

The Use Of Small-Group Discussion Activities In Teaching Speaking To Motivate Teenagers’ Speaking Confidence In Esl Classrooms At An English Centre In Vietnam.

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I. Introduction

The globalization trend in the last two decades has driven an increasing demand for global communication. Future citizens with a will to work in well-paid occupations should speak English fluently. As a consequence, education plays a vital role in the development of new generations. There has been a range of research on different aspects of language teaching. According to Hosni (2014, p.23), the utmost requisites of English learning are involvement in materials, opportunities to use it, inspiration and guidance. In addition, Ur (1996) stated that speaking, out of the four skills, was the most important one. Some students are studying English but they can only produce few utterances, which has been a typical problem in teaching and learning English. “There is no point knowing a lot about the language if you can’t use it” (Scrivener, 2005, p.146). As the issue is acknowledged, a variety of methodologies regarding teaching speaking have been under investigation. Utama et al. (2013) argued that a complete acquisition of speaking skill is attributed to the combination of linguistic aspects (such as grammar, word use, pronunciation and fluency) and non-linguistic aspects (such as personality, motivation and self-confidence). Furthermore, during the communicative process, learners should pay attention to the meaning rather than focus on the forms (Hamer, 1982). This current study considers the relationship between the non-linguistic aspects, specifically learners’ confidence, and meaning-focus practice, namely discussion activities in teaching speaking.

II. Literature Review

Teaching Speaking

What is Teaching Speaking?

Hosni (2014) claimed that teaching speaking is helping students enhance their communicative competence. According to Asrida (2016, p.61), teaching speaking is defined as a process in which teacher and students verbally communicate and interact with each other in the classroom. These may seem impossible under the traditional English teaching curriculum because of the great amount of grammar points to be delivered and the design of the classic textbooks. However, in modern ESL classrooms, teaching English is divided into skills lessons that ensure equality in the time allotted for each skill, especially speaking. The changes enable teachers to apply the recent methods to achieve the aim of teaching speaking which is discussed similarly in Harmer’s (2001) and Hosni’s (2014) study as the maintenance of students’ speaking competency and training to reach a higher level of speaking proficiency. Learning conditions are now satisfactory but not enough to help learners develop speaking skills if there are no suitable types of tasks.

Types of Speaking Tasks

A number of communicative activities have been discussed and different authors have different ways to classify them. Pattison (1987) proposed seven types of speaking activities: Questions and answers, dialogues and role plays, matching activities, communication strategies, pictures and picture stories, puzzles and problems, discussions and decisions. More recently, seven is also the number of categories that Harmer (2015) presented in his book, including acting from scripts, communication games, discussion, prepared talks and presentations, questionnaires, stimulation and role-play, and storytelling. Likewise, Asrida (2016) emphasizes the importance of four activities: Pair tapping, active debate, information gap and discussion. They may have different ways to name the tasks but they seem to share the same principle about discussion activities in which learners exchange ideas and come to the final decision for a problem assigned. (Pattison, 1987; Harmer, 2015; Asrida, 2016)

Factors Should be Considered

From the varied communicative activities, teachers should choose the suitable ones for the area they would like students to improve. This has a strong relationship with the teaching speaking principles that should be followed. Brown (1994, p. 275, as cited in Adrisda, 2016) discussed seven principles for teaching speaking: (1) Shifting the learner's attention from forms to meaning; (2) Developing learners' intrinsic motivation, (3) Organizing meaningful contexts to use authentic materials; (4) Giving feedback appropriately; (5) Emphasizing listening and speaking correlation; (6) Encouraging students to be active participants; (7) Training students with speaking strategies. Among the seven principles above, the sixth principle may have greater importance as it determines the amount of speaking time a learner may experience regardless of the satisfaction of the other principles. If learners show initiative in communication, they may learn more than the others. Teachers now should consider: What makes learners play an active role in communication? Utama et al. (2013) and Dornyei et al. (as cited in Park & Lee, 2005) highlighted the importance of self-confidence in boosting learners' willingness to speak. In addition, Roysmanto (2018, p.2) also claimed that the higher the learner's self-confidence is, the better their speaking performance is. Therefore, increasing learners' confidence deserves greater attention in teaching speaking.

How to Tackle Learners' Speaking Confidence

Factors Influencing Speaking Confidence

The problem of lacking confidence in learners' communication should be solved by investigating the factors that influence speaking confidence. According to a variety of related research, there are some factors to be considered:

First, the fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz, 1986; Wörde, 2003, as cited in Yalcin & Incecay, 2014) is widely accepted by many researchers. Ur (1996) also mentioned "inhibition" referring to the worry about making mistakes and being criticized. The students were afraid of making mistakes and being judged by other people in any situation (Mohamad & Wahid, 2009, p. 74). They are filled with anxiety whenever they want to speak, not just the evaluation in testing conditions.

