

Enhancing Speaking Skills of ESP Students Using Activity Based Learning Techniques

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Abstract

This paper discusses the effectiveness of Activity Based Learning (ABL) used to teach speaking skills to Engineering students in a private university in Maharashtra. The present study was used to determine the effect of ABL on the development of the speaking skills of first-year B. Tech students. Pre-assessment and post-assessment equivalent design was used to collect the data of the research. Total one hundred students of FY B.Tech. were selected as subjects of the study. Pre-assessment was done at the commencement of the course. Then ABL techniques were used to teach the selected topics. After the completion of the selected content, post-assessment was conducted to measure the development of the speaking skills among students. The findings of the study showed that ABL is an effective and essential way to enhance ESP students' speaking skills since the selected students' post-assessment score was significantly different from their pre-assessment score.

Keywords: Activity Based Learning, ESP, speaking skills

Introduction

Learning is acquiring new knowledge, behavior, skills, values, preferences or understanding, and may involve synthesizing different kinds of data. While learning the content by just listening to teachers; if students are encouraged to process the information with higher-order thinking such as comprehension, analysis, synthesis, application, and metacognition they will understand the content better. Students will be able to remember the content learned throughout their life, to relate the information to any life situation, and will be able to connect it with past learning, build their own knowledge (Garner, 1987). The present paper focuses on one of such opportunities provided to students to use the inputs received in various activities and evaluate the impact.

In case of ESP students, especially engineering students, it is quite relevant to see if traditional ways of teaching the courses such as Communication Skills, Soft Skills, Professional Communication, etc., are really giving expected outcomes. Most of the students joining such professional courses are either from rural/semi-urban or from low exposed urban background. Except a very few of them, all lag expected command on English in general and on speaking skill in particular. In addition, when they start learning the concerned courses in traditional lecture-based/teacher-centric way, they get almost no exposure to develop the skills expected in the corporate/professional atmosphere. Therefore, there is indeed a need to switch to ABL and provide these ESL learners essential exposure to develop such essential skills one of which is effective speaking. The researcher here is not denying the practice of using various activities by a few teachers. However, the fact is that mostly these activities are completely un-designed, unguided, and unmonitored. Moreover, the impact/outcome analysis is done seldom by these teachers. Therefore, the present paper highlights the outcome of the well-designed, properly guided, and monitored activities used for developing speaking skills amongst ESP students.

Activity-Based Learning (ABL): A Short Review of Research

The definition of ‘activity’ is ‘work that involves direct experience by the student rather than a textbook study’. ABL is generally defined as ‘any instructional method that engages students in the learning process in the classroom (Prince, 2004) Thus, activity-based learning, should allow students to engage with and process information in such a way that he/she understands and builds his/her knowledge about a particular subject. When students are able to apply the knowledge and skills learned in relevant situations, that is the outcome of successful learning.

The idea of activity-based learning follows the constructivist educational theory and is child-centered pedagogy. Activity-based learning may be defined as a method of instruction, where activities of different types, suitable and relevant to specific subjects are integrated seamlessly into the regular instructional materials and methods to involve students in the teaching-learning or instructional processes and engage them fruitfully (Suydam & Higgins, 1977). The prime aim of the method is to make the classroom more student-friendly and reduce the fear and domination of the teacher.

Active learning is a crucial element of the new thrust toward what is now commonly called “learner-centered” or “learning-centered” teaching (Weimer, 2002). Most definitions of active learning focus on two key components: “doing” and “reflecting.” The most cited definition of active learning comes from Bonwell and Eison (1991): “Involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing.” The overall quality of teaching and learning is improved when students have ample opportunities to clarify, question, apply, and consolidate new knowledge. In this case, instructors create opportunities for students to engage new material, serving as guides to help them understand and apply information.

According to Harfield, et al. (2007) during ABL students are not passive recipients of knowledge; rather, they actively participate in learning experiences. This is so, since ABL is based on the constructivist theory of learning that indicates that ‘humans cannot be given information, which they immediately understand and use; instead, humans must construct their own knowledge based on their previous experiences and usually in collaboration with others’ (Powell & Kalina 2009).

Kolb (1984), points out that demonstrative activity-based teaching as compared to conventional ways of teaching is more suitable for facilitating learning. Domin (2007) also states that teachers could provide successful learning experiences to learners through engaging them in activities. Churchill’s (2003) study indicates that ABL could also facilitate the development of higher-order thinking skills in students.

The study of Zahoor-ul-Haq et al., (2015) explored that, students actively participated in the language classroom who were taught through activity-based learning method (ABL) because activity-based instruction provided students many opportunities to develop their listening skills. Students taught through activity-based teaching method outscored students who were taught through traditional language teaching methods in the listening skill on post-test. The low achievers of the experimental group showed a significant jump over the low achievers of the control group on post-test in listening. The results also proved that high achievers who were taught through activity-based teaching methods showed better performance in listening than those high achievers who were instructed through conventional/traditional way of language teaching.

