



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

Language Classroom Practices: Interactive Sessions and Activities for English Language Teaching in the Context of Upgrading Speaking Skills for L2 Learners

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Abstract:

The present article has been designed to comprehend the benefit of interactive sessions and activities in enhancing oral-proficiency in English language to L2 learners, particularly dealing with tertiary level learners. English is a language of opportunity for students. English Language occupies a unique position in our country and the world at large. It is a unifying agent and a common channel of expression across the globe. The focus on learner-centered methods have provided learners greater scope to language acquisition. Having been exposed to rote-method learning in schools, students have remained passive learners refraining from academic activities when at the tertiary level, participation and involvement is most expected of them. The development of speaking skills and oral proficiency is a gradual and slow process which targets the holistic development of individuals in the language learning process. The present attempt is an inspection and understanding into promoting oral skills in L2 learners using activities which motivate interaction to initiate the ability to exchange ideas in the target language, between participants. It aims to review the suitability of interaction and activities used in teaching the language to enhance oral proficiency in L2 learners for communication purposes and the significant role of teachers and learners in the learning process.

Keywords: Motivation, interaction, communication, acquisition

1. Introduction

Speaking skills form the central construct of a language. They play a vital part in the learning of a language. Oral proficiency is a major qualification in deciding the communicative abilities of a person. Studying communicative approach to promote oral proficiency and its role in the learning process is essential in developing a method towards learning that takes into consideration both the cognitive and influential aspects in learning. Exploring these initiatives to enhance effective learning would provide insights to methods and strategies which can further facilitate the development of speaking skills of L₂ learners. Nagraj (2006, 41) defines, "The development of language learning or teaching from form-based to meaning-based approach: the move towards an eclectic approach from a rigid method: the shift from teacher-fronted to learner-centered classes: all are subsumed under the term communicative approach". The present study functions on the communicative approach that places importance on the learner and learner-abilities, and emphasizes on understanding and meaningful expression of the content. Its purpose is to analyze the effect of interactive, activity-based teaching in the language learning scenario.

2. Socio-economic Effect on Language Learning

Since its inception, the domain of language teaching and learning has undergone several remarkable changes. The paradigm-shift from teacher-centered methods to learner-centered ones and the interest in affective factors in education has remained a matter of primary concern ever since 1960's, more so with the evolution of humanistic psychology (Arnold, 1999). Christophersen (1973, p. 13) opines, "Language learning process is clearly a psychological one". It has been observed in students that weak social situations, dilute economic conditions and limited exposure to the target language has led to inhibited participation and fear of inappropriate utterances, which in turn, has curtailed performance in academics. Bernstein (1971) believes that there exists a relationship between social structure and language use. Restricted social relationships based on communalized roles evoke context tied meanings realized through restricted speech variant. In such situations, there is less need to raise the level of meanings to the level of explicitness or elaboration. Language minority students show deficits in speech activities due to insufficient experience in the use of the language. Lack of knowledge in accessing the library, using internet facilities or approaching faculty for assistance are results of socio-economic effect and students rather prefer to remain below average learners than venture to seek for help from appropriate sources. Hence a method suitable to language learning as well as communication is most demanding of the situation where motivation and initiation play a role.

3. A Historical Overview of the Communicative Approach

For the past few decades there has been an increased focus on the notion of communicative approach to teaching and its relation to performance. Education, psychology, industrial organization and other fields have shown a rising interest in understanding the role played by communicative approach. It is essential that a brief outlook into the inception of this approach and its development thereof be traced for better understanding.

