

A Discourse Perspective to Teaching the Speaking Skill in an EFL Classroom

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Abstract:

Academic studies imply that students master one of the most important skills which is speaking. Learning to speak in English entails knowing how native speakers use the language besides the grammatical and semantic rules. Some EFL learners mainly the ones studying at Algerian universities do not give focus on the speaking skill despite its importance (Saville-Troike, 2006), which poses many questions such as what kind of activities teachers use to teach this skill. As a matter of fact, a discourse perspective to teaching speaking implies using a number of tasks, strategies and competencies that stress appropriateness in using the language (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000). That is, the speaking skill should be taught and fostered through a diversification of activities. To this end, the present paper focuses on teaching and improving the speaking skill by adopting a discourse perspective and using a variety of activities. It starts with defining speaking, the speaking importance, and the speaking functions, then it sheds light on speaking in the language classroom.

Keywords: speaking skill, EFL learners, discourse perspective, speaking importance, speaking functions, speaking activities.

1. Introduction

Speaking is one of the main language skills that should be given much importance; it is considered by researchers as a productive skill in that a learner produces sentences, participates in conversations and discussions, and the like. For Saville-Troike (2006), *‘speaking is very important area of activity for L2 learners if they will be using the language for interpersonal purposes, whether these are primarily social or instrumental’* (p. 166). EFL students in different Algerian universities, in fact, speak for different reasons and they should be enabled to develop this skill. Though they have an oral expression module which should assist them to improve this skill, they still encounter difficulties in speaking. One of the solutions is to adopt a discourse perspective to teaching speaking that ensures the diversification of the speaking activities. This perspective involves developing the linguistic, discourse and sociocultural competencies. In the main, the following will focus on teaching speaking from a discourse perspective by suggesting a number of activities. To this end, we shall define the speaking skill, stress its importance, focus on speaking as a skill, state and describe the difficulties related to it and from a discourse perspective, and provide some solutions for improving it.

2. Speaking Definition

There are various definitions to the verb to ‘speak’ and the term ‘speaking’. according to the Reader’s Digest Oxford Complete Wordfinder (1993, p. 1489), speaking is *‘the act or an instance of uttering words etc’*. Bygate (1987) views speaking as a skill that requires attention in both first and second language. Speaking is also equated to oral communication. According to Luoma (2004), speaking is viewed by teaching and testing experts as one of the skills that should be developed by learners. It is what individuals do and part of ‘the shared social activity of talking’ (ibid). Nunan (1993) states that the *‘ability to produce discourse that extends beyond a limited number of utterances, and in which information is conveyed clearly, needs to be consciously learned. It can also benefit from explicit teaching, and should therefore form part of the school curriculum’* (p. 107).

3. Speaking Importance

Nunan (1999) relates success in language learning to the ability to build conversations in the target language. According to Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000), any misunderstanding in oral communication is the result of any of the following problems:

- The speaker does not have full mastery of the target language knowledge and produces unacceptable forms (in terms of grammar, phonology or lexical choice).
- There is no shared knowledge between the speaker and the hearer.
- The speaker may violate the sociocultural rules of appropriacy because of pragmatic transfer from L1 (first language).

Two main aspects of speaking are accuracy and fluency. The first has to do with the ability to speak using correct grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and intonation whereas the second is related to the ability of the speaker to produce a flow of speech spontaneously without hesitations.

4. Speaking Functions

Language and speaking specifically serves two main functions : transactional and interactional. The first one is the communication of information (Brown & Yule, 1983 ; Nunan, 1991) whereas the second one is to establish and maintain social relationships (ibid).

5. Speaking from a Discourse Perspective

Speaking is viewed as reflecting an individual's competence in using language. From a discourse perspective, speaking involves an interactive communicative approach in which the speaker uses a number of sub-skills, specifically linguistic, discourse and sociocultural competencies . In other words, a learner's speaking competence is measured by his/her ability to express himself/herself appropriately (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000, Shumin, 2002 ; Widdowson, 2007). Speech production contrary to writing is *less planned, more contextualised* and *more informal* ; however, it shares

the same parameters as writing which are presuppositions, sociocultural rules and speaker intention. Brown and Yule (1983) argue that the speaker :

- has a wide range of quality effects besides facial expressions, postures and gestures.
- controls the production of the communicative systems and processes that production under more demanding circumstances.
- must monitor what he is saying and determines whether it harmonises with his intentions.
- is under the pressure because he has to continue speaking in the allotted time.
- can observe his/her interlocutor and modify what he/she is saying to him/her besides monitoring the listener's reaction to what he/she, the speaker, says.

For Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000), the aforementioned linguistic, discourse and sociocultural competencies ensure better learners' oral communication and include the following prerequisites:

- a. knowing the vocabulary relevant to the situation
- b. ability to use discourse connectors such as well ; oh ; I see ; okay
- c. ability to use suitable 'opening phrases' and 'closing phrases' such as Excuse me or Thank you for your help
- d. ability to comprehend and use reduced forms (reducing vowel sounds is particularly important in English)
- e. knowing the syntax for producing basic clauses in the language
- f. ability to use basic intonation – or tone – patterns of the language
- g. ability to use proper rhythm and stress in the language and to make proper pauses
- h. awareness of how to apply Grice's maxims in the new language
- i. knowing how to use the interlocutor's reactions and input

- j. awareness of the various conversational rules that facilitate the flow of talk

The maxims of cooperation suggested by Grice (1975) are important in oral communication as they ensure the flow of exchange between the participants:

- a. Quantity: it refers to the effective speaker making the right decision with respect to the amount of information imparted – not too much and not too little.
- b. Quality: it refers to the speaker's conviction and belief that s/he is stating the truth.
- c. Relevance: it refers to the fact that the speaker needs to make sure that the hearer sees the relevance of what is being to what s/he knows about the situation and the goal of interaction.
- d. Manner: it refers to the delivery of the message. The speaker is expected to produce a coherent, well-presented utterance that does not make it difficult for the hearer to carry out the interpretation process

(Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000, p. 171-172)

The idea behind the maxims is that the speaker wants to be understood and interpreted correctly, and the hearer wants to decode effectively the message s/he receives.

6. Speaking in the Language Classroom

Speaking activities and tasks in the classroom should focus on enabling students to using all the prerequisites mentioned above for effective communication. Harmer (2007) states that 'Good speaking activities can and should be extremely engaging for the students' (p. 123). Ur (1981 in Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000) suggested a number of group task-centred activities to foster the use of the spoken language by providing authentic opportunities for the students to become better users of knowledge they have in the second or foreign language.

a. Reasons for Speaking Activities

Harmer (2012) mentions four reasons why students are asked to do speaking activities in class :

- To retrieve and use the language they already know
- To give students a desire to speak for a communicative purpose while the content is as important as the language
- Not to tell students what language they should use
- To have an idea about how well students are doing

b. Some Speaking Activities

Speaking activities can be introduced from easier to more difficult. Some of these activities found in Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) are :

a. Role play

This activity plays a major role in stimulating real communication that fits experiences outside the classroom (Bygate, 1987). In this type, students make use of their knowledge of vocabulary, intonation, turn taking, and so forth provided that they have sufficient information about the participants, the situations and the background for the simulated situation. These elements make the activity meaningful.

b. Group discussions

This is an effective speaking activity especially in a large class. Students in the L2/FL should be encouraged and given the opportunity to take part in group discussions and in any activities that require from them producing even a single word or term. An important amount of classroom time should be devoted to this type of speaking activities so as to facilitate the spoken production of each student, and this is going to prepare them for more autonomous speaking activities. According to Harmer (2012), discussions can be very motivating and successful when they are well organised.

c. Using the target language outside the classroom

This is an activity where students are given homework assignments such as collecting information from offices, stores, restaurants, etc. This is about the target language spoken in second language contexts. The students' job is to report and present them in class as oral presentations.

d. Using the learner's input

Using the learner's input for creating meaningful speaking activities assists in making the activity authentic and relevant to the student. This involves giving the opportunity to students to talk about topics of their own and discuss them in class in pairs then in groups.

e. Feedback

Feedback is important in any speaking activity in that it encourages students to develop their communication skills. It should be noted that teachers are required to provide feedback on the oral performance and point out the good use of vocabulary, stress, and intonation on the part of students. It is not an opportunity to only focus on individual difficulties.

f. Looking at authentic speech in the form of written transcripts

Written transcripts including authentic speech can help the students have an idea about and be aware of features of oral discourse. These transcripts may include feedback techniques, useful expressions, connectors and other details that better attract the students' attention in the written form rather than when they are listened to.

Peer feedback can be used in an effective way when emphasis is on performance. To this end, feedback can be done in pairs or even in groups. It is important that it should be constructive.

g. Self-evaluation and self-analysis

Self-evaluation and self-analysis can be a useful instruction technique that improves the students' spoken delivery in a second or foreign language. Teachers record their students, or students record

themselves using videotaping, and this allows them to make self-analyses. The latter will enable those students to improve their oral deliveries.

c. The Teacher's Role in Speaking Activities

Teachers should encourage their students develop and improve their speaking skill when they play the following roles (Harmer, 2012):

- The teacher is a prompter who pushes the students forward by suggesting things they might say next and by encouraging them to speak.
- The teacher can be a participant in an activity provided that he does not dominate the activity.
- The teacher gives feedback highlighting both positive and negative points, as mentioned earlier.

An important pedagogical question asked by researchers is whether a strategy-based instruction can improve oral communication in a second or foreign language context. Results of a strategy-based instruction carried out by Cohen (1998) on fifty-five French and Norwegian students at the University of Minnesota who were grouped in experimental and control groups demonstrated its efficiency. The results also suggest that integrating this strategy instruction with the language instruction in the language classroom can foster the learner's ability to communicate orally (Cohen, 1998 in Celce-Murcia, 2000, p. 175).

7. Conclusion

To conclude, the speaking skill needs to be taken care of by teachers in that they should plan for what to select as best and suitable activities though teaching the spoken language is a hard task. Teaching speaking from a discourse perspective involves making a shift from focusing on linguistic performance to focusing on a more pragmatic perspective (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000). In this case, contextual features of spoken interaction must be in classroom activities.

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