

THE EFFECT OF CLUSTER BASED STRATEGY INSTRUCTION ON IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' SPEAKING ABILITY

Fakhri Mohammadi Gaskari¹, Houshang Azari²

Department of English Language,
Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon Branch,
IRAN.

¹Fakhrimohammadi@yahoo.com, ²Dr.h_azari@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the effect of cluster based strategy instruction as some strategies (DVD, pictures, games and video projects) on Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability. This study tried to answer whether using cluster based strategy instruction might enhance higher speaking skills in Iranian EFL learners at intermediate level. To answer the question, 60 intermediate language learners in Poursayed language Institute in Roudsar were randomly selected via administering an OPT to 100 language learners. Then they were divided into two groups of 30 and were randomly assigned to an experimental and control group. A pre-test of speaking including 10 questions was administered to both groups, and the participants were asked to answer them orally. Then the experimental group received a treatment of four strategies of speaking skill while the control group received a treatment of existing method. After ten sessions of the treatment, a post-test of speaking was administered to both groups. The data was analysed through calculating an independent sample t-test and a Pearson correlation test. The results indicated that the means of the two groups were significantly different.

Keywords: Speaking ability, teaching speaking, strategy, OPT, EFL learners

INTRODUCTION

The term classroom interaction refers to the interaction between teacher and learners in the classrooms. L₂ classroom interaction research began in 1960s with the aim of evaluating the effectiveness of interaction in language acquisition. According to Brown (2001), interaction is at the heart of communicative competence. When a learner interacts with another learner he/she receives input and produces output. Nunan (1991) stated that language is acquired as learners actively engage and interact with each other to communicate in target language.

Huebner, 1960, said "language is essentially speech, and speech is basically communication by sounds". And according to him, speaking is a skill used by someone in daily life communication whether at school or outside. The skill is required by much repetition, it is primarily a neuromuscular and not an intellectual process. It consists of competence in sending and receiving message. So speaking is a mean for expressing ideas, opinions, or feelings to others. Social-interactionists see language as rule-governed cultural activity learned in interaction with others. According to Vygotsky (1978, as cited in Shannon, 2005), social-interaction plays an important role in the learning process. Ellis (2004) stated that "interactionists view language learning as an outcome of participating in discourse, in particular face-to-face interaction" (p. 78).

According to Chaney (1998), speaking is the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in variety of contexts. Speaking is important in language learning and teaching.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Arends (1998) stressed on the practice of interacting with others as a way of making teachers' teaching style lively. It can prevent teaching from being stale and routine. When trying new techniques, they are not necessarily entertaining new principles. Most of them shared a common theme of emphasizing verbal tasks that focused on meaning rather than language structure (Breen, 1984).

According to Chastain, 1976, the most realistic opportunity that teachers have to demonstrate to students the practical use of second language to communicate is to use the language as the medium of communication during the daily routine of conducting the class. If they speak the language in class and if the students also speak it, to express themselves, the class becomes an example of using language to function in a social situation. Thus, one of the most important roles of speaking is to observe as a vehicle for participating in class activities (Chastain, 1976, p. 271). The strategies the teacher uses can be fun and enjoyable, and at the same time achieve academic goals. Teachers should choose activities that enhance students learning, and avoid ones that are a waste of teachers' and students' time. Good & Brophy (2000, p. 30) state that "learning should be fun and motivation problems appear because the teacher somehow has converted an inherently enjoyable activity into drudgery." It can therefore be concluded that interesting and fun strategies can be used to promote speaking in the EFL classroom. According to Brown (1994), if strategies are intrinsically motivating and appeal to students' goals and interests then it can have a positive impact on their speaking.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The ability of students to be able to communicate naturally in English is one of the long term goals that language teachers would like to achieve in class. According to Bygate (1987), the problem in teaching a foreign language or a second language is to prepare the students to use the language. Indeed, it is a demanding task for language teachers to provide sufficient inputs for students to be competent speakers of English.

Usually, students feel insecure about their level of English and they face problems communicating as well as expressing themselves in the target language. As a result, they rather remain silent as they are in fear of making mistakes and do not show active participation in speaking lessons. In addition, language teachers at schools do not give full attention on speaking activities due to some constraints. Moreover, some ESL teachers prefer individual and pair work in class due to the fixed seating arrangement. Thus, emphasis should be given to address this problem as speaking is an important element in mastering English language.

Many EFL Iranians complain that they understand English, but do not feel confident enough to join a conversation and worry about that they pass different courses like listening and speaking ones in the institute, however they fail to speak in real situations of language use. There are a number of reasons for this problem. Students are trying to translate from their native language into English production blocking is occurring due to nervousness, lack of confidence. They do not like the materials. They are too shy and afraid to take part in the conversation. There are not enough conversation opportunities in or outside of class. And exam preparation focuses on grammar, vocabulary, and leaves little time for active use. In

order to improve English speaking skill students should speak, talk, converse, gab. A common argument among language teachers who are dealing with conversation courses is that the students do not talk at all.

RESEARCH QUESTION OF THE STUDY

Does cluster based strategy instruction have an effect on speaking of Iranian s' EFL learners?

HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY

In keeping with the above research question, the following null hypotheses were formulated:

Applying cluster based strategy instruction in teaching speaking does not lead to more acceptable oral proficiency.

