

Peer working and Speaking Fluency in EFL Contexts

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Abstract: Learning a foreign language is definitely one main challenge for beginners, especially when related to formal and standard forms. Its difficulty emerges more prominently when it comes to deal with oral aspects of language, as they are dominated by certain psychological and cultural backgrounds. Thus, for the reason of highlighting the role of peer working in EFL speaking classes, an experiment has been conducted at the level of ENS Laghouat in Algeria, first year English language students, learning the Oral Expression module. The number of students is 66 forming two balanced groups: thirty three students each, during the academic year 2018/2019, with four hours and a half per week. The principle of the experiment was to ask participants of the experiment group to work in peers to develop a specific oral task and present it in each session in a bisected way for two weeks (six sessions), after they have been doing oral tasks individually at least for two months. Simultaneously the control group students carried out their oral tasks ordinarily for the same period of time. Such an experiment has been followed by a comparative analysis the findings of which proved that the experiment group has shown a high level of oral performance and fluent interaction for 88% participants, whereas the control group participants remained with an ordinary rate of oral interaction and fluency, not exceeding 46%, using the interview in pre- and post-experimental phases as a means of data collection. All in all, this peer working strategy needs to be resuscitated in our Algerian EFL classes, so as to reap satisfactory results notably at the level of this important communicative productive skill, at early beginnings of foreign language learning, for the reason that learners tend to exclude all forms of timidity, fear and ambiguity in understanding a given task through a reciprocal manner with each other. By the end, this strategy meant to alleviate the psychological as well as the cultural constraints noticed when communicating orally in English as a foreign language with its various topics.

Keywords: Peer working, Speaking, Foreign Language, Cultural constraints

Introduction

Speaking as a productive skill is agreed upon to be considered as linguistic feature that best represents any person's linguistic competence and even social class personality. Thus, a plenty of categories and aspects of academic institutions have specialized in training their learners, whether young or old, in the art of speaking or what is called oratory skills for certain academic, professional and social purposes. Their main aim is to help them better their speaking skills at several levels namely: language correctness, pronunciation and fluency.

In the light of these requirements, a field study has been necessarily launched at the level of the Teachers' Higher College in Laghouat during the academic year 2018/2019 to diagnose the problem of learners' low performance in oral classes, investing first year students a raw material for the sake of testing a basic hypothesis that defends the following: "Peer working can function as a suitable strategy to achieve better oral performance and fluency for first year EFL students".

The experiment was launched after about two months from the start of the academic year and it lasted for two weeks of a practical oral work that was first initiated by an interview for the

experimental group. The findings have shown concrete amelioration in respondents' oral performance when compared to the control group.

I. Literature Review

A. Nature of the Speaking Skill

The Speaking skill is defined by Brown (1994), Burns and Joyce (1997) as follows: "Speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving and processing information" (p58). Such a definition clarifies that this productive skill has a reciprocal nature to convey meaning. Both form and meaning of the spoken aspect are widely dependent on the context, in which it occurs, including participants themselves, their shared knowledge, their physical setting and the purpose of speaking. It is often spontaneous, open-ended, and evolving. However, speech is not always unpredictable.

Previously conducted researches note that in order to become successful speakers, learners not only need to know how to produce specific points of language such as grammar or vocabulary, what we usually call linguistic competence, but also that they understand when, why and in what ways to produce language. In brief, successful speaking involves what the anthropologist Hymes referred to in 1972 as "Communicative competence". This concept refers to what a speaker needs to know to communicate appropriately within a specific speaking community. It involves knowing not only the language code, but also what to say, to whom, and how to say it appropriately in many situations, further, it involves the social and cultural knowledge speakers are presumed to have. It has important implications for the selection and sequencing in language curricula.

According to Burns and Joyce (1997), speech has its own skills, structures and conventions different from written language. For this reason, speaking is said to be a powerful tool used for personal, academic, professional and social purposes; and to become an effective speaker, students do not only need strategies for spoken communication but also to gain confidence through risk taking and practice, need opportunities to express their ideas and opinions in various domains by participating in a variety of experiences through formal and informal oral communication.