The Structural Approach in English Language Teaching, predominant in 1957, proved inadequate in dealing with the cause. Linguists, like Chomsky believed, 'language is rule-governed behavior, not just a bundle of structures', 'learning is discovering and meaning-creating and not habit-formation', (cited in Bose 2005). In the 1960s several alternatives were proposed of which Communicative approach emerged successful. Language acquisition was not seen as an additive process - a learner was supposed to learn 'whole chunks' at a time. It was not regarded necessary to attend to linguistic form. The changes in linguistic theory till the 1970s saw a shift away from the study of language, which was till then seen purely as a formal system, towards the study of language as communication; a shift towards sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, semantics, speech act theory and pragmatics. This had a major impact on language teaching, culminating in the so-called communicative approach to second language teaching, which was a reaction against the predominant formalistic view of language teaching. Its initial impact was on syllabus design. Wilkins (1976), influenced by Halliday's functional approach to language and Austin's speech acts, produced a notional syllabus which took the language teaching world by storm. Further developments resulted in a new era which claimed that second language could be acquired, like the mother tongue, if similar conditions were provided in the classroom. Since 1970s Humanistic Approaches emphasized on learner's emotions, desires, personality and needs in the teaching-learning process. This concern was reflected by second and foreign language teacher trainers in the late 1970s and 1980s leading to the development of methods such as The Silent Way Method, Suggestopedia, Community Language Learning and Total Physical Response Method which construe common features to their approaches. Wilkins' *Notional Syllabuses* in 1976, had a significant impact on the development of Communicative Language Teaching. Studies involving children and adults learning second languages saw new dimensions lately, framed on Communicative Approaches and their different versions which were based on the principle that 'language is better learnt when the learner's attention is not on language but on the activities he is engaged in using the language'. Thus, activities were found to play a great role in the language learning process. To mention a few, their salient features state that communicative course goals should focus on 'communicative needs of the learners and not grammatical structures, production should be allowed to emerge in stages, classroom activities should be interesting and encouraging and teachers should be friendly and helpful facilitators (Bose 2005, 28). The present analysis relates to the framework of Communicative Approach with activity-based method as a means of teaching.

"Language is related to reality and thought by the intricate relationships called *meaning*... Language clearly relies as much on its structure as on its semantic properties to convey meaning (Brumfit, Pincas, & Broughtin 1978, p.26)." The process of learning through trial and error is its primary concern, directed towards developing fluency. Hence, unlike traditional methods, recent learner-centered approaches imitating communicative curriculum have contributed substantially in helping learners experience the use of target language for language acquisition. What a learner acquires of a language represents what he has learned in the process of becoming a 'communicative member' of a speech community. In order to communicate effectively, a speaker must be able to express himself in the right ways on the right occasions. Richards & Rodgers (2001, p.161) point out, "Language is a system for the expression of meaning; the primary function of language is to allow interaction and communication; the structure of language reflects its functional and communicative uses; the primary units of language are not merely its grammatical and structural features, but categories of functional and communicative meaning exemplified".

From the discussion presented in this section, it becomes evident that language learning entails the engagement of learners in a continuous interactive process which helps learners to successfully navigate through these processes and gain advantage to acquisition of the target language. Unlike traditional teaching, language activities have provided appropriate means to blending of interaction and communication that pave way for meaningful learning in a language classroom.

4. Review and Analysis of Interactive Sessions and Activities

Oral communication is an active skill as against the passive linguistic skill. Therefore, developing oral communication is considered as a language learning activity rather than a language teaching activity. Activities provide opportunities for learners to speak and manipulate situations for them to interact with each other, to share their experiences and enable them to discover each other's interests. A research project, for instance, carried out with 82 final and third-year undergraduate students during the academic years 2010 and 2011, by Fallon, Walsh & Prendergast (2013) using activity-based approach to learn research methods, set its findings on two objectives, namely:

- i. To develop a module in 'Research Methods' which embraces activity-based approach to learning in a group environment; and
- ii. To improve engagement by students.

The findings of this study revealed that between 63% and 96% students responded positively to the concept of engagement in activity-based approach. The results of learning showed quality in presentation, understanding of the concept and satisfaction in combined effort during preparation in the learners. Their hypothesis supported the view that students who were not actively involved neither engaged themselves with the materials, nor sensed a deeper learning experience. The study arrived at the conclusion that their project on teaching Research Methods using activity-based learning approach enhanced student participation and made learning and teaching more enjoyable, easy and practical.

