Effective Strategies to Develop Speaking Skills among the Arab Students in an ESL Classroom

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Abstract: English has become the predominant language for communication globally. For students or learners whose mother tongue is not English, mastering English is more important not only for their academic life but also for their prospective career as today's generation demands it. In the case of tertiary level Arab students, they are expected to be industry-ready as they graduate but in most cases, their speaking proficiency or skill is quite poor to be able to communicate effectively and efficiently. Although some of them have been in English medium schools and institutes, they are still found to be incapable of having right skills of speaking in English language. So this Paper focuses on the strategies to unlock such problems or barriers of speaking proficiency in English among the Arab students in an ESL classroom. Some strategies have been applied to the target group of students to assess and help them to develop their speaking skills.

Keywords: Developing ESL/EFL Speaking skills, Vocabulary knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is the process in which meanings are shared with the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols in a variety of contexts and social environment [1]. Speaking is believed to be a crucial part of second language learning and teaching. Over the years, teaching speaking has been undervalued and English language teachers have continued to teach speaking just as a repetition of memorization of dialogues. However, today's world requires that the goal of teaching speaking should allow students to improve their communication skills so that students can express themselves and learn how to follow the social and cultural rules relevant in each communicative circumstance or situation. It is also marked that the basis for teaching is the spoken, not the written language as in the nineteenth-century revolution it was given a huge importance in teaching, partially because many of its advocates were phoneticians. There have been various teaching strategies used like the audio-lingual and audio-visual methods, which focussed on presenting spoken language from the tape before the students encountered the written form. Later methods have continued to emphasize the spoken language. Ellis points out: 'The literature on tasks, both research-based and pedagogic, assumes that tasks are directed at oral skills, particularly speaking' [2] Hence, in order to teach second language learners as how to speak English in the best possible way, some speaking activities have been provided below that can be applied to ESL and EFL classroom settings.

Context of the study

As stated earlier, speaking skill is an essential element in English language. Over the experience with many foreign students, the researcher has realized that the end goal or the end product of ESL students is to speak good English so as to communicate with each other and the world. The target group of this study is the Arab students. They have come from different Arab speaking countries to India to learn English Language. Many of them are high school graduate in their first language (Arabic). So there is a transitional challenge faced by the students. It is a transition from Arab-speaking to English-speaking environment or classroom. It is also to be noted that their knowledge of English language is quite low especially of the grammar rules and vocabulary. However, Grammar rules, vocabulary and pronunciation are less focussed in the study because the challenge of the teacher is to make them first comfortable to speak English as a habit to overcome the transitional challenge or problem.

According to Nopiani K. A, in speaking activities, there are two reasons why speaking skill is difficult for the students. First reason is that the students lack motivation in learning English, another reason is the unsuitable methods used by teacher(s) in teaching speaking skills. Whereas, teaching English as a foreign /second language needs the use of effective learning and

teachings methods, techniques that promote the speaking skill [3].

In this particular target group of students, the researcher finds that the students are desirous and active to learn and develop their speaking skills. What lies important is if they are guided and taught with some innovative and effective strategies then there will be a possibility to develop their speaking skills.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Thanyalak Oradee [12] conducted a study on Developing Speaking Skills Using Three Communicative Activities (Discussion, Problem-Solving, and Role-Playing). It has focused to study and compare speaking skills of Grade 11 students in Udon Thani Thailand of a secondary school using above mentioned three communicative activities, and the attitude of the students towards teaching English speaking skills using the three communicative activities. The research findings have shown that the students' English speaking abilities after using the three communicative activities were significantly higher than before their use and their attitude towards teaching English speaking skills using the three communicative activities were rated as good.

Intakhab Alam Khan argues in his research [4] that in most of the Saudi school classrooms, the major focus of both teachers and students was on the reading and writing skills rather than the other two skills (listening and speaking). Both the teacher and student gave less importance to the Listening and Speaking Skills. The main cause for the students poor achievement especially in speaking skill was that teachers themselves had a very limited exposure to reasons of difficulties and appropriate instructional strategies. In this connection, he brought forth a few pedagogical implications regarding the teaching strategies: The following topics along with videos can be integrated with the lesson planning: Topic1-Introduce yourself Topic 2-Interview Topic3- Ordering Food Topic 4-Asking for directions. He used Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach which encourages students to practise structures through activities.

Shaimaa Abd El Fattah Torky [13] in her study attempted to develop speaking skills for first year Egyptian secondary students with the use of a task--based proposed program designed in the light of the cognitive approach to language learning. She states that the teacher most of the time controlled the class by doing most of the speaking and directing all the language production. The teachers were obsessed with correcting their students' errors. This made the students passive recipients waiting for direction and afraid of making mistakes. Students lacked motivation to speak.

