

‘Spoken Communication Skills taught at English Language Institutes as a second language’

Farhan Uddin Raja

ABSTRACT: *This study aims to explore the various methods used to accomplish oral communication competence in English language institutes. The study can prove to be a valuable contribution in assessing and improving the methods and techniques used in the conversational classes conducted at language institutes. The focus of this research is to highlight the different types of activities and the processes involved in teaching verbal communication skills at English language institutes. Communication has always been quintessential for verbal transactions and English more specifically has become an integral part for social and professional development. As these institutes are basically aiming at enabling people to converse in the target language effectively, therefore the objective is to discover the different methods and techniques employed by the institutes, and then through the analysis of those methods finding the possibilities of improvement in the learning process and recommending ways to revise them. This research comprises the observation and analysis of the activities used in conversational classes with the fuller description of the processes involved. It also comprises the description of the factors deficient in the selection of the activities for the successful acquisition of oral communication along with the recommendations for the betterment.*

Key words: English language, communication, activities, verbal, professional

INTRODUCTION

Competence in oral communication, in speaking and listening, is a prerequisite to students' academic, personal and professional success in life. Oral communication competence can contribute to individuals' social adjustment and participation in satisfying interpersonal relationship. Youngsters with poor oral communication skills are sometimes viewed as less attractive by their peers and enjoy fewer friendships. As individuals mature and become working adults, oral communication competence continues to be essential for them. Oral Communication competence is required in most occupations. Employers identify communication as one of the basic competencies every graduate should possess, asserting that the ability to communicate is valuable for obtaining employment and maintaining successful job performance.

Given the importance of the ability to communicate competently, the communication discipline is viewed as central in language teaching these days. The ability to communicate effectively and appropriately is therefore quintessential and taught at various language institutes in different ways. 'How is this oral communication skill taught at language teaching institutes', is the focus of this research.

Communication has become one of the markers of social solidarity, social ranking and professional capabilities and most of the components of the language are learnt through this medium. With this respect, English has gained inevitable importance being the international language. There are various methods, techniques and principles given by the scholars and researchers to improve communicative skills. Considering the context of Pakistan where English is used as a second language, learning it becomes essential. In this regard several language institutes are rendering their services. It is very common to find an English learning institute in almost every area of the posh cities of Pakistan. All these institutes claim that they can teach English to people in 6 months time, in some cases three months, with complete command over the language. Now, most of these institutes do not even hire an English teacher who holds a degree in English (Linguistics). On the contrary, mostly such people are hired in these institutes who possess good command of English irrespective of the fact whatever discipline they may come from. Most of these people are unaware of the latest

trends, techniques and methods that are currently being used across the globe for teaching English as a second language.

In Pakistan, these language institutes are considered an important source for learning communicative skills, which is the focus of this research i.e. how oral communication skills are taught in English language learning institutes? Many people have worked in the area of teaching English as a second language and have devised various methodologies and approaches. The research aims to explore to what extent these institutes are following those methods and principles.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The motivation for investigating 'how teaching oral communication skills are accomplished at English language institutes' is derived from my past experience of being a student in some of these institutes. The purpose of this study is to discover, through the activities, the type and the principles, being used in the English language institutes for teaching their students spoken English. The techniques and principles used in interactive approach for second language learning will be the basis of the analysis of the data gathered. This will also facilitate the teachers of English language institutes who may need to improve the background knowledge in conducting these classes and to become familiar with the current global trends and techniques in the world of teaching English as a second language.

SIGNIFICANCE

This research will be more beneficial for the teachers of language institutes who do not have any formal background knowledge in conducting these classes, who are not aware of the principles that should be followed by them in designing activities for teaching the oral communication skills to the students. By highlighting the loop holes and the lacking in the appropriate teaching methodology along with the recommendations, institutes can improve their teaching criteria and provide better teaching to the students regarding the teaching of oral communication skills. The research will familiarize them with the types of skills and techniques on which the activities of teaching conversational skills must be formed and selected.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The primary question that this study focused on was,

- How teaching oral communication skills are accomplished at English language institutes?

The secondary question was;

- What types of activities are devised for teaching oral communication skills?

A lot of work has been done on teaching oral communication skills. Scholars have written several books that provide the language teachers with numerous activities that can be used effectively to assist students' learning process. Frederick Klippel's *keep talking* is a very profound book on communicative activities for language teaching. This book contains a collection of various activities, which can prove to be very helpful for the accomplishment of the communicative skills. This book is divided into 13 parts. All the activities contain a fuller description of the topic type, level, organization and preparation required for the activity along with the purpose.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in qualitative paradigm, adopting case study, which enabled me to examine the core problems in the area of teaching oral communication skills at English language institutes, and thus can facilitate teachers at the language institutes to bring about some improvements in the on hand practices. In Strauss and Corbin (1998, 17) view, a qualitative research can be defined as,

“By the term ‘Qualitative Research’ we mean any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification. It can refer to research about persons’ lives, lived experiences, behaviors, emotions, and feelings as well as about organizational functioning, social movements, cultural phenomenon and interactions between nations.”

