Speaking skills and teaching strategies: The case of an EFL classroom

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ABSTRACT

English occupies a place of prestige in the whole world simply because it is the *lingua franca*. In Saudi Arabia, though it can never replace Arabic yet becoming popular in younger generation for educational/economic growth and development. The way English has been taught in most of Asia including the gulf region, is to a great extent responsible for the deterioration of the standard of English for various reasons. The issue of falling standards of English in KSA in particular in the past is very much due to the curricular aims and objectives of English language Education. The main cause for the students learning difficulties and poor achievement especially in speaking skill is that teachers themselves have a very limited exposure of reasons of difficulties and appropriate instructional strategies.

Introduction

English is the lingua franca of the world, thus occupies an important place. English is a compulsion due to the reason that the knowledge of English is expected to enable us to establish intellectual, economic, social commercial and even diplomatic relations with the rest of the world. Its knowledge is truly considered essential for higher education even in Saudi Arabia where Arabic is extremely important for cultural and religion reasons.

There are four language major language skills: Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. In most of the Saudi school classrooms, the major focus of the concerned teachers and students is on the Reading and writing skills rather than the other two skills. Both the teacher and student give less importance to the Listening and Speaking Skills.

Teaching the students who have a limited exposure and understanding of the English language can be a tedious job. As Saudi learners of English communicate in Arabic at homes, markets etc most of them face crucial problems in writing and speaking because these are productive skills.

The Research Context

The great number of erroneous utterances that Arab learners of English produce in oral performance and their recourse to communication strategies, as shown in Rababah's study (2001), is an indication of how serious the problem is. It is also an indication that the objectives of the English departments in the Arab world have not yet been achieved, and that this situation requires a solution.

Krieger (2005, p. 10) observes, 'EFL students who lack intrinsic motivation may have high extrinsic motivation if their education system emphasizes the extrinsic rewards flowing from high scores. Even though these forms of motivation are important but maybe are not as good as intrinsic motivation, they can still inspire students to work hard'. According to Brown (2001), 'if learners have the opportunity or desire to learn for its own sake, such as to become competent users of that language, they will have a higher success rate in terms of long-term learning than if they are driven by only external rewards'. MacDonald (1993, cited in Turnbull, 2001, p. 532) feels that teachers should use L2, rather than L1 as much as possible for motivational reasons. Learners see the TL as immediately useful, as opposed to being so at some distant point in the future. This motivation leads to enjoyment and success; both important factors in the contexts of English as a second language (ESL) and English as a Foreign language (EFL).

Relevance of CLT as EFL strategy

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is said to be one of the latest pedagogic approach which is based on the principles of motivation enforced learning. CLT incorporates the idea of interaction considering it as an essential element of the whole process and output. The basic pedagogical principle of CLT is that successful acquisition of the target language on the part of the learners depends on the amount of interaction and negotiation of meaning that they participate in. In this way, the integration of language input and output contributes to the language development system of the learners (Beale, 2002, p. 15).

According to authors such as Canale (1983), Nunan (1991, 2004) and Littlewood (2007), CLT focuses on language as it is used in real contexts i.e., language for "real life" communication and so the students are given opportunities to express their ideas and opinions. The teacher acts as a facilitator during classroom activities so that students will ultimately be equipped with tools in order to generate a spontaneous language use outside the classrooms boundaries. It is rightly considered as the means of developing fluency in the real learning situation.

Significant changes have been noticed regarding the role of the language teacher over the years since CLT replaced the traditional 'grammar translation method'. The postulates of CLT suggest that the teachers are meant to be less dominant in the classroom and develop more authentic relationships with students. Teachers are considered more as facilitators than commanders of every classroom activities (Beale, 2002, p.13).

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In this connection, Johnson (1980) offers some useful suggestions in his article 'Making Drills Communicative' about how teachers can move from traditional exercises to information gap activities for instance. CLT encourages students to practise structures through activities.

