Developing Saudi EFL Students' Oral Skills: An Integrative Approach

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Abstract

This study investigates the problems of EFL/ESL university students' unwillingness to speak and take part in class discussions. Saudi students find it inappropriate to speak in class because of their fear to be seen as verbally challenging their teachers' views openly and publicly. Even when they do, they speak a little. This leads to frustration on the side of the teacher, in addition to the absence of any clear feedback from the students: whether they have/have not understood the lecture. The study proposes an integrative approach addressing this problem by integrating all the four communication skills, in addition to the sociolinguistic factor. It has been conducted at the English Department, Qassim University, KSA. The results show that the students have exhibited a considerable improvement in the oral skills. In short, the integrative approach procedure has been generally useful in overcoming those hurdles of students' reticence to communicate, participate, and interact with one another in class discussions.

1. Introduction

In ESL/EFL contexts, speaking is perhaps the most important of the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Carter and Nunan 2001; Celce-Murcia 2001). Speaking is a linguistic activity which, like language itself, consists of several elements: viz., pronunciation (sounds), morphology and lexis (words and their parts), grammar and syntax (structure), semantics, discourse (conversation and utterances), pragmatics (usage and its rules), fluency (ease of speech, confidence, coherence, and speed), in addition to topicality (themes and ideas). As such, teaching speaking involves dealing with all or one and more of the above (Bygate 1987, 2001; Jassem 1994; Dugas, DesRosiers, and Gaskill 2010). However, no single study can tackle all these components in one volume. This paper handles the development of speaking with a focus on discourse and topicality.

2. Speaking: A Literature Survey

First, sociolinguists have pointed out different approaches for investigating speaking in general. They have contributed a great deal to the analysis of speech and the ways of speaking through dividing it into different styles or registers such as: casual, careful, passage reading, and word list styles (e.g., Jassem 1994; Dorian 2010). All speakers, native or non-native, show different levels of competence and fluency in their interactions and styles. Speaking carefully, or expressing the ideas of an academic nature, is the most important requirement for teachers and lecturers. So, how can teachers and students develop and improve such an academically serious discourse?

Second, teaching speaking has generated a huge amount of research and writings such as textbooks and materials preparation (e.g., Bygate, 1987, 2001; Hatfield, 1999; Lazaraton, 2001; Seely, 2005; Ferguson, 2007; Kneen, 2008; Dugas et al, 2010.)

Finally, field-work and method-based studies have examined the reasons that make ESL/EFL students, mostly South East Asian, reluctant to participate in classroom learning discourse (e.g., Reda, 2009; Xia, 2009; Liu and Jackson, 2009; Lee, 2009).

Few studies have examined developing, in particular, the students' speaking skills. For example, Jassem (1997) was particularly interested in tackling and enhancing Malaysian English majors' skills in academic discussions by using various methods such as written assignment-oriented seminars. This is an interesting work as it handles an EFL/ESL context similar to the one at hand, where Malaysians are usually silent; they are keen on listening rather than speaking. Lee (2009) has examined the reasons for improving Asian students' low participation in class in Australia through combining both writing and speaking.

2.1 The Nature of the Problem: Why Saudi Students do not Speak?

In ESL/EFL classroom interaction, teachers and students are often on opposing sides with one another: teachers babble all the time, whereas students mumble and swallow their words, or say nothing. Almost all such teachers and lecturers, therefore, complain about the unwillingness of their students to talk and communicate. This may be particularly frustrating to some of them, especially when they receive no feedback or response for their questions. This is a common phenomenon to all ESL or EFL contexts, especially the latter, no matter whether the teacher is local or foreign.

2.2 Aim of the Study and Its Integrative Approach

The purpose of the study is to replicate Jassem (1997) to a Saudi Arab English-medium university setting. More precisely, it aims to examine how to enable Saudi English major students to communicate by using an integrative approach to speaking. This approach combines suitable techniques from the four communication skills in addition to sociolinguistics: from listening there are note-taking and comprehension (e.g., Peterson, 2001; Kneen, 2008); from speaking there is discussion (e.g., Bygate 1987, 2001; Ferguson, 2007; Dugas et al, 2010); form reading there is studying one's textbooks (e.g., Grabe and Staller, 2001); from both writing and speaking there is writing up (e.g., Kroll, 2001; Seely, 2005); finally, from sociolinguistics there is the notion of style (e.g., Jassem, 1994; Dorian, 2010).

