Communicative Activities to Develop Learner's Speaking Skill: the Case of EFL Algerian Learners

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Abstract

The use of communicative activities seems to have become an optimal step to develop the learners' classroom interaction (Allwright. R,1984). Classroom Interaction is beneficial to language development overall, but whether it is beneficial to improve all skills of foreign language learning is not known because a certain skill may be developed in different manners (Mackey, 2007; Ellis, 2003). Apparently communicative activities are to be considered as one of the major ways to be developed for learning a foreign language. The present research work aims at exploring communicative activities in an Algerian EFL teaching/learning context. In particular, this is to focus on learners' interaction based on the classroom activities proposed to them. The results obtained can be interpreted in this way; they indicated that most of the participants (25%) choose stories/jokes because this gave them the opportunity to master and practice their speaking skills more than in any other activity.

Keywords: Algerian Learners of EFL, Communicative Activity, Speaking Skill

Introduction

In an era of globalization, the use of English as a global language enjoys a noteworthy position. At the present time, it is believed that the mastery of that language as an ongoing learning process in ESL/EFL classroom settings basically requires the development of the four principal language skills, namely, listening, writing, reading and speaking, by resorting to a wide range of communicative activities and strategies. In foreign language teaching and learning, the ability to master the speaking skill is a difficult task that both teachers and learners have to face. Most of the time, this difficulty leads teachers to think about the appropriate classroom activities which students may need to increase their self-confidence and, consequently improve their language proficiency. Hence, the use of a variety of communicative activities like discussing issues and conversations or classroom debates which may help EFL students to gradually enhance their oral proficiency, and become effective communicators in that target language.

The speaking skill is considered as a major skill to be developed by both teachers and learners because it is necessary for displaying the language learners' proficiency, especially those who give much more importance to speaking skill as it's the essential pillar to build up their competences. Ur (2000, p.12) declares that *"of all the four skills [listening, speaking ,reading and writing],speaking seems intuitively the most important: people who know a language are referred to as 'speakers' of the language, as if speaking included all other kinds of knowing"*.

Furthermore, the main question often given to foreign language learners is "Do you speak English?" Or "Do you speak Spanish?", but not "Do you write English?", to say the least, most people take speaking and knowing a language as synonymous. Celce-Murcia (2001, p.103) argues that for most people *"the ability to speak a language is synonymous with knowing that language since speech is the most basic means of human communication"*.

The use of communicative activities seems to have become an optimal step to develop the learners' classroom interaction (Allwright.R, 1984). Classroom Interaction is beneficial to language development overall, but whether it is beneficial to improve all skills of foreign language learning is not known because a certain skill may be developed in different manners (Mackey, 2007; Ellis, 2003). Apparently communicative activities are to be considered as one of the major ways to be developed for learning a foreign language. The present research work aims at exploring the use of communicative activities such as songs, plays, describing pictures in an EFL teaching/learning context. In particular, this is to focus on learners' interaction based on the classroom activities proposed to them.

Using communicative activities has become a hot-topic and an optimal tool to develop the learners' speaking skill.

Before the nineteenth century, games were mainly based on physical activities. Later on, Europeans tried to modify some of the principles of their games to fit with the American approaches because they perceived theirs as a waste of time. From that time on, games started to be constructed around precise 'educational instructions'.

The idea of using these activities in teaching does not seem to be widely accepted and implemented because there has been a misconception that all learning should be serious in nature.

In fact, using games is an important tool that allows language teachers to add colour to their classrooms by providing challenge and entertainment. El-shamy (2001, p.15) defines a game as a *"competition activity played according to rules within a given context, where players meet a challenge to achieve an objective and win".* For instance, the activity of storytelling has been used for a long time and is still used in the classroom and the main goal of this activity is to give students opportunities to practice their oral skills, jokes and anecdotes have the same goal as well.

Haven (2000, p.75) identifies storytelling as being powerful, motivating and effective, stating that "factual and conceptual information is learnt faster and better, and will be remembered longer, recalled more readily applied more accurately when that information is delivered as a well-told story".

An Indian proverb says *"tell me a fact I'll learn, tell me a truth I'll believe but tell me a story, it will live in my heart forever."* A story is defined as a narrative account of a real or imagined event(s), it is a structure of a narrative with a specific style and a set of characters. Through the technique of storytelling, the learner may share personal experiences and learn from others' wisdom, beliefs, and values. Besides that, stories build blocks of knowledge and are the foundation of memory-building and learning. One last feature of stories is that they connect people to the past, present and future (Barzaq, 2009, p-p.6-7). As storytelling is basically a productive skill which promotes the use of spoken interaction, speaking then is a very important process that helps to evaluate the learner's proficiency in the target language when it comes to the use of storytelling or any other feature of the spoken language.

