



SPEAKING AND SPEAKING PROFICIENCY

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ABSTRACT

The current work discusses the importance of speaking and sub-skills of speaking. Furthermore, determines the distinction between the terms 'speaking' and 'speaking proficiency'. It also provides with the different genres of speaking essential to learning and teaching speaking.

Introduction

In the literature, there is some overlap between the terms 'speaking' and 'speaking proficiency'. This overlap springs from the lack of operational definitions which determine the distinction between the two terms obviously. The term 'speaking' is used to mean different things. It means oral production if speaking is listed as one of the four language skills. Learners of foreign languages as well as a big number of teachers if asked to give the meaning of speaking would probably say 'producing speech'. The other meaning of the word is 'oral communication' which implies both production and reception. In language testing, 'speaking' is labeled as productive and receptive but the focus is on oral production.

Materials and Methods: Speaking Proficiency

According to Chaney & Burk (1998), speaking is "the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts". The Oxford Pocket Dictionary of Current English (2008) defines 'speaking' as "the action of conveying information or expressing one's thoughts and feelings in spoken language". Thus, it cannot be assumed that any vocalizing is speaking and any silent, passive behavior is listening. The Speech Communication Association's (SCA) standards document clarifies the boundaries of what 'speaking' and 'listening' include as the terms are used by the speech communication discipline. Based on the SCA guidelines, 'speaking' includes both spontaneous informal speech (e.g., talking in work groups, responding in class



discussion, participating in interviews) and prepared formal speeches. Speaking instruction focuses on expected behaviors (responses, delivery) in both formal and informal settings and the process of composing speech text. So, the problem here is that a precise definition of the term 'speaking' is lacking.

The definition of the term 'speaking proficiency' has the same problem. As a result of this confusion, alternative terms for 'speaking proficiency' have been used. One of those terms is 'fluency' which has two senses in the literature ..."a narrow sense" and "a broad sense". The narrow sense refers to 'fluency' as a criteria of 'oral proficiency' and the broad sense is 'oral proficiency' itself (Lennon, 1990). The other term relates to the distinction between 'language usage' and 'language use'. The former refers to mastering language system whereas the latter indicates the use of language for communicative purposes.

The act of speaking can be divided into genres which include:

Formal interviews (in relation to job applications)

Highly ritualized greetings (discussions about weather)

Transactions (ordering around of food in a restaurant)

Tutorials at colleges or university

Arguments

Chat up lines

General social chit chat (Thompson, 2003).

If 'speaking proficiency' means how well language is used in communication, the question that arises here is how ESL/EFL learners arrive at this stage. In answering

this question, Nunan (2003) states that ESL/EFL learners should be taught to:

- produce the English speech sounds and sound patterns
- select appropriate words and sentences according to the proper social setting, audience, situation and subject matter.
- organize their thoughts in a meaningful and logical sequence.
- use language as a means of expressing values and judgments.
- use the language quickly and confidently with few unnatural pauses.

Another important question that arises here relates to how teachers and testers measure speaking (oral) proficiency of the learners. The American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) has published The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (1986) which contains descriptions of different levels of language proficiency. It provides a detailed description of the kinds of communication functions, range of vocabulary, degree of accuracy and flexibility that learners of a language are able to control at different levels in each of the four major language skills. These descriptions can be helpful in setting language learning goals, in planning learning activities and in evaluating proficiency. These guidelines identify stages of proficiency, as opposed to achievement. They do not measure what individuals achieve through specific classroom instruction, but assess what individuals can and cannot do. This is regardless of where, when, or how the language was learned or acquired; thus the words "learned" and "acquired" are used in the broadest sense. These guidelines are not based on a particular linguistic theory or pedagogical method, and are intended for global assessment.



In connection with speaking, there are four levels in the scale: Superior, Advanced, Intermediate and Novice. The three lower levels are divided into three sublevels each: Low, Mid and High. The aim is to show progress at the levels where most foreign language learners are. The level descriptors mention the situations that the learners can cope with and the language activities they can do. They also describe the strong and weak points of their language (Luoma, 2004). On the whole, the scale is long and requires special training to use. Moreover, it is not practically stating strength and weakness in individual learners' performances.

