

EFFECTIVENESS OF USING IMPROVISATIONS TO DEVELOP ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS

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Abstract- Most learners find speaking in English challenging, and tend to be silent in English speaking classrooms due to psychological factors like inhibition, fear of making mistakes and language difficulties. In that regard, improvisations or spontaneous role plays can be used as an effective tool to develop their speaking skills. This paper presents an experimental research on identifying the effectiveness of using improvisations to develop students' English speaking skills. 48 intermediate level law undergraduates were divided into the experiment and control group. The speaking competence of both groups in terms of their fluency and accuracy was tested in a pre-test. The students in the experimental group acted out 15 improvisations in pairs as the intervention whereas the control group only engaged in the activities in the English programme for fifteen weeks. A post-test was conducted to identify whether there is a significant improvement in the speaking competence of the experimental group. The objectivity of the tests was identified using inter-rater reliability, and 80% of ratings of the two raters was identical. Results of Paired Sample t-Tests of the pre- test and post- test of the experimental group indicated that there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the pre test (M= 6.47, SD= 0.994) and the mean score of the post test (M= 7.47, SD= 0.744), $t(23) = (-10.018, P = .00 < .05$. The magnitude of the mean difference is large and indicates that improvisations developed the undergraduates' fluency and accuracy in speaking. In addition, teacher observations and informal interviews conducted with the students present the benefits of using improvisations. In improvisations students practice a number of skills: engage in active listening, be aware of body language, maintain eye contact, build rapport with the audience, and produce utterances spontaneously in unexpected situations. It is important to study the effectiveness of using improvisations related to specific situations of undergraduates' future professions to cater the needs of the learners in English for Specific Purposes programmes.

Key terms: improvisation, role plays, speaking skills 1. i.

I. INTRODUCTION

In many English language teaching programmes, teaching and learning of speaking are vital components, which are

also challenging for both teachers and learners. The aim of teaching speaking is to improve students' ability to express themselves and to make them aware of social and cultural rules appropriate in diverse communicative situations. Communicative teaching materials include group activities, information-gap activities, and role plays that can provide a source for practicing, sharing, obtaining information, and for carrying out real-world transactions. These activities include ranking, values clarification, brainstorming, and simulations (Richards, 2016). Improvisations or role-play activities are a familiar technique for practicing real-world transactions. Improvisations based on individual role cards are used mostly with young learners of English. In improvisations students are given roles and situations and asked to react immediately. For example, Student A acts as a latecomer to school and Students B acts as a principal who asks for reasons. In such a role-play, the two students decide which utterance to use. Improvisations provide a wide variety of social interactions and relationships in clearly defined situations. They involve the following steps.

“Preparing: Reviewing vocabulary, real-world knowledge related to the content, and context of the role play (e.g., returning a faulty item to a store)

Modelling and eliciting: Demonstrating the stages that are typically involved in the transaction, eliciting suggestions for how each stage can be carried out, and teaching the functional language needed for each stage

Practicing and reviewing: Assigning students roles and practicing a role play using cue cards or realia to provide language and other support” (Richards, 2016).

Most of the adult learners of English would prefer conducting debates and presentations and they are reluctant to act out improvisations. Apprehension of acting out in the class makes them demotivated in role playing. However, if they practice role playing regularly, they will develop English speaking skills. This explores effects of improvisations to develop English speaking skills of learners.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Improvisations develop learners' communicative skills in authentic and dynamic situations. As improvisations are interactive and visual, it has the potential of making the learning experience fun for the students. It is identified that when students carry out communicative tasks, such as improvisations they engage in the process of negotiation of meaning, employing strategies such as comprehension checks, confirmation checks, and clarification requests. These are believed to lead to a gradual modification of learners' language output, which over time takes on more and more target-like forms (Richards, 2016).

Long's (1996) with his interaction hypothesis claims that negotiated interaction facilitates second language acquisition. Similar studies on the benefits of negotiation have been conducted by Pica (1994) and Gass (1997). Also, the interaction hypothesis has been proved by studies that have explored the effects of interaction on production (Gass & Varonis, 1994), on lexical acquisition (Ellis, Tanaka, & Yamazaki, 1994), on the short-term outcomes of pushed output (Swain, 1995), and for specific interactional features such as recasts (Long, Inagaki, & Ortega, 1998; Mackey & Philp, 1998).

Mackey(1998) studied whether conversational interaction facilitates second language development by employing a pretest-posttest design. He used adult ESL learners (N = 34) of varying L1 backgrounds, divided into four experimental groups and one control group. The intervention used was task-based interaction. The results concluded that there is a link between interaction and grammatical development and highlighted the importance of in interaction.

