



Developing speaking skills in the English classroom

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Abstract

This paper focuses on developing speaking skills in the English classroom in an Arab EFL context, particularly in Oman. It explores the most important factors that material designers should take into account when designing speaking activities. It also describes some speaking tasks taken from published books in the Omani context and examines their effectiveness in developing speaking skills of the intended language learners.

Key words: motivation, input, exposure, integration, real-time processing.

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1. Introduction

Most learners of English as a second language aspire to be able to use the language in real life communication. In order for such an aspiration to be accomplished, course books designers as well as teachers need to take into their account a number of criteria that good speaking tasks should meet. "Of all the four skills, speaking seems intuitively the most important: people who know a language are referred to as 'speakers' of that language, as if speaking included all other kinds of knowing" [1].

This article attempts to explore the most important factors to be considered in designing materials for developing speaking skills. It also tries to describe some selected speaking tasks and sheds a light on the teaching context on which these tasks are based. Moreover, it endeavours to evaluate the effectiveness of the said tasks in developing the speaking skills of the intended language learners.

This paper is divided into three main sections. The first outlines the most important principles of good speaking tasks. The second section aims at describing the selected speaking tasks in terms of their source and their objectives. In this section, I will also attempt to describe the learning/teaching context as well as the learners for whom these tasks are designed. Based on the principles which will be identified in the first section, the final section examines to how extent these speaking tasks are successful in developing the learners' speaking skills and draws conclusion for future.

2. The most important criteria of good speaking tasks:

There are lots of factors which should be taken into consideration in designing materials for developing speaking skills. In this section, I will try to identify the most important ones.

2.1. Motivation;

A good speaking task should have a *communicative purpose* for using the target language. The learners need to

see L2 as a means of communication for which they use to achieve a specific purpose. Therefore, it is vital to contextualise the speaking tasks by providing the learners with meaningful situations and *clear outcome*. Such an outcome will probably give them a sense of achievement. "In the communicative classroom, interaction is far less teacher-centred and focuses on learners speaking to each other for a specific reason in order to achieve a specific outcome" [2]. In this respect, students' motivation can be increased if they have a listener who is interested on what they say [3]. Therefore, one may argue that activities such as information gap activities and doing surveys can offer real outcome for the learners, because the listener usually needs to fill the gap, which can be noticed in his or her referential questions. Students' speaking skills can also be fostered if the speaking task *suits their age and level*. For example, young learners might well encounter a motivation demand if the task is of a higher level or if the chosen topic does not touch their lives and does not cater their needs and interests.

"When students with language limitations are asked to work with topics that do not interest them, and without the necessary information, then language production activities suffer" [4].

Moreover, for students' speaking skills to be evolved, teachers are encouraged to provide their pupils with *stress-free environment*. Communicative activities can create a supportive environment in which optimal learning can result. Accordingly, group work and pair work can reduce the tension and urge shy or reluctant pupils to communicate freely [5].

2.2. Speaking Practice;

Alongside the other features, speaking practice seems to be fundamental. Language teachers should make sure that almost all the learners practise speaking adequately. Teachers are also urged to reduce their talk time in order to maximize the opportunities for the learners to have more talk time. Successful speaking activities should provoke all students to participate and so ensure that they are all offered

practice opportunities [6]. It could be argued that this can be accomplished by getting students to work in groups or pairs where they can take turns in solving a problem or discussing a topic. However, some learners might use their mother tongue during group work. Therefore, it is significant to urge them to keep using the target language. Nominating group leaders for every group can help overcome this problem, as they can ensure using English in their groups and can organise the participation within their groups. Teachers are advised to “appoint a chairperson to each group who will regulate participation” [1].

2.3. Activating the levels of knowledge;

One of the most important criteria which speaking task should adhere is that it should give the learners the chance to use all their available resources. There are three levels of knowledge to understand the spoken language: Schematic (background knowledge), Context and Systemic (grammar, semantic, phonology) knowledge. Language learners need to have speaking activities which activate these levels of knowledge [7]. This can help their prediction and develop their oral fluency as well. Hence, selecting the relevant topics for the learners is significant in activating their knowledge of the world.

2.4. Integration of skills;

The integration of the different language skills appears to have a great impact in the success of any speaking task. Speaking should not be isolated from the other skills. In real life contexts, speaking is usually integrated with the other skills. One might be involved in a telephone conversation and writes down some notes at the same time. “During interaction, every speaker plays a double role- both as a listener and as a speaker” [8]. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to offer their students opportunities to practise both speaking and listening and to combine them in conversations [7].

2.5. Input and Exposure;

In order for the learners to produce the new language competently, they need first to be exposed to it in meaningful situations. The pre- task stage should be utilized well to give the students the input needed which can help them reformulate the language. Thus, in speaking tasks, it is preferable to expose the learners to the target language through listening or reading (receptive skills). Learners should be given sufficient exposure to rich and real English [9].

In addition, “language which students have only just met for the first time is often not available for instant use in spontaneous conversation; more exposure and practice is usually necessary before people can use new language fluently” [10].

