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Using Literature to Foster Competence in Speaking

Jaspreet Gandhi, M.Phil.

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is twofold. The first part focuses on the difficulties and challenges that the students face in communicating efficiently. The second part of the paper emphasises how literature can be an effective tool in developing speaking skills. The use of literature evokes a personal response in the reader or listener. The material used in literature is authentic. It provides exposure to real language; it can relate to the learners' need more closely with a more creative approach and have a positive effect on the learners' motivation. Literature also provides interesting language practice materials in the form of drama, poetry and prose.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how these three areas: Poetry, Prose and Drama expand and encourage the learners in acquiring speaking skills. The emphasis has been laid on how these areas assist learners to comprehend the language effortlessly.

When a teacher narrates a story, his aim should be to make the students interact by giving his opinions, feelings and personal experiences. Similarly teaching poetry will also motivate the students to discuss the characters and theme, or debate the moral issues. Furthermore, my

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focus will also be on drama which is again a very valuable tool to work on the speaking skills, especially pronunciation. Drama bridges the gap between the course book dialogue and its natural usage and when the learners play, move and act at the same time with drama, they become more confident in communicating and it elevates their learning process.

Key words: literature, authentic, prose, poetry, drama, natural usage

Introduction

We generally speak more than we write. So, as teachers, it is our responsibility to practice speaking and listening skills more than the reading and writing skills. Language teaching, especially second language teaching, has always been a matter of debate and discussion. It has constantly compelled teachers to evolve and adopt newer strategies and techniques of teaching. The research reported in this paper has focussed on the premise that the goal of our language course should be truly to enable our students to communicate in English. They should learn how to speak the language efficiently.

Nunan (1991) argues, “Success is measured in terms of the ability to carry out a conversation in the (target) language”. Sara Holbrook and Michael Salinger suggest:

The sheer number of communication skills students need is indeed formidable. Stacked on a three legged stool- reading, writing, and speaking- that pile of requirements is growing exponentially with the information age. In fact, a weakness in any one of those three legs may cause a collapse in a student’s ability to succeed in a world that does not run on multiple choice answers but on essay responses delivered clearly and, very often orally.

Hence, it is necessary that the students should become confident enough to speak the language or else they will be de-motivated. It has always been a daunting task for learners of English to master the language. They face a lot of difficulties and challenges while acquiring the language.

The Focus of This Paper

This paper points out these problems which hinder the students in the process of speaking the language fluently. Solving these problems are not easy but solutions can certainly be worked out through diligent observation and practice. We need to remember, however, what Albert Einstein once wrote, “We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them”.

Possible Source of Solution

For every complex problem, there is a solution that is simple and neat. The solution to this problem of developing fluent speaking is *Literature*. Literature is the supremely civilizing

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pursuit. The present paper suggests teaching speaking skills through literature as a possible and effective solution.

Literature always stimulates the emotions of the students. Literature is also associated with intellectual activity. Through the different tools of literature, the students comprehend and learn the lexical items, semantics, vocabulary, phrases, idioms, use of tenses and various parts of speech which, undoubtedly, enhance their speaking skills.

Difficulties Faced by the Students to Speak English Fluently

It is generally noted that the learners acquiring English as a second language in India are shy about speaking the language in front of other students. There could be various reasons for such behaviour. Either they are from such a cultural background where they cannot talk loud in the class, or they lack the confidence in speaking in front of others. But then they should always remember that the more they practice, the more they will improve their speaking skills. We need to realize that we learn to speak only by speaking.

It has also been seen that the learners are apprehensive about speaking English because they find the language difficult to cope with if the way of teaching is above their current skills and their standards and interest. If the tasks done in the class are too difficult or too easy, they will certainly revert to their first language either for their comfort or for some emotional support. This is the greatest hindrance in their acquiring the language since they translate word for word to check if they have understood the task before attempting to speak.

Learning and Communicating

Learning a language and communicating in a language are two different things. As Paul Simpson states:

Perhaps the greatest challenge in the study of English language is how to understand its most prosaic day to day functions. It is hard to develop a conscious awareness of what we routinely take for granted about language. (2003, after word: p- 180).

As we know that English is a complex language and English grammar is again too vast to memorize and use logically. With many rules to master, it is indeed an intimidating task for students to use the correct ones. Students are always obsessed with correctness and in order to be perfect they end up in committing numerous errors. These errors continue in the use of pronunciation, verbs, tenses or maybe the correct use of vocabulary. All these complexities make it complex for the students to speak the language effectively and effortlessly.

We need to recognize that teachers who have inadequate competence in English may also help perpetuate the problems faced by the students.

