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Methods of Improving Speaking Ability in English in L2 Classrooms – A Case Study

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Abstract

In this study 20 female students were selected from four Government schools in Erode district, Tamilnadu, India, studying in the first year and second year of higher secondary classes through stratified random sampling procedure. The data was collected through a questionnaire having alternate items. The questionnaire was designed by consulting experts in the concerned field. The main findings of this study recommend the following:

1. Teach English as a language to the students and not as a subject which leads to rote memory only to pass the examination.
2. Give enough time to perform exercises and provide opportunities for the improvement of speaking ability.

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3. Consider the students' complaint that teachers scold them for poor performance in speaking and that this discourages students from participating fully in speaking activities.

4. Teachers and students are equally responsible for the poor speaking ability.

5. Improvement may be achieved through more stress on the quality of books at the basic level, through giving enough time to speaking, administering phonetic drills to students, by avoiding scolding, by creating friendly environment, by making practical and applicable strategies by teachers for students while teachers speak most of the time in English, by developing boldness and confidence in students for asking questions, by organizing less crowded classes, by offering awards and motivation for students, and by using media like CNN and BBC for continuous uninterrupted listening.

Key words: English Language, Speaking ability, Teaching of English, Students' perspective.

Introduction: Importance of Communication Skills

This paper deals with the improvement of speaking ability of the students in English. It is widely recognized that students in most colleges in India do not perform well when it comes to speaking English. Many reasons have been suggested for this continued poor performance. To improve upon the situation, the perspective of the students is very much important because the modern age is the age of media, propaganda and mass communication. Every person desirous to reap the full benefits of modern education, library use, research knowledge, science, commerce and trade, etc., should have sound knowledge of English language and good communication skills. The person who has not good communication skills will suffer badly in this era of competition in comparison to the person who has good communication skills who can soon catch the eyes of an authority to award him or her a higher position or responsibility in order to increase his or her self-esteem and reputation.

Speech is the prime means of communication and the structure of the society itself would be substantially different if the teacher failed to develop communication through speech (John Laver, 1994).

Cloze Tests and Related Activities

To develop oral communication, cloze tests are suggested. Cloze test is defined as “a test of the ability to comprehend text in which the reader has to supply the missing words that have been removed from the text at regular intervals” (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/cloze+test>). Cloze test activities have the scope of integrating all the four skills. If all the language production of the student is controlled from outside, he will hardly be able to transfer his knowledge from a language learning situation to a language using situation (Bygate, M. 2003). Students who repeated two tasks, having first performed them ten weeks earlier, completed them more fluently and with greater complexity on the second occasion because of a shift from conceptualization towards that of formulation (Carter, R & Numan, D., 2005).

Problem-solving Activities

Teachers can facilitate language acquisition through problem solving activities and task which ensure learner participation and interaction naturally (Aslam, M 2003). For example, pronunciation can be improved through problem-solving activities. But, for this purpose, the knowledge of Phonetics is necessary for a teacher of English to correct students’ mistakes and to help them make appropriate differentiation between English sounds and the sounds from their mother tongue.

Current Situation in Schools

We notice that many teachers are not familiar with the recent developments in language teaching methods. This situation is easily noticed in some of the Government schools in the Erode district. Their knowledge of both written and spoken English is not adequate and they also have difficulty in presenting learning items using suitable strategies. Perhaps it may be useful to prepare these teachers to write tests similar to IELTS and TOFEL, designed specifically for the teachers of Tamilnadu.

Communicative Skill

It is a fact that is impossible to conceive of a person being communicatively competent without knowing how to speak English in socially relevant contexts (Hedge, T., 2008). Working in groups is important but many students comment that they find working in groups not useful and not encouraging. Most important is how teachers work with boys and

girls, how they motivate speech activities, and relate them to their personal interests and on-going life of the school day. These are vital factors for the improvement of speech.

Method

20 female students were selected from four Government schools in Erode District, Tamilnadu, studying at the first year and second year of higher secondary classes through stratified random sampling procedure. The data was collected through a questionnaire having alternate items. The questionnaire was designed by consulting experts in the concerned field. The main findings of this study reveal that teaching English as a subject to the students, and not as a language, encourages students to rote memory in order to pass the examination.

