

Using Communicative Approach in Arabic Language Classroom to Develop Arabic Speaking Ability

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Abstract

Studies have shown that most Malay learners of Arabic language exhibit weak performance in speaking Arabic despite spending years of learning the language. Among the causes of the problem are traditional methods like reading, translation, and memorization that are popularly used in the teaching and learning of Arabic language. Since Arabic language is not widely used in Malaysian society, the only chance the students have to speak Arabic is in the classroom. Therefore the researcher designed a series of classroom activities using communicative approach for a period of 14 weeks on 45 students of Islamic Education minoring in the Teaching of Arabic as Second Language at the Institute of Education at the International Islamic University Malaysia. Surveys were administered to the students before and after the communicative activities took place. In addition the researcher also performed classroom observation and collected self reports from the students after each activity. The results from paired sample t-test showed that students' perception on Arabic speaking and ability to speak Arabic improved after 14 weeks. In addition level of difficulty faced to speak Arabic decreased gradually. Results from the Pearson Product Moment correlation coefficient suggested that the improved perceptions of speaking Arabic lessened the difficulties faced by students in speaking Arabic. The results also suggested that the improved perceptions towards speaking Arabic increased students' ability to speak Arabic.

1 Introduction

1.1 The Goals of Language Learning

According to National Capital Language Resource Center of the United States (NCLRC) the idea of foreign language teaching and learning in the United States, including the Arabic language, is to accomplish communication goals. In other words, the "desired outcome of the language learning process is the ability to communicate competently, *not* the ability to use the language exactly as a native speaker does". Communicative competence includes "knowing how to use language for a range of different purposes and functions, knowing how to vary our use of language according to the setting and the participants, knowing how to produce and understand different types of texts and knowing how to maintain communication despite having limitations in one's language knowledge" (Richards, 2006:2). Therefore it is crucial for language teachers and learners to be able to distinguish between learning a language and learning about the language. Language learning is defined as "becoming able to use it to comprehend, communicate, and think - as they do in their first language" (NCLRC). It further states that "when learners think of the language like any other school subject, they may learn a great deal about its vocabulary, grammar, and sentence and discourse structure, but the language will not become a true medium of communication for them and will not engage them very deeply" (NCLRC). In addition, the teachers and learners also need to recognize that "interpretive skills (listening, reading) develop much more quickly than expressive skills (speaking, writing), and the ability that students covet most; the ability to speak the second language fluently requires the longest period of growth" (NCLRC). Teaching methodology employed in the classroom should be able to develop this skill in line with other language skills. However Ellis, (1994: 228) stated that "in most cases classroom learners often fail to develop much functional language ability." Lightbown and Spada (2002:91) explained that "formal learning takes place through conscious attention to rules and principles and greater emphasis is placed on mastery of the subject matter that was treated as a decontextualized body of knowledge" (Ellis, 1994:214). In addition Lightbown and Spada (2002:92) said the "teacher's goal is to see to it that students learn the vocabulary and grammatical rules of the target language" and "the goal of learners in such courses is often to pass an examination rather than to use the language for daily communicative interaction." These scenarios have been observed by Bygate as he mentioned that "one of the basic problems in foreign language teaching is to prepare learners to be able to use the language" (Bygate, 1987:3). He suggested that teachers must understand the goals of language teaching and learning properly, know what it takes to achieve the desired goals and prepare the language course accordingly to ensure the goals become reality. In addition teachers should be able to understand the effects of the methodology used. There comes the importance of this study for it provides feedbacks about the effectiveness of the teaching methodology used from the learners perspectives.

1.2 Teaching Methodologies for the Speaking Skills

Methodologists have been researching about effective methodologies for speaking skills since 1970s. Classic