The literature available in the field of activity-based teaching proves that this construct has been widely researched with respect to management and other such sectors. Active learning strategies are considered the most effective for deep learning (Peters, 2011), and are becoming the preferred choice to be used in teaching entrepreneurship (Asvoll& Jacobsen, 2012; Shariff, Hasan, Mohamad & Jusoff, 2010; Ulrich, 2009). A study on the assignment for students, as team, working with businesses to provide a report on a real consulting project was designed in a learner-centered environment to enhance all enterprise skills (Fitzsimons, 2014). Enterprise skills included communication, teamwork, problem solving, initiative, planning, organization, self-management, learning to learn, technology, negotiation and networking (Jones, 2006). The results of the study revealed that by working as a team on a life project for businesses, creativity and knowledge had been shown to be enhanced (Laverie, Madhavaram& McDonald, 2008 cited by Fitzsimons, 2014). Jones (2006) has argued that by facilitating enterprise-related learning outcomes through learning activities and communication that facilitate a learner centered approach using deep engagement, constructive alignment could also be enhanced. Constructive alignment refers to the alterations made to the teaching method to enhance productivity, according to the module's learning outcomes. Taking responsibilities for their own learning and understanding that there was going to be no perfect solution to their assignment were part of the training instructions. The commitment and motivation that drove the students to give the assignment their best surpassed all prior expectations. The importance of functional communication was highlighted by students from the dual angle of communicating with the businesses and with each other. The study concluded with a summary of the impact of the active learning strategy and the range of potential skills and learning which could be developed with students in an entrepreneurial module (Fitzsimons, 2014).

Viewing language learning as a natural creative process rather than habit formation, 'mental activity' initiates active participation from students in 'using the language' which makes language learning more enjoyable, and which by itself is a positive factor in contributing to improved attitudes and better results. Richards and Rodgers (2001, p.165) point out, "The range of exercise types and activities compatible with communicative approach is unlimited, provided that such exercises enable learners to attain communicative objectives of the curriculum, engage learners in communication, and require the use of such communicative processes as information sharing, negotiation of meaning, and interaction". The purpose of using activities for language learning relies on the basic assumption that learners will be able to transfer knowledge and skills developed in the regular classroom to new contexts and situations in the interactive sessions. Flexibility in negotiating with the facilitator and peers to make learning interesting and achieving depends on strategies employed or contrivance used to accomplish the objective.

5. Teacher Roles in Language Learning

Teaching and learning is a socially negotiated activity carried within the ongoing interactions of the classroom (Rogoff, 1994 as cited in Kovalainen, Kumpulainen&Vasama, 2001, p. 17). The teacher plays the role more of a co-communicator or a co-participant than of a controller in facilitating the communicative phenomenon between the participants and the activities designed for enhancing various skills. As Brumfit (1975) rightly observes, "We should be imaginative and wide-ranging in our search for ideas to improve what we are doing... Unless innovation builds on current practice, it is unlikely to succeed, and any reformer needs to understand the strengths and weaknesses, of the existing situations." Moving from the rigidly structured practice to a less controlled situation which allows the student to communicate his ideas, the teacher assures relaxation of restrictions thereby nurturing freedom of thought and expression while implementing activities. By providing questions to challenge thinking, preparing learners for the activities and helping students and groups as needs arise, a teacher moves around the class as a facilitator of learning, giving few commands and imposing less disciplinary control (Harel, 1992 as cited by Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 200).

Promoting cooperation rather than competition is another aspect which can aid language learning in students. Covington and Teel (1996, p. 108) explain, "Whenever students are busy avoiding the feelings of failure, or attempting to make others fail, there is little room for involvement and learning". Fostering feelings of oneness and joint responsibility is as essential as learning is, in a language classroom. Social support from teachers and peers is an important component that may influence students' academic achievement (Huang, Zohreh and Rou, 2010). Engaging students in pairs and small groups reduces stress and anxiety and helps them feel more comfortable which can result in better academic and social outcomes. Awareness of unconditional guidance from the teacher and timely support during productive language use can foster confidence and enhance language acquisition in the learners.

6. Learner Roles in Language Learning

The success or failure of a teaching program depends on the successful interaction and learning of learners in a teaching-learning process. Any language classroom is not merely a pedagogic space but also a social space (Pinto da Silva, n. d.). The effective functioning between the learners and teachers is a joint venture wherein the learners bring preconceptions of what teaching and learning should be like (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The learner is a negotiator between the self, the learning process and the object of learning (Breen and Cadiln, 1980). Teacher friendly atmospheres establish a healthy rapport with the learners and urge better collaboration and learning conditions. Learners develop a positive attitude towards team work and also become directors of their own learning. "The narrower the gap between teacher intention and learner interpretation, the greater the chances of achieving desired learning outcome" (Kumaravivelu, 1991, p. 98). Therefore, the effective functioning of language learning depends on the successful interaction between the learners and the teacher. Learners are more likely to apply extended self-regulated learning strategies (Ryan & Patrick, 2001). Hallinan (2008) observed that students liked school better if they felt supported with respect and praise from their teachers. The more the students liked school, the better their academic and social outcomes. Learners need to acknowledge that failed

communication is a joint responsibility and not the fault of the speaker or listener just as successful communication is an accomplishment jointly achieved (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

