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Comprehensible Input Processed through DIG Activities for Time-Bound Speaking Skills

K. Sathya Sai, Ph.D. and G. Baskaran, Ph.D.

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Abstract

Activating Speaking Skills of ESL Learners to meet the expectation at work situation remains one of the major challenges of English Language Teachers in Colleges. Adult Second Language Learners in countries like India aspire to learn time-bound speaking skills in order to secure a particular job. The subjects just need a limited vocabulary range and knowledge in frequently used structures and expressions at least to manage fairly their work situation in the beginning. Their ‘acquired competency’ from formal education is passive and they find a gap between knowledge gained from education and skills required to communicate at work situation.

This paper explores a method that helps the subjects for time-bound speaking skills and also activate ‘Learned Competency’ in due course of time. The emphasis of this new method is on activating speaking skills by DIG (Drill, Imitation, and Generation) activities among adult learners who have certain productive inability due to various reasons. The subjects of the study have been exposed to the second language only in the class rooms for more than a decade and their ‘Learned Competency’ is memory oriented and their ‘Acquired Competency’ is evanescent due to lack of practice. Hence, this new approach emphasizes on ‘DIG (Drill, Imitation, and Generation) activities in acquired ‘comprehensible input’ to develop productive skills of the learners by imposing pressing situation in production point.

Key terms: 1. **Comprehensible input:** language that is presented at a level understood by the learner. 2. **DIG Activities:** Drill, Imitation and Generation of sentences. 3. **Learned Competency:** knowledge of a language gained from formal learning (but not active in usage due to lack of practice.) 4. **Acquired Competency:** Ability developed from an environment where the learners learn how to use a language from other users.

Select Performance in Select Skills

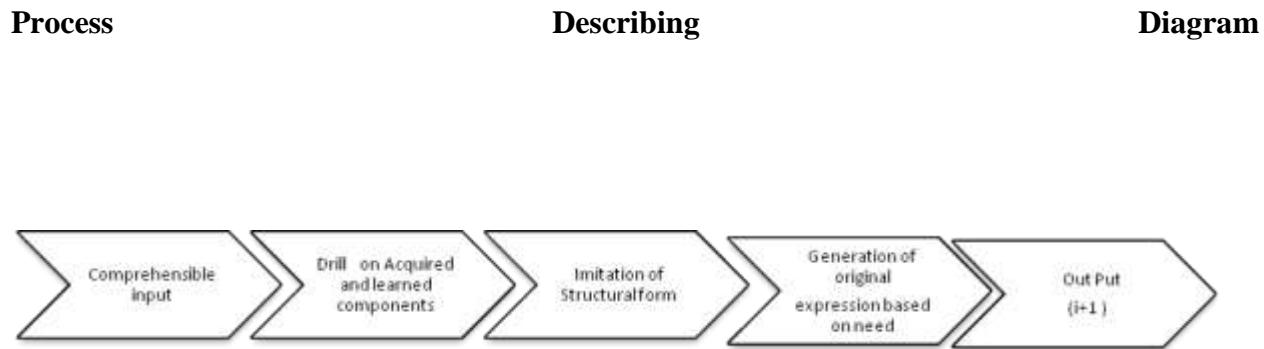
This paper is an attempt to evolve a special method for developing speaking skills among ESL Learners closely following Stephen Krashen's Second Language Acquisition theory with some modifications in order to address the specific problems of the select Learners, and also to meet their immediate requirement. The emphasis of this method is on activating speaking skills of adult learners who have certain productive inability due to various reasons. The subjects of the study have been exposed to the second language only in the class rooms for more than a decade and their 'Learned Competency' is memory oriented and their 'Acquired Competency' is evanescent due to lack of practice. The select subjects have not been given situations to practice language skills, and they themselves have never initiated discussion in second language. Assessments to test their language skills are always in the form of written examination, and spoken aspect is not considered for assessment at all. Hence, there is no need or compulsion for the learners to speak the target language in the class room or not even for examination.

This approach aims to manipulate the already gained 'Acquired Competency' Supplemented by 'Learned Competency' of the select subjects and evolve a module to develop their Speaking Skills. Stephen Krashen's Second Language Acquisition theory insists on 'comprehensible input' to ESL Learners in a 'low anxiety situation' for successful speaking. According to him, "Real language acquisition develops slowly, and speaking skills emerge significantly later than listening, even when conditions are perfect."¹ According to Krashen 'Language acquisition' is a subconscious process and, one can use language fluently and effectively by developing "feel" for corrections and not by being consciously aware of grammatical rules. His conception is that 'acquired competency' is naturally supplemented by 'Learned competency' during practical speaking activity. He does not insist on tedious drill. He is against imposing compulsion on learners to speak. But, in the present acquisition process drill is considered as essential and subjects are motivated for earlier production of received input, because these subjects do not try to speak as they do not feel the necessity.

