Interdisciplinary Journal of Linguistics
Volume [17] 2024, Pp. 213-220

TEACHING SPEAKING SKILLS AND THEIR ASSESSMENT

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ABSTRACT

Speaking, among the other language skills, seems to be the most significant skill. For many language learners, speaking a foreign language perfectly with good pronunciation and fluency is one of the most complex tasks to achieve. Because of this observation, the paper aims to present a brief description of foreign language speaking skills and their recent status. It seeks to clarify the factors that affect students' speaking abilities, with specific expressions of the common dilemmas teachers face while trying to address the issue of verbal skills. The paper also covers some aspects that need to be tackled when dealing with speaking as it shows the necessary activities that must be designed by the teacher in the classroom.

Keywords: Speaking skill, Testing Oral Skills, Communication, Motivation.

1. Introduction

Speaking is an important language skill. As Lado, R. (1961:240) states, "Speaking ability is described as the ability to express oneself in life situations or the ability to report acts or situations in specific words, or the ability to converse or to express a sequence of ideas fluently." Speaking is an act of making vocal sounds. It means to converse or express one's ideas, thoughts, and feelings in spoken language. To speak implies conveying information. Speaking skills are the skills that provide us with the ability to communicate effectively. Without communication skills, the ability to progress in the working world and real-life situations would be impossible. Speech anxiety is one of the most common fears people have across the world.

2. Speaking Activities in the Classroom

In a foreign language classroom, the ability of being able to be clearly understood when speaking, and the ability to use effective oral communication skills are very important to make learners of Foreign language proficient in speaking skill, following are some classroom speaking activities through which the teacher tries to create interaction by exchanging information and communicating ideas about the correct

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grammar i.e. accuracy, adequate vocabulary, acceptable fluency as well as good pronunciation to convey the intended meaning through the speech like a native speaker.

a. Discussion and its Importance

Discussion is an important form of oral practice in the classroom. The best discussions in the class are those that arise spontaneously. The discussion generally has a recognizable purpose. Discussion is similar to dialogue in the sense that both involve careful listening and observing what others say and speak. Learners' spoken abilities will transfer into the discussion. They can convey their personal experiences in the classroom, where they handle different topics and subjects of interest to every individual learner.

Littlewood (1999) explains that through class discussions the learners would be able to use the foreign language as a medium to talk about their experiences, express their views and opinions, and handle their social relationships. Besides this, FL teachers generally claim what is named "discussion failure" (Harmer, 2001, 272). The reason for this, is that foreign language learners are reluctant to give their opinions in front of the whole class because of lack of self-confidence.

b. Formation of Buzz Group

As Harmer, (2001) suggests a technique to realize a successful oral discussion and to avoid all the speaking difficulties which might encounter the learners, be the through "Buzz group" which is based upon the formation of small groups; It gives the learner the chance to talk and interact at the same time. Through this" Buzz group" ' application, before being asked to perform orally in front of the whole class, the level of learners' stress will be reduced. Harmer (2001) has also illustrated some examples to show the worth of the cited technique for an entire range of discussions, for example;

1. Let the students predict the content of a reading text or invite them to talk about their reactions to it after reading.
2. Discuss what should be included in a news broadcast or have a quick conversation about it.

To prepare learners means to respond directly and spontaneously through ' instant comments ' by showing them pictures or introducing any topic at any stage of the lesson and then asking them to give their first impressions. As a result, the important factor to consider when dealing with oral discussions in foreign language classrooms is students' engagement with the topic and their interest, providing them with the period for thinking, arrangement of ideas, and language expressions they will use.

c. Importance of Role Plays

It is one of the very common classrooms speaking activities. As Ur, (1984: 131) is of the view that, "Role plays are used to refer to all sorts of activities where learners imagine themselves in a situation outside the classroom, sometimes playing the role of someone other than themselves, and using the language appropriate to this new context". This special speaking activity is supposed to have many positive impressions on learners in the classroom;

- It gives them understanding as they examine others' ideas, feelings, and points of view.
- It is a chance to practice their oral skills and understanding as they use the foreign language to describe observations, feelings, and responses.
- It provides them with the chance to practice decision–making and problem-solving skills as they improve their experience in independent thinking and cooperative learning.
- It also develops both speaking and listening activities.