2.6. Some focus on form;

Although it is essential for the learners to develop their speaking fluency, there should be some focus on form when setting a speaking task. Such a focus can be more beneficial when students work on guided tasks. “Instruction, which focuses on language form can both speed up the rate of language development and raise the ultimate level of the learners’ attainment” [9]. In addition, “achieving a balance between accuracy- and fluency- based tasks is further

essential criterion in developing a programme” [6]. Language teachers can utilize group discussions to notice learners’ language errors and then to draw the learners’ attention to them after their discussions.

2.7. Real- time processing of language;

Bygate (1987) highlights the link between the knowledge and the skill in his model of the spoken language production. He claims that the “skills are dependent on some appropriate knowledge resource. They involve using known conventions for communicating specific meanings. The exercise of the skills, however, can increase the knowledge store” [11].

Furthermore, in real life, the interaction between the speaker and the listener happens in real time, therefore, in order to maintain the flow of the conversation, the speaker has very little time to respond to the listener [2]. Accordingly, as a classroom implication, good speaking tasks should involve some real time processing of language. In other words, they should help develop production skills. This can be accomplished by helping the speaker deals with the pressures of having to speak quickly enough to express what he or she wants to express, e.g: using ellipsis, or fillers and hesitation devices [11]. By using such authentic features of spoken discourse, speaking in the language classroom will probably be more authentic.

Moreover, a successful speaking task should also help develop interaction skills. Such skills are needful to avoid communication breakdowns. Both production and interaction skills can nourish oral fluency [1].

3. Description of the speaking tasks and the teaching context:

Having outlined the most important principles of good speaking tasks, I will endeavour in this section to fully describe the teaching situation and the two selected speaking tasks.

The teaching and learning context:

These speaking tasks are designed for grade 5 in Basic Education schools in the Sultanate of Oman where English is considered as a foreign language. However, nowadays, it is widely spoken there. The syllabus in Basic schools is called ‘English for Me’. The tasks are taken from unit 3 lesson 13 steps 1 and 3 page 33 in the skills book. Each unit in this class consists of 15 lessons. Pupils in grade 5 are about 10-11 years old, and they have been learning English for 5 years. The maximum number of pupils in basic education classes is 35 pupils. They usually sit in 7 groups of 5 pupils each and they are mixed ability groups. Moreover, every class has one English lesson out of 8 lessons per a day, and 40 minutes are allocated for each lesson.

The syllabus in basic education schools seems to adopt communicative language teaching (CLT). This can be perceived through the type of activities it provides to the learners such as information gap activities and role- play activities. It also focuses more on developing oral fluency and creating a genuine purpose for speaking. In grade 5, the syllabus designers claim that “there is a particular focus on giving and asking about personal information through interviews, surveys and other personalisation activities”. Furthermore, providing the learners with stress-free

environment is much recommended by the syllabus and clearly stated in the introduction of the teacher's book. In unit 3, pupils will learn how to talk, read and write about things they and other people can and can't do. The language focus is simple present tense and using the modal verb 'can' for ability.

3.1. The speaking tasks;

Lesson 13 in unit 3 consists of 4 steps. The speaking tasks emerge in the first and the third steps. In this sub-section, I will describe the first three steps of this lesson, because they are much linked to each other, whereas the fourth step deals with other skills and it does not influence the speaking tasks in the earlier steps.

By the end of the speaking tasks, the pupils should be able to use 'can' and 'can't' to ask and answer questions about their own and others' abilities. The writing activity in the second step aims at assessing how well the learners are able to transfer the information recorded on a chart and reproduce it in a written form.

Here are the teaching steps as they are suggested by the teacher's book:

Step 1: Doing a survey (Speaking);

1. (Skills book p 33, Activity 1) the pupils look at the small pictures at the top of the chart and name the activities, e.g: play the guitar.
2. The teacher draws the blank chart on the board and explains where to write their names. S/he tells them that they are asked to do a survey about things they can and can't do.
3. Group work. Each group decides the four activities they want to ask each other about.
4. Open pair work. (Demonstration).
5. The pupils do the class survey in groups.

Step 2: Writing sentences:

- 1) (Skills book p 33, activity 2) The pupils look at the information in their charts. They write 3 'can' and 3 'can't' sentences, and then one 'can' and one 'can't' sentence about themselves.
- 2) The pupils read each other's work.

Step 3: Speaking:

- 1) (Skills book p33, activity 3) They look at the talking heads. They read the dialogue silently.
- 2) The teacher asks a pupil about another pupil in his or her group. For example, Can Ahmed ride a camel? The pupil refers to the chart and answers. Repeated with a few more pupils.
- 3) In their groups, they ask about the things their friends can and can't do.

4. Evaluation of the speaking tasks:

Setting the scene in the previous section leads me to evaluate the speaking tasks. Such an evaluation will be based on the criteria which have been identified in the first section.