Pressure Situation to Learn Select Items Better

In contrast to Krashen's approach, in this present experiment, it is felt that, the subjects of this study should be kept in a pressing situation at the out put point so as to enable them to speak. They may have adequate 'Learned Competency' and 'moderate acquired competency', but it is deduced that these learners have not developed the ability to speak because of unavailability of speaking atmosphere. Another problem with these subjects is; when they attempt to speak, they rely on 'learned competency'. Their conscious attempt to produce correct sentences shifts their

attention to thought of correction from ability to produce sentences and also they start thinking in the first language. The hypothesis of this approach is that the subjects' speaking skill can be developed by activating 'acquired competency' supplemented by 'learned competency' from micro level activity to 'macro level', by subjecting learners to the process described in the following diagram.



Meet the Expectation at Work

This process diagram explains the new method which aims at activating Speaking Skills of ESL Learners to meet the expectation at work situation. Communication skills expected from the subjects are very specific skills which enable them to use language effectively and productively to perform their everyday job related activities. As the subjects' pursuit is time bound, and the area of language usage is limited to their field, there arises the need for developing exclusive package to achieve the productive skill before the subjects appearing for job interview. This paper is an attempt to evolve a method which is a modification on Stephen Krashen's approach to Second Language Learning to address the specific problems of the select Learners.

Comprehensive Input through Idea Units

This method prepares a Comprehensible input in idea unit without stressing much on grammatical aspects. It aims at retrieval of 'Acquired Competency' from the year long received input. Input content are preferably from spoken structures. Subjects are given inputs in single idea units along with phonological details such as pitch, modulation accent, pause, discourse markers, tongue twisters,etc., The subjects are not interfered during speaking even for correction. The modules, which are given as input, should be from practical situations and usage, which naturally create 'a feel for correction' when they use it incorrectly. The learners themselves are expected to be alert to their mistakes and take the responsibility for correction.

Drills

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Drill is an imperative task in language acquisition in order to achieve complete knowledge and emotive components of the second language. This is essential because the ‘word order’ of the target language is different from that of first language. Thus learners can overcome mother tongue influence in arranging words using drill. J.A.Bright who knows the drawbacks of drill still endorses it for its special impact on the learners; “ all specific drills are artificial... question and answer drill make a useful intermediate step”³. Another problem with these subjects is that they always think in first language before producing sentences in the second language. This causes a speech impediment which can be eliminated by drill. Drill also helps for training speech organ phonologically according to the requirements of second language.

Imitation

Imitation of idea packing structure with replacement unit of word or phrase may help learners use same structure to express different ideas. This can be started from single sentences to short conversation, with two exchanges between Student-1 and Student -2 as pair activity. Bright used the following pattern;

Pupil 1: I'm going to Delhi.

Pupil 2: Are you going in January or February?

Pupil 1: In January.

Imitation of the pattern leads to

Pupil 3: I'm going to the pictures.

Pupil 4: Are you going in the morning or evening?

Pupil 3: In the evening. (Bright J.A191.)

Activating structures with modification help learners operate different structures frequently used in conversation. In this stage, comprehensible input can be in the aspect of vocabulary, grammar, structures, replacement of words and phrases in sentences, etc. This practice may help learners generate sentences fluently and effectively.

Stages

Generation of original ideas is the final stage in the speech production process. The two previous levels require conscious practice on the part of the learners. This practice gradually reaches ‘subconscious level’ and during sentence generation, it automatically helps for generation of ideas. At this level, learners are prompted by practical situation to operate the acquired practice and knowledge to meet the situational requirements. The subjects are placed in a situation which compels them to speak. Corrections are made by learners themselves, not by applying any grammatical rules but by developing a ‘feel’ for correction.

This level examines the output from the learners and find how a language acquirer develops competency over a period of time. It states the level of acquirer before giving input as ‘level i’, and after processing the ‘comprehensible input’ through various processes, the out put,

at the final stage, is seen as ‘level i+1’. Wilson says, “the more comprehensible input one receives in low stress situations, the more language competence one will have.”² In this present method, low stressed situation is observed at input level. But at output stage, learners are kept in a situation that compelled them to speak. The finding shows that the learners speaking skills is improved in terms of ability to speak by manipulating ‘Acquired Competency’ Supplemented by ‘Learned Competency’.

Conclusion

The emphasis of this new method is on activating speaking skills among adult learners who have certain productive inability due to various reasons. These subjects are pursuing their graduation programme with a sole objective to be placed in companies immediately after the completion of their course. A good communication skill is a prerequisite to enter these companies. A special ELT method is devised to activate the passive language competency of these learners. Even though Krashen ignores drill and is against pressing situation for producing speech, This new approach emphasizes on ‘drill’ and ‘practice’ in acquired ‘comprehensible input’ to develop speaking skills in pressing situation. Drill on ‘learned component’ as well as ‘acquired component’ may help the subjects to activate the speech organ to target language production, and pressing situation is essential to make these subject become alert and produce.

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