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USING COMMUNICATIVE TASK-BASED SPEAKING ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE ESL SPEAKING MOTIVATION IN UNDERGRADUATES

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Abstract. Reticence in ESL speaking amongst undergraduates in developing countries has become a matter of concern. According to Lile (2002), “retaining motivation in ESL class room is one of the biggest obstacles that language teachers/ instructors and lecturers encounter and behavioral problems in the classroom often or always seem to be linked to the lack of motivation”. When it comes to ESL speaking, students are not only de-motivated in the classroom but are often anxiety driven and taciturn at all spheres in their education cycle. Many instructors have expressed their frustrations to find out the reasons for the reticent behavior and work out suitable strategies to help students with such behavior (Soo & Goh, 2013). CTBSAs are introduced as a solution to this problem in many instances. It facilitates student-centered learning by motivating the students to work together during various tasks and by deviating from the traditional teacher-centered learning environment. Group activities are encouraged when being involved in CTBSAs. Bruners Scaffolding Theory is incorporated in the research as it addresses the positive impact that is brought out via the scaffold assistance provided by a peer or a well-known other to master ESL when socializing and interacting with the peers while interactively engaging in the CTBSAs. The theory can be applied to enhance language motivation in the ESL classroom. The main objective of the research paper is to discuss how CTBSAs can improve language learners’ motivation and speaking confidence in the ESL classrooms and how the eclectic method can be used when teaching CTBSAs. The positive and negative effects of CTBSAs and their impact on the undergraduates communication confidence in the Asian context will be analyzed in the research by incorporating other literature.

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INTRODUCTION

Retaining motivation of the students in the ESL class room has become one of the biggest problems faced by teachers. According to the literature published in the Asian context, from the 4 components of English learning (reading, writing, speaking and listening), the most troubled area has proved to be speaking (Li & Liu, 2011).

When it comes to ESL speaking, students are not only de-motivated in the classroom but are often anxiety driven and taciturn at all spheres in their education cycle.

Many instructors have expressed their frustrations to find out the reasons for the reticent behavior and work out suitable strategies to help students with such behavior (Soo & Goh, 2013).

This is significant in the English classroom context mainly due to lack of competence in the target language. Many researchers have investigated that students’ lack of interest to be involved in communicative activities ultimately leads them to be incompetent communicators.

It has been identified from the researches done around the world that the act of being silent, reluctant to participate or speak using the target language has always been considered

the main source of frustration and failure for both instructors and students (Flowerdew & Miller, 1995; Jackson, 2002; Zhang & Head, 2009; Taher, Shrestha, Rahman & Khalid, 2016).

It is a major obstacle for students to develop oral proficiency in the English language as compared to the development of reading and listening skills.

When necessary action is not taken to reduce this oral anxiety at undergraduate level, it “adversely results them to be incompetent in their employment performance and social interaction as skilled graduates” (Perera, 2008), making them be less competent in communication and interaction when using English for their work purposes.

Perera (2008) reveals in the research that “one of the main goals in Sri Lanka is to equip the students with the necessary knowledge and technical skills for the modern employment market” and this is one of the targets intended to be reached by ESL speaking countries around the world (Hue, 2010; Ballantyne, Sanderman & Levy, 2008). Therefore, enhancing motivation in the students in learning ESL has become a challenge for the English language educators.

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Communicative Task-Based / Speaking Activities (CTBSAs)

Communicative Task-Based Approach (CTBA) is interpreted in various ways by researchers.

“Task-based learning is a natural extension of the constructivist and situated approaches to learning. The essence of task-based learning is to actively engage learners in authentic learning activities and to put learners in the kinds of situations in which they need to use these skills” (Hasan, 2014).

When the history of Task-Based Approach (TBA) is concerned, “Task-based instruction has gained popularity in the field of language teaching since the last decade of 20th century” (Sanchez, 2004). In this approach, learners concentrate on meaning rather than form; that is, students carry out a group of communicative tasks instead of doing form-based discrete exercises. “Students are expected to express their own ideas, either orally or in a written mode, about the topic of the lesson” (Willis, 1996, p. 23).