Dr. Shabana Thayniath (2015) emphasizes the importance of ABL techniques to make learning interactive and interesting. According to her short activities should be included in the learning of language. This gives more scope for listening to English conversations, developing one's own vocabulary and skill of speaking.

Ms. Jyostna Kumari and Dr. K. K. Sunalini (2017) focus on the role of activities/tasks which are very much essential to develop the communication skills of engineering students. According to their research, students’ active involvement in the learning process is needed instead of just imparting knowledge monotonously. Such a classroom adds variety to regular, passive learning and improves the efficiency of the learners thus creating a positive environment for language learning.

Aniruddha Biswas, Sumit Das, and Suchandan Ganguly (2018) mentioned in their research article that a student can learn best only if he/she is involved as an active role player in the teaching-learning process. Unless the habit of involvement is grown up in the nature of the student, he/she cannot perform as a team leader in a group of people in some project. By adapting activity-based learning students can learn how to make mistakes and overcome that.

Effective Speaking: A Core Skill for Professionals

Speaking is the ‘ability to carry out a conversation in the language’ (Numan, 1991). Speaking is regarded as a vital language skill (Grainger 2000) since the most important function of a language is ‘facilitating communication with others’ (Littlewood, 1992). Indeed, the art of speaking is considered ‘the single most important’ (Numan,1991) and the ‘most rewarding’ (Haley & Austin, 2004) aspect of language learning. Learning to speak, whether in first or other languages, necessitates that, students develop linguistic and sociolinguistic aptitudes (Mahbub-ul-Alam & Khan, 2014). To elaborate, learning to speak a language requires learners to use accurate grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Moreover, it involves developing knowledge about when and how to communicate (Burns & Seidlhofer, 2002). Moreover, the teacher should not only be encouraging but also keep in mind that learners learn while making mistakes during an assigned task (Baker & Westrup, 2000).

Data Collection

Data for the present research was collected from one hundred First year B.Tech. students from a private university in Maharashtra. They have to study a course entitled Professional Communication-I prescribed in their first semester. For the present research Pre-assessment and post-assessment equivalent design was used to collect the data. After conducting pre-assessment in the beginning of their academics, various ABL techniques were used to teach the selected topics. Later on, a post-assessment was conducted to measure the development of speaking skills among students. Selected students’ performances were observed and analyzed.

Activity first - Breaking the ice (Self-introduction and introducing others)

This is a warmup and ice-breaking activity wherein students are expected to introduce themselves and their peers during a practical session. Unlike the traditional way of making students prepare themselves and present sequentially, the instructor/researcher made it activity based in the following way. She wrote total nine points on board namely, *name, native place, birth date, hobbies, why engineering, why specific branch of engineering, why this University, expectations from communication skills teacher, and motto in life*. Students were asked to prepare three different sheets and write information about three points sequentially on each sheet separately. When all the students completed writing they were told to fold the sheets and submit to the instructor. All these sheets were mixed and re-distributed three sheets to each student randomly. Then they were asked to sit in a circle, read and pass the sheets from one student to another until they get their own sheets back. When a student received all three sheets of her own, she raised her hand and introduced herself. When all the students completed introducing themselves, they were assigned peers and asked to introduce each other using the same points.

Activity second - Public speaking (Welcome speech, introducing chief guest, vote of thanks)

Working engineers have to deliver speeches and presentations. So to give practice of speaking in public this activity was selected. In this activity, students were asked to select any situation from the given situations. Situations such as; a celebration of Women's Day, Independence Day, Science Day, World Language Day, Health Day, Environment Day, Engineers Day etc. were given to them. They were asked to prepare welcome speech, introducing chief guest and vote of thanks for the same situation. Then they were asked to deliver those speeches.

Activity third - Group discussion

As GD is a part of the selection process, engineering students must know all the do's and don'ts of it. So the selected students were guided on all the required elements of GD. Some videos of GD were shown to them. Then they were divided into a group of six. They were asked to decide the topic of their choice and information about various websites was also given to them so that they would easily find information and collect some points to put in GD. They were given enough time for preparation and then they discussed the topics. When a group is discussing, other students played both the roles, as audience and as observers, and provided constructive feedback to the performance of their peers. It engaged the students in GD as well as out of GD in implementing the knowledge gained. Moreover, they felt satisfied when their peers evaluated them. When they were commenting on the performance of their peers, they used English unhesitatingly.

Activity fourth- Mock business meetings

Engineering students should also have knowledge about how to conduct business meetings effectively and how to participate in them. So, in this activity, they were told some effective techniques to conduct business meetings successfully. Then they were divided into groups and given various situations. They were asked to assume that they are faculty of university and university is going to organize International Conference on recent technologies in engineering. Therefore, to plan for that they were asked to conduct a mock meeting. Students were asked to prepare a copy of the agenda and then they were instructed to participate in a mock meeting.