communicative language teaching began to spread in 1970s to 1990s replacing traditional approaches which put its centrality on grammar. During this particular phase attention shifted to gaining communicative competence. It is argued that language learning is more than gaining grammatical competence but knowledge and skills are needed to use grammar and other aspects of language appropriately for different communicative purposes. Communicative Language Teaching approach (CLT) was accepted with enthusiasm in 1970s and 1980s (Richard, 2006). As time passes by more and more communicative methodologies were introduced to improve the existing ones. Among the methodologies proposed was by Rivers and Temperley (1978, as cited in Bygate, 1987). They stated that in learning to communicate there are two skills involved namely skill getting and skill using. In their framework 'skill using' or the ability to use the language functionally is clearly more important. However learners need to have skill getting as the basic for communication. Therefore they suggested pseudo communication activities to bridge the skill getting and skill using. Skill getting involves developing knowledge about the language. At this stage learners are trained to perceive the units, categories functions and internalize the rules relating categories and function, practice the sequence of sounds and start to formulate the communication. For an introduction, they suggested that learners be given exercises on grammar such as blank filling and various kinds of syntactic manipulation to help them use of grammatical structures and apply the various grammatical rules in sentences. While building the basic for communication learners need to perform a lot of activities such as dialogue techniques, brief oral reports consisting of four to five sentences and gapped dialogues that can be done in group work to lead into spontaneous communication. The main point is that the content of these activities is structured by the learning situation and not springing from the learners autonomously. Later learners need to develop skill using where the real communication takes place. At this stage learners are trained to translate personal meanings into language where they learn to express themselves using all language elements at their disposal. Therefore learners' progress depends greatly on how daring they are in using linguistic innovation. The activities suggested demand learners to express themselves autonomously and freely such as in greetings, apologies, complaints, reporting, speaking about hobbies, TV programmes, and so on. Rivers and Temperley designed the activities to cover three basic elements of speaking skills namely oral practice for the learning of grammar, structured interaction, and autonomous interaction. In 1981 Littlewood suggested a methodology which was considered close to the earlier methodology proposed by Rivers and Temperley (1978). His framework consists of two types of activities namely pre communicative activities and communicative activities. The purpose of the pre communicative activities is mainly to prepare learners for the second type of activities. Pre communicative activities is divided into structural activities; where learners are trained to practice certain knowledge or skills specified by teachers focusing on the grammatical system of language as well as linguistic skills and quasi communicative where learners are involved in typical conversational exchanges including drills, dialogues and so on. Similar to Rivers and Temperley's views, the idea is to enable learners to relate forms to communicative functions, specific functions and social functions. In other words learners are given 'part skills' of communication to be practiced. As for the second type of activities; communicative activities, the main concern is communicating meanings. Learners are required to integrate the knowledge and skills practiced in the first activities into the full activities of communicating meanings. It is divided into functional communication activities and social interaction activities. In the functional communicative activities learners are trained using the language to express and convey meanings as effectively as possible. As for the social interaction activities learners are trained to use the language in a wider variety of social situations and relationship. The activities are similar to those in functional communication activities except they have clearly defined social context. Similarly Bygate (1987) proposed that learners need to have motor perceptive skill and interaction skill. The first skill is needed to perceive, recall and articulate in the correct order sounds and structures of the language. As for the second skill, it is needed to use the knowledge about the language and motor perceptive skill to perform a communication. In conclusion it is noticeable that all methodologists address both forms and functions of the language. Functions are undoubtedly the aim of language learning. However forms are needed to ensure effective and accurate use of functions. It is also apparent that the methodologists never separate the learning of forms and functions as they are connected with various activities.

2 Methodology

2.1 Participants

Participants involved in this study were fourth year students majoring in teaching of Islamic Education and minoring in Teaching Arabic as a Second Language. The total number of the participants was 45 and the researcher divided them into 2 groups; G1 and G2. These students had at least 5 years experience of Arabic language before entering the Institute. At the Institute the exposure to Arabic language continued as the courses offered for their specialization were mostly in Arabic language. Even though they are majoring in Islamic Education, they have to master Arabic language as much as possible because they might be needed to teach Arabic language in addition to Islamic Education at schools.

2.2 Activities and procedures

It is aware that there are many ways to perform communicative language teaching in the classroom. However for this particular study the researcher has decided to conduct fun activities in the classroom that require students' active participation and involvement. Fun activities were chosen to reduce students' anxiety and scare to participate. Communicating in the classroom may be familiar and normal to learners learning English or any other languages but not for learners of Arabic. That is why the communicative approach should be performed in the most persuasive and fun ways to tackle the students. The following activities were repeated several times each for a period of less than 20 minutes twice a week in regular class of Language Drills because students will be able to practice what they have learnt in the course orally. To motivate students' participation the researcher sometimes designed the activities to be in "competition mode". Students were required to sit in several groups and every time they were assigned with a task they will have to do it in their respective group. Students were given some time to prepare for the tasks. The objective behind this is to train spontaneity. The activities were designed to be contextual and required the students to speak spontaneously in the class. They were not allowed to bring anything written during the presentation. They were also not allowed to memorize what they want to say. Everything should be quick, spontaneous and fast. The tasks completed were graded accordingly.