Rivers and Temperley (1978) emphasised on autonomous interaction as a matter of translating personal meaning into language. According to them much attention should be given on creating opportunities for students to use second language for normal purposes. According to Rokya (2002) the two main objectives when including these types of materials in a class should be overcoming resistance to the foreign language and creating a need for speaking. According to Boudreault (2010) ESL professionals need to use improvisations more because the artificial world of the classroom can be transformed into a quasi-real language situation which provides an endless amount of opportunities for student's personal growth.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed pre-test and post-test control group design. The experimental group and the control group consisted of 24 adult intermediate level ESL learners each.

Prior to the intervention, a pre-test was conducted. In the pre-test, the students had to speak about a given topic for three minutes and the aim of the test was to measure both fluency and accuracy of English speaking.

The experiment group was provided with the treatment- which is the opportunity to engage in improvisations throughout fifteen weeks. Each pair of the students was given an improvisation per week to act out in the class. In the intervention, the language functions such as asking for directions, ordering food and beverages, talking on the telephone, and making an appointment with doctors were used. Each improvisation was acted according to the role cards given by the teacher for three to four minutes. Prior to acting out the students were given time for preparation.

Both groups were also provided with the regular speaking activities such as presentations and debates. A post- test for the students of both groups was used to find out whether there is an improvement in the students' speaking competence. On the other hand, the qualitative analyses was drawn from informal interviews conducted with the students, and the teacher journal in which the researcher' observations of the students' performances were collected.

Data analysis was conducted in comparing the mean values of the test scores of before and after the intervention to identify whether there is a difference in marks following the improvisational intervention. The objectivity of the tests was identified using inter-rater reliability, and 80% of ratings of the two raters was identical.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results of Paired Sample t-Tests of the pre- test and post-test of the experimental group indicated that there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the pre test (M= 6.47, SD= 0.994) and the mean score of the post test (M= 7.47, SD= 0.744), $t(23) = (-10.018, P = .00 < .05$ (two tailed). It is evident that students' scores increased after improvisations are used. On the contrary, the mean value of the pre-test conducted with the control group is M=60.60 and the post test score was M=60.79. It is identified that there is also a development in the students' of the control group as well due to the regular speaking activities used. In fact, the improvisational intervention used with the experimental group contributed to develop speaking competence of the experimental group tremendously.

The data collected from the informal interviews conducted with the students and observations collected in the teacher's journal supported the fact that improvisations develop English speaking skills. Improvisations made the students experience using the

language for real communication. Students can have an opportunity to work together providing help to others while performing the activity. The atmosphere in working in pairs lessened their fear in making mistakes when speaking English.

"I like the activity because I speak English without any fear and it is entertaining."

Self-monitoring and confidence in speaking were developed while gaining enjoyment. It encouraged the learners to participate more in learning.

"I like attending the English class because I get a chance to perform in front of the classmates in the speaking activity. We have never get a chance to perform in other lectures".

In improvisations, the students focused more on meaning not the form. Therefore, such interaction can decrease students' inhibition in speaking.

"I have never acted in English, and I think that I am very much fluent in speaking because each day I perform well in the dialogue".

Most learners mentioned that they were motivated in speaking in improvisations since they can have their choice of language creatively.

Rokya (2002) claimed that there is reluctance that is observed in language teachers of adults when role plays are introduced to them. Also, some traditional style teachers are afraid of the fact that they will appear unprofessional if they focus the lesson on 'playing' instead of serious study. Some language teachers feel comfortable only when using the course textbooks and feel that drama activities could take away from their position as the language "role model" (Rokya, *ibid*). In using improvisations the teacher had a less dominant role in the language class. The active participation of the students provided a live classroom environment.

Developing fluency and basic speaking competencies requires more than just producing memorized chunks of language. Opportunities for learners to experiment with the language and to use it productively outside of fixed dialogues are often rare. In improvisations, students use language spontaneously and creatively to progress in their acquisition of the target language and to become competent in English speaking skills.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper proposes using improvisations to develop English speaking competence of second language learners of English. The following recommendations are made according to the findings of this study.

- Most of the second language learners of English have inhibition in speaking in English, so that improvisations have a great effect on students' interaction in breaking down communication barriers.

- Second language learners need self confidence in English speaking. In using improvisations students monitor their utterances, and peer support they receive and provide improves their competence in speaking.
- As most adult second language learners of English like to be depended on the input given by teachers, improvisations can be used to make learners more autonomous and creative.

The future studies related to improvisations would be based on providing practice of speaking based on improvisations related to English for Specific Purposes in order to make learning and teaching more oriented towards learners' current studies and future expectations.

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