Use of Literature to Impart Speaking Skills

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We as teachers should assist the students to overcome these difficulties. An effective way to do this is to use literary tools to impart speaking skills. Literature involves a special or unusual use of language and provides the students with tools for their own creative activity. These tools are prose, poetry and drama. The students are able to explore the linguistic and conceptual aspects of the written text and use it to improve their speaking skills as well as diction. Good literature is always capable of teaching grammar through correct usage, subconsciously. Michael W. and Jeffery D. Wilhelm write:

Literature provides a unique and powerful way of knowing- and therefore offers us new ways of becoming and being. Reading literature allows us to explore both what is and what could be. Teaching literature, therefore, can open door that nothing else can open, at least not in the same way.” (2010, p. 7).

We see literature assists the students to unravel the many meanings in a text. Furthermore, literary texts have a powerful function in raising moral and ethical concerns in the classroom and encourage our students to explore these concerns and connect them with the struggle for a better society. Note what Gillian Lazar declares:

Literature provides wonderful source material for eliciting strong emotional responses from our students. Using literature in the classroom is a fruitful way of involving the learner as a whole person, and provides excellent opportunities for the learners to express their personal opinion, reactions and feelings. (1993, p. 3).

The Result

So, when the students share their opinions, reactions, and feelings in the class, subconsciously they are working on their speaking skills. As they are aware of the fact that they have to speak in front of the entire class, so they are careful to use the correct pronunciation and appropriate vocabulary. They are also particular about the use of tense and verb.

Literary Tools Used for Enhancing Speaking Skills

When I talk about literature, I keep in mind all the tools, namely Prose, Poetry and Drama.

Teaching through Prose – Use of Stories

Stories are a part of prose, and storytelling is the oldest form of education. People around the world have always told tales as a way of passing down their cultural beliefs, traditions and history to future generations. Cultures and societies have preserved and celebrated their memories through stories.

Teaching speaking skills through stories is very effective as it is very interactive. Students have fun; they enjoy themselves and are enthusiastic. Stories enrich their visual imagination

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and creativity. Students are introduced to literature and the beauty of the language. We will easily agree with Sherry Norfolk, Jane Stenson and Dianne William when they write:

Storytelling and literacy comprehension go hand in hand. Students learn to construct meaning from an increased engagement in storytelling, and language skills improve. (2006 Foreword: xv)

Stories can organize, retain and assist students to access information. Stories help them store information in the brain. So, when students are taught speaking skills through story based activities, activities not only enrich their active and passive vocabulary but they also concentrate on the stress, intonation, pause and articulation of voice.

When students get an opportunity to narrate a story in their own language, they can put the information stored in their brain into a meaningful text. This helps them to bring out the emotions, which provokes learning. Once the initial hitch of speaking in front of others is removed, the students become more comfortable in sharing their thoughts. Furthermore, when they see that their stories are valued, recognized and heard with interest, it gives them a confident stand. As substantiated by Sherry Norfolk, Jane Stenson and Diane William:

Once students see that their stories are valued and recognize how their own tales connect to the stories of others, a metamorphosis takes place when that happens, the classroom no longer contains a teacher merely feeding students facts. It becomes a group of people communicating on a real level. You can be yourself; they can be themselves; and together you can take an amazing journey of self-discovery. (2006 Foreword: xii).

Therefore, stories can help students develop a positive attitude towards learning process. They become more active, experience things directly and are able to express themselves in the way that best suits them. Stories not only improve their vocabulary, sentence formation, the use of tenses and verbs but also work positively on their fluency when they speak. Stories assist them to build up an overall personality of students as they are connected to the society directly, improving their communication.

Enhancing Speaking Skills through Poetry

Sara Holbrook and Michael Salinger writes the following to focus upon poetry as aid in learning language:

Poetry is precise, visual language, action verbs, and sensory details. It's of tremendous benefit to second language learners, even crucial to their full integration into the community. Poetry performance is learning to move to the rhythm of language. (2006: p-xiv).

Poetry has always been very beneficial to enhance the language of the students. When I talk about language here, I would like to emphasize on the speaking skills. When students hear

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poetry in the class, they compare and contrast different point of views and develop understanding of significance of figurative language.

In poetry words are chosen for their beauty and sound and then arranged in such a manner that they rhyme. Poetry is such a sophisticated literacy tool that it works on the moods and emotions of the students. They are able to express ideas that are meaningful to them without the constraints of grammatical accuracy. When they listen to poetry, it facilitates awareness of pronunciation, intonation and sentence flow. They practice specific language structures such as phrases, idioms, word order and verb tense.