7. General Classroom Observations

The findings obtained from classroom observation provide evidence to the fact that teaching oral skills forms a part of the language classroom. The two aims of the present analysis which focus on interaction and activities to promote speaking skills were found to influence learning abilities significantly. For example, students were found to interact and assist each other after following the instructions given before conducting the activities. Pair and group work were found most conducive in preparing students for participation. From the discussions between learners, the researcher could also build a sense of rapport that existed between them. This allowed acquaintance of the strengths and weaknesses of the learners and to use this knowledge to plan activities accordingly. One of the significant findings is that though an activity-plan was designed for the study, yet there were instances when deviations were found inevitable. The sudden changes and decisions emerged from the situations in the classroom. Thus, it can be acknowledged that modifications and re-designing are likely, based on the demands and requirements of the learners. It is important to note here that learners realize to negotiate better with the demands of the language learning process as they interact with others and share their views while giving their oral presentations. Findings related to observations in the oral output proved that with appropriate guidance and assistance, activity-based method of language teaching could become a source of motivation to initiate simple learning strategies and imbibe interest in the language learning process. The analysis of activity-based teaching revealed that although students were found hesitant initially, in course of time, they were able to adapt themselves from being passive listeners to active participators. The subtle heterogeneity in competency levels proved helpful in breaking down barriers between students, allowing free interaction rather than forceful engagement. Participation was found satisfactory, as they learnt to set standards for themselves. However, level of involvement fluctuated in the activity classes and at certain instances uncommitted responses, reserved speech and withholding opinion was observed in the learners. Hence, repetition of activities with adaptable changes exercised periodically was found to be an immediate remedy. Thus, the findings associated to analysis of activities proved that activity-based teaching affected oral proficiency in the language learning process. The way activities can be designed to suit the demands of the classroom atmosphere allows ample scope for implicit and explicit learning of oral skills. Activities depend on reciprocation from students and it was found that teacher-friendly and non-threatening relationship emerged as two important factors that overruled the compulsion of serious, formal and traditional study. The study also established a genuine fact that variety generates interest. Activities initiated fun and learning where appreciation and correction were acknowledged with a spirit that elevated the process of learning. Interaction with learners made it easier for the instructor to identify their strengths and weaknesses and to plan activities accordingly for the sessions. It was also evident that any language classroom, by virtue of its nature, promotes language learning and development of oral skills, though the teacher may not always be aware of it. The findings further revealed that learners are also aware of the importance of improving oral skills and the part it plays in effective communication. From the discussions above it can be concluded that activity-based teaching does have an impact on language learning and there exists a relationship between activities and interaction in the process of language learning.

8. Implications for Institutions

The present study has some very important implications for educational institutions. The findings of the study reveal that activities play a significant role in the language learning process. Motivation and involvement are major constituents of learning. Hence, institutions should take steps in creating classroom spaces wherein teachers can incorporate activities into the regular syllabus to motivate interaction and promote speaking skills which form an essential part of language learning. Institutions must take measures to encourage learning through activities which can be designed in accordance with the language syllabus in the curriculum that could initiate intellectual and cognitive development. Students can be made to access the resources available through their peers and the teachers as well, in the learning process. Training teachers and learners to further enhance their communicative skills through activities could also be made part of the teaching-learning process. Ensuring periodical submission of assignments and simple projects that involve pair or group work as part of the curriculum could be an important step by the institutions to create an awareness of the importance of enriching communicative skills of which oral competency occupies the pivotal position. Such measures could enable better performance in students from social, economic and language minority backgrounds. Organizing workshops and conferences where teachers and learners can be made aware of the need to focus on communicative skills could be an important measure in maneuvering the progress of language learning, by the institutions.

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