Results and Discussion: Importance of Teaching Speaking Skill

In learning a foreign language, the ability to speak in that language is of crucial importance. It reflects our knowledge of the language and our ability to use that language to express feelings, ideas, thoughts, and knowledge of the world. The main aim of many of the target language learners is to be able to speak to friends, teachers, and visitors in that language. Many language learners and educators regard speaking as the measure of knowing a language. Nunan (1991) wrote "success is measured in terms of the ability to carry out a conversation in the (target) language". In addition, it is clearly observed that students who do not learn how to speak or do not get any opportunity to speak in classroom may soon get de-motivated and lose interest in learning. More important than that is the fact that speaking is fundamental to human communication. In our daily lives, we speak more than we read or write. Rankin (1928 cited in Mohanraj, J. 1995) found that the amount of time devoted to the language art is inversely related to its social utility in human affairs. His study revealed that in course of our daily communication with

people 70 per cent of our working day is spent in verbal communication. Of this communication time, 45 per cent is spent in listening, 30 per cent in speaking, 16 per cent in reading, and 9 percent in writing.

However, many English teachers still spend the majority of class time on teaching grammar, reading, vocabulary, and writing almost ignoring speaking and listening skills. They do so because the former areas are tested in examinations. Hence, speaking becomes a neglected skill in many classrooms. Students may have a good knowledge of grammar and a wide vocabulary which they use to pass examinations but they find it more difficult to speak English.

There are many advantages of learning how to speak. Good English speakers will be in a strong position to help themselves as well as their country's economic, social, a political development. Baker and Westrup (2006) list very good educational reasons to practice speaking during a lesson:

- Speaking activities can reinforce the learning of new vocabulary, grammar or functional language;
- Speaking activities give the students the chance to use the new language they are learning;
- Speaking activities give more advanced students the chance to experiment with the language they already know in different situations and on different topics.

Teaching speaking is not only important to those who study a second or foreign language but also to the native speakers of that language. For many years it was assumed that native English speaking children would naturally acquire the spoken form of the language. It is only relatively recently that educationists have seriously considered that it might be



necessary to teach the spoken language to native speakers. This concern led to a demand within the educational system that it should be taught and included within the school curriculum. The Bullock Report (1975) could be taken as an example.

Several methods/approaches in language teaching have emerged during the last decades with the aim of developing the quality of language teaching. These methods/approaches differ from the point of view of their emphasis on certain language skills, techniques and procedures used in teaching, the role of teachers and learners. Among the four skills speaking is given a little attention in most of the teaching methods and approaches.

Despite its importance, for many years, teaching speaking has been undervalued and English language teachers have continued to teach speaking just as a repetition of drills or memorization of dialogues. Speaking in traditional methodologies usually meant repeating after the teacher, memorizing a dialogue, or responding to drills, all of which reflect the sentence-based view of proficiency prevailing in the audio-lingual and other drill-based or repetition-based methodologies of the 1970s (Richards, 2008).

However, today's world requires that the goal of teaching speaking should improve students' communicative skills because only in that way students can express themselves and learn how to follow the social and cultural rules appropriate in each communicative circumstance.

The Sub-skills of Speaking

Each language skill has some micro skills called sub-skills. These sub-skills make a difference between native speakers and non-native speakers of a language.

Knowledge of all the sub-skills is necessary for complete English speaking competency (Dornyei and Thurrell, 1994). Hereby, the sub-skills of speaking are presented to aid the stated assumption. The first speaking sub-skill is referred to as "coping strategies" with which non-native learners can contribute to a conversation within the bounds of their ability. This includes paraphrasing, reduction, word coinage, etc. In addition, "coping strategies" can help learners be more confident with the language. Another sub-skill is the ability to negotiate meaning. Learners, who lack the full repertoire of negotiative functions, such as clarification requests, expressing opinions, making suggestions, expressing reactions to others, might find themselves in dialogues where their meanings and intentions are unclear (Dornyei and Thurrell, 1994). Learners of English need help in figuring out the rules and routines specific to English dialogues, therefore "interaction management" is another key skill that learners would do well to acquire (Dornyei and Thurrell, 1994; McCarthy and O'Keeffe, 2004). In an account of the 'transactional' and 'interactional' functions of language, Brown and Yule (1983) touch on a distinction which seems to be parallel with semantic and pragmatic meaning. To them, that function which language serves in the expression of content is described as transactional, and that function involved in expressing social relations is described as interactional. "Whereas linguists, philosophers of language and psycholinguists have, in general, paid attention to the use of language for the transmission of 'factual propositional information', sociologists and sociolinguists have been particularly concerned with the use of language to negotiate role-relationships, peer-solidarity, the exchange of turns in a conversation, the saving of face



of both speaker and hearer (Brown and Yule 1983)".