B. Making Speaking Fluent

Some effective factors may affect learners' capacity to talk in the FL to a considerable extent. These factors which enter in interpersonal communication are found to be highly relevant to the process of speaking in such contexts.

1. Anxiety

According to researchers, there are two main types of anxiety to be mentioned here: "debilitating anxiety", that gets in the way, and "facilitating anxiety", which actually helps learners do better than they might otherwise (Kleinman 1997, Scovel 1978). In its accurate form, anxiety may be manifestation of shyness and fear of making mistakes. Thereby, students who experience such a kind of anxiety will have poor class participation, inability and unwillingness to respond to questions, or even refuse to take any kind of risk to speak. In this concern Ur (1984) says: "Learners are often inhibited about trying to say things in a foreign language in the classroom;

worried about making mistakes , fearful of criticism or losing face , or simply shy of the attention that their speech attracts “ (p21).

Some researchers do expect a relationship between anxiety and speech skill in foreign language learning (Allwright and Bailey 1991). According to the work carried out in North America (Gardner et al .1976, a survey involving over one thousand Canadian high school students of French), the more anxious learners are , the older they are and the further they get in the compulsory school system, the stronger this relation will probably become. Unfortunately, researchers do not precise if it is the increasing anxiety that gets in the way of developing good speech skills, or whether, as may seem at least equally likely, it is the poor speech skills that themselves create anxiety.

2. Self-esteem

Di Stoney Coopersmith (1967: 4-5), defined self-esteem as: “a personal judgment of worthiness that is expressed in attitudes that the individual holds towards himselfand indicates the extent to which the individual believes in himself to be capable, significant and worthy”. Research has shown that a student who feels good about himself is more likely to succeed. Holly(1978) compiled a summary of many studies and pointed out that self-esteem is the result rather than the cause of academic achievement .In addition , Martin Covington (1989) from the university of California carried out an extensive review of the research on the relationship between self-esteem and achievement, concluding that self-esteem can be modified through direct instruction can lead to achievement gains .

Heyde (1977) , makes the distinction between self-esteem in general , self-esteem with regard to a particular type of situation (home , work , school, etc) , and self-esteem with regard to a particular task .Heyde found that all three types of self-esteem correlated positively with oral performance in French for some American college students , but that self-esteem with regard to the particular language task was the most strongly related to performance .In her work , Heyde (1977) was able to point to differences in the behaviour patterns of learners with low self-esteem. She found that learners with high self-esteem hesitated less, correlated themselves more, and did not need prompting and so on.

3. Peer Working

Peer working or peer group is defined by the *Oxford Advanced Learners' Encyclopedic Dictionary* (p 660) as “group of people of approximately the same age or status: mix with one's peer group” 1998. In the academic, pedagogical contexts peer working is a second to none strategy of helping learners, especially young ones in foreign language contexts. It functions as a motivating tool that lets a single learner interact freely with their peer freely without feeling any sort of hierarchy (the teacher, for instance) .Such a freedom give learners extra energy to express themselves, trying though with erroneous answers ,without taking into consideration the reaction of their peers. Peers in their turn also function as a safety valve for one another when they review and correct each other's errors competitively and even ordinarily.

B. Learners' Speaking Problems

Inhibition, finding nothing to say, low or uneven participation and mother tongue intervention are among the most important speaker related features that make the process of speaking in a second or foreign language a complex matter.

1. Inhibition

Unlike reading , writing and listening activities, speaking requires some degree of real-time exposure to the audience .Learners are often inhibited about trying to say things in a foreign language in the classroom : Worried about making mistakes , fearful of criticism or losing face , or simply shy of the attention that their speech attracts (Penny Ur , 1996).

2. Nothing to Say

Even they are not inhibited, we often hear learners complain that they cannot think of anything to say: they have no motive to express themselves beyond the guilty feeling that they should be speaking.

3. Low or Uneven Participation

Only one participant can talk at a time if he or she is not to be heard; and in large group this means that each one will have only very little talking time. This problem is compounded by the tendency of some learners to dominate, while others speak very little or not at all.

4. Mother Tongue Interference

When learners in the same class share the same mother tongue, they may tend to use it: because it is easier, it feels unnatural to speak to one another in a foreign language. When we have "small group discussion it can be quite difficult to get some classes particularly the less disciplined or motivated ones to keep to the target language.