In addition, most of the students could not express themselves adequately and even found difficulty answering simple open-ended questions. Students continued to make the same errors even after being corrected many times. Her study provides evidence for the effectiveness of using communicative interactive tasks in developing Egyptian first year secondary students' speaking skills. These tasks helped increase their motivation and positive attitudes towards learning to speak which as a result the students' ability to speak fluently and correctly increases.

Shehadeh [5] examined the effectiveness of engaging students in an ESL classroom with activities on their self- and other-initiations- a means for correcting mistakes during speaking to produce modified output (MO). This modified output is considered important for successful second language acquisition. Twenty seven ESL /EFL speakers of English representing from 13 different L1 backgrounds-performed three tasks (picture description, opinion exchange, and decision making). Modified output was defined as the modifications that non-native speakers made to their output to make it more comprehensible and accurate as an indicator of discourse and strategic competence. The self –initiation emerged when the learner realized by himself that there is something wrong with his utterance that should be modified. On the other hand, others' initiations were based on the corrections given by peers. Results showed that this strategy gave students opportunities to practice both self- and others'-initiations, hence provided students with more opportunities to produce Modified input.

O'brein [6] examined the effectiveness of a course based on communicative tasks to develop speaking proficiency among advanced non-native speakers aged from 17 to 40 in an ESL context. Three elements were applied throughout the course: 1) ongoing need assessment, 2) collaboration between the teacher and students in designing the tasks and 3) regular students' assessment of their accomplishment of the task. The students' progress was rated through a speaking test applied individually to students. In addition, attitude assessments were administered. The course proved to be effective in developing students' speaking proficiency as it created conditions in which they were able to engage in meaningful interaction while their attention was focused not on explicit features of the language but on understanding the message and using the language they felt they needed. Moreover, students acquired positive attitudes toward the course as they felt that they were an integral part of defining the content and style of the course.

From the above review, it is obvious that the speaking skills can be developed in a classroom of ESL through some proper speaking activities/techniques and

if devoted ample amount of time for speaking.

Basic Components of Speaking

Speaking skills is considered to be one of the difficult skills that has to be mastered by students in learning English, although other skills are also in due respect. It is also considered as one of the most difficult aspects for students to master. The students need to possess all the components of speaking skill in order to speak clearly and fluently which may mean the proficiency. Fulcher and Davidson [7] state that there are five components of speaking skill that can be defined as follows:

Pronunciation

Pronunciation is the way for speakers (learners) to produce clear language when they are speaking. It would apparently mean that they can communicate effectively when they have good pronunciation and intonation although they have limited vocabulary and grammar knowledge. Pronunciation refers to the traditional or customary utterance of words which produce sounds as per the words and letters. Hence, pronunciation is nothing but the way for students to produce the utterance words clearly when they are speaking.

Grammar

Grammar refers to the way in which words are used, classified, and arranged together to form coherent written or spoken communication. Students need to arrange correct sentences in conversation both in written and oral forms. They have to follow a set of rules or principles that can be used to generate or process all well formed or grammatical utterances in the language. Moreover, the other definition of grammar stated by Greenbaum and Nelson [8] refers grammar to the set of rules that allow us to combine words in our language into larger units. Hammer also opines that grammar is the description in a language in which words can change their forms and can be combined into sentences in that language [9]. Hence, it is the fundamental principles and structure of the language, including clear and errorless sentence construction and the proper forms of words in proportion to the sentence [10].

Vocabulary

Vocabulary is an important component for successful second language use because without an extensive vocabulary, one will not be able to use the structure and function the comprehensible communicative. Power of words is considered as one of the keys to be successful in communication. Vocabulary means the appropriate diction or the most important element in a language especially in speaking skill; moreover, knowing many vocabularies will make us easier to express our ideas, feelings and thoughts both in oral or written form. Vocabulary is the knowledge of knowing the meaning of words. It is to be noted that words come in two possible forms: oral and written. Oral vocabulary is the set of words for which we know the meanings when we speak or read orally whereas written vocabulary consists of those words for which the meaning is known when we write or read silently.

Fluency

Fluency is defined as the ability to speak a language communicatively, fluently and accurately. Fluency usually refers to express oral language freely without interruption within self or the teacher. In teaching and learning process, if the teacher wants to analyse students' level of fluency, the teacher allows students to express themselves freely without much or no interruption. The goal is to help students speak fluently and with ease though may have errors. The teacher does not correct immediately because of the fact that too much correction interferes with the flow of conversation.