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

This study has been carried out over five years from 2006 onwards, covering all the courses I have taught at the Department of English Language and Translation at Qassim University, KSA. The methods of data collection have been adapted from Jassem (1997), and included: (i) participant, or teacher classroom observations ;(ii) written and oral questionnaires; and (iii) discussions with both students and professors. The questionnaire was divided into five sections: (i) lecturer; (ii) subject; (iii) test; (iv) teaching method; and, (v) other comments. The teaching method included four components, which were: (a) lecture; (b) tutorial; (c) workshop; and, (d) seminar. These sections reflect the influences that may inhibit or encourage speaking in the classroom.

The total number of students who have taken part in this research is large; it has amounted to over 500 students, from all the eight levels of the program, especially the upper ones; on the other side, there are no more than 20 male teachers.

3.2 Data Analysis

The data will be analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Emphasis will be given to the qualitative dimension since this relates to the opinions of the students themselves as to the nature of the problem here.

4. Results and Findings

4.1 Speaking Development Procedures

Group discussions and seminars encourage students to interact and take the initiative. Group discussion can be defined as an academic, or study session, in which a student or a group of students can collectively present, describe, and discuss their written assignments in class.

4.2 Objective of Workshops

Group discussions have a number of aims, which are intended to:

(i)   Exchange ideas amongst the students freely;

(ii)   Train the students to speaking publicly;

(iii) Re-enforce the lectures and to facilitate their understanding with a hands-on experience; and

(iv)   Explore new dimensions such as: course applications, course limitations, and developments of certain theories and ideas. These points are very important, especially the second one, as it explicitly tackles speaking itself. There are different steps for developing an academically-oriented classroom interaction or speaking, some of which are:

(i)   Understanding the topic: No speaking is possible without students having understood their lecture topic first.

(ii)   Relating and applying the topic to a local problem or issue: For example, students are asked to find out, test, and to solve a problem in their own area;

(iii) Team work and cooperation: Students need to work as teams by discussing matters with classmates inside and outside of class;

(iv) Writing: Students are required to present their work as a research project, term paper or assignment.

(v) Presentation: Each student must present his work orally in front of the whole class.

(vi) Commentator/Discussant: Each student presenter may be assigned a student discussant for his work ahead of the presentation. He may have to answer questions from other students on his work.

4.3 A Model: One Exemplary Workshop

The purpose of this workshop, like Jassem (1997), is to show how one such group discussion has progressed from the beginning to the end. The workshop was carried out for and by the fourth year English major students of ENGL *466 Language Testing*, in Semester II, 2009/10. The students have already received and enjoyed instruction about the nature and scope of language testing for a whole semester. The workshop has gone through several stages as shown below.

4.4 Stage 1: Task Description

By the end of the first five lectures, the students have been asked if they could do a similar description of an English language test used in KSA in general and in their local schools in particular. Fifty students were asked to work in groups of between 5-10 individuals each. There have been five groups in all. Each group of students has been told to collect sample examination papers from all types of schools (primary, intermediate, and secondary) and report their results in the form of short assignments, or research projects.

4.5 Stage 2: Task Execution

The students have finished their task quickly in about a week or so. They have collected their data from local and regional schools. They have been requested to depend on the examination samples at hand. When the students have submitted their written group assignments of about five pages each, the teacher has corrected and returned them for further modifications. All the groups have accomplished the specified task successfully.

4.6 Stage 3: Task Presentation and Discussion

Towards the end of the course, there has been a group discussion, or workshop, for all the students of the course. The workshop has lasted for two hours, where every group member has had to present his part of the work orally to all the class. Co-operation and co-ordination amongst the students has been essential for their work to succeed. The workshop has proceeded along two dimensions: a teacher role and student role.

As to the teacher role, the lecturer:

(i) Has taken control of the whole class as to time management, turn distribution, and discipline maintenance.

(ii) Has informed the students about the purpose of the workshop, which is the discussion of their work.

(iii) Has divided the students into groups to be seated in a circular fashion.

(iv) Has requested each group to choose a co-coordinator who will act as their compere. The groups have later been asked to discuss and plan their strategy in five minutes.

(v) Has told the groups that each student is assigned about three minutes to present his part. This has been strict due to time limitations and student large numbers.