4.1. Motivation;

The first task (classroom survey) seems to have a communicative purpose due to many factors. This task is derived from information gap activities, which are tried and tested in developing speaking skills in language classrooms. The task can provide the learners with a clear outcome; filling the chart and collecting genuine data. In addition, the

teacher's book advises the teacher to encourage his or her pupils to answer the questions asked during the survey "honestly". The aim behind that can be to increase reliability and to make the task more authentic. Moreover, the task provides them with a good opportunity to ask referential questions which represent crucial features of real- life communication.

On the other hand, the second speaking task seems to lack the communicative purpose. Although the pupils are required to ask about their group mates, they still lack the real purpose to do so, as they already have the answers when they have done the survey task. Hence, the task can be adapted by asking the pupils to change their groups in order to have the chance to ask real questions about other pupils whom they do not know about.

As I mentioned earlier, the pupils are aged 10 -11 years old. Therefore, both the tasks appear to be suitable for their age and level. The language seems to be appropriate and the selected topic is interesting. The notion of the survey task can captivate the young learners' attention and can exploit the children's strong desire to talk.

As a feature of good speaking tasks mentioned above, stress free environment seems to take place in both the tasks. The pupils might well be motivated to practise speaking by working in groups (in the survey task) or in pairs (in the closed pair practice task). Pair work can urge shy pupils to use the language more confidently [12]. The speech in group work or closed pair practice tends to be private which is more authentic. The stress can be reduced and the confidence can be gained when speaking privately.

4.2. Speaking Practice;

Both the tasks seem to thrive in maximizing practice opportunities. In the survey task, all the pupils are involved in using the target language. The teacher's role here is essential as a facilitator and a support provider. While the pupils are involved in the task, he or she should circulate around to guide the students and to make sure that they use English while doing that survey. Group leaders can help the teacher in this respect by encouraging their group mates to use the target language. As for the closed pair task, it provides all the different levels of learners with a good speaking opportunity. Furthermore, both the tasks are two-way process activity type, because every pupil will play two different roles at the same time; the speaker and the listener. The speaker's role is played when the pupil asks, whereas the same pupil has to listen well to record his or her partner's answers.

4.3. Activating the levels of knowledge;

Both the speaking tasks can activate the learners' schematic knowledge, because the students are required to ask and answer about some personal activities which they can or cannot do. Therefore, the topic of the tasks seems to be relevant to their knowledge of the world and can meet their needs and interests.

In terms of the systemic knowledge, the tasks provide the pupils with good opportunities to use and check their knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. As I mentioned in the description section, the learners are asked to name the pictures at the top of the chart. This stage aims at activating the pupils' vocabulary. It often makes some pupils "shine"

in front of their classmates if they answer correctly. In addition, Grammar knowledge can be also activated in the three main steps of the lesson by helping the learners notice that the modal verb ‘can’ does not change if it is used in the third person singular. Such a rule will be deduced by the learners in the next lesson (lesson 14) which encourages them to learn by discovery.

Integration of the language skills:

The information gap activities almost always succeed in integrating speaking and listening. In order for the learners to fill the chart correctly, they need to listen well to their mates’ responses. Moreover, exchanging the roles in the pair practice task offers the pupils the chance to be speakers as well as listeners.

The writing task in the second step of the lesson seems to be a good follow-up activity which enables the children to transfer the information recorded on the chart. It also integrates writing into the oral skills.

4.4. Exposure and Input;

As I mentioned in the description section, these speaking tasks emerge in lesson 13. This constitutes that the learners have been sufficiently exposed to the language throughout the previous 12 lessons. Moreover, in lesson 12, pupils are supposed to sort personal activities into verb categories, e.g. play basketball, use a calculator, etc. So, the lexis practised in lesson 13 is consolidated and revised. What is more, asking the pupils to name the activities at the top of the chart can be the pre-task stage which helps the learners to do the following tasks well.

4.5. Some focus on form;

Having mentioned that this syllabus seems to adopt CLT approach, the speaking tasks attempt to help the pupils

notice some grammatical structures. A significant principle of CLT is “learning to use language forms appropriately is an important part of communicative competence” [20]. Hence, the writing task asks the young learners to transfer asking direct personal questions using the first person singular into written statements about another person using the third person singular.

Furthermore, the open pair practice stage in the speaking tasks can offer an accurate demonstration of the dialogues. It can also be a key-place, because it helps the teacher decides if he or she can proceed to the following steps.

4.6. Real time processing of language;

The language which is produced in the survey task is quite guided, because it is addressed to young learners (grade five). However, the task might involve them in using some authentic spoken features such as contractions, repetitions and pauses.

5. Conclusion:

Although there is no ideal speaking task, we as language teachers can offer successful speaking tasks if we take into our consideration the criteria of good speaking tasks. I have concluded that learners, and especially those who are young, need to see a real purpose for communication. They also appreciate tasks that activate their schemata and bring them fun. I have also learnt that teachers should provide the different levels of learners with sufficient speaking practice and this can be fulfilled through group and pair work.

To sum up, an important conclusion which I have come up with can be “speaking activities must have three features. They must give the learners practice opportunities for purposeful communication in meaningful situations” [13].

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