Learning to speak entails learner's engagement in communicative situations so that they will activate their speaking capacities. The development of oral skills thus requires students to make an active use of the language that is correct in its grammar and pronunciation. This is to say that fluency and accuracy are two of the essential aspects to be developed in the teaching of oral skills and, consequently, during classroom participation. Our aim in this research is to demonstrate how the essence of such activities as storytelling or oral discussions should be adequately understood and how they can be used in the teaching and practice of oral expression as tools to develop learners' interactive skills.

Method

a. Subjects

The research is concerned with first-year students at Tlemcen University, Algeria. Thirty (30) students were chosen randomly. This included individuals who are in the age group of 18 to 21 years old; they are Baccalaureate holders from different streams (Life and Natural Sciences, Humanities and Foreign Languages) who have studied the English language since of the first-year of Basic School, which makes a total of seven years before beginning university studies. Our learners spent a total of four (04) years studying English at Middle School and three (03) years at secondary schools. As they come from government schools, they all roughly share the features and results of having studied under the same educational system. Arabic is the national and official language of the Peoples' Democratic and Republic of Algeria, so it is the students' mother tongue; French is the first foreign language and English is the learners' second one. First-year University students are exposed to the fundamentals of the English language in the form of courses presented as a consolidation to the knowledge already acquired at the secondary school. Along these lines, they are concerned with the acquisition of the basic linguistic features in such modules as grammar, oral expression, written production, linguistics, human social sciences, study skills, research methodology, reading comprehension, and information and communication technologies. It is worth pointing out, however, that the participants had already acquired some basic knowledge in developing their speaking skills through oral expression or ICT courses.

b. Procedures and Selected Materials

Choosing the appropriate sample can be considered as one of the most challenging tasks that any researcher might face in conducting a research of this type. In this respect; Dornyei (2007:96) says that *"the sample is the group of participants whom the researcher actually examines in an empirical investigation and the population is the group of people whom the study is about».* For the present study, we are dealing with a sample of thirty (30) EFL students and ten (10) EFL teachers from the University of Tlemcen.

One of the instruments used in conducting the research if the structures interview. It was conducted with the thirty students involved in the study. The interview itself includes six questions. The students are asked orally and individually; in this research, the goal is set to explore ways to improve the students speaking skills and to explore the essential factors that lead to first-year students' low achievement in oral expression; another major goal of this research is to know if teachers are really applying communicative activities in their teaching process.

Results and Discussion

The results obtained can be interpreted in this way; they indicated that most of the participants (25%) choose stories/jokes because this gave them the opportunity to master and practice their speaking skills more than in any other activity. While role play and songs were opted for by the same percentages of participants (10% each), games and presentations were preferred by about a fifth (20%) of those who took part in the study each. Fifteen percent (15%) expressed preferences for other activities which were not mentioned in the study.

## Preferable communicative techniques for speaking activities
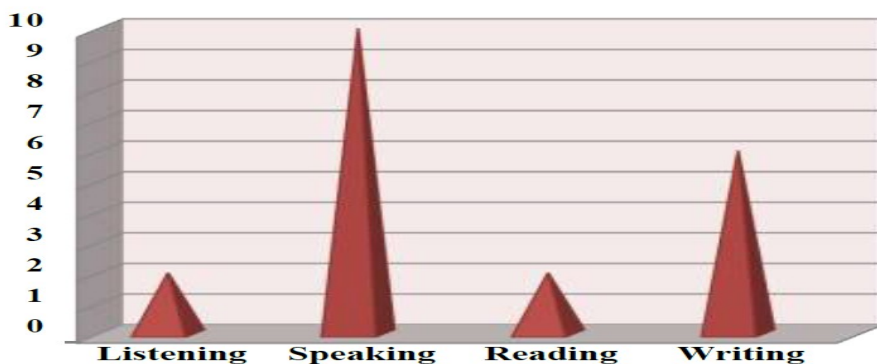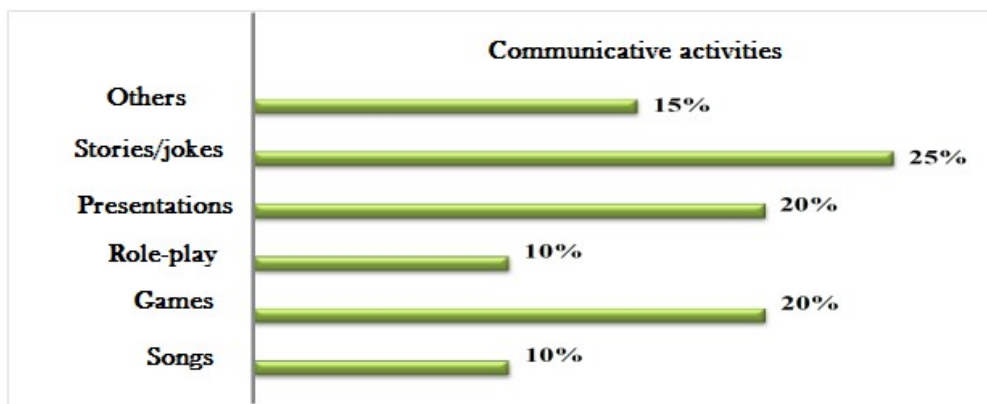
Preferable Skills to Master Most by EFL Students