(vi) Has requested the students to listen carefully, take notes, and ask questions once the group's turn is over.

Regarding student roles, the groups have started to present their works, starting with the smaller groups first. The coordinator of each group has been responsible for the order and sequence of the speakers of his group. All the presentations have progressed very smoothly and ended on time. Every member of every group has taken part and has spoken. The students have presented their work in order with confidence and joy. With respect to questions, there has not been enough space for that. All in all, one or two questions have been asked to each group because of time constraints. I have noted two or three interesting things in this respect:

(i) Some students have asked very interesting questions indeed. Such students have a great potential. I have been able to discover them here.

(ii) The answers have been given either individually, or by the group as a whole. However, some students have not answered some questions that are beyond their tentative work, as stated.

(iii) The lecturer has intervened in the responses, if needed.

To close each group's turn, a round of clapping has been the signal for completing their presentation. Finally, the whole class has been given a strong round of applause for successfully completing their job.

At last, concluding and wrapping-up ensued. The lecturer has summarized all the discussions by the various groups, and has commended their achievements. He has asked the students to hold on to these assignments, which they may need to develop further on the basis of new teaching materials in future courses.

4.7 Reactions to Group Discussions

It has been essential to know what the students' reactions to the workshops or group discussions are. From classroom observation, it has been evident the students have liked it and have begun to talk more. In addition, the lecturer has asked the students whether they have liked and enjoyed the workshop by the show of hands. The response has been overwhelmingly positive. None has been negative as the following table shows.

As can be seen from the table, all the students have enjoyed and liked the workshop which encourages student classroom interaction, its main purpose. Why have they done so? Why have they accomplished that with confidence? Why have they been interactive and communicative? How have they ever been able to finish their presentation in three minutes?

4.8 Discussion

The findings of this research support those of Jassem (1997) in which Malaysian English major students have been able to interact and speak academically, effectively, informatively, confidently, and joyfully. The style has been formal as the topic is academic. Tan (2005) has reached a similar conclusion with Asian students of English as a second language in Australia where writing has been combined with speaking.

Obviously, there have been two reasons for the ever increasing interactions of the students in these group discussions. The first relates to the method and the second to the overall integrative procedure. As to method, workshops are more suitable for speaking, where students are independent and fully-prepared. To be able to speak on academic topics, the student needs to be ready and well-prepared.

As to the technique, one can mention the following points.

(i)   Comprehension: Understanding the course lectures well has enabled the students to apply the ideas successfully.

(ii)   Team work: The students have co-operated and discussed matters together. They have not competed, but rather they complemented one another.

(iii) Motivation: The students have enjoyed their work a lot.

(iv)   Familiarity: The students have been familiar with what they have been doing. First, they have known the theory of language testing and its uses. Secondly, they have also been familiar with the English tests of their country: KSA. Discussing it has been both thrilling and interesting.

(v)   Integration: The students have combined many skills in completing the task: (a) listening to lectures; (b) reading textbooks and course materials; (c) peer group discussion; (d) interacting with teachers; (e) collecting data; (f) writing the task; and (f) presenting the task. Thus an integrative approach has been followed throughout from beginning to end.

(vi)   Learner-Centered Teaching: The students have been the center of teaching by encouraging all of them. In the end, all students performed well.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This research has demonstrated that it is possible to develop students' speaking skills effectively and interestingly. Of course, this has been dependent on the integrative procedure used to elicit speaking in this context. To achieve this goal, certain conditions are to be met, including:

(i)   understanding the topic background;

(ii)   liking the topic and applying it to a local problem;

(iii) teaming up with friends;

(iv)   familiarity with the topic;

(v)   receiving advice and encouragement;

(vi)   skill integration such as listening and speaking, writing, reading and speaking; and discussing and evaluating.

This seems to be one of the best ways for the development of student interaction and communication about academic topics in a formal style.

It goes without saying that the students have naturally differed in the amount and length of their speech contributions. Some have been more outspoken than others but all students have spoken and participated.

As to the implications of this work, a few suggestions can be made here:

(i)   it can be used, with proper modifications, to develop speaking skills in all English topics at this and similar universities worldwide;

(ii)   quantifying student contributions such as why some students talk more, some less, some very little.

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Table 1.% Students' Reactions to Workshop on "Language Testing"

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	All
Positive	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %
Negative	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----