

CLASSROOM INTERACTION: A STRATEGY TO DEVELOP THE ORAL COMPETENCY OF ESL LEARNERS

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Abstract

This paper will focus on the role of classroom interaction in developing the oral competency of ESL learners. The need for the study comes from the observation that learners lack in the oral skills when it comes to any form of public speaking. Learners want to express themselves but are unable to do so since they do not feel confident, hence, affecting their performance. Classroom interaction will serve as a platform and an opportunity for these learners to overcome the challenges that they face in speaking. Therefore, this paper will attempt to look at the different levels of learners and will attempt to provide suggestions for improving the oral competency of learners through classroom interaction.

Keywords: Speaking skills, oral competency, classroom interaction, ESL learners

Introduction

This paper will focus on the use of classroom interaction as a step to enhance competency in speaking/oral skills. Speaking means “using language for a purpose” (Baker & Westrup, 2003.p.7). Speaking is a productive skill. According to Widdowson (1978), “Speaking involves not only the production of sounds but also the use of gesture, the movements of the muscles of the face, and indeed of the whole body” (p.59). Speaking also involves some sub-skills. Some of the sub-skills like organising thoughts and ideas in logical sequence and use of appropriate words and structures to express the intended meaning are of paramount importance in speaking (Baruah, 1984.p.214).

According to Ghosh (2010), “Classroom Interaction is a practice that enhances the development of the two very important language skills which are speaking and listening among the learners. This device helps the learner to be competent enough to think critically and share their views among their peers”.

Oral skills are a part of classroom interaction. This paper will focus on determining the level of learners in terms of their oral skills and providing suggestions for the same in order to enable learners to overcome their challenges they encounter when they have to speak in public.

Objectives of the study

- To identify the fast and slow learners and categorise them into different groups such as below average, average and above average based on the criterion
- To determine the current level of learners' confidence and fluency level
- To determine the current level of learners' clarity and delivery

Methodology

For this study, first years post graduate students pursuing Masters in Commerce have been taken since it was observed that most of the students lack oral communication when they have to perform a task in class. The researcher feels that this may affect them at a later stage in life if they have to work in the professional front. Therefore, developing their oral competency in terms of confidence, fluency, clarity and delivery and so on will help them in the long run.

A total number of twenty (20) learners were taken for the study. The total marks for the extempore speech was 20 marks and the topics chosen were general in nature. The pass mark was 40% of the total marks. The learners had to pick one chit on which the topic was written. The time duration given for each student was three minutes to prepare and another three minutes to speak.

The criterion for assessment was confidence, fluency, clarity, delivery, logical arrangement of thoughts and ideas; and use of appropriate content.

After the activity was conducted, the scores of the learners were tabulated, and out of 20 learners, 12 (60%) of learners found it challenging to express themselves, 3 (15%) were average in their performance and only 5 (25%) could articulate themselves without any difficulty.

Data analysis and findings

The observer notes that five learners (25%) meet the entire criterion. This is reflected through their confidence and fluency while speaking. Besides these, the learners could use appropriate vocabulary related to the topic they got. This is an indication that these learners have logical arrangement of thoughts and ideas.

The other criterion that indicates that the learners are confident is their prior knowledge about the subject/ topic chosen. The learners understand the content and therefore, are able to apply their knowledge. Hence, due to the above reasons, these learners could deliver their content effectively.

In this case, the learners may be considered to be above average on the basis of the criterion given.

However, the observer notes that 60% learners could not meet the criteria listed. Firstly, it was observed that these learners lacked confidence and fluency which automatically affected their delivery.

The learners could not really use the appropriate vocabulary related to the content even though they have the understanding, they could not deliver. Logical arrangement of thoughts and ideas was also affected as learners tend to jumble information. It is also important to mention that some learners could not utter a single sentence except for their names and topic chosen. They felt very uncomfortable and were very shy to the point that it badly affected their performance.

Therefore, these learners may be considered to be below average based on the criterion given. The 15% of learners managed to meet the criterion and hence, may be considered to be average. These learners have the potential to do better with a little more effort and guidance from the teachers/mentors.

The scores of the students have been graphically represented below in figure 1 and 2.

