

Approaches to Speaking: Challenges in Organizing Classroom Discussion and Possible Solutions

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Abstract

This paper reviews a complete outline of different approaches to speaking, ways to initiate classroom discussion, problems in initiating classroom discussion and possible solutions. It also emphasizes on creating proper learning environment to teach speaking skills. This paper reviews various speaking activities and the problems that arise while initiating those activities in second language classroom. One of the goals of this paper is to provide teachers and educators to know more on various approaches to speaking. Another goal of this paper is to show various problems organizing classroom discussion and provide possible solutions to them.

Keywords: Approaches to speaking, Classroom discussion, Problems, Solutions

Introduction

Teachers and educators are constantly concerned with categorizing various methods used to teach various language skills, whether they are receptive or productive. Reading, writing, listening, and speaking are the four language skills that are most essential for successful language learning. Speaking is the most important of the four language acquisition skills and is categorized as a productive skill. Multiple language teaching methods and approaches are used by teachers of varying competency levels to support the learning environment for the target language. One of goals of this paper is to provide teachers and educators to know more on various approaches to speaking. Teachers should not let go any opportunity to increase their students' fluency and confidence. According to Gower, Phillips, and Walters (1995, p. 99), teachers have a responsibility to help students "realize their need for language" and give them the opportunity to participate in class discussions. Another objective of this research is to illustrate numerous issues with arranging classroom discussion and offer potential solutions.

Categorizing Forms of Production (Speaking)

There are several approaches to speaking and to get the absolute outcome, language teachers need to be more conscious about the language teaching theory into practice. Burns (2012) states that speaking skills help learners in 'developing the ability to process speech quickly to increase fluency' (p. 167). She also states that

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speaking is a kind of skill that needs to be applied in 'real-time' through communicative activities (p. 166). In an ESL classroom, interaction can take place through various patterns. Effective classroom interaction depends on the 'roles for the teacher and the students' (Eckard & Kearny, 1981, p. 17). For instance, teacher-teacher interaction-based class, only teacher-centered class, teacher-student interaction-based class, student-centered class and student-student interaction-based class. Ur (2003) terms these as 'patterns of interaction' which involve teacher and student as distinct participants in a language class (p. 101). In a class, where teacher initiates the discussion, students become the passive listeners in that class. According to many researchers, a class in which student-student interaction takes place, is the most effective language learning class.

Examples of Interaction Patterns

Many teachers and educators divide categories for convenience interaction activities. Such as, individual work, choral responses, collaboration, students' initiation and teacher's response, whole class engagement, self-access, open-ended questioning etc.

Literature Review

Many researchers worked on various approaches to speaking, ways to develop effective interaction, problems in initiating classroom discussion and their solutions.

Aspects of Speaking Skills

Speaking Skills refers to 'developing the ability to process speech quickly to increase fluency (e.g. speech rate, chunking, pausing, formulaic language, discourse markers)' (Burns, 2012, p. 167). It also includes the negotiation of speech using communicative strategies. Communicative strategies involve 'developing cognitive strategies' as a way for constraints in language awareness (Burns, 2012, p. 168). Ferris and Tagg (1996) state in a study that many professors suggest that 'to overcome cultural inhibitions/shyness' ESL students need to interact and participate in the classroom. In this way, students will be able to ask and questions effectively.

Speaking skills includes the accuracy and fluency in the target language. Fluency and accuracy are considered as the two measures of speaking skills. Kaltinick & Kaltinick (1974) state that students below Intermediate level learns speaking skills through situation-based 'structured' speaking activities (p. 340).

Fluency

Students can be fluent speakers of English language if they get the opportunity to speak up according to their interests. Murphy (1974) states that 'signal activi

ties' provide an opportunity for the learners to develop their 'oral fluency' along with interpersonal function of interaction (p. 51).

Accuracy

Students' accuracy of language depends on communicative speaking activities. Accuracy involves 'correct use of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation' (Gower et al., 1995, p. 99). Students learn their mistakes through getting corrective feedback from the teacher.

Teacher's Role in Initiating Classroom Discussion

Teacher plays a vital role in initiating classroom discussion through speaking activities. Harmer (2007) finds out that there are three relevant roles that a teacher plays in promoting classroom interaction (p. 347). Learners need to get access to information and resource which they can use to increase their speaking skills. According to Bailey (2006), access to information and resources are essential for adult ESOL learners (p. 118).