In role plays, the students have to imagine a role (e.g. an electrician) and a situation (e.g. accidents). Role play in a foreign language classroom is a drama-like activity, it can take many forms:

d. Simulation

Simulation is another important role-play activity that can be used to develop oral fluency. 'A simulated environment' can be created by the teacher, likewise a 'Structure' in which students must have a general view of the tasks to be achieved and the activity to be done. However, it seems somehow difficult to distinguish between the two kinds of activities above.

e. Formation Gap Activities

Another type of activity in the classroom spoken interaction is, as described by Harmer (2002:88), "Where two speakers have different parts of information making up a whole because they have different information, there is a gap between them". In foreign language classrooms, group activities are proven to be among the most useful in second language acquisition since they provide negotiation of meaning and conversational adjustment which push students to more accurate output.

f. Formation of Talking Circles

The formation of talking circles in the classroom is a very useful strategy. It provides an encouraging and safe environment where students are allowed to share their points of view with their associates using the target language without any fear of criticism. It is an effective strategy for reaching group consensus and for real-life problem-solving. In class, the students sit in a circle so that each one has the chance to speak. During this spoken form of activity, both parts of interaction have some guidelines to follow. Only one student speaks at a time, while others listen carefully. Address all comments to the issue or

topic, not to comments made by other students, and avoid both positive and negative responses to another student's comment.

g. Activities-Based Storytelling

Storytelling activities have always been one of the important tools for practicing speaking skills in the classroom. They can be permitted to ask a limited number of questions after the story has been stated by their classmate.

h. Testing Oral Skills

Testing the learners orally is very important. Testing, formally and informally takes place at the beginning and at the end of most language courses, as well as at various times during the course. It aims to test the progress during the course or achievement at the end of the course. To test learners' speaking abilities; teachers have many criteria to examine the pronunciation, fluency, accuracy, and interaction capabilities of the learners.

i. Testing Pronunciation

Language learners show great enthusiasm towards pronunciation and consider it a very important factor in realizing successful communication (Kelly 2000). Pronunciation is one of the difficulties learners encounter, and this is the reason that when dealing with assessing speaking, it is considered a strong factor to examine in oral tests as well as in ordinary communication in the classroom using the target language. In a communicative test of speaking, students are asked to pronounce the language intelligibly even if some influences from L1 remain. They are expected to produce every individual sound appropriately.

j. Testing Fluency

Fluency testing is essential to determine the impact of fluency in foreign language comprehensibility. The two key indicators of fluency are - speech rate and speech continuity. In testing learners' fluency, they are not asked to produce speech very fast and follow the same rhythm as native speakers do, but only to speak at normal speed with clear continuity and with logical sequencing of sentences.

k. Testing Interactive Communication

Grammatical accuracy, fluency, and pronunciation are not all that is needed to test foreign language learners' speaking abilities, but when assessing speaking, language teachers also need to examine their student's interactive abilities in the classroom. Interactive communication is the candidate's ability to interact with the interlocutor and the required speed and rhythm to fulfill the task requirements. It also includes the ability to use functional language and strategies to maintain or repair interaction. In assessing learners' interactive capacity, teachers have to judge their capability to converse without hesitation as well as their ability to participate proficiently in different interactive states of affairs and to develop a variety of topics by initiating and responding properly.

l. Knowing Learner's Speaking Difficulties

While teaching speaking skills, it is essential to care about not going to extremes, either by being too exclusively concerned with theories and thinking about their application to teaching, or by following a certain routine of playing the tape recorder, questioning, and answering. The teacher must have an overall understanding of what speaking is and what are the limitations or difficulties which the learners may encounter while developing their speaking skills ability. Besides that, how to bridge the gap between an analysis of speaking and the actual classroom teaching. Hence, foreign language students declare having obstacles in achieving a real and perfect oral performance due to the following factors:

m. Lack of Motivation and Interest

Speaking a foreign language can be a difficult task in the classroom. Most students find it tough to deal with speaking skills because of the non-motivational atmosphere, as Littlewood (1999) is of the view that, unless learners of a foreign language are given full opportunities to express themselves, present their ideas, and communicate and integrate with the world around them, they are not going to improve their speaking performance. So, students' speaking skills develop best in a motivational atmosphere where dynamic interactive learning is highly valued to encourage learners to feel safe, comfortable, and relaxed with little or no exposure to the target language. Motivation is very important and is the key concept for avoiding inhibition. It is closely related to interest, so the student's failure to participate orally may be due to their lack of interest which can derive from the learners' impressions that the activities they tackle in the classroom are too difficult. Besides, they complain about the nature and types of topics in discussion and they describe them to be uninteresting. It depends primarily on the teacher to guarantee motivation as well as interest in his classroom by choosing topics and issues that attract students' attention and interest as well as carrying out activities that do not put heavy demands on the learners and give them the chance to express themselves freely.