Teachers can have activity-based poetry classes to enrich the speaking skills. They can create an atmosphere for the students to be wholly involved in the activity by showing pictures to introduce the topic. Instead of reciting the poetry simply, teachers can have some kind of dramatization of the poetry. When students dramatize poetry, they will automatically be involved in it completely. Furthermore, they will talk about their response, share ideas and discuss the theme. This will enrich their confidence in speaking fluently. Poetry is indeed very effective. Sara Holbrook and Michael Salinger state:

Using poetry to teach active listening strategies, clear expression, and the power of inflection, articulation, and gesture in effective communication is not only a convenient strategy, it is highly effective. (2006 preface: ix).

Enhancing Speaking Skills through Drama

Drama assists the students to concretely explore the mysteries of human communication. It offers ways for students to respond to and express their individual and shared understanding of a text. Students develop an active, interactive and reflective relationship with the text and they can respond to the text socially, emotionally, morally, physically, spiritually and culturally. Patrice Balbwin and Kate Fleming states:

Drama as a multi-sensory medium can provide an experiential structure for exploiting text visually, auditory and kinaesthetically. Its participatory nature motivates and promotes effective emotional learning, which is the most easily remembered learning whilst at the same time providing intellectual stimulus. (2003: p- 5).

When students work in dramatic contexts, they are offered the opportunity to use language as it is used in real life. Undoubtedly, drama enriches the spoken language. Through drama, students enhance the speaking skills and gain confidence as when they act and assume roles and interact in improvisation. They are more likely to remember the context they are learning because they are able to create and actively express the deeper meanings of that context through dramatization. They are also able to analyse and explain personal preference and construct meanings. It has been observed that in acquiring speaking skills through art forms, like drama, the students are also offered opportunities to learn more about themselves, others

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and the worlds in which they live and grow. As stated by Nan L. McDonald and Douglas Fisher:

Simply put, learning with and through art enlivens instruction, increases student involvement and deepens both the meaning and memory of the learning at hand. (2006: p-2).

Hence, when the students want to acquire proficient speaking skills, drama has always been of great help. When students enact a drama, they play certain roles, which might be close to what they see in the world around them or in history. It brings out their inner potential to think deeply and express their ideas. They are able to express themselves explicitly as they can relate to the characters; they try to give their best performance. Unconsciously, they are working on their imagination, vocabulary, sentence structure, stress, intonation and rhythm.

The modulation of the tone is extremely important during dramatization. When students work on this, it automatically enhances their speaking skills. Furthermore, drama may bridge the gap between the text and real life. They are able to express their understanding of texts through drama involving the use and creation of images, movement and sound.:

Drama activities creates a sense of shared ownership through which children can investigate and develop characters, fill the gaps left in the text, reveal the subtext, and use their imagination to bridge the divide between writer and reader, integrating and encompassing all aspects of literacy. (Patrice Baldwin and Kate Fleming 2003: p-5).

Some Common Class Activities

We, as teachers, can introduce some common activities based on prose, poetry and drama to enrich the speaking skills of the students. Some of these activities are listed below:

Activity 1

To create an atmosphere of enthusiastic learning, teachers can ask the students to narrate stories which they might have heard earlier. In this manner students share their thoughts in an exhilarating manner. It enables them to form sentences, use good and appropriate vocabulary, share ideas and work on their speaking the language fluently.

Activity 2

Teachers can ask any student to recite any poetry and ask the other students to observe the speaker and pick out the figurative phrases in the poetry. Figurative language always enriches the spoken language. When students recognize figurative devices and know where and how to use them, it will undoubtedly enhance their speaking skills.

Activity 3

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Teachers can ask the students to enact any story, poetry or drama being taught in the class. Dramatization always bridges the gap between the course book dialogue and its natural usage. So, when students enact any particular story, poetry or drama, they speak out confidently with the correct usage of tense and verb.

Activity 4

While enacting any drama, teachers can ask the students who are not enacting in the drama to pick out the grammatical errors made by the performers while performing their respective roles. This will help the participants as well as the non-participants to know their mistakes and correct them so that while speaking the same thing again, they are more vigilant.

Activity 5

Teachers can conduct some kind of a quiz based on the story, poetry or drama. These questions should be asked orally. While answering the questions, the students are not only giving the answers but also checking their spoken language, as it gets those marks.

Thus, we see that if we have an activity-based curriculum to teach language through literature, it can do wonders to the learning of speaking skills of the students.

Conclusion

Thus, my hypothesis in this paper is that literature is indeed a very authentic tool to impart speaking skills. If we look at every poem, story or drama as a mini-lesson, we as language teachers can use these little jewels to teach the spoken language to the students effectively so that they can communicate with a variety of audience and use it for different purposes.

Nonetheless, it should be kept in mind that “the raft is not the shore” (Just a proverb). Literary tools should not be taken as ends in themselves

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