

INTERACTIVE CLASSROOM TECHNIQUES TO IMPROVE SPEAKING
ABILITY IN ESL STUDENTS

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Abstract

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The purpose presented in this paper was to identify the effect of using interactive classroom techniques on English as a Second Language (ESL) students' learning. This qualitative study conducted a review of literature on interactive classroom activities, addressed some useful interactive classroom techniques, and examined the effects of using interactive classroom techniques to improve ESL students' speaking abilities. Through the literature review, it became evident that most research conducted on the effect of using the interactive techniques on students' learning showed positive results. In this mono-designed paper, a bulk of the research states that interactive classroom techniques, to a certain extent, can improve ESL students' speaking abilities. It showed that using interactive techniques often can make a class more effective.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In China, language teaching in general, and applied language teaching in particular, has undergone a change in the last two decades. Previously the traditional classroom was exclusively teacher-centered. Previously, the teacher applied the cramming method of teaching which is full of endless prose translations and grammar or sentence structure explanations, with learners speaking only when spoken to by the teacher. This pedagogy has been replaced by the communicative approach to teaching, also called the interactive classroom. Most language teachers today are familiar with the interactive classroom.

English is an important language widely used all over the world. However, in China, English is used just for exams. In China, English is defined more as reading and writing than listening and speaking. While a crucial element of second language learning and teaching, speaking should not be ignored by ESL students and teachers. Learning how to speak English accurately and fluently is always a great task for ESL students.

This review of literature addresses some useful interactive classroom techniques which could improve ESL students' speaking abilities. It also examines the effect of using interactive classroom techniques to improve ESL students' speaking abilities.

ESL students should acquire experience through interactive classroom techniques in order to improve their speaking abilities. In order to teach second language learners how to speak in the best way possible, some speaking activities should be used that can be applied to ESL classroom settings.

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed as a question is as follows:

What is the effect of using interactive techniques on the learning of ESL students?

Definition of Terms

Techniques. A technique is a procedure used to accomplish a specific activity or task (Retrieved January 7, 2009 from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Technique>).

Ability. Ability (also called skill) is the learned capacity to carry out pre-determined results often with the minimum outlay of time, energy, or both. (Retrieved January 7, 2009 from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skill>).

ESL. Abbreviation for the term English as a Second Language (Retrieved January 7, 2009 from <http://www.answers.com/topic/esl>).

Delimitations of the Research

The research was conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville (Platteville, Wisconsin), over eighty-eight (88) days. Primary searches were conducted via the Internet through EBSCO with ERIC, Academic Search Elite, Wilson Databases and Google/Google Scholar as

the primary sources. Key search terms included “techniques,” “ability,” and “ESL.”

Method

A brief review of literature on studies examining techniques, ability and ESL learners was conducted. . The findings are summarized and recommendations were made.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Interactive Classroom Techniques

English is an important language widely used all over the world. Hayriye (2006) states that in the process of learning and teaching the second language, speaking always plays an indispensable role. In fact, speaking skills do not receive enough attention by people. Actually, some teachers regard speaking-teaching just as memorizing the conversations again and again.

Indeed, English courses in China are just for examinations. In China, English is defined more as reading and writing than listening and speaking. “Real-life” problems require people to think in English and talk fluently on any topic in their mother tongues. But they find they can not speak well in English, even for daily conversations. So the interactive classroom techniques appear. Based on Nakamura’s (1996) research, the target of language teaching should pay more attention to communication rather than memorization. Teachers should make every effort to help students solve language problems by using several interactive techniques to engage students in class. Indeed, Gray and Madson (2007) and Lin (2001), through several years of research, show that using interactive techniques more often can make a class more effective.

Hayriye (2006) names many interactive techniques to improve students’ speaking ability, including discussion, role-playing, story-telling and other similar techniques.