According to Cheng (1980, p.62) CLT activities focus on students' interaction with their peers. Group activities maximize the amount of oral interaction on the part of the students. Students are also less likely to be inhibited when working with their peers. The teacher moves from one group to another without being obtrusive. She/he gives guidance and help when needed only.

Nunan (2004, p.10) describes communicative language teaching as an overarching concept ("a broad, philosophical approach to the language curriculum") of which "task-based language teaching represents a realization…at the levels of syllabus Page 56 design and methodology". Littlewood, (2004, p.324 cited in Littlewood, 2007, p.244) describes CLT as "a development within the communicative approach", in which the crucial feature of the communicative 'tasks' serve not only as major components of the methodology but also as units around which a course may be organized".

Methodology

The study is exploratory-descriptive type. Observation and personal experience provide the base for the research, however, a teachers' questionnaire has also been used to support the data.

Limitation

The study is limited to the King Abdulaziz university Community College, Jeddah-Saudi Arabia, however the findings can be applied to other similar colleges.

A Case Study of EFL teaching

This research can be understood as a case study of EFL teaching in the foundation year of almost all the government tertiary institution of KSA. King Abdulaziz university community college is just a sample for the present case study study.

Case studies have the advantage of being able to incorporate a range of methods or approaches. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2003, p. 134), "Case studies have become one of the most common ways to do qualitative inquiry… we could study it analytically or holistically, entirely by repeated measures or hermeneutically, organically or culturally, and by mixed methods". The case-study approach is particularly appropriate for individual researchers because it gives an opportunity for one aspect of a problem to be studied in some depth and within a limited time-scale.

Following Stake (2000, 2006), Yin (1994) and Merriam (1998) the research design is conceived as a qualitative multi-site case study. The 'case' here is the teaching of EFL in tertiary institutions in Oman. Elements of the case study are drawn from multiple sites and different groups of participants at each site that together provide data illuminating EFL teaching in Oman as a 'case' This study can also be seen as a 'multicase project', described by Stake (2006, p. 6) as … a special effort to examine something having lots of cases, parts, or members. We study those parts, perhaps its students, its committees, its projects, or manifestations in diverse settings … One small collection of people, activities, policies, strengths, problems, or relationships is studied in detail … The cases have their stories to tell, and some of them are included in the multicase report, but the official interest is in the collection of these cases or in the phenomenon exhibited in those cases. We seek how to

understand better how this whole … operates in different situations".

Methods of Data Collection

The data for this study have been elicited through 3 different sources:
- EFL Policy
-Classroom observation,
-Teachers questionnaires (Appendix. A)

Analysis and interpretation

Based on the data gathered through teacher's questionnaire (appendix-A) and graphical presentation (appendix), it has been found that most of the teacher have positive attitude towards learning strategies for speaking skill. It has also been found that teacher's technology orientation and implementation of some offline and online technology are quite useful.

Findings and conclusion

The findings lead to the conclusion that strategies for learning/teaching speaking skill is extremely important in the modern educational scenario. The teachers should be able to use some technologies and motivate the target learners. Motivation is the most crucial issue of education in general in a place like Saudi Arabia, and technology can reinforce the learners to think positively about the learning of English as well. It is interesting to note that almost all the classrooms are well equipped with the latest technology so it becomes inevitable for teachers to integrate them and facilitate the target learners.

Pedagogical implication

The above findings and conclusions can be considered important for the following pedagogical implications regarding the teaching strategies:

Speaking topics and strategies

The following topics and videos can be integrated with the lesson planning:

Topic.1: Introduce yourself

The following questions are expectedly answered by the target learners:
1- What's your name?
2- How old are you?
3- Where are you from?
4- What does your father do?
5- Where do you live?
6- How many brothers do you have?
7- Where do you study?
8- What are your hobbies?