C. Spoken Versus Written Language

Undoubtedly, both writing and speaking are two communicative productive skills. However, learners often assume that written language is more difficult to learn, and they perceive the oral language as less complex than the written language .A rational study looks for the need to clarify the relationship between the two, not to support one against the other, but rather to explain the existence of one when dealing with the other. It is worth -noting here that there are some similarities as well as some other differences in the attitudes towards the relation between both skills, but for the utility of our work we are going to tackle the aspects that are relative to our analysis and study. Thus, we find Halliday (1987; in Eysenck and Keane, 2005:398) stating: "Writing is in essence a more conscious process than speaking....spontaneous discourse is usually spoken, self-monitored discourse is usually written".

According to Weigle (2002:15) the relationship between writing and speaking is important for language testing because of the question: to what extent can writing be seen as a special case of L2 language use? And to what extent does writing represent a distinctly different ability from speaking?.

Several linguists and educational researchers have historically held contradictory positions about the relationship between writing and speaking. Traditional linguistic research has stated

that speech is primary and written language is a simple reflection of spoken language, while educational research has taken the stance that the written form of the language is more "correct" and therefore should be given higher interest. However, in recent years, a form of reconciliation came to hold both skills in a position where none is superior to the other. Wiegle (2002:15) states: "Oral and written texts do vary witnessing, the equal weight both forms have regarding their respectful features brought at the same level of importance". For instance, the way we arrange what we have to say in telephone or face conversations is different from the organization of a composition or simply an e-mail message. Also, the oral language is just as linguistically complex as the written language, but the complexity is of a different kind. The inevitable differences in the structures and use of speech and writing come about because they are produced in very different communicative situations.

As it has early been mentioned, the earliest needs to communicate have always been oral, while the written form has always been left as secondary skill. This is mainly because we grow up naturally speaking our first language, and even the second or third, but when it comes to writing any of these languages we need to undergo a learning process, a thing that makes of the skill a rather "attended to, structured skill". Penny Ur (2007:159) says: "Written discourse is fixed and stable so the reading can be done at whatever time, speed and level of thoroughness the individual reader wishes. Spoken text in contrast is fleeting, and moves on in real time".

Halliday (1985) in Nunan (1991) notes that writing is complex at the sentence level while speech is also complex and structured; but its complexity lies in the way clauses are put together. Despite the fact that, Brookes and Grundy (1998) came to assist this point when stating that we pay more attention to writing since we are more aware of what we are doing and consequently we give more emphasis to correctness. Around the point of correctness, some linguists see that once a piece of writing is ready, a reader is able to return to his writing in the same way we can ask someone to say something again in speaking. Differently Zamel (1992) claims: "our reader can return to our writing but we cannot, and we cannot easily rectify misunderstandings on the part of the reader."

The characteristics that ordinarily differentiate writing from speaking were listed by Brown (1994) as follows:

- **Permanence:** oral language is transitory and must be processed in real time, while written language is permanent and can be read and reread as often as one likes
- **Production time:** Writers generally have more time to plan, review, and revise their words before they are finalized, while speakers must plan, formulate, and deliver their utterances within a few moments if they are to maintain a conversation.
- **Distance:** between the writer and the reader in both time and space, this eliminates much of the shared context that is present between speaker and listener in ordinarily face-to-face contact and thus necessitates greater explicitness on the part of the writer.
- **Orthography:** Which carries a little amount of information compared to the richness of devices available to speakers to enhance a message (stress, intonation, pitch, volume, pausing, etc.).
- **Complexity:** Written language tends to be characterized by longer clauses and more subordinators, while spoken language tends to have shorter clauses connected with coordinators, as well as more redundancy (e.g. repetition of nouns and verbs).

- **Formality:** because of the social and cultural uses to which writing is ordinarily put, writing tends to be more formal than speaking.
 - **Vocabulary:** written texts tend to contain a wider variety of words, and lower frequency words, than oral texts.
- It is then, an accepted fact that written and spoken languages do differ.