Teacher's Role as a Prompter

Sometimes students get stuck while speaking on a certain topic and unable to find a way to regain the fluency then the teacher may act as a prompter to help them progress over that situation without any disruption. Harmer (2007) states that teachers may help learners by 'offering discreet suggestions' to revive their participation in classroom discussion (p. 348).

Teacher's Role as a Participant

Teacher can play the role of a participant by helping students in a running discussion. According to Harmer (2007), teacher can participate in 'dialogic events in larger groups' with the students as 'near-equal participants' (p. 348).

Teacher's Role as a Feedback Provider

Teacher can play the role of a feedback provider in a speaking skills-focused language classroom. Over-correction and correction in the middle of a fluency or accuracy task may 'inhibit' the learners and the 'communicativeness' of the task may also disappear (Harmer, 2007, 348).

Interactive Speaking Activities

The purpose of speaking activities is to teach learners the use of interaction patterns and communicative strategies to capturing learning outcome of them. In addition, in terms of communicative classroom, materials and activities are often realistic 'to reflect real-life situations and demands; of the students (Celce-Murcia, 2001, p. 6). To create an effective learning environment, teachers must reduce the barriers to communication (Prozesky, 2000, p. 44).

Stimulation-based Activity

Stimulation is a kind of communicative activity in which learners get a problem-solving task and they act according to the situational context. Gower et al., (1995) demonstrate that stimulations can be simple but the more they genuine they are, the more students' participation evolve (p. 107).

Role Play

Role play is a kind of communicative activity which helps shy learners to speak within a situation. Ur (2003) outlines that students get 'stimulations' and according to the 'allotted roles' they play different roles in a given situation.

Information Gap Activity

Information gap is another type of communicative activity in which different group of students get different clues and they share the unknown information with each other. Information gap activity can be puzzle solving, picture description, arranging and describing things etc. (Harmer, 2007, p. 349).

Guided Activities

Guided activities can be instructional-based in which students have to follow teacher's instruction and act accordingly. Such as, 'model dialogues' carrying different grammatical rules and vocabulary items (Gower et al., 1995, p. 101).

Creative Activities

Creative activities include 'information gap,' 'opinion gap,' 'board games,' 'picture description tasks,' 'pyramid discussion,' 'ranking tasks' etc. (Scrivener, 2011, p. 218). All these activities are communicative and encourage learners' participation.

Research on Approaches to Speaking

A number of experiential research have reviewed that tertiary level students' face difficulty in interaction-based activities. These studies concentrated on approaches to speaking of ESL learners of different proficiency level of (Such as, Murphy, 1974; Harmer, 1995; Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Ur, 2003; Torkey, 2006; Scrivener, 2011; Gan, 2012).

Furthermore, there are different approaches to speaking. Some of them are the direct and indirect approaches to speaking. Among them, direct approach comprises of "skill getting" and indirect approach consists of 'skill using' (Torkey, 2006, p. 18). Indirect approach to speaking increases 'learners' autonomy' focusing on 'communicative tasks through negotiation and the sharing of information' (Torkey, 2006, p. 18). Indirect approach to speaking includes 'discussion, information gap, simulations and talking circles' based activities which enhance learners' speaking capability.

Moreover, direct approach can be implemented to 'contrive sufficient focus on form (accuracy) to enable interlanguage development' (Torkey, 2006, p. 18). In

addition, Farooqui (2007) states that teachers teach 'effective communication strategies, conversational routines (for example, small talk), conversational formulae (for example, forms of address) and speech acts such as requests, compliments, clarification and questions' to raise students' contribution to classroom discussion (p. 106).

Discussion

To develop promote effective classroom discussion, teachers are required to 'gauge the conversational material' according to the 'proficiency level of the learners' so that they can engage themselves into easy-going activities (Eckard & Kearny, 1981, p. 17). Conversational activities can be categorized into 'controlled, semi controlled, and free' (Eckard & Kearny, 1981, p. 17).

In addition, according to Harmer (2007) purpose of speaking event can be characterized as 'interactive or non-interactive' (p. 343). It is quite predictable that communication will be more in 'unplanned' conversation as it occurs spontaneously.