REVIEW OF THE LITRATURE

For more than two decades there has been an abundance of research regarding strategy instruction. Originally, most of this research focused on the effects of strategy instruction on students with learning disabilities. Researchers are currently looking at how strategy instruction affects all learners. (Beckman, 2002). Strategy Instruction is a powerful student-centered approach to teaching that is backed by years of quality research. In fact, strategic approaches to learning new concepts and skills are often what separate good learners from poor ones. Cornett (1999) highlighted that students develop fluency in language and verbal communication skills, as well as the use of the body in face-to-face communication, when they are involved in role play activities. Those skills are especially essential for students learning a second language who may not often speak English at home. These EFL learners are stimulated to employ the language and then improve fluency and pronunciation with the chance to participate in role plays (Burke & O'Sullivan, 2002). Thornbury (2006) averred that conversation is an informal talk between one or more people; most learners identify the ability to participate in conversations as a desirable language-learning goal.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The subjects of the study were 60 Iranian EFL learners in Poursayed's English Institute. They were selected based on the administration of an OPT exam to 100 intermediate EFL learners. Selected students received scores at least one standard deviation below the mean in the OPT. They were divided in two groups of 30 and were randomly assigned to an experimental and a control group.

Design

This study followed quasi-experimental design. The subjects of the study were Iranian EFL learners in Poursayed's institute in Roudsar branch. The design of the study includes at least four stages: 1) subject selection via administering an OPT, 2) exposing the participants to the pre-test of speaking, 3) treating the experimental group of the study with the cluster based strategy instruction' and the control group with the existing method of teaching speaking. And 4) administering the post-test of speaking to both groups of the study.

Materials and Procedures

The materials of this research were divided into four parts. 1). Materials for proficiency test: an OPT exam was administered between 100 learners. After that 60 learners among those who are scoring were one standard deviation below the mean was chosen. 2). Materials for

pre-test: it concluded 10 questions that learners could answer orally. The researcher used asaei, 2011, speaking questions. The learner's answers were taped and analysed. Their scores were based on farhady, Jafarpour and Birjandi's book, 1995. 3). Material for treatment: they were selected from Top Notch Fundamentals one A by Allen afcher, (2011) that was for intermediate learners. And DVDs, pictures, video projects were used. 4). Materials for post-test: it contained 10 questions. They were oral test questions. For both the groups (Experimental group and control group) the same pre-test and same post-test prepared by the researcher was administered and data collected. Both the experimental and control group received instruction over the ten sessions. In experimental group, teacher used four strategies in classroom while the control group was thought by traditional way.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data obtained from testing the hypothesis of the study were analysed via calculating a t-test between post-test scores of the experimental and control groups of the study Pearson product moment correlation.

RESULTS

Table 1. The Summary of Descriptive Analysis for the Data related to the post-test of the experimental and the control group of the study

<i>Groups</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S.D.</i>
Speaking +four strategies	30	16.07	2.20
Speaking -four strategies	30	15.03	1.07

As table (1) indicates, the mean of the +four strategies group (the experimental group) is higher than that of the –four strategies group (the control group). Accordingly, the number of participants in each group was 30; in addition, the amount of the standard deviation was higher in the experimental group as compared to the control group of the study.

Table 2. Correlation between the pre-post Tests in Experimental Group

<i>N</i>	<i>Pearson Correlation</i>	<i>Sig.(2-tailed)</i>
30	0.946	0.000

Table 3. Correlation between the pre-post Tests in Control Group

<i>N</i>	<i>Pearson Correlation</i>	<i>Sig.(2-tailed)</i>
30	0.672	0.000

According to table 2 and 3, there was significant correlation between the pre-post test scores of two groups.(p<0/05)

Table 4. Independent Sample Test

	<i>Number</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std.Deviation</i>	<i>T-statisitc</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>Sig.(2-tailed)</i>
<i>Pre-Test</i>	30	14.97	2.13	-8.46	29	0.000
<i>Post-Test</i>	30	16.07	2.20			

The result of the T-Test of the study, table 4, can confirm this analysis, the observed T value is (8.46) ($T_{Obs} = 8.46$) while the critical value of T on the basis of 2-tailed significance level of (0.05) is 2.000. ($T_{Cri} = 2.000$). so the observed T is higher than critical T and high enough to reject the null hypothesis of the study.

DISCUSSION

According to the findings obtained in the light of running different statistical tests, it was deduced that the subjects in Experimental Group, who were taught speaking via four strategies, appeared to have benefited from these four strategies. It also indicated that the null hypothesis of the study was rejected. This rejection means that the utilized treatment of the study affected the outcome; thus, it can be concluded that using (DVDs, pictures, video projects, games) as classroom activities enhance performance in a test of speaking among Iranian EFL learners.

CONCLUSION

The results of the present study enunciated that using (DVDs, pictures, video projects, and games) seem to provide a sort of enjoyable environment for the learners to flourish in. This reason leads to better attention in learning and stimulate them to participate in speaking activities. Finally, this study confirms the remarks made by Deesri (2002) that the strategies the teacher should focus on should be interesting and should capture students' attention. In the young learner's' classroom, these activities are usually centred on songs, poems, chants, drama, stories, games and Total Physical Response (TPR) activities. Theoretically, the results of the current study can be considered a contribution in the latest theories and models of teaching strategies to the speaker of other languages. Such a contribution includes the enhancement of speaking skill in classrooms. Pedagogically, the results of the study seem to be more practical and compatible to an Iranian situation of foreign language learning particularly for those who encounter problems regarding their speaking and communication skills.

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