II. Methodology

A. Procedure

The aim of this study has been to highlight the role of peer working in EFL speaking classes. Thus, an experiment has been carried out at the level of ENS Laghouat in Algeria, first year English language students, studying the Oral Expression module, the number of students is 66 forming two balanced groups: thirty three students each, during the academic year 2018/2019, with four hours and a half per week. The principle of the experiment was to launch an interview for the participants of the experimental group whose number was 33 students: 23 feminine and 10 masculine, the aim was to collect primary data on EFL learners' speaking difficulties and to sensitize them to the importance of class peer work. The next step was to apply the experiment of the peer working strategy on the experimental group for two successive weeks and then analyze and compare results with the other control group.

Table 01: Participants of the Study

The Experiment Group		The Control group	
Total Number	33	Total Number	33
Gender		Gender	
10 masculine /23 feminine		28 F 05 M	

B. Population of the Study

The population of the study involved two first year groups (Middle School Teachers) in the academic year 2018/2019. Once the step of the interview ended, participants of the experiment group were asked to work in peers to develop a specific oral task and present it in each session in a bisected way for two weeks (six sessions), after they have been doing oral asks individually at least for two months since the beginning of the year. Simultaneously the control group students carried out their oral tasks ordinarily for the same period of time.

III. Results and Discussion

Using the same data collection technique used before the experiment; the interview, learners (experimental group) had been exposed to a second interview as a post experimental data collection technique. Such an experiment has been followed by a contrastive analysis, the findings of which have proved that the experiment group has shown a high level of oral performance and fluent interaction for 88% participants, whereas the control group participants

remained with an ordinary rate of oral interaction, not exceeding 46% as shown in the following tabulation .

Table 2: Experiment Group Response on “Peer working” effectiveness

Has peer working helped you better your oral performance (presentation)? (Item 10 of the post experiment interview)			
Yes		No	
29	88 %	04	12%

The previous table illustrates clearly that most participants have much benefited from that practical strategy of peer working to carry out their oral tasks with a score of 88 % (29 participants) and this percentage has been concretely proved statistically through participants’ fluent participation in the oral class under the supervision of the teacher researcher .In contrast to the minority of the same group that expressed the inutility of such a strategy through the score of 12% (04 participants) , this may be explained by certain psychological backgrounds including for instance : introvertedness, the personal desire to individual prominence in the classroom and so on .

As far as the control group is concerned, findings of the oral interaction (fluent participation) and fluency took a steady low scoring not going beyond 46 % of the participants, compared to the 35% scored before two weeks.

Table 03: Control Group Oral participation Scores

Participants	Before 2 weeks	After two weeks
33	12	15
	35 %	46%

The percentages in this table show that the ordinary way of doing oral tasks has a certain degree of increase at the level of learners’ (fluent) participation, but it is slow (just three more participants in two weeks). This implies that learners are less motivated when they work out the oral tasks individually owing to the previously-mentioned reasons.

Implications and Conclusion

At the end, this work intended to see the deep effect of the peer work strategy on first year English language students’ oral skill performance through the adopted means of collecting data: the pre and the post experiment interviews. Therefore, this study reflects our attempt to reach a clear diagnosis of the needs, lacks of this context's learners together with the necessities

required by the oral expression skill. So we started and established our study on the actual outcomes of teaching speaking at the ENS of Laghouat, which does not rely on a specific syllabus, and it does not refer to any designed strategy-based text books. Consequently, the task of elaborating and selecting teaching materials is kept for teachers themselves.

As far as the research question is concerned, it seems that it has been answered and the hypothesis has been approved utterly. This led us to confirm that the speaking skill especially in foreign language contexts remains one obstacle in front of learners when they tend to speak publicly and the strategy adopted in this study has just been one endeavour and sincere intention towards helping our fellow learners better their language performance in one essential communicative productive skill highly recommended in the teaching / learning of languages as a whole.

All in all, this peer work strategy within the speaking fluency skill seems, at least for us, to be applicable and can become a concrete fruitful reality, if all the members of the teaching/learning settings cooperate and strongly believe in its possible implications and hold positive attitudes towards its results through developing its dimensions.

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Appendix: Learners' Interview Scripts.