n. Inhibition or Shyness

Unlike the other skills, speaking requires what is termed as immediate exposure. Foreign language learners used to be self-conscious to talk or express their ideas in front of others using the target language (Ur, 1984). "It is too easy for a foreign language classroom to create inhibition anxiety," (Littlewood, 1999:93). He further emphasizes that inhibition from one side results from learners' feeling of ignorance in front of their teacher or instructor whom they consider as the main source of knowledge. Hence, on the other side, inhibition appears closely related to students' shyness and fear of making mistakes as well as criticism. So, because of their feeling of linguistic inferiority and their inability to develop their communicative skills, they become ashamed when attempting to talk and they are cautious about making errors in their speech. That's why they prefer to

reduce their speaking time and participation in the conversation. In some cases, this inhibition forces the learners to prefer not to speak at all and remain silent. "Learners occupy a permanent position of inferiority before a critical audience with little opportunity for asserting their individuality. They are likely to feel drawn out to communicate with those around them. On the contrary, many learners will prefer to keep a 'low profile', in the hope that they will not be called upon to participate openly" (Littlewood, 1981, 93).

o. Vocabulary and Grammar Constraints

Adequate knowledge of vocabulary and grammatical rules is very important to speak a foreign language. In language context, many students show the desire to speak and to participate but unfortunately, they fail to present their messages verbally. In other words, we can say that, they are unable to find suitable words for specific topics or they do not have enough vocabulary stock in their linguistic repertoire. That's why, not only good vocabulary knowledge is essential in speaking, but good grammatical competence has also an important role in conveying meaning. It means that not only having a good vocabulary but sufficient grammatical knowledge is also very important for learners so that they will be able to combine words, phrases, and sentences correctly to communicate effectively and fluently. "The learner must attain as high degree as possible of linguistic repertoire". (Littlewood, 1981:6).

p. Poor Listening Practice

The relationship between listening and speaking is very important. Thus, less listening practice will lead automatically to poor speaking competence. So, students' inability to produce speech is not only due to their lack of motivation and interest, and inability to find suitable words and use grammar correctly to combine them, but it also derives from their restricted experience in listening to the target language, as they listen only to their teacher's model of speaking and which is not, in fact, the only model they encounter in their real-life situation. Hence, our students should be aware of the importance of listening to a native speaker's model of speech. (e.g. intonation, pitch, fall, facial expressions, etc.). These features must exist for successful listening, good speech production, and acceptable communication in the target language.

q. Pronunciation Problems

Errors in the pronunciation of the learner and how these errors can prevent successful communication are crucial problems to rectify. Foreign Language learners' inability to pronounce well may affect their spoken performance and classroom participation. In the case of the English language, an erroneous pronunciation of one sound may lead to a big misunderstanding and/or a change in meaning. Unfortunately, many learners develop habitual errors that cause the unrecognizability of certain words and in many situations, it creates communication problems. As Kelly (2000,11), is of the view that, "A learner who mispronounces a range of phonemes can be extremely difficult for a

speaker from another language to understand. This can be very frustrating for the learner who may have a good command of grammar and lexis but have difficulty in understanding and being understood by a native speaker". In addition to mispronunciation, a few learners misuse the supra-segmental features such as intonation, stress, juncture, pitch, etc. Kelly (2000,11), also emphasizes that "The inaccurate use of suprasegmental elements such as stress or intonation can also cause problems". As pointed out above, problems caused by pronunciation errors led to problems in both reception and comprehension of the meaning and the function of an utterance (Kelly, 2000). Furthermore, there is another problem of the first language or mother tongue interference with the pronunciation of the second language in terms of accent and mood. Students often encounter such kind of problems since they share the same mother tongue and they tend to use it usually, as they feel comfortable, natural, and secure when speaking, and speaking a foreign language out of its context or outside the classroom seems difficult for them. It is challenging for them to keep using it consistently.

3. Conclusion

This paper presents a brief discussion of some of the theoretical aspects that are related to foreign language speaking skills. In this paper, we have shown what is meant by a successful oral performance. Oral speaking is not easy, it is extremely difficult to practice because foreign language learners encounter many constraints. Yet, our foreign language teachers try to overcome these complications by adopting a variety of techniques that facilitate the student's interest in order to develop their speaking skills, discussion skills, interpersonal skills, critical listening, group interaction, and problem-solving skills.

In the end, we can conclude that to participate actively in class, students must be able to communicate effectively, and appropriately in a variety of moods and contexts. Speaking is the oral articulation of ideas; it influences the development of critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and general learning outcomes. It is an intellectual and social function. It shapes students' perceptions of the world, represents these perceptions as knowledge, and encourages foreign language learners to transform it as they shift through observations, evaluate information, and compare views. Students become more proficient speakers as they adopt their capabilities to use the language and the ideas appropriate to the situation, respond to listeners' verbal and non-verbal cues, ask questions to clarify understanding and produce emotional responses. To realize the learner's active engagement in the speaking process, teachers need to determine the areas of difficulties their learners encounter. They should structure and plan meaningful tasks and experiences within the classroom environment and present them more realistically and authentically. As a teacher, one has to encourage his students to use the target language even outside the classroom and try to provide them with a conducive environment in order to enable them to practice it properly.

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