The most commonly used technique is discussion. Hayriye (2006) shows the result that students could have many different reasons for discussion including reaching a consensus on a phenomenon, sharing different opinions about something and working on problems to be solved. Moreover, in Hayriye's research (2006), discussion could make students develop the ability to think critically and make decisions both quickly and correctly. It enables students to express their ideas in a polite and suitable way, even though they have conflicting ideas. Students must come up with questions and express their opinions or explanations when doing discussion in groups or with the whole class. Boyd (2008) also proposes that by using discussion in the classroom, students will develop a habit of reasoning before answering the questions. Students should find some facts to support their own opinion and then persuade others, thus a good habit of speaking will be formed. In the research of Gray and Madson (2007), they conclude that using interactive techniques to teach students has twice the effect of using ordinary methods of lecture for teaching students in class. To name a few activities in class, Sköld (2008) suggests some activities to get students engaged to improve their speaking skill, such as discussion on some topic on relationships or plans for every day. Sköld (2008) agrees with many other researchers that discussions both in smaller groups and with the whole class can also be a good way of letting the pupils express their opinions.

Hayriye (2006) points out that one other way of getting students to speak is role-playing. Hayriye (2006) assumes that in role play, teachers could imagine various plots and settings in the society. Students could adjust themselves in such

roles to feel or think in the surroundings of the imagined background. Boyd (2008) states teachers could also observe students' oral expression and facial expressions to identify the feelings of students as well as the speaking skills they gain.

Based on the arguments of Hayriye (2006), simulations are somehow the same as role play. While specifically speaking, using the simulations technique, students could use concrete things in real life to make the classroom environment more similar to reality. Both role play and simulations belong to a kind of entertainment. So students could really enjoy themselves even if they are doing something wrong.

Williams (2005), apart from the techniques Hayriye (2006) introduces, shows a kind of program called "LearnStar" to improve students' ability to speak. In Williams's (2005) research, students usually use LearnStar to compete with each other by reviewing for exams. It benefits the students as well as motivates the students to learn actively.

Rowland (2006) points out in the research that according to the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth, a good proficiency in speaking English has a relationship with English reading and writing. Weisburd (2008) also gives evidence that good after-school programs could motivate students to use their English to join some games, activities, and projects. It also does help them to practice their speaking ability.

In addition, Hayriye (2006) sums up in the research that using information gaps could inspire the paired students to provide something their partner does not

know. In such a way, students not only solve the problem that should be difficult to complete by only one student, but also enables each student to grasp the opportunity to talk about the information he/she gains.

Another effective technique to improve speaking ability is storytelling. Hayriye (2006) states that storytelling requires students to share ideas with plenty of imagination. Students would not worry about if the conclusion is right or wrong. It all depends on the students' ability to make stories go on fluently with imagination. And Hayriye (2006) concludes that using interviews in the classroom could make students more sensitive about rubrics of questions they would prepare and helps them seize any chance to practice their speaking ability.

“Picture narrating” and “picture describing” are also effective techniques stated by Hayriye (2006). Both could enable students to talk freely with creativity. Those techniques can also develop students' speaking ability in public. And the activity “find the difference” makes students work in pairs as they are given two different pictures. The paired students discuss the similarities and differences in the pictures. In this way, they could do exercises which enhance their speaking ability.

The unique characteristic of brainstorming, as another introduced classroom activity by Hayriye (2006), is that students would not feel hesitant to open up for some ideas flashing in their mind and help students come up with ideas with freedom, without worry about giving any wrong answers.

In the article “Ten easy ways to engage your students,” Gray and Madson (2007) argue that teachers who maintain eye contact with students to deliver

information would be more effective than those who don't look at students during the lecture in class. And according to Gray and Madson (2007), there are many ways to get students engaged. Students could be easily absent-minded in class even if the class is interesting enough. So teachers should find a way to pull students' minds back to class. Calling on a student could be simple to conduct. Every two or three minutes, one student may be called, thus a bit of pressure would work on the student and others may be curious about what is happening next. So, in this way, they could easily concentrate their minds in class.

Apart from those activities, Farley (2008) states in the study that giving some performance or through media games, students become interested in these activities. In addition, teachers could also provide some experiments conducted by students to engage them in those activities. These techniques could make teachers help students to be engaged in class, and interested in their teaching, in order to benefit students' speaking ability.

Importance of Speaking Ability

The world today with high-tech activities needs a mutual language in the development of information technology. D'Vaz (2008) claims that the Lingua Franca of the world, English, would be legitimate to be universal.