Second, level of proficiency is said to have a significant influence on one's self-confidence. Debreli and Demirkan (2016, p.59) argued that proficiency level correlates with anxiety level caused by the fear of making mistakes. In addition, it is proven that the students with higher proficiency level were more anxious while speaking (Osboe et al., 2007, p.3). An explanation could be that students who are of higher level know more about what should be concerned to produce a correct utterance, which makes them think more and become less confident.

Third, speaking topics are also important for students to participate in conversations. According to Osboe et al. (2007, p.5) "Content that is familiar and easy to understand appears to facilitate their confidence." Students can have more ideas and experience to speak if the topic is common, which leads to better confidence to speak. Likewise, learners will be eager to speak when given the topic related to real-life situations.

Fourth, linguistic difficulty is another factor that is closely related to the topic factor. Horwitz (1986) stated the fact that students sometimes do not understand the topic given because of their insufficient vocabulary as one of his suggested factors for speaking anxiety. Even when the topic is familiar, some students may still find it difficult to speak since they struggle to search for suitable lexical items and functional structures to express their ideas. (Hosni, 2014; Ur, 1996)

Fifth, achievement in speaking practice is proven to have considerable impact on learners' confidence. Yalcin and Incecay (2014, p. 2623) claimed that "The more the students achieved to accomplish the tasks, the more relaxed they became". Thus, teachers can build students' confidence by giving some easy activities to let them experience the feeling of success which, then, motivates them to reach bigger achievement and recycle their self-confidence to an upper level.

Which Task Tackles These Factors?

In sum, teachers should carefully choose a type of task that could satisfy most of the factors above to enhance students' speaking confidence. The task should (1) provide a safe environment for students' feeling, (2) promote students respond promptly without much consideration about what to say, (3) allow students to get information about unfamiliar topics or put them in real-life contexts, (4) provide students with necessary vocabulary and functional language, (5) scaffold students through easy steps to more difficult steps.

Matsuda and Gobel (2004) proposed group work as an important solution to improve speaking confidence. The similar idea was presented by Osboe et al. (2007) that students were in favour of speaking in small groups instead of the whole class. Aida (1994) also stated that group work provided a non-threatening environment for learners' feelings. Hence, small groups could be a prominent task to tackle this problem. Furthermore, Debreli and Demirkan (2016, p.58) found that students without being well-prepared can speak more confidently as they do not have time to think about worrying factors. This can be applied in small group

discussions since this task draws students' attention to the problems assigned in meaningful contexts and motivates students to react promptly to their friends' ideas about the problem. Moreover, vocabulary and structures can be provided when necessary through scaffolding steps while being guided to reach the final goal of the task. All things considered, this study is going to focus on the small group discussion in ESL classroom in order to tackle the problem of learners' lack of speaking confidence.

Small Group Discussion in ESL Classroom

Small Group Discussion

Asrida (2016, p.64) defined discussion as an interaction among students as well as students and teachers in which participants interchange ideas, opinions and questions with each other. Discussion is considered as a mean to solve problems related to a given topic (Mayuni, 1995, as cited in Asrida, 2016). A similar explanation was found in Pattison's work (1987) that discussion asks learners to exchange information about the problem assigned to reach the final conclusion. These perspectives seem to support each other and lend support to my own definition: Small group discussion is a series of scaffolding activities guiding a group of three to five members to the mutual agreement on the issue.

Activities of Discussion

According to Harmer (2007, p.128, as cited in Adrisda, 2016), discussion could be divided into three activities: Buzz group, Whole class discussion, Panel discussion. Harmer (2015) then re-divided discussion into four activities with some differences: Buzz groups (brainstorming), formal debates, unplanned discussion and reaching a consensus. First, buzz groups are also called brainstorming which requires learners to predict the content of an upcoming task. Second, formal debates give participants preparation time for their argument, then they take turns to present the argument for or against the issue. Next, unplanned discussion is an unexpected conversation occurring when students show unpredictable interest on a subject during the class. Finally, reaching a consensus is a well-designed scenario which forces students to make a final decision on a problem within the awkward choices provided. Each of these activities can be conducted in small groups and provokes different pretend membership such as cooperating or opposing. Nevertheless, they share the same procedure for a successful discussion as well as an aim of motivating students' confidence.

How to Conduct Discussion Activities in ESL Classrooms?