One of the questions the participants were asked was 'As an EFL learner, which of the four skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing, do you prefer to mast most?", and the answers given confirmed that the majority of the participants opted for speaking, stating that as the main aim of learning a language is it to develop and display language proficiency, that skill, i.e. speaking, is the one capable of helping them demonstrate their ability to master the language and use it for communicative purposes..
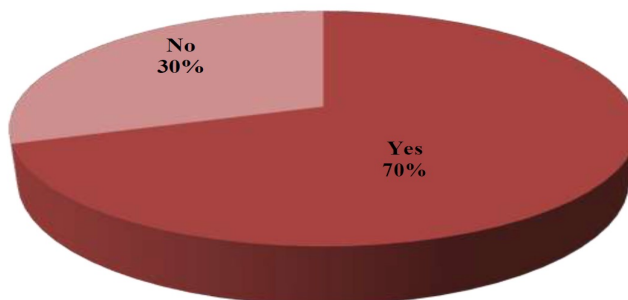
Implementation of Communicative Activities when Teaching Oral Expression

When asked which technique they opted for to carry out the speaking activities they assign in their classrooms and how they go about implementing them, the majority of teachers responded that they applied communicative techniques for their activities because they provided a source of fun for them, along with a sense of accomplishment since they give them opportunities to practice language in meaningful situations; they also said that they raised the students' awareness of the practical purposes the language is used for and kept them engaged in the learning process. As we can clearly conclude from the graph below, group work activities occupied a prominent place in the teachers' practices (80%), while the remaining 20% went for pair work activities; this is a clear indication of the teachers' commitment to assigning techniques which cater for the learners' needs and expectations.
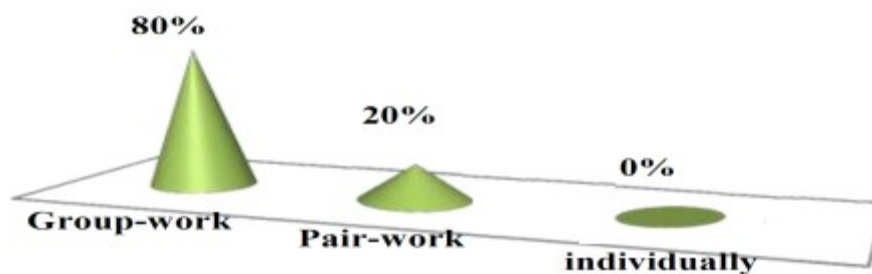
The Most Efficient Technique to get the Students to Speak

To summarize the findings of this research, and by analyzing the results obtained, most of the participants have a preference for group-work because this type of collaborative work gives the learners the opportunity to communicate, express themselves, participate and encourage each other in order to achieve their common communicative goals. Besides, it is the ideal technique to exchange ideas. However, in instances where there is any resorting to working individually, this is done in order to get them to assess their language proficiency and to identify their needs and lacks.

4. Discussion

At the end of each group discussion, the teacher evaluates the, students' performance through the slides he/she will have prepared beforehand. In this phase and throughout the whole process, the teacher would proceed to highlighting the positive aspects of the students' performance first, helping them to build on them in future activities, and then the negative ones so as to make them aware of them and avoid them in future activities. Throughout this important phase, the learners are made aware of the fact that the implementation of interactive techniques and the use of such communicative activities may better foster the speaker's fluency, as has been confirmed through the collected data from the teachers' questionnaires, mainly from question five, and through the students' interviews which show that the majority of students enjoy the use of these activities in oral expression, and that most teachers confirm the fact that this can all be done to accomplish the tasks assigned according to the objectives of the lesson.

Conclusion

The present paper is an exploratory research involving first year students at ABU BEKR BELKAID UNIVERSITY. It aims at exploring ways to put the learners in comfortable zones for a better speaking performance and a higher feeling of self-esteem. Learning to speak entails the learner's engagement in communicative situations so that they will activate their strategies and enhance their communicative

capacities. The development of oral skills requires the students to make an active use of the language that is correct in its grammar and pronunciation. That is to say fluency and accuracy are two essential aspects to be developed in classroom discussions where the main goal is to improve students' ability to communicate with the language fluently. The ultimate aim is to achieve the learning goals the teacher has set by carrying out the different activities to be implemented in the classroom; such interactive techniques as role play, songs, conversations, and guessing games seem to be the ideal choice for that purpose as they can create a good atmosphere where the learners can interact and communicate freely without feeling any inhibition or shyness.

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