However, English learners usually find that some native speakers always speak in fragmented sentences, although they think they speak more correctly. Sköld (2008) explains that English learners need to learn to use complete sentences to express themselves rather than using fragments in speaking. Collins,

Gullette and Schnepf (2005) also point out that people with limited English speaking ability may have the experience of misunderstanding, inappropriate treatment or having longer wait time on inconvenient occasions. In spite of these phenomena, Sköld (2008) endorses that speaking is the most important ability in the process of learning and teaching in a second language. Both in classroom and in daily life, speaking ability should deserve attention by English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers and students. Nakamura (1996) shows in the research that most college students as well as college graduates want to improve their English communication ability and, in particular, their speaking ability. That is why English speaking skills should be given more attention.

Hayriye (2006) also claims that teaching speaking is a very important part of second language learning. The ability to communicate plays an important role in one's school life but also in other fields of one's lifetime. Therefore language teachers turn the pure memorization method into some active teaching methods, such as providing the surroundings where meaningful conversations could take place. In order to serve for such surroundings, various speaking activities such as those listed above can contribute a great deal to students in developing their speaking skills. These activities make students engaged and more active in the process of learning. And, at the same time, these activities make their learning more meaningful and fun. For instance, as Osborne (1995) points out, describing pictures could help learners develop their creativity and imagination as well as their public speaking skills.

Boyd (2008) quotes a saying that if a person will lose all of the skills except one, the person will keep his or her speaking skill for it can develop all the rest of the skills. Smith (2003) also states that the speaking skill is the most basic skill necessary in life especially for young children as well as for the ESL students. It easily demonstrates gained knowledge and social awareness through one's speaking. Furthermore, according to Jiang (2006), among the four basic important skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking in ESL teaching, speaking is the most important one used in the classroom. Here all these researchers show the importance of speaking ability. D'Vaz (2008) proposes that English can make the countries, including some isolated tribes in the world, connect together during the development of society in all kinds of fields such as economics, science, literature and culture.

The Relationship between Interactive Classroom Techniques and Students' Speaking Ability

Lasky and Tempone (2004) mention in their research that students with a great deal of potential to develop have possible choices to be what kind of people they want to be. If they are suitably trained and directed through some correct and enjoyable techniques, they would be on the way to their goal. Specifically speaking, students' speaking ability could surely be improved by certain interactive activities proposed by ESL teachers, just as Lasky and Tempone (2004) state in the method of "Learning by doing" (p.87).

According to Hayriye (2006), now many ESL teachers realize that it would be helpful to teach students' speaking ability in the second language by "interacting." The final goal for speaking is to communicate. Communicative language teaching is based on real-life situations. By using this method in ESL classes, students will have the opportunity of communicating with each other in the target language. Atkinson, Regan & Williams (2006) sum up that ESL teachers should create a classroom environment where students have real-life problems and meaningful tasks that promote oral language.

Williams (2005) shows the research result that after using the LearnStar program, students are naturally engaged in the excitement of the competitions. It thus provides a stimulating and fun format for students to enhance their learning of the course material.

According to Boudreault (2010), apart from role-play, drama makes students feel authentic to daily life, that it brings the literature materials back to life. When students get control of the real occasions, they might easily open up for some ideas with imagination that allow their speaking ability to be practiced at the same time. Brown (2006) also claims an idea that fairy tales, nursery rhymes and songs are also for ESL students. Teachers could use these to make students have fun and be interested in learning. In such a relaxed atmosphere, students could not feel worried about speaking in order to practice. Cullen (1998) agrees with the idea that music and songs can be used for teaching in ESL classrooms. Such activities could not only make students enjoy the lyrics but also lead a talkative discussion in class that makes the ESL class more effective.

Smith (2010) suggests in the research, the pair-dictation activity in classrooms could motivate students to use their speaking ability to solve the problem. If any one of the paired students could not finish the activity, they would get a punishment. So the two students must work together and speak as clearly as they could to complete the task. In this way, it enables students to practice their speaking ability.

Reporting is a simple way mentioned by Hayriye (2006). He states that it makes the relationship between student and teacher more harmonious and helps to improve students' speaking ability. As Maier (2007) suggests in the research, teamwork in the classroom provides a good learning atmosphere which enables students to learn effectively, especially using their speaking skills.