ESL classrooms not only limit the number of students to no more than twenty but also provide a full-time speaking lesson, which enables teachers to carry out speaking tasks with complete procedures. Discussion is one of the task-based activities whose procedure can be consulted from Van Gorp and Bogaert (2006, as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2014): Introducing the task, supporting task performance and post-task phase. To make this general procedure more detailed, first teachers give a chart of the scaffolding steps as instructions, then elicit students' prior knowledge about the issue. Next, provide them with only theme vocabulary and structures to give them space to gather information about the issue given within the group. Students are, then, supposed to provide comments on peer's knowledge, choose suitable pieces of information to use, finally achieving the mutual solution for the issue. During the discussion time, students assist each other with their language and ideas while the teacher observes and provides necessary help. At the end of the task, teachers ask for students' own reflection of their discussion by "if you could change something, what would you change?". After that, the teacher gives feedback on the good points and common mistakes that students made.

Benefits and Challenges of Small Group Discussion

The undeniable benefits of this task are broadly accepted. Some could be mentioned are: (1) Meaning focus improve students' critical thinking (Asrida, 2016); (2) Maximizing students' speaking time so improving fluency (Asrida, 2016; Richard, 2006); (3) Enhancing group work skills and learning from other members (Asrida, 2016; Richard, 2006); (4) Self-expression training (Asrida, 2016); (5) Making learning process more motivational (Asrida, 2016; Richard, 2006). Along with the advantages, there are some challenges when conducting discussion activities in ESL classrooms. Alfares (2017) conducted a study about group work and found two main groups of difficulties. The first is learning difficulties referring to the mixed ability in a group which may lead to a waste of time of better learners and a resort to the mother tongue of the weaker ones. The second is emotional difficulties including bad behaviors or introverted personality which may discourage the lively atmosphere of the group discussion.

Related Previous Studies

Hosni (2014) investigated the speaking difficulties and factors causing these difficulties in young learners' language learning. She discussed that although oral language learning did not require much effort from the young, there were still some conditions for its development which had been proposed in previous studies.

Hence, she used teachers' observations, students' interviews and curriculum analysis to examine the obstacles. Her findings concluded three main difficulties: linguistic, mother tongue use, and inhibition. The five factors found to affect these are teacher's teaching philosophy, strategies, curriculum, outside classroom activities and evaluation rules.

More recently, Debreli and Demirkan (2016) conducted a study on the relationship between speaking anxiety and two factors of English proficiency and gender. They reviewed from existing studies that anxiety influences language acquisition, especially speaking. Among a variety of factors causing speaking stress, gender and proficiency level receives little attention. Consequently, they combine questionnaires and semi-structured interviews and T-tests to collect and analyse university students' feedback about this. The results showed that students generally had low speaking anxiety levels and the most common reason for anxiety is making mistakes. A key finding was that lower English proficiency caused less speaking anxiety level.

Regarding solutions for speaking anxiety, Yalcin and Incecay (2014) examined the effect of spontaneous speaking activities on reducing anxiety. Different studies were reviewed to gather situations when students experience anxiety, among which preparedness to speak constituted greater attention. Therefore, they concentrate on different spontaneous activities at a university and collect feedback to check if they help reduce anxiety. The findings confirmed their hypothesis and also suggested that the feeling of success made learners more confident in speaking.

Another study by Osboe et al. in 2007 focused on the correlation between students' confidence and L2 speaking anxiety. They learned from the previous researchers that anxiety restricted L2 practice, so they employed questionnaires to collect data about the causes of speaking anxiety and how to overcome them. The findings revealed that students who are willing to speak in L1 are more confident in L2 speaking and small group discussion emerged to have a positive impact on learners' confidence level.

A more detailed research on benefits and difficulties of group work was carried out by Alfares in 2017. Learning through interaction has been mentioned in many studies, which sets the foundation for group work in her study. Questionnaires and interviews were implemented to collect data. The findings are positive as group work enhances the learning process and increases motivation. As for the difficulties, some members' negative attitudes lessen the benefits of group work.

In conclusion, the current demands for citizens with fluent English speaking skill shift English teaching and learning's focus towards improving communicative skills. One of the vital factors in speaking development is learners' confidence. Related to enhancing one's confidence, a variety of factors and activities have been investigated. One of those is small group discussion. This study harbors an ambition of finding out the positive correlation between small group discussion and learners' speaking confidence. A small scale study conducted is going to be described in the next sections.

III. Research Method

Participants

This study was conducted at two ESL classrooms (of the same course) of an English centre in Bien Hoa City, Viet Nam. In this centre, speaking native language (Vietnamese) was not allowed for teachers. Students were strictly required to speak English, at least in the classroom.

The participants in these two classes were seventeen pre-intermediate level teenagers, ages ranging from thirteen to fifteen. They have been students at this English center for at least one year which is equivalent to three usual courses. In this study, they took an extra newly-introduced speaking course called "Speaking Booster" which lasted four weeks.