2.3 Data collection and analysis

In this study data were collected using 3 methods; pre and post surveys, classroom observation and students' reflection. Students responded to a five point Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The scales were developed by the researcher in English language covering 3 main objectives; students' perceptions on Arabic speaking, difficulties in speaking Arabic and the after effect of using communicative approach on their Arabic speaking abilities. The survey was referred to 3 parties for validity purposes and this includes 1 expert for language validity, 2 experts for content validity and students for face validity. Improvement to the survey was made before distributing it to the students. The surveys were administered to students twice; in early semester before the communicative classroom activities took place and at the end of the semester. The data collected were analyzed using a paired sample t-test and Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. In addition the researcher also performed classroom observation to see students' responses to the activities and the changes in students' attitudes. Besides the researcher requested students to write a short reflection after each activity.

3 FINDINGS

3.1 Findings from survey

A paired-sample t-test was conducted to compare students' perception on Arabic speaking skills in two conditions, which are; pre-test and post-test conditions. The result indicates that there is a significant difference between the pre-test ($M=3.95$, $SD=0.535$) and post-test scores ($M=4.20$, $SD=0.518$) in condition; $t = -2.170$, $p=0.036$. The results suggest that after several months of using Arabic language communicatively, students' perception on Arabic speaking improves.

Secondly, to measure the comparison of students' difficulties, a paired-sample t-test was conducted in pre-test and post-test conditions. The results indicate that there is a significant difference in the pre-test ($M=3.210$, $SD=0.766$) and post-test scores ($M=2.33$, $SD=0.497$) in condition; $t (41) = 6.811$, $p=0.000$. The results propose that the difficulties in Arabic speaking faced by students decreases after several months of practicing Arabic in the class.

Thirdly, a paired-sample t-test was conducted in pre-test and post-test conditions to compare the effect of communicative Arabic language learning on students' speaking ability. The results indicate that there is a significant difference in pre-test ($M=3.25$, $SD= 0.484$) and post-test scores ($M=3.99$, $SD= 0.535$) in condition, $t (41) = -7.434$, $p=0.000$. Based on the results shown, students' speaking ability increases after several months of learning Arabic language communicatively. Therefore, the teaching method used does have positive impact on Arabic speaking ability.

Evaluation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Perceptions		
Pre- Test	3.950	0.535
Post-Test	4.200	0.518
Difficulties		
Pre-Test	3.210	0.766
Post-Test	2.330	0.497
Effect on speaking ability		
Pre-Test	3.250	0.484
Post-Test	3.990	0.535

Table 3.1

Mean and standard deviation of student in pre-test and post-test on three conditions **The relationship between students' perception and difficulties in speaking Arabic**

A Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between students' perception on Arabic speaking and difficulties in speaking Arabic. There is a negative correlation between the two variables, $r = -0.358$, $p = 0.015$. The results show a strong, negative correlation between the students' perception and the difficulties in speaking Arabic. The increase in students' perception is correlated with the decrease of the difficulties to speak Arabic.

The relationship between students' perception and Arabic speaking ability.

To evaluate the relationship between the students' perception the Arabic speaking ability, a Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient was conducted. There is a positive correlation between the two variable, $r = 0.273$, $p = 0.066$. The results show a slightly positive correlation between the students' perception and the Arabic speaking ability. The improvement in students' perception is correlated with improvement in Arabic speaking ability.

3.2 Findings from observation

In the first 3 weeks students relied mostly on papers during the presentation. They still wrote what they wanted to say on a piece of paper and brought it with them during the presentation even though it was prohibited. They were not able to express easily and still looking for words that strictly match what they wanted to say. They were also not able to express using common words or expressions that they were familiar with. During this period they looked nervous and anxious in completing their tasks. Although some activities were in a form of competitions the participation was not encouraging. However they managed to learn and tried to use new vocabulary that were alien to them before. They showed efforts and cooperation during the lesson. When it comes to reading activity, students managed to read the article correctly except for several minimal errors occurred. They also showed high understanding of the content of the article and managed to answer all the questions correctly.

In the second 3 weeks, students started to get used with these kinds of activities. Therefore they looked more relax. Most of them managed to speak more fluently than before. Most of the time they looked more comfortable speaking Arabic, however problem like looking for words that perfectly match what they wanted to say still occurred but lesser. As usual they showed good effort, cooperation and supportive to their friends.

In the last 3 weeks, students became very active and eager to participate, describe and share their thoughts in the activities. They looked more comfortable speaking Arabic in the class and less nervous.

