games than real communication, and the participants' social roles are irrelevant to the performance of the activity. This structure controls the number of variables that students must deal with when they are first exposed to new material. As they become comfortable, they can move on to true communicative output activities.
Communicative output activities allow students to practice using all of the language they know in situations that resemble real settings. In these activities, students must work together to develop a plan, resolve a problem, or complete a task. The most common types of communicative output activity are *role plays* and *discussions.* In role plays, students are assigned roles and put into situations that they may eventually encounter outside the classroom. Because role plays imitate life, the range of language functions that may be used expands considerably. Also, the role relationships among the students as they play their parts call for them to practice and develop their sociolinguistic competence. They have to use language that is appropriate to the situation and to the characters.
Students usually find role playing enjoyable, but students who lack self-confidence or have lower proficiency levels may find them intimidating at first. To succeed with role plays:

- Prepare carefully: Introduce the activity by describing the situation and making sure that all of the students understand it.
- Set a goal or outcome: Be sure the students understand what the product of the role play should be, whether a plan, a schedule, a group opinion, or some other product
  Use role cards.
- Give each student a card that describes the person or role to be played. For lower-level students, the cards can include words or expressions that that person might use.

- Brainstorm: Before you start the role play, have students brainstorm as a class to predict what vocabulary, grammar, and idiomatic expressions they might use.
- Keep groups small: Less-confident students will feel more able to participate if they do not have to compete with many voices.
- Give students time to prepare: Let them work individually to outline their ideas and the language they will need to express them.
- Be present as a resource, not a monitor: Stay in communicative mode to answer students' questions. Do not correct their pronunciation or grammar unless they specifically ask you about it.
- Allow students to work at their own levels: Each student has individual language skills, an individual approach to working in groups, and a specific role to play in the activity.
- Do not expect all students to contribute equally to the discussion, or to use every grammar point you have taught.
- Do topical follow-up: Have students report to the class on the outcome of their role plays.
- Do linguistic follow-up: After the role play is over, give feedback on grammar or pronunciation problems you have heard. This can wait until another class period when you plan to review pronunciation or grammar anyway.

Language learners can also benefit a lot from discussions held in the classrooms when the instructor prepares the language learners first, and then gets out of the way.

Through well-prepared communicative output activities such as role plays and discussions, you can encourage students to experiment and innovate with the language, and create a supportive atmosphere that allows them to make mistakes without fear of embarrassment. This will contribute to their self-confidence as speakers and to their motivation to learn more

6. Conclusion

Developing speaking proficiency requires more than simply just getting the language learners exposed to a pool of vocabulary or grammar descriptions. Unfortunately, most of the language teachers who are to run conversation courses still devote much of the class time immersing the students with non-communicative activities. The language learners themselves also show few interests in talking. These are just some of the problems that teachers with large classes face when teaching speaking activities in the classroom. These problems are not new nor are the solutions offered above.

In view of the above, the present paper was set to serve as guide for those who are interested in having large class of energetic students talking and working in English in groups together. In a nutshell, to help the language learners develop communicative efficiency in speaking, instructors can utilize activities approach combine language input and communicative output.

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