The functions of speaking are of two types. They are-

1. Transactional
2. Interpersonal

Transactional function of speaking conveys information through 'facilitating the exchange of goods and services' and interpersonal function is 'maintaining and sustaining good relations between people' (Harmer, 2007, p. 343).

Recommendations to Outline Speaking Activities

Many researchers suggest various types of speaking activities which accomplish the purpose of classroom discussion. To manage the 'flow of speech' teachers may involve students in introducing new 'topics, turn-taking, signaling intentions, opening/closing conversations' (Burns, 2012, p. 167).

Theme and Stimuli

Teacher may bring interesting theme-based materials to grow students' interest. In this way, students become active participants in the classroom discussion. Activities can be discussion-based, comparison-based, argumentative etc. In the process of learning, students will in any way learn the speaking skills. Scrivener (2011) adds that students will learn the syntax and vocabulary items without knowing they are being taught and there will be a 'little or no explicit teaching of grammatical or vocabulary points' (p. 211).

Flouting Talk-talk Loop

Teachers should avoid 'talk-talk loop' in the ESL classroom. Scrivener (2011) states that teachers' getting locked into a talk and not getting students' responses is referred to as 'talk-talk loop' (p. 211). Teachers need to allow more

'wait-time' for the students to initiate a discussion.

Asking Open-ended Questions

Open-ended questions help teachers to increase learners' interest in contribute in classroom discussion. It can used as an important technique for developing effective communication in the class. Scrivener (2011) labels that asking open-ended questions with a speaking skill focus, 'encourage reactions' of the students (p. 212).

Organizing conversation

Teachers' first and foremost duty is to organize the conversation. Therefore, all the students of a language class get a chance to participate in the classroom discussion. Teacher can participate in the discussion to make it interesting (Scrivener, 2011, p. 212). Teachers can participate in the discussion to make it interesting but more STT is encouraged.

Execution of Devil's Advocacy

'Devil's advocacy' can be act as an interesting involvement strategy that teachers can play with the students to arouse their interests. Devil's advocacy refers to introduce compare and contrast, debate-based activity or argumentative discussion in the class. Debate-based activities shapes the 'functional purposes' of speaking skills (Parcher, 1998, p. 1).

Problems in Initiating Classroom Discussion

While initiating classroom discussion, various types of problems arise in the speaking-skills centered class. Such as, confidence, accuracy, fluency, L1 interference, thinking in the target language etc. related problems.

Confidence level

If students are not confident enough they hesitate to participate in the speaking activities. Students' confidence level has a great deal to do in developing their speaking skills. Farooqui (2007) suggests that teachers may use 'dialogue and discussion through asking questions' which helps reducing students' 'shyness and hesitation' during classroom interaction (p. 106).

Consciousness over Accuracy

When the students become conscious over their accuracy, they are less interactive in the class. Even if they join any conversation, they take a long time to think and speak.

Consciousness over Fluency

When students become conscious over their fluency, if they stuck somewhere they lose interest in joining in any discussion. If they are corrected instantly during any fluency-based activity, they lose interest to contribute next time. Learners need to get access to information and resource which they can use to increase their speaking skills. Gan (2012) states that students face fluency problems while speaking because of their less grasp on vocabulary (p. 50).

L1 Interference

It is likely to happen L1 interference in terms of students' interaction and preparation time.

Students may think within their minds what to say next and in that way they try to translate words into the target language from their L1.

Solutions to the Problems in Initiating Classroom Discussion

Corrective Feedback

Corrective feedback is a significant issue to help students aware of their mistakes. To run a fluency based activity, teachers can 'monitor discretely or vanish' to facilitate more space for contributing in the classroom discussion. Scrivener (2011) states that in terms of fluency-based speaking activities, 'correcting in the middle of a fluency task' is obtrusive for the continuation of the task (p. 225). He also adds that in terms of accuracy-based activity, sometimes students need to get 'instant correction' (p. 225).