As Nunan (1989) describes in his work:

“A communicative task is a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while the attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand as a communicative act, in its own right”. (Ellis, 2009).

When communication skills are concerned, it may be carried out through all 4 components of the language learning process - reading, writing, listening and speaking. Different task-based activities may be followed in order to improve each component in the language learning progression. For an example the component of ESL writing maybe improved through activities which concern only writing skill improvement. These include activities such as writing in different styles, writing of different documents as letters and reports, writing activities in groups or individually, matching/ sorting activities, summarizing, paraphrasing activities etc. According to a British Council website, writing tasks involve listening and brain storming, ordering and sorting and matching activities. Likewise, reading and listening skills also carry activities which are unique to these specific fields. In this research the author intends to focus on communicative activities which are solely exceptional to the field of ESL speaking development. CTBSAs implemented in the research are expected to bring oral proficiency to the reluctant ESL speakers in the ESL context and enhance English learning motivation in the ESL classrooms. A few of the activities which are focused on when improving English language speaking activities such as role-plays, debates, dialogues, dramas, icebreakers, warmers, speaking games and individual/

group presentations (Holmes, 2004; Pradhan, 2016) are given prominence in this paper as CTBSAs.

When discussing about enhancing speaking and motivation of the students through CTBSAs, “Achieving situational authenticity” is pointed out as one of the main ways, as described by Ellis (2009). The researcher mentions how it is necessary that the task needs to correspond to some real world activity. The task can be said to manifest some sort of relationship to the real world. When the students are given situation-specific tasks to perform, they are exposed to real world dialogue, vocabulary and expressions which ultimately provide them a better understanding of different contexts. When ESL speaking is concerned, these tasks allow the students to be more conversant during different situations and overcome anxiety in ESL communication. When students are involving in situation-specific role plays, dramas, dialogues, debates and discussions, their expressions and vocabulary related to each situation enhance as the students work together in groups or pairs while brain storming ideas and opinions and sharing knowledge together with the peers and teachers.

This cooperative learning environment when being involved in Task-Based Activities in Speaking (TBAS) in the ESL context, is expected to make the students feel more relaxed and free of anxiety. Their motivation is expected to rise as their fear of being laughed at, embarrassed when making mistakes and tension in front of an audience when speaking in English is less in this friendly atmosphere. Cooperative learning (compared with competitive and individualistic learning) increases students’ efforts to achieve, encourages positive relationships with classmates and faculty, and improves psychological health and well-being (Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 2014). The students are made to interact when being involved in the TBAs. In activities where group work is involved, their cooperation increases and the students not only improve their motivation in learning the language but enhance their team spirit, leadership skills, confidence and thinking capacity in a different language. According to Li and Lam (2013), “students interact with each other in the same group to acquire and practice the elements of a subject matter in order to solve a problem, complete a task or achieve a goal”. When working in groups during activities such as role-plays, dramas, debates etc., it paves the way for the students to give feedback on the performance of their peers. This can be taken as a plus point where students learn their mistakes and correct themselves with the advice provided by their colleagues or sometimes teachers. This process is considered as “Scaffolding assistance” where the well-known other or the peer provides advice and opinions for the learner to move a step forward from where he/she stands with the ex-

isting knowledge. Nguyen (2013) reveals in his research that peer scaffolding is often presented in L2 research as an effective way to foster L2 learners' development. This is applicable when dealing with the TBSA as students get to improve their standards in the language with peer support and feedback. This method of constructive criticism motivates the students in correcting their mistakes and being fluent in the communication process by overcoming reticence.