Data Analysis

The data for pre-assessment was collected from these in the beginning of the academic year in the forms of various questions related to their personal details to make them speak. Similarly, data for post-assessment was collected in the same way. The analysis of the students' pre-assessment and post-assessment was done. The parameters such as confidence level, fluency, accuracy, content understanding, etc. were decided to evaluate the students' performance in both assessments. Pre-assessment and post-assessment result of selected students was compared and analyzed to identify students' understanding and grasping of the terms/topics taught. The remarkable change was found in their grades. The students who were

in category D (poor) could achieve category C (average) and B (good), those who were in category C could come to category B and category B students could come to category A (very good).

Discussion and Findings

The results of the research showed that there are significant differences in the pre-assessment and post-assessment scores of speaking skills of selected students. Selected students performed significantly better than their earlier performances in the same activities. In pre-assessment the students were asked very simple questions such as *Introduce yourself, what are your hobbies? why have you selected engineering field as your career? Why have you selected this university for your graduation? What motivates you in your life? Who are your favorite teachers? Why? What are your aims in life? Why English is important to you? What are your expectations from English teachers?* Etc. Very few students could give answers to these questions. Many of them knew the answers but due to lack of communication skills they preferred to remain silent. Many of them didn't understand the question.

When they were asked to speak on simple topics like, *my favorite game, my family, most beautiful day in my life, the happiest moment in my life* etc. very few students spoke for one or two minutes; the remaining students tried but could not complete the activity. The same students performed very nicely in post-assessment. Those who had got very less marks in pre-assessment they could score good marks in post-assessment. When the researcher conducted Ice breaking activity i.e. introducing self and other students come to know how to introduce oneself and others formally. Around 80-90% of students got the confidence to introduce themselves and their friends. The same observations are applicable to public speaking also. When the researcher guided students about how to deliver speeches effectively and made them to write speeches and deliver in front of their batch mates; 60-70 % of students were confident enough to maintain eye contact with their audience as they themselves had written those speeches there was fluency in their speaking. Some of them were anxious but with practice, they could overcome it to some extent.

Students liked activities such as group discussions and mock meetings. All the students enjoyed doing these activities. They were provided multiple resources; videos of GD, various websites of career guidance where they found the material on the topics they had to discuss. Healthy competition was observed during their performances. They were keenly observing the performances of other students as they had to give feedback on peer performance. In mock meetings, they worked in a group. Each group had given a different situation on which they had to conduct a formal meeting. So, students distributed their roles and played roles very confidently. They prepared required documents such as notice, agenda, and minutes for the meeting. Students found themselves more confident and fluent compared to their earlier performance in the pretest.

Along with pre and post-assessment, the selected students were also given a questionnaire to take their views on the ABL used in the class. The following table shows the analysis of the questionnaire.

Students Responses on the questionnaire on ABL

Statements	Students' response in percentage			
	Greatly	Considerably	Moderately	Littly
ABL motivated me to attend the activity-based contact sessions	75	25	-	-
ABL helped to search more information for learning activities	35	35	30	
ABL encouraged pre-preparation for learning activities	40	31	20	9
ABL motivated to participate in group learning	55	24	17	4
ABL increased participation in the group activities	67	22	8	3
ABL helped to take leadership positions in the group activities	65	21	10	4
ABL inspired to come forward to do the presentations	40	60	-	-
ABL taught to respect the valuable presentations of peers	60	20	20	-
ABL helped to create opportunities for learning with peers	54	23	23	-
ABL encouraged to come forward to correct the incorrect answers of peers	40	37	13	10
ABL gave the opportunity to evaluate the presentations of the peers	52	38	7	3
ABL encouraged to come forward to give more information for insufficient explanation	40	45	15	-

The above table reveals that the majority of the students have accepted that ABL contact sessions have increased their involvement for self-learning practices. Almost all the selected students of the research expressed that ABL contact sessions have motivated and increased their participation in group learning and group activities. Moreover, they stated the ABL sessions inspired them to respect the valuable presentations of peers. It can be concluded from the findings that ABL approaches have improved the self-learning and peer learning practices among the First Year B.Tech. Students.

It is concluded that ABL significantly increased the level of student achievement in speaking skills. The results supported the findings of Bailey (2005) and Songsiri (2007), who

stated that speaking ability and self-belief in speaking might be enhanced if a suitable program of study, teaching methods, adequate activities, and resources could be provided to students. The literature also suggests that teachers should conduct a variety of speaking activities in the classroom to enhance their speaking abilities (Zhang, 2009). Therefore, it is recommended that ESL teachers should use ABL for teaching English and Communication Skills to ESP students.

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