Scaffolding

The aim of scaffolding is to help 'a less competent one to communicate by both encouraging and providing possible elements of the conversation' (Scrivener, 2011, p. 227). Scrivener (2011) conveys that scaffolding works as a 'useful language feedback' such as, showing interest by nodding head, saying 'uh-huh,' eye contact, 'yes' these types of precise words to encourage the students to continue their discussion in the class (p. 227). Teacher can also scaffold the students by providing 'a word or phrase that the speaker is looking for' (Scrivener, 2011, p. 227).

Structuring Speech through Communication Strategies

There are some conversational or communicative strategies which can be followed by the learners to structure their interaction pattern. Torcky (2006) states that speaking can be continuous through using 'non-specific words and phrases, fillers, repetition, loosely organized syntax' (p. 17).

Use of Fillers as a Communication Strategy

Students can use discourse markers to take time and become ready to speak. Harmer (2007) suggests that learners can use 'ummm, well, you know' etc. to take a break in a conversation (p. 343). Therefore, they can easily become confident enough to speak up when they are ready.

Turn-taking as a Communication Strategy

Students can use several phrases to take turn in a conversation. For example, 'well, I'd just like to say' etc. to structure speech within their mind and deliver it with the interlocutors (Gower et al., 1995, p. 100).

Use of Discourse Markers as a Communicative Strategy

Students can use various discourse markers to structure their speech. They can use 'right, now, anyway' to mark the beginning and end of the segment of a sentence (Gower et al., 1995, p. 100).

Use of Various Expressions as a Communicative Strategy

Students can use various common and useful expressions to structure their speech in an ongoing speaking activity. They can use 'that reminds me, by the way, talking of' while introducing a topic (Gower et al., 1995, p. 100). Again, they can also use 'well, I must go, nice talking to you' etc. while finishing a conversation (Gower et al., 1995, p. 100).

Ways to Stimulate Classroom Interaction

There many ways that a teacher can use to stimulate lively classroom discussion. Students can be encouraged to interact in the class. They can also be given plenty of controlled, semi-controlled, guided, freer or creative activities. Teachers can make the speaking activities more communicative and carefully take decisions to plan the activities.

Pair Work

Teachers can set various types of pair work according to the lesson plan. Pair work increases the amount of student talk in the class. Gower et al.. (1995) state that when a teacher supplies the motivation and students work in pair or small groups, it develops 'rapport between students' (p. 45). Student-student interaction lessens the risk of teacher-centered language classroom. Student-student interaction becomes high through speaking activities.

Group Work

Group work increases the amount of student-student interaction as well as student-centered classroom. Jim Scrivener (2011) mentions that a teacher should make use of small group or pair to maximize opportunities for quiet speaker to

speak (p. 60). Debate can be an interesting group work through which language classroom becomes lively and interactive. According to Parcher (1998), 'debate program enhances the critical thinking ability' of the students in a speaking skill-focused class.

Whole Class Discussion

Grouping students and whole class discussion create a friendly environment in the classroom. 'Varying groupings' enables students to experience working with different individuals and maximize learning opportunities (Gower et al, 1995, p. 58).

Conclusion

In conclusion, speaking plays the most significant role in the language learning process out of the four language skills. Since it has been demonstrated to be more beneficial than learning for academic purposes, it has a significant impact on how students connect with one another in real-world situations. Learning a language can be done for a variety of reasons, such as learning it for academic purposes (EAP), learning it for a particular purpose (EAP), etc. A teacher can also serve as a facilitator, resource, prompter, and guide while instructing students of various sociocultural backgrounds and proficiency levels in speaking skills. By creating communicative and interactive activities including guided activities, semi-controlled activities, and creative activities, teachers can encourage greater STT in the classroom. In a classroom setting where student-student interaction is promoted, learning will occur more frequently. To initiate productive discussion in a language classroom, setting better speaking activities are very significant. In terms of initiating classroom discussions, students might face lack of confidence, low motivation, peer pressure, L1 interference, inhibition, accuracy and fluency related problems. However, to reduce the amount of problems arise in speaking class, teachers can do a need analysis on the students before starting the language course. Teachers can also make speaking activities based on the topics which increase students' interest. Also, they can make sure that less-spoken students get the opportunity to participate and contribute to the classroom discussion. The students' speaking abilities can be improved via practice and study. The real contexts in Bangladeshi EFL classrooms can be studied and determined through classroom observation, as well as further studies can be based on real-life practices.

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