Bruner's Scaffolding Theory and Communicative Task-Based Approach

"Scaffolding refers to the steps taken to reduce the degrees of freedom in carrying out some tasks so that the child can concentrate on the difficult skills; he/she is in the process of acquiring" (Bruner, 1978). As Bruner (1978) explains, scaffolding does not have to be applied only to a child's learning process but to any learner. The early studies that described scaffolding, be they descriptions of parent-child interactions (Greenfield, 1999) or classroom interactions (Langer & Applebee, 1986), were observational rather than interventionist studies. The notion of scaffolding is increasingly being used to describe the support provided for students to learn successfully in classrooms (Kafai & Soloway, 1994). When a student with "scaffolding assistance" masters the task, the scaffolding can be removed and the student will be able to complete the task alone.

The theory is discussed by a variety of researchers and each have their unique way of explaining it.

Some of them are as follows:

"Scaffolding is a form of adult assistance that enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts" (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976); Cappello & Moss, 2009).

According to an explanation by Bergin and Bergin (2012), "Scaffolding occurs by breaking down the skill into small units and guiding performance to a higher level"

When a student with lack of oral competence is provided the assistance of scaffolding, it is expected that the student will boost the competence level and improve his/ her speaking abilities. When involving in CTBSAs, Constructive criticism is highly appreciated as it is discussed as a means of scaffolding when improving speaking skills of students. When a student makes presentation errors, lacks in stage performance, has anxiety in front of an audience and shows signs of glossophobia, they are offered constructive criticism by the relevant authorities to boost their confidence and improve their existing skills. "Teachers' scaffolding allows reticent students to perform tasks slightly beyond their capabilities without repetitive guidance"

(Talley, 2014). In a research conducted by Hyland (2000), it mentions that the "teachers should encourage students to take more responsibility for their own work, by allowing them to make their own decisions about their use and sources of feedback". According to the Scaffolding Theory, this will allow them to overcome their anxiety levels and uplift their confidence while being more responsible the next time they focus on speaking tasks.

Hyland and Hyland (2001) describes how "we consider this feedback in terms of its functions as praise, criticism, and suggestions". Speaking confidence can be enhanced while providing self-satisfaction to the students through "Praise" which is the most frequently employed function in the constructive feedback, but this is "often used to soften criticisms and suggestions rather than simply responding to good work".

As mentioned above, Bruner's (1978) Scaffolding theory can be applied when involving with CTBSAs. Peer-Scaffolding through constructive criticism in this regard can be mentioned as a much suitable method of improving the ESL speaking motivation in undergraduates as they get exposed to the comments, suggestions and honest feedback of their peers while being involved in these activities. Nguyen (2013) mentions how the students discuss among themselves and brain storm ideas and they are generally mentally relaxed among the presence of their peers where it becomes much easier for them to correct each other. As the students are able to find out their own mistakes and errors from their peers while getting ready to perform in front of the audience, they receive the chance to automatically correct their faults and succeed.

Even when discussing situation-specific language-related activities such as role plays, the students are able to learn from their peers, get feedback from the teachers and expand their language horizons. The students have the opportunity to brain storm with their peers and learn new vocabulary, expressions and terminology when focusing on the situation-specific activity. In a research, Boudreault (2010) mentions how activities such as dramas and role-plays "increase facility to meet changing or unknown stimuli with immediate responses in the students". It further mentions how improvisation leads to a blending as the students create the personality traits as he/she simultaneously identifies with the characters as they evolve. This leads the students to enhance their language skills while being able to improve each other's abilities.

Allowing the students have time to ask and answer questions (Q and A) by their peers and teachers, based on their activities after the sessions also allows them the chance to improve their responsive abilities in the language. The scaffolding assistance is provided via the Q and As which are considered to enhance

the language speaking proficiency in the students. According to a study conducted by Ko, Schallert and Walters (2003), it mentions how a Q and A session after a story telling task allowed the students to be motivated and work out solutions for their problems in language more competently beyond the teachers' influence. Their responsiveness was more and the responses revealed that several scaffolding factors contributed to improved story telling in the students. This can be applied to any CTBA with prominence to speaking, such as presentations, debates and discussions.