Thus in qualitative paradigm findings are arrived at not by any statistical data but by reasons behind various aspects of behaviour.

The data was divided into two segments for this study. Twelve classes were observed followed by an interview with the teacher conducting the classes. The observation of these twelve classes that were based on oral communication skills took about three weeks. The interview with the teacher was scheduled for about an hour in which twenty questions in all were asked. Most of these questions were open ended in accordance to the approach of the research type. According to Burns (1995), 'triangulation' that involves gathering data from various sources increases the reliability and validity of the research. So for this reason, the data was collected through various sources. These included field notes, reflective journal, and students' responses during the classes and an open ended interview with the teacher.

The basis of the analysis of the data collected was 'speech performances' given by Brown in his book *'Teaching by principles'* (Ch: 15; 266-268) and 'the principles for designing the performative activities for teaching communication' (Ch: 15; 268-270). According to H. Douglas Brown there are six types of classroom speaking performances.

1. Imitative
2. Intensive
3. Responsive
4. Transactional
5. Interpersonal
6. Extensive

Imitative type of speaking activities offer limited practice through repetition and it focuses on some particular element of language form such as drilling. There are various types of drilling for example substitution drilling, conversion drilling and translational drilling. The 'Intensive' type of speaking activities focuses on the phonological and grammatical aspects of the language. 'Responsive' is one of the most influential speaking performances. It is a short answer to question technique, focusing on meaningful conversation. Activities such as interviews or an activity based on inquiry comes under responsive type. 'Transactional' language is an extended form of responsive speech. It is

carried out through dialogues. It consists of long sentences and is context based activities. 'Interpersonal' performance is one having a conversation based on social relationships, behaviours and attitudes. Activities are based on type of language and structure used when conversing with friends, parents, or using language in different social surroundings. It is more causal. 'Extensive' language is more formal, based on oral reports and speeches. This type of speech performance is used at advance level. The type of language is used when you are asked to give your own opinions, suggestions and arguments.

DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis of the observed classes, data gathered through triangulation and the interview conducted with the teacher is done collectively. Two charts based on the speech types of the activities and the principles given by Brown in his book *Teaching by Principles*, are used for the analysis.

BROWN'S TYPES OF SPEAKING PERFORMANCES

Types of Speaking Performances	Activity
IMITATIVE	✓
INTENSIVE	X
RESPONSIVE	✓
TRANSACTIONAL	X
INTERPERSONAL	✓ (Partially)
EXTENSIVE	X

**BROWN'S PRINCIPLES FOR DESIGNING SPEAKING
ACTIVITIES**

PRINCIPLES	ACTIVITIES
Range from accuracy to meaning, interaction and fluency	In all the classes, accuracy was the primary focus. The teacher was mainly interested in the correct delivery of the utterance produced by the students.
Intrinsically motivating	Most of the students in the class were absolute beginners and mainly two activities were carried out by the teacher for teaching spoken communication. Therefore the element of intrinsic motivation was found lacking among students.
Encourage the use of authentic language in meaningful context	Context based activities were exercised but with great irregularity and scarcity. Mostly, the topics were randomly selected and students were asked to participate. No prior word bank was provided to them for the topic selected.
Provide feedback and correction	The teacher preferred to correct the students' grammatical and phonological mistakes during their discussions through constant interruptions.
Link between speaking and listening	Separate classes for listening were offered to students in the institute, therefore during the spoken communication classes, no stress was laid upon listening.

<p style="text-align: center;">Students initiate oral communication</p>	<p>Since students were intrinsically not greatly motivated, they were hesitant to initiate the discussions. Therefore the teacher, most of the times, initiated the discussions and then gave the floor to students afterwards. On rare occasion, when the teacher arranged context based activities, through constant compelling of the teacher students tried to initiate discussions.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Encourage the development of speaking strategies</p>	<p>There was a scarcity of variety of strategies exercised for conversations. Mostly, the teacher asked students to participate. For topics selected, the teacher randomly asked different students questions to stimulate responses from them. Student to student interactions were rare occurrences.</p>

In the classes observed, the use of variety of activities was found missing. Mostly, discussions were carried out on the topics selected, which were based on responsive type of speech performances. It generated short answers by the students against the questions on the selected topic. For example,

Teacher: How does it help?