Table: 1

Response from the students about the Speaking Ability in English
(N=20) (Only Female Candidates)

S. No.	Questions	Yes	No
1.	Enough time for speaking ability	10 (50%)	10 (50%)
2.	Different exercises given for speaking ability	12 (60%)	8 (40%)
3.	Speaking on given topic for limited duration	10 (50%)	10 (50%)
4.	Shy in speaking due to laughing of class fellows	13 (65%)	7 (35%)
5.	Don't know to speak correct English	14 (70%)	6 (30%)
6.	Activities not arranged properly	10 (50%)	10 (50%)
7.	Lack of vocabulary	10 (50%)	10 (50%)
8.	Need more time to speak a small information	12 (60%)	8 (40%)
9.	Teachers did not speak English while teaching	10 (50%)	10 (50%)
10.	You like English	8 (40%)	12 (60%)

Result and Discussions

This table reveals that 10 (50%) students said that enough time was given for the improvement of speaking ability whereas 10 (50%) students denied. When asked whether

different exercises were given to them to develop speaking ability, 12 (60%) students replied that it was so, while 8 (40%) were of the opinion that such was not the case. 10 (50%) students agreed that they can speak on a given topic for a limited duration but 10 (50%) did not agree in this regard. In relation to a question whether the students are shy to speak because they think their classmates will laugh at them, 13 (65%) students said “Yes” but 7 (35%) said “No”. 14 (70%) students responded positively, while 6 (30%) students responded negative regarding the question whether they did know how to speak correctly. For the question whether the teachers did not speak English most of the time while teaching, 10 (50%) students said “Yes” whereas 10 (50%) said “No” in this regard. 12 (60%) students replied that their lack of vocabulary was the reason for their poor speaking, while 10 (50%) said “No” in this regard. For the statement that the teachers were the main cause for the students’ poor speaking ability and to improve the situation, the teachers should arrange for regular activities, 7 (35%) said “Yes”, 13 (65%) said “No”. In addition to that, the students were of the opinion that both teachers and students were equally responsible for the poor quality of speaking skill. 12 (60%) of students said that they were in need of more time to speak to present even a short piece of information due to lack of vocabulary, whereas 8 (40%) students said “No” in this connection. When asked whether the students would speak in English in the class if they liked English, 8 (40%) students agreed, whereas 12(60%) denied.

Ways to Improve the Speaking Ability

Speaking ability can be improved by reading more books and it should be devoted at the basic level, for it is a step-by-step process and such competence cannot be improved all of a sudden. It can also be improved by listening to standard English news like CNN,BBC and Cricket commentary and so on. English should be taught as language as well as a subject so that more time may be available for the students in performing various activities/ exercises in a natural way. Some individual activities, such as speaking on a certain topic, should be assigned to students for a minute or in the beginning stages of speaking activities. Students should be given motivation, encouragement, some psychological training, reassurance and counselling to remove their shyness or fear based on their assumption that their classmates would start laughing when they commit errors and their teachers may scold them. Teachers should ask question in English so that students may try to reply in English, from this way both of them can enhance their speaking ability. Teachers should also be given training how they can encourage and not discourage the students. They should also be taught how to control

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students in a positive way in order to provide a friendly and conducive environment in the class while a student is speaking in the class.

Linguistic skills such as grammatical structures, vocabulary, and phonetics should be emphasized by the teachers in the classroom so that the students should know how to speak correctly. To check the language competency of the students at various levels, a viva-voce examination, conversations, mock-interviews may be made a compulsory part of the semester/annual examination system.

Conclusion

Most of the students complained that enough time was not given for the improvement of speaking ability in the classroom. It can be safely concluded that English is being taught as a subject and not as a language, due to which limited time is available and the habit of rote memory is promoted. Different exercises were not given to them regarding speaking ability; most of the students agreed in this respect. Some students agreed that they could speak on a given topic for a limited duration, while more than half did not agree in this connection. Some students were scolded by their teachers for speaking incorrectly in English but more than half did not think so. Some of the students could not speak in English classrooms because of their fear for their teachers. Another important point to be noted here was that maximum number of the students was shy because of their fear that their classmates would laugh at them. According to the data from the table, half of the students knew how to speak correctly. More than half the students responded that their teachers did not speak English most of the time in the classes of other subjects. Students and teachers may be equally responsible for the poor speaking ability. Teachers need to improve their professional knowledge and skills. Different activities such as Role play activities, Dialogue, Conversation, Group discussions and debate competitions were not regularly arranged according to the statements made by the maximum number of the students.

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