Tongue-Tied Learners: An Issue in the Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract
The oral conversation class requires participation, exchange of ideas, opinions and information among learners. Unfortunately, foreign language teachers often complain about the lack of participation and interaction among their learners. The present work tries to shed light on a crucial issue encountered in many foreign language learning classrooms; it is the lack of participation and interaction. The study, based on collected data, revealed that lexical difficulties constitute a real handicap that leads to the lack of self confidence and anxiety among foreign language learners, giving birth to psychological barriers which hinder the learners from speaking. In order to overcome those learning difficulties, the teacher has to strive for effective strategies which help learners improve their lexical ability and their oral skill.

Introduction

English language learning has become a necessity in these days of fast communication. Therefore, learning needs and objectives have changed from the mastery of rules and the linguistic competence as propounded by Chomsky to the use of the language in real life contexts. In fact, for decades and since the sixties, emphasis was directed towards the written skill as the only productive skill. Learners had to be competent in writing. As a result, those teaching methodics have failed in making the foreign language learners communicatively

competent. For such reasons, practitioners have come to a common conclusion that foreign language learners should be competent in the oral skill. Therefore, communicative competence has been emphasized in the contemporary teaching methodologies. Contrary to the written skill, the oral one requires learners who demonstrate an inner desire towards speaking. Ellis (2004) asserts that:

> *It would seem then that learners' willingness to communicate depends in part on their personality and in part on their intrinsic motivation to perform classroom activities.* (2004:14).

That is, they should be motivated, enthusiastic, and make effort to master speaking. As Nunan (1991) puts it *"success is measured in terms of the ability to carry out a conversation in the (target) language."* Thus, if students do not learn how to speak or do not get any opportunity to speak in the language classroom they may soon get de-motivated and lose interest in learning. On the other hand, if the right activities are taught in the right way, speaking in class can be a lot of fun, raising general learner motivation and making the English language classroom an active and dynamic one.

In the same line of thought, effective communication depends on one's ability to express oneself in speech clearly, accurately and fluently. Although thoughts could be expressed in writing, it is only through speech that one's thoughts would be put across accurately and effectively to one's audience. The question which imposes itself is: which factors impede foreign language learners from speaking? In order to find answers to the research question, some possible answers are hypothesized:

- Affective variables (negative ones) may prevent the learners from speaking, e.g., shyness.

- The lexical disability may hinder the students from participating in the classroom

- Social and affective strategies will help the students overcome their psychological hindrances and develop their self-confidence and;

- consequently improving their oral performance.

2. Methodology

In order to strive for all the factors that impede communication and participation in the foreign language classroom.The investigation concerns first year students in the University of Mostaganem. A group of 35 students participated in the study, 25 girls and 10 boys. A questionnaire was designed in order to find out the reasons behind the students' speaking difficulties and also to trigger for all the variables pertaining to their speaking difficulties.

3. Data analysis

The data analysis revealed that 91.42% of the students are reluctant to speak because they do not feel self confident because they have vocabulary difficulties. 71.42% of the students said that they were shy and they had lexical difficulties, too. It seems, according to the data obtained that the majority of the students face difficulties in participating in the oral class and this is due to their lexical disability. Obvious, that lexical disability gives birth to anxiety which is recognized as the most important obstacle that makes individuals, and especially learners, perform less than their abilities. Anxious learners may show symptoms that may or may not be seen by the teacher. Unless those symptoms are not apparent, or identified, it is almost impossible to help anxious learners overcome those uncomfortable moments. For such reasons, the

teacher has to strive for adequate techniques and strategies which reduce those uncomfortable conditions.

4. Speaking Difficulties

Good speaking skills are the act of generating words that can be understood by listeners. A good speaker is clear and informative. This requires a mastery of vocabulary on the part of foreign language learners.

> *"Oral expression involves not only(...)the use of the right sounds in the right patterns of rhythm and intonation, but also the choice of words and inflections in the right order to convey the right meaning"* Mac Key"*1965:266*

Unfortunately, linguistic difficulties seem to constitute a real handicap for foreign language learners, leading to psychological troubles which result in making learners tongue-tied. In fact, for learners who are studying English as a foreign language, it is very important to experience real communicative situations in which they will learn how to express their own views and opinions, and to develop their oral fluency and accuracy which are very essential for the success of second language communication. Unfortunately, this would be difficult and sometimes impossible without knowing the meaning of words. In order to effectively overcome such psychological barriers, the language teacher has to strive for adequate strategies that help foreign language learners become risk takers in order to interact and participate actively in improving their speaking skill.

5. Learning Strategies

Learners have a complex set of attitudes, experiences and language learning strategies which typify each learner and may lead to successful or unsuccessful language learning. Because

learners' cognitive abilities, previous knowledge, learning styles and strategies differ according to their personalities, each learner has his own way in approaching the learning process. He uses his own procedures, tricks or plans in order to achieve the learning task. These tricks and plans are called 'strategies'. Moreover, research over time has shown that learning strategies have a high probability of enhancing learners' achievement. Moreover, all the studies have come to the same conclusion that learning strategies play a salient role in successful learning. In order to go deeper in the different types of strategies; one should first define what a strategy is. Chamot (2004) considers that:

> *Learning strategies are the conscious thoughts and actions that learners take in order to achieve a learning goal.* Oxford (2005)

Learning strategies are classified in two main types: direct strategies and indirect strategies. These are divided into six sub-strategies.

5.1 Direct Strategies

They are mentally-based strategies. That is, the task requires mental processing in order to be done. They include memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies. Memory strategies are used for remembering, storing or retrieving information. They include creating mental linkages, applying images and sounds, reviewing well and employing action. The cognitive strategies are used for understanding new information. They include practicing, receiving, sending messages, analysing, reasoning, and creating structure for input or output. The compensation strategies help learners overcome shortages in using language. They include guessing intelligently and overcoming limitations in speaking

and writing (the productive skills).Indeed, direct strategies, when properly used help learners achieve well in language learning.