Comprehension

Comprehension is an ability to perceive and understand the speech or discourse, and to formulate the same into the meaningful sentences. "Comprehension towards a second language is more difficult to study since it is not directly observable and must be inferred from verbal and nonverbal responses, by artificial instruments, or by the intuition of the teacher or researcher. So it refers to the fact that participants fully understand the nature of the research project, even when procedures are vague and involved risks" [11]. Therefore, in speaking it can be concluded that the comprehension refers to the speakers' ability to understand about what they are saying to the listeners in order to avoid misunderstanding of the information; in addition, its function is to let the listeners easily grasp the information from the speakers [3].

Strategies to develop speaking skills

The following four strategies have been applied to the target group of students to assess and help them develop their speaking skills.

SnE Method (Speak and Express method)

In this particular method, the students were asked to talk anything with their own efforts. For example, introducing themselves, their partner, likes and dislikes, hobbies and alike. Here, the grammatical rules are tolerated and helps students to freely express themselves. Its aim is to make them feel comfortable of English language. Another activity under this method which has made tremendous impact was "sing and explain". The students were asked to prepare any English song (more or less like task-based) then they were asked to sing the song in class and explain the meaning of the song in their own words. It was both fun

and learning. At times, other teachers would be invited to judge and give comments so that their learning becomes exciting. As stated earlier, the learners are experiencing the transitional environment so this particular SnE method has helped them to utter English words and sentences and allowed them to be part of the English-speaking world or environment. Here, the teacher becomes more of a facilitator giving positive feedbacks to encourage the students and in building their confidence level.

QnA Method (Question and Answer Method)
It is the fact that this method is one of the traditional or common methods; however, it is still very useful to develop speaking skills. In fact, it can be used in different approaches. Here, each student was asked to stand in front of the class and the classmates would ask some relevant questions as per the students' background. It gave an opportunity to speak for both ends- The whole class as they ask questions and the presenter as he/she responses them.

Another aspect of QnA method applied was interview. It was divided into two sections of interviewing. First, the class was divided into pairs - two/two. Each student would have a list of questions to ask his/her partner and the same from the partner. The interviewer may have some prepared questions but the interviewee would answer spontaneously. This has given a good opportunity to speak in a smaller unit which was a very close-knit learning. Besides that, the same students were asked to go out of the classroom and interviewed other teachers and staff of the institute in a given time frame. After having done the interview, each student would stand and report to the class the information they have gathered. This again enabled students to speak which was both fun and learning activity. In this process of learning, sometimes role-play was done. They would select some popular sport stars or film stars or singers. In the class, the students selected celebrities like Christiania Ronaldo, Messi, James Bond, Rihana and others. One would act as a celebrity and the other would take interview asking several questions and eliciting answers from the interviewee.

PnS Method (Pick and Speak Method)
In this method, different chits have been folded with a word in each chit. The words were simple and common to the knowledge of the students. Some of them which have been used were city name (city they belong to), money, respect, and some immediate environment topics like describe your classroom, classmates, teacher, your apartment, etc. This in fact led them towards the real world experience or everyday life conversation. This helped them to express with whatever knowledge they have. It was more of challenging as they had to express without any

preparation. However, with some or little they could express was worth. It also has helped to develop some public speaking skill although the focus was not on public speaking. This was done on a regular basis and could increase their level of confidence.

SnW Method (Speak and Watch Method)
This method was applied by using technology. Here, the students were asked to speak some basic information about themselves also other simple topics and the same was recorded for about 2 minutes on mobile phones. The students were very serious and prepared as they speak. After the recording, the same was played back so that they could see their improvement also could do some necessary correction. This method was applied on regular intervals. Eventually, they could see a difference in their speaking as they became more conscious that they were being watched or recorded.

CONCLUSION
This study was done in a qualitative manner to investigate the strategies enhancing the development of speaking skills of Arab ESL students. A confidence factor was gradually developed during a period of 6 weeks of regular speaking activities having applied the four strategies. This has impacted the students from being passive learners to active learners as they began to involve more in class than the teacher. The goal of the study was achieved which was to make them overcome their transitional environment from Arabic to English speaking environment. Creativity of topics applied in each above strategy and the comfort of speaking in English were considered to be as speaking strengths, however the errors in pronunciation and grammatical structure were categorized as weaknesses of the study. It may be noted that the above four strategies could be applied to promote speaking skill in any ESL/ EFL classroom contexts.

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