Instrument

At the end of the course, a questionnaire was implemented to collect students' feedback about their experience during the course by answering ten questions via Google Form. This method gives students enough time to carefully reflect their own learning. Moreover, collecting feedback anonymously at the end of the course makes students relaxed to tell the truth because they will not study with the same teacher in the next course.

Procedure

The students participated in eight sections in four weeks. The main focus of the lesson plans is discussion activities. Students are gradually guided to the final discussion task through four scaffolding stages: engaging, exploring, connecting and discussing. First, some games, pictures or videos were exploited to arouse students' interest in the topic, along with some simple exchanges related to their experience. Then, some more information about the topic would be revealed through buzz groups which required students to first guess parts of the information provided then explore the facts through videos, audios or reading texts in groups. Next, students would connect the information learned in the previous activities with their own experiences or preferences by

small talk within their groups. Finally, they would get involved in discussions in groups to reach a mutual agreement on something, then briefly report their group's ideas to the whole class.

Data Presentation

The questionnaire was designed for students to range their opinion from agreement to disagreement (agree-neutral-disagree) about 10 elements related to their speaking confidence. Generally, over 50% of the students agree that the treatments help them be more confident. Surprisingly, some factors mentioned in the literature review bore little resemblance to the results from this study. Most of them ranged "neutral" or "disagree" for the factors supposed to make them less confident. A more detailed report is presented in Appendix.

IV. Findings And Discussion

This study suggests some findings revealed from the results above as well as discuss some explanations or related issues:

First, students in ESL classrooms do not really care about being judged by others. With 59% disagree being afraid of speaking in front of the class and 71% disagree being negatively evaluated, this is a surprising result because the factor of negative evaluation in literature review has been broadly accepted in previous studies. One explanation could be that the students had frequent speaking time in ESL classes and teachers did not criticize or interrupt them when they made mistakes during normal conversations. A similar finding was found in Debreli and Demirkan's study (2016): Students were aware of their being learners so making mistakes is unavoidable.

Second, unfamiliar topics may have an insignificant impact on confidence as long as they can explore related information before speaking. 70% of the participants disagreed or marked "neutral" for unfamiliar topics but they strongly agreed (59%) with being more confident if they learned some information from teachers and friends. This slight difference from related studies could be attributed to the fact that the students have explored plenty of topics in projects during courses at this ESL centre so they consider learning new topics as a common case. Provided that they learned some information about the topics through teammates or teachers, they would be confident to speak.

Third, the environment with friendly, open or frequent teammates and teachers make students more confident. Friendly peers and frequent classmates have 65% and 76% of agreement respectively. However, unfriendly teammates have a trivial influence on their speaking confidence. This could be explained that teenagers in ESL classrooms may want to show their independence from people around them so they would prove that surroundings do not affect them.

Finally, small group discussions enhance students' speaking confidence in many ways as it satisfies some factors mentioned in the literature review. 47% of students agreed on being more confident when speaking in groups. There is also a strong agreement (86%) that when their group finished discussing and assigned smaller parts of the task to each member, they would be more confident to report their group's work in front of the whole class. Students can feel more secure when they receive assistance with vocabulary; grammar structures and ideas within their groups. This makes them more confident in front of the whole class, especially ones with poor grammar performance whose confidence, 65% of the students thought, would be improved by good grammar.

V. Conclusion

The study provides certain evidence for the use of discussion activities in enhancing speaking confidence. It is proven that discussion can provide a non-threatening environment for nurturing group members' confidence by allowing them to tutor each other in both ideas and linguistic features. Furthermore, scaffolding stages before the final big speaking task can gradually build students' confidence and catapult them to succeed in the last one. From the findings above, some implications could be drawn out to improve teaching speaking skills: (1) Students should be required to use English in daily conversation without being corrected so that making mistakes is not embarrassing to them; (2) Preparing and sharing information about every topic should become a routine in teachers' plan so that students can feel relaxed with any new topics; (3) Assign weaker students with the frequent peers so that they feel first comfortable, then more confident; (4) Group discussion activities should be exploited in teaching speaking to maximize students speaking time; (5) There must be scaffolding stages before the main task, which helps them achieve small successes by answering or discussing things without preparation. Otherwise, the single main task might destroy the confidence students used to have. Despite some positive findings, this study has some limitations. The study only focuses on ESL students who are familiar with English speaking environment so the result can not be generalized to language learners in other conditions. Moreover, the students were on the same level and pretty cooperative, or else the harmony in group discussion might have been affected. Therefore, further research could be conducted in terms of a more varied population and mixed participants' level and attitudes.

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