5. 2 Indirect Strategies

They are feeling-based. The environment and the learners' emotional state direct learning and problem solving. According to Westwood:''*An effective learning strategy enables learners to plan what they will do, and then monitor and modify their own thoughts and actions they proceed (2004:7)*.The indirect strategies include metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies.

5.2.1. Metacognitive Strategies

Metacognition is among the new concepts which are attracting theorists'investigations. Closely related to perception; metacognition is of a great importance in foreign language learning. Indeed, one cannot dissociate foreign language acquisition and metacognition because this latter facilitates the acquisition process. The concept of metacognition has emerged since the 1970s. It has been introduced by Flavell[1] (Noel, 1997:7). Metacognition is the knowledge of one's or others' proper cognitive activity, which allows planning, then its regulation when communicating information[2].

Metacognition, then relates to one's cognitive knowledge and the control over the cognitive as well as the affective strategies. In order to obtain effective and methodological

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[1]. Flavell (1976) « La métacognition est la connaissance de sa propre activité cognitive ou celle d'autrui, qui permet la planification puis la régulation de celle-ci pendant la communication. » (Our translation)

acquisition, the learner must be able to actively handle not only his previous knowledge with the new one but he also has to apply selective strategies through regular supervision and constant management to reach at the end a thorough evaluation of the task he undertakes. According to Anderson (2008):

> *It is the ability to reflect on what is known, and does not simply involve thinking back on an event, describing what happened, and the feelings associated with it. Metacognition results in making specific changes in how learning is managed, and in the strategies chosen for this purpose.*

Metacognition is recognized as having a strong impact on our awareness and thoughts. Moreover, one's awareness in using metacognitive strategies helps him/her to reach positive achievement. Organizing, planning, monitoring, and evaluating are all meta- cognitive strategies that contribute in making learning successful. In fact, various sources support the idea that learners who use metacognitive strategies are good learners. Successful learning relates to the use of metacognitive strategies because these allow learners monitor and evaluate their own achievement. Thus, it is crucial that the teacher helps his learners be aware of their importance and integrate them in the activities and tasks. When learners become used to metacognitive strategies, they can assess themselves and react when learning is ineffective. Through organization, planning and self- evaluation, the students can control their learning and achieve better results. Obviously, the English teacher plays a significant role in helping his learners be aware of the importance of the metacognitive strategies which are meant to facilitate problem solving.

5.2.3. Social / Affective Strategies

The words social and affective imply that there is interaction with someone else. So, in order to interact positively and reach comprehension between the interlocutors, one has to take into account the affective dimensions which allow interaction and understanding. The classroom constitutes a social environment in which affective dimensions play a salient role in shaping positive interactions between the learner and the teacher or between the learners themselves. Learning strategies such as monitoring, organizing, elaborating or evaluating alleviate anxiety. (O'Malley & Cahmot, 1995).

In fact, a multiciplity of variables affect interaction and make the whole teaching /learning process a multidimensional phenomenon. In fact, the teacher and learners' behaviours, motivation and attitude all contribute in making interaction effective and constructive .A cohesive behaviour where asking questions, answering them, sharing and exchanging information make the language classroom a successful one.

Although direct strategies and indirect ones are completely different; the first, mentally-based, and the second emotionally-based, both are salient in foreign language learning and consequently they are complementary. In fact, cognitive strategies, like reasoning, analyzing, note-taking, summarizing, and synthesizing are salient and certainly help learners achieve proficiency. But these would be ineffective without the use of metacognitive, affective and social strategies. Nevertheless, activities that encourage learners use such strategies should be well-structured and designed by the English teacher.

6. Using the Dictionary

A very common learning strategy in foreign language learning is the use of the dictionary. In fact, many foreign language learners feel confident when using a dictionary in problem solving. The dictionary then, can be used to help those insecure learners overcome their psychological barriers and participate actively in the oral conversation class. For the present study, the use of the dictionary is not to make the students memorize lists of words but it is to make them feel secure and break silence in the oral class.

Step1: With the guidance of the teacher, the students select a topic .All the students should agree on the topic they want to discuss. Then, the students are asked to use the dictionary to find out a new word they are not familiar with and which is related to the topic.

Step 2: The students, are asked to pay attention to the phonetic transcription .Then, they are asked, in turn, to spell the word out, write it on the board and explain its meaning to the whole class. Then, everyone writes it down on a piece of paper.

Step 3: In pairs or small groups, the students interact with each others; selecting the new words and using them in contexts. They try to use the words that may be used together within a coherent context. Orally, and probably with noise, the students speak, give opinions, and even agree or disagree about the words to be used.

Step 4: In the last step, the students are asked to perform their dialogues. Performing the dialogues encourages the students to experiment and innovate

with the language, and create a supportive atmosphere that allows them to make mistakes without fear of embarrassment.

This will contribute to their self-confidence as speakers and to their motivation to learn more. As a result, they will overcome shyness and   create classroom speaking activities that will develop their communicative competence.

Conclusion

A major issue in foreign language learning is achieving communicative competence. The speaking skill, therefore, has become the main goal in the teaching methodology. Yet, the psychological factors hamper the students from speaking. In addition, the lexical difficulties are often behind those psychological problems. Consciousness is the ultimate condition for helping those learners overcome their difficulties and improve their oral skill. Clearly, the oral classroom does not become a lively and dynamic one unless attention is given to all the parameters that relate not only to the quality of the pedagogical tools but also to the psychological factors.

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