Student: It gives confidence.

Long phrases and descriptive answers were avoided by the students and mostly the teacher started the discussions. For instance, if 'should boys and girls be friends' was the topic selected for class discussion, most of the students preferred to remain silent and did not contribute their views in the target language, until they were pointed and were asked question individually. No prior instructions were given to the students. There were

long pauses during the discussions. When there occurred long pauses and none of the students volunteered arguments or counter arguments, the teacher provided new question on the same topic to accelerate the discussion. During the discussions, several linguistic errors were made by the students. The grammatical errors were not appreciated by the teacher and were corrected immediately on their occurrences during the discussions. Transactional communication was rarely found and mostly the use of discourse fragments was taught in isolation. Therefore, students were unable to use them in real life like conversations. They were successful in forming sentences in isolation but were in trouble using the same in discourse. This resulted in students' focus on using small phrases and sentences rather than descriptive and explanatory sentences. For the selection of the activities the element of motivation was not focused upon. In answer to one of the questions during the interview, the teacher said, "Motivation is basically with the students not with the activity. If the student is motivated and interested, he can learn". It inferred that developing interest of students through different activities is not the focus of their communication classes.

FINDINGS

In the light of the class observations and analysis, it can be inferred that the activities used in the classes were not used with any definite purpose or goal in mind. Activities were merely used for the sake of conducting classes. This analysis is also supported by the answer of the teacher to one of the questions asked during the interview. He said, "We just open them for discussion. They learn what they want". This shows that the activity does not have any definite goal, rather it depends on the students what they want to learn. It implies that the vague purpose of the spoken communication classes was to teach spoken communication, but without specific goals for teaching.

During some informal discussions, it was discovered that in order to hold students, teachers are bound to use some specific method for teaching spoken communication. For example, if teacher wants to do an activity based on presentation skills and students feel hesitant in participating in it teacher cannot force them because they might quit coming to the institute. It was also found that some students come to attend classes in English language institutes for their entertainment and to have a good

time. They at time create problems during the class and the teacher has to bear them. Mostly, the teachers hired in these institutes are not professionals and do not purely belong to the discipline of English (Linguistics). Those teachers are hired who can speak English effectively irrespective of the fact whatever discipline they may belong to.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations or suggestions given here are based on the comprehensive analysis of the data discussed in the previous section.

- a. Qualified and trained teachers should be hired for teaching oral communication skills. Teachers with formal education in teaching oral communication skills can be more beneficial in conducting communication classes, as teaching oral communication is a skill itself, which needs the basics of theoretical background knowledge. Teachers with formal education will be aware of the communicative methods and different activities, which can be used to teach different skills of oral communication.
- b. There should be some planning done by the teachers or the concerned authorities regarding the selection of activities. There should be variety of activities for teaching different communicative skills. The activities must be selected on the basis of those objectives.
- c. The element of students' motivation and interest should be considered during the selection of activities.
- d. Books written on oral communication skills should be provided to the teachers for assistance before the selection of activities to be used in classes.
- e. Students and teachers, both must be clear about the purpose of the activity to be used. Before using the activity in the class, teacher must know the objective of the activity and the students must also be told about it. It makes the objective of the activity easier to achieve if the students know about the purpose.
- f. Proper feedback should be given to the students after the class. As it helps the students to identify their flaws and rectify them later.

CONCLUSION

Keeping in view importance of English language, it is appreciated that a large number of institutes are rendering services in teaching oral communication skills in various areas of the cities in Pakistan. The education provided by these institutes does not encourage thinking of the students and hence students are unable to speak their mind. Therefore, it is significant that these institutes raise themselves to better standards of education. There is a need that these institutes must hire professionals possessing relevant knowledge used for teaching oral communication skills to students, and are aware of the latest trends, techniques and methods that are currently being used across the globe in the world of Teaching English as a second language.

REFERENCES

- Burns, A. *'Teacher-researchers: Perspectives on Teacher Action Research and Curriculum Renewal'*. In Burns, A. & Hood, S. (Eds.), *Teachers voices: Exploring course design in a changing curriculum* Sydney, Australia: National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research, Macquarie University. (1995): (pp. 3- 29).
- Brown, J. D. *Understanding research in second language learning: A teacher's guide to statistics and research design*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1988).
- Klippel, Friederike. *Keep Talking: Communicative Fluency Activities for Language Teaching*. New York: Cambridge University Press (1984).
- [Strauss](#), Anselm & [Corbin](#), Juliet M. 'Basics of Qualitative Research': *Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc. (1990).