3.3 Findings from students' reflection

Almost all students reported that these kinds of classroom activities are interesting. One of them wrote that "the activities were fun, able to reduce boredom in learning Arabic". They enjoyed the competitive style of learning as it is highly encouraging for them to participate. Among the benefits of the activities reported were obtaining new vocabulary especially in daily life context, training spontaneity, improving grammar while speaking, promoting creativity to manipulate what they already have (familiar words and expressions) to express in Arabic, developing courage and confidence to speak Arabic.

4 DISCUSSION

From the findings it is found that using communicative approach in the classroom can encourage students to acquire communicative competence through continuous practices in the classroom. Learners become even more encouraged to participate if the activities conducted in competition mode. Learners might not want to speak but what they care most is the marks and winning the competition. Indirectly they try their very best to speak and score. When learners get engaged in the class activities frequently their perceptions towards using the language communicatively improved. When their perceptions improved it gives them strength to overcome their difficulties in speaking and finally they manage to speak comfortably. Therefore it can be concluded that communicative language teaching is an effective way to develop speaking skills among students.

Activities performed by students in the classroom
<p>Activity A COOKING CLASS Materials:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Few pages of picture dictionary for children containing vocabulary related to variety of foods, fruits and kitchen appliances. 2. Provision of verbs related to the preparation of meals by the lecturer. <p>Procedures:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students were required to sit in their respective groups. 2. The lecturer distributed the pages of the dictionary for every group and briefed the students about their tasks. They were required to tell their friends about certain recipe for example “how to bake a cake”. 3. Students have to tell their friends how to sauté, bake, roast, toast, boil, stir etc using various kinds of ingredients. 4. Students were given 15 minutes to go through the dictionary and prepared the recipes for the meals assigned. 5. Students were called to present their recipes. 6. The teacher will ask few questions regarding the recipes presented to encourage spontaneous answers.
<p>Activity B SHORT ARTICLE READING AND DISCUSSION Material:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A short article taken from an Arabic magazines or newsletter. <p>Procedures:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Each student was given a copy of the article and they were given about 15 minutes to read and understand the content of the article. They were allowed to discuss with their friends. 2. The teacher requested the students to read aloud the article paragraph by paragraph correctly. This activity will train them to speak Arabic correctly. 3. Then, the teacher asked questions regarding what they have read.
<p>Activity C GIVING DIRECTIONS Materials:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Few pages of picture dictionary for children containing vocabulary related to directions and signs. 2. Provision of verbs related to giving directions by the lecturer. <p>Procedures:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students were required to sit in respective groups assigned. 2. The lecturer distributed the pages of the dictionary for every group and briefed the students about their tasks. 3. They were required to give direction for example “how to go to the library from this class”. 4. Students have to tell their friends how to go straight, turn right and left, take lift and describe what they might see on the way to reach the destination eg. Shop lots, square, rivers, bridge etc. 5. Students were given 15 minutes to go through the dictionary and prepared the directions roughly. 6. Students were called to present their directions. 7. The teacher will ask few questions regarding the directions presented to encourage spontaneous answers.
<p>Activity D SHORT STORY READING AND DISCUSSION Material:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Variety of short stories for children e.g animal stories, stories of companions etc. <p>Procedures:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Each student was given a copy of the short story and they were given about 15 minutes to read and understand the content of the story. They were allowed to discuss with their friends. 3. The teacher requested the students to read aloud the story paragraph by paragraph correctly. This activity will train them to speak Arabic correctly. 4. Then, the teacher asked questions regarding what they have read. 5. The teacher extended the activity into a discussion about the values that they have learnt from the stories, students experience, opinions about the character etc.
<p>Activity E DESCRIBING PICTURES/CARTOONS Material:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A copy of picture for example a picture of a hotel and its surrounding area. <p>Procedures:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Each student was given a copy of a picture. 2. They were requested to understand what the picture is all about. 3. They were allowed to discuss it with their friends. 4. Then they were requested to share what they understood from the picture and described anything they can see in the picture. 5. In addition the teacher will relate the picture with the students’ experience to encourage spontaneous answers.
<p>Activity F ELECTRONIC MEDIA BASED ACTIVITIES Materials:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Video clips of cartoons (translated version of Doraemon, Conan etc.), children religious songs (nasyeed), movies etc. <p>Procedures:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Each group was requested to find a movie or video clip of anything educational in Arabic language and bring them to class. 2. In the class, students were requested to listen and watch the movies etc carefully and try to understand what it is all about, the characters etc. 3. Then the teacher started to discuss with the students what they have watched or listened. 4. To allow more spontaneous participation, the teacher asked questions that requires students’ opinions etc.

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