Knowing when and how to open /close a conversation is a key speaking competence that learners must be taught. Another key sub-skill learners should acquire is "discourse management". This refers to the management of clausal utterances and making dialogues more coherent and explicit. Dornyei and Thurrell, (1994) and Hedge (2004) remark as to why the acquisition of the above sub-skills is important as becoming a competent second language speaker. They state that conversation is just not about saying something grammatically correct; it is a social activity and had a multitude of social rules. In addition, knowledge of vocabulary and grammar will not allow someone to communicate effectively.

A list of speaking sub-skills is included below:

1. Producing segmental features of English at word level [especially vowel and consonant sounds, stressed and unstressed syllables].
2. Using supra segmental features of English [especially intonation, stress in sentences, word-linking and weak forms] accurately in spoken utterances.
3. Expressing grammatical [syntactic and morphological] relationships in spoken utterances at the level of the sentence.
4. Expressing relationships between parts of a spoken utterance through cohesive devices [especially grammatical cohesion such as noun-pronoun reference].
5. Using markers in spoken discourse, in particular
introducing an idea
developing an idea

transition to another idea

concluding an idea

emphasizing a point to indicate important information

explaining or clarifying a point already made anticipating

an objection or contrary view.

6. Sustaining communicative dialogue with and without explicit markers

single exchange

double exchange

multiple exchanges.

7. Expressing conceptual meaning in spoken utterances.

8. Expressing attitudinal meaning in spoken text and utterances [especially by intonation].

9. Marking the main points or important information in spoken text and utterances [especially through emphasis or vocal underlining and through verbal cues].

10. Expressing information or knowledge in informal and semi-formal utterances.

11. Planning and organizing information in formal expository discourse

oral narrative

oral description of phenomena or ideas.

12. Oral descriptions of process or change of state (quoted in Miguel Bengoa, 2008).

In the first place, learners should know how to produce the various sounds whether vowels or consonants. This ability to produce individual sounds is referred to as the segmental features as opposed to the supra segmental features which operate over longer stretches of speech, such as, stress, rhythm, intonation, pitch, and voice



quality. This is important because changing of stress or intonation at word or sentence level results in different class or meaning. Spoken language is made of utterances that are grammatically coherent and to the speaker to be understood s/he should be able to express the grammatical relationships in spoken utterances through cohesive devices. Markers are used in both written and spoken English to link what has come before to what comes next. Discourse markers used in written English could be 'on the one hand', 'turning now to' or 'in conclusion'. Typical markers in spoken English include 'now', 'so' 'actually', 'well', 'I see', 'by the way', 'I know' and so on. These markers indicate how one piece of discourse is connected to another. In sustaining a communicative dialogue, the use of markers might be ignored as the focus is directed to conveying the intended message. The term 'conceptual meaning' refers to logical or denotative content of certain lexical items. For example, the word 'street' could be conceptualized as 'paved', 'for public use', 'usually in urban places'. However, the 'attitudinal meaning' reflects

what we feel about something. Thus, the conceptual meaning is shared among people whereas the attitudinal meaning is personal. Another feature is the ability to distinguish between the use of formal, semi-formal, and informal utterances according to the context of speech. Finally, planning and organizing information could be practiced through 'oral narrative', i.e. story telling or description of certain phenomena or ideas. This includes recalling previous incidents or phenomena, thinking in terms of sequence, and looking for adequate expressions.

Conclusion

In this paper, the notion of 'speaking' and 'speaking proficiency' and other related issues were discussed with reference to the work done in this area. The sub-skills of speaking have been presented in some detail. Furthermore, role of teaching speaking in the various methods and approaches has been elaborated. A discussion of teaching spoken English in non-native context has been presented.

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