Sköld (2008) states that in order to develop their spoken English proficiency, students ought to take every possible opportunity to practice this skill. Many teachers attempt to provide pupils with such opportunities in the second language classroom, while the students do not seem to make good use of them. Boyd (2008) says, as an educator, to motivate students to open up for ideas, the primary important task is to be a good model as a speaker in class.

Today's world requires that the goal of teaching speaking should improve students' communicative skills. Hayriye (2006) explains that only in that way, students can express themselves and learn how to follow the social and cultural rules in an appropriate way in every communicative circumstance.

As Weisburd (2008) states, without the pressure of grades and tests, learning speaking would be much more enjoyable and safer for English learners to

practice their speaking skills. The combination of safe motivation and easy-going activities is the exact situation learners need in the process of learning speaking.

All in all, these interactive classroom techniques are indeed helpful both for students and teachers. On several levels, they can make learning and the teaching process more effective.

CHAPTER THREE

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Through the review of the literature, it becomes evident that most research conducted on the effect of using interactive classroom techniques support that teaching style. The bulk of the research states that various kinds of activities have their unique characteristics which improve students' speaking skills and produce positive results.

First and foremost, for the growth of an individual, a person's speaking skill is one of the most important abilities throughout one's lifetime, so the techniques mentioned above could surely help the individual overcome the shyness appearing in public and make him or her brave enough to speak out sharing his or her thoughts with plenty of imagination. As one of the cells of the whole society, every individual has his or her own personality and responsibility to express with full imagination.

As to the whole group or class, the effect of using interactive classroom techniques is also remarkable. Under the guidance of teachers, every ESL student could easily and naturally merge into the communicative circumstance in the classroom; at the same time they could make good use of every moment and all materials to polish their speech. Apart from their individual outcomes, the team-work spirit would also be a focus. In general, the result of the group work will turn out better and more effective than the work of only one student.

Many ESL teachers applied these interactive classroom techniques to their classes. The effectiveness is obvious under the studies made by many researchers.

However, research has shown time and time again that teachers could use these interactive techniques in class, but the type and quantity they could use correctly were not mentioned. It is my point of view that using one interactive classroom activity simultaneously with another one and making these techniques diversified would be more effective than just simply applying one to the ESL students in class.

In the theories of the famous theoretician in second language acquisition, Stephen Krashen (1981), it is evident that Krashen's (1981) hypothesis and the language model exactly explain the process and methods of second language learning. Speaking follows listening and comprehension after what may seem like long delays in learning. Particularly in oral language, ESL teachers should radically increase student production of oral language and provide opportunities to use language to communicate. By using these interactive techniques in the classroom, students are given the best chances to exercise and show their production of their new language and it is also advantageous to the student who is too shy to talk.

Above all, when students use oral language, in the flow of conversation or expression, one has no time to stop and think about the formal rules. Gradually fluency is obtained in a very different way. It comes from hearing and understanding phrases correctly modeled and from having the opportunity to apply this learning. In such interactive classroom activities, students could make every use of these communicative circumstances to train and develop their language fluency without stopping to think about their grammar errors while

speaking. Through some certain exercises, ESL students could improve their speaking abilities to a great extent.

Apart from these, in Krashen's (1981) hierarchy of language acquisition, listening and speaking are the first two steps. Listening means building receptive vocabulary, knowledge of sentence structure and context. Speaking means using language meaningfully, expressing the vocabulary you know and practicing sentence structure. Both of these two steps could be completed by using the interactive techniques in the classroom. After practicing for some periods of time, it is certain to enhance the ESL students' speaking ability.

Moreover, language is acquired naturally and peripherally, while not directly taught, which is also advocated by Krashen (1981). And it is reasonably correct that spoken fluency is driven by non-conscious fluency, and not through forced taught language.

Finally, it is important to note that throughout the study for this paper, interactive classroom techniques could certainly improve the ESL students' speaking abilities, not only for every individual, but also for the development of the whole class, even for the whole society. Learning English does not mean giving up culture, background or a native tongue. It is simply adding a new and valuable skill that will make the transition much smoother. Therefore if these activities are correctly used, and techniques for speaking are properly developed, there would be more and more people who could easily and confidently express their opinions both in class and outside the class. Hopefully, we can make every effort to use our skills to keep pace with the development of this society.

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