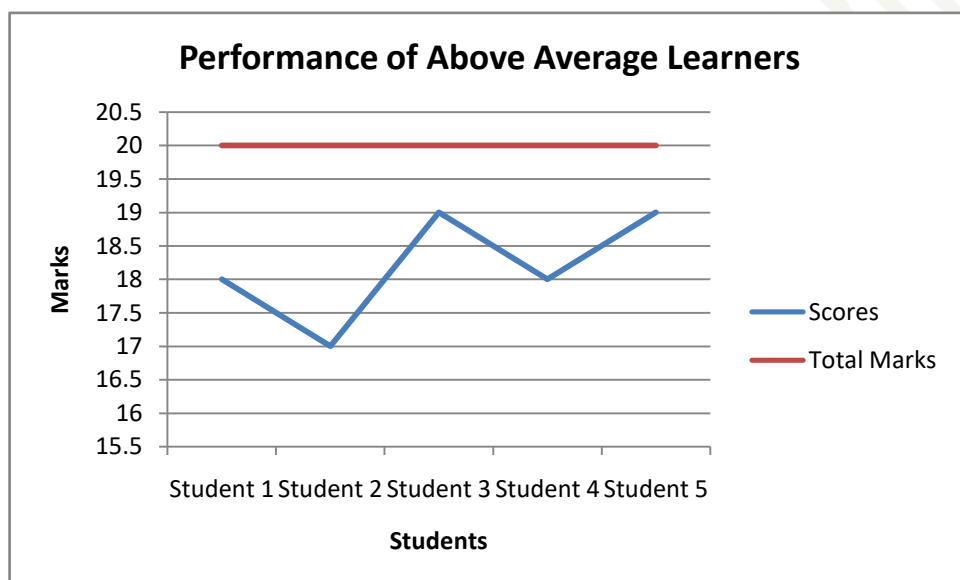


Figure 1. Performance of Above Average Learners

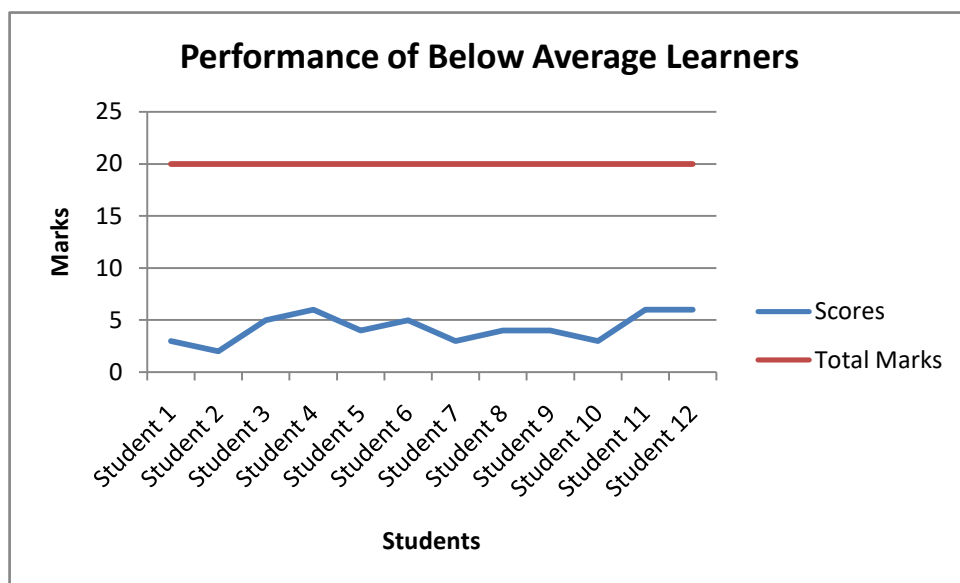


Figure 2. Performance of Below Average Learners

In the two groups above, one can see that there is a gap in the learning process between the two. This may be attributed to the background that these learners come from. From the student's profile collected, most of these learners are from the semi-rural and rural areas where the exposure to the language is limited perhaps, only to the prescribed textbooks and the teachers. Hence, when students complete their higher secondary level and move to the cities for further studies, they find it difficult to cope with the content or nature of the course. Going back to figure 1, the 25% of learners will manage to sail through at a later stage in life in the professional front since they are able to articulate themselves in any given situation. What about the below average learners? How can we as teachers help them bridge these lacunae? What approaches can we use to suit the learner and aids in oral competency? What type of classroom activities can we use to support them to reach the desired oral competency? It is here that perhaps, the teacher can employ the concept of developing oral communication through classroom interaction. This is a very helpful method which will benefit learners in the long run.

Discussions and suggestions for developing oral competency

Looking at the findings above, it can be inferred that the role of the teacher is of utmost importance in facilitating the classroom interaction to help bridge the gap in the learning process. The teacher has to be a facilitator, guide and mentor to the learners to encourage and motivate them to interact more in the classroom. Through classroom interaction, the learners will get themselves involved with concepts and ideas through participation.

It is the responsibility of the teacher to create a learning atmosphere inside the classroom. It is through these interactive sessions that the teacher can extract responses from learners and

motivate them to come out with new ideas related to the topic. Muntner (2008) talks about the positive climate, teacher's sensitivity and considering learners' perspectives when dealing with learners in the classroom.

There are different techniques that the teacher can use in the classroom to help learners. The different types of classroom interaction can be:

- Collaborative Learning or group learning
- Group Discussions and Debates
- Interactive Sessions
- Story-telling
- Conversation with/among learners
- Role Play

These techniques allow learners to participate thereby facilitating learning and simultaneously, building the confidence of learners which is the precursor in any oral interaction. Participation methods can be in the above forms and therefore, brings personalities into the open and involves members in active expressions of their learning as it is taking place (Powell, 1969).

The role of instructional material also plays a very important role in classroom interaction. These can be textbooks, workbooks, instructional software, web-based content, homework, projects, quizzes, and tests. According to Chingos & Whitehurst (2012), there is strong evidence that the choice of instructional materials has large effects on student learning. Therefore, teaching materials or course books plays a very important role in classroom interaction.

According to Dhar (2011), teachers agree that the course books are relevant for helping the students practise their oral skills. However, this is far from being true in reality. This can be justified by looking at the huge size of the classroom and the content of the course books which has either very few activities or the activities given are not really conducted in class due to various factors such as size of the classroom and time constrain to complete the syllabus before the examinations.

Some of the other techniques that can be included to enhance oral skills can be taped materials, speaking activities such as presentations and conversation, group discussions, peer teaching and using elicitations in the classroom (Dhar, 2011).

Therefore, understanding this relationship between teacher, student and course materials will definitely help and motivate learners to interact in the class and thereby improving his/her oral skills.

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that the competency level of a second language learner in speaking/oral skills can be brought about through classroom interaction. Classroom interaction is emerging as one of the leading conventions to enhance the students' linguistic resources as well as equipping them with appropriate skills for communication. Therefore, further research into this field could be conducted in order to establish the relationship that occurs in classroom interaction.

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