DISCUSSION

No matter which component (reading, writing, speaking or listening) is concerned, Banks et al. (2005) state how important it is to incorporate diverse teaching skills, different experiences and more facilitation abilities within classroom to allow the students to learn better. Therefore, it is mentioned how it is partly the responsibility of the teacher to incorporate interesting task-based activities in the ESL context, when teaching adolescents to enhance their motivation towards the subject.

There are common task-based activities which can bring enhancement in ESL proficiency for the students. As Willis (1996) describes in his work, there are different tasks which can be implemented in the ESL context such as listening, ranking items, comparing or contrasting items, problem solving activities, sharing personal experiences and creative tasks. All these can be incorporated in the ESL context when supporting the learners to improve their communication skills in English regardless of the reading, writing, speaking or listening component specifically.

Peters (2000) mentions that the attitude the student has towards the learning environment, the teacher, the material, and towards him/herself all affect this level of motivation in learning and that a student will find it difficult to perform in a stressful environment. Enhancing motivation towards a positive path is the main concern of the teacher and it is a recognizable challenge that teachers witness in the ESL context. Proper instruction, achievable relevant materials, caring, friendly and energetic teachers are all combined together to supply a quality learning environment to a student. Communicative Task Based activities in this regard play a vital role as they pave the way for the students and the teachers to bond together and get rid of the anxiety in speaking English.

There are many researchers amongst ESL and applied linguistics who have found out Communicative Task-Based Teaching Activities (CTBTAs) to be the answer to ESL reticent speakers and also as the answer to reduce reticence and reluctance in using English language and improving motivation in ESL orals

(Erten & Altay, 2009; Chen, 2003). In recent years a debate has developed over which approaches are more effective to structuring and planning and implementing lessons. Task-Based Activities have shown significant progress when teaching ESL not only in reading, writing and listening but mainly in oral proficiency (Li & Liu, 2011; Littlewood, 1981; Jeon & Hahn, 2006; Torkey, 2006).

Even though task-based instruction has shown significant progress in majority of researches, there are drawbacks to be witnessed as well. There are evidences which have revealed that, at times, the communicative Task-based method cannot be effectively applied. Dailey (2009), conducted a research on "Implementing Task-Based Language Teaching in Korean Classrooms" and witnessed that the efficiency of it on the improvement in the ESL speakers seems to be rather low. A research conducted by Carless (2007) attempts to check the suitability of TBAs which have brought negative results. He sympathizes with Asian cultures by saying that, There is a need for more critical scrutiny of the suitability of task-based approaches for schooling, particularly in Confucian-heritage culture context where task-based teaching may prove to be in conflict with traditional educational norms. Most of the researches which have shown negative results on the CTBAs are from the Asian context where the students are taught in the traditional teacher-centered classroom using the note-taking method, the translation method etc. Therefore, their familiarity in the TBAs is less and they are psychologically inept and less molded to take up a challenge and complete a task, without the assistance of a teacher or an adult (Hu, 2013).

CONCLUSION

Students' lack of motivation to speak in ESL, at undergraduate level has motivated many researchers to be involved in research concerning this area. The reasons for reticence and anxiety in undergraduates during learning English, how to motivate ESL learners in the classroom to converse effectively, the methods which can be used by teachers and instructors to improve ESL speaking confidence in undergraduates are the key areas of ESL research on oral confidence.

After being involved with CTBSAs, peer scaffolding assistance provided through constructive criticism and Q and A sessions encourage and motivate the young learners to get rid of their reticence in ESL and be motivated in conversing the language. Being involved in situation-specific language-related tasks during ESL lessons allows the students to enhance their vocabulary and get rid of their reticence in speaking. The classroom environment in this regard also plays a very important role as the students must be mentally and psychologically relaxed to

overcome their reticence to speak the language. In the presence of their peers and with the assistance of the approachable teachers, the students are able to overcome their anxiety and motivated in their presentations. Team spirit brought out via

group activities is one of the best ways to support the students to learn the language. In this way, collaborative learning and scaffolding play a highly important role when CTBSAs are concerned.

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