The following video link can be proved to be extremely useful for the target EFL learners:
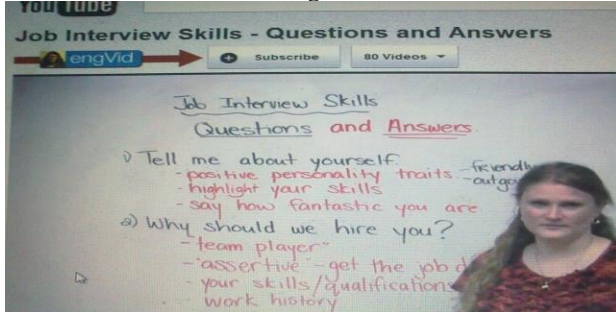
Image 1

(youTube video)

Topic.2: Interview
The following is a model of a job interview:
1- Can you tell me something about yourself?
2- What do you know about our organization?
3- Why do you want to work for us?
4- What can you do for us that someone else can't?
5- What do you find most attractive about this position?
6- How are you different from other applicants?
7- How long would you stay with us?
8- Do you feel that you have potential as an employee?

YouTube videos on an interview for a job can be integrated by the concerned teacher to facilitate the target learners. The following is an example:

Image 2

(Video tips for interview)

On the basis of the above interview tips, the following interview can develop a learner:
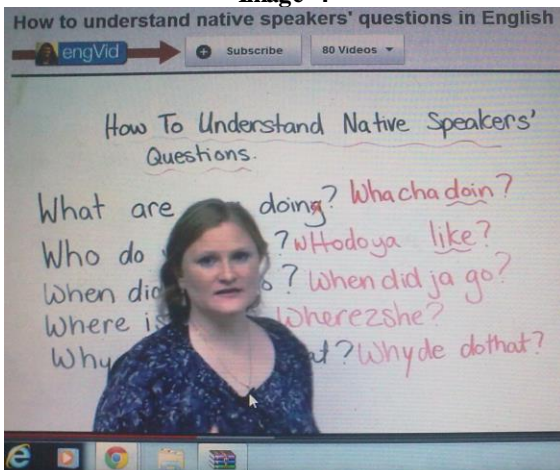
(image 3)

(BC's interview video)

The pronunciation exercise and expression (accent, dialect etc) can also be dealt with some very useful videos. The following is a good example:

Image 4

(pronunciation drill)

A conversation is not going to be an easy task unless the learners possess sufficient vocabulary to use in the target conversation. In this case, the following video can be used in a particular context of the airport:

Image 5

(a video on 'specific vocabulary')

The following contextual conversation can be taught to the students to use in their current and future life. A video can help in the process as well.

Topic.3: Ordering Food
Waiter: Welcome, what would you like to order?
Customer: I would like to get a double cheeseburger.
Waiter: Would you like everything on it?
Customer: I would like everything on it, thank you.
Waiter: Do you want any fries?
Customer: Let me get some large curly fries.
Waiter: Can I get you anything to drink?
Customer: Sure, how about a medium Pepsi?
Waiter: Is that everything?
Customer: That'll be all. Thanks.
Waiter: You're welcome, and your total is $5.48.
Customer: Thank you. Here you go.
…….………………………………………...
Topic.-4: Asking for directions
A: Could you help me with something?
B: What did you need help with?
A: I need to find a mall.
B: You don't know where it is?
A: No, and I've been looking everywhere for it.
B: It's in the same place as the Al-Nahdi pharmacy.
A: Where is the Al-Nahdi pharmacy?
B: It's on Prince Mohammed Street.
A: I know where that is.
B: I'm glad I was able to help.

In addition, the following image is the example of the computer assisted learning in the English language lab. The students are practicing one of the language learning programmes: Rossetta stones.

Image 6

(a view of students practicing speaking in a language lab)

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

To conclude, Arab learners face many problems in all language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The great number of erroneous utterances that Arab learners of English produce in oral performance and their recourse to communication strategies, as shown in Rababah's study (2001), is an indication of how important the pedagogic problem is.

Therefore, it is indeed very important that the concerned teachers should provide the target learners with the material based on communicative strategies and motivate them to use for the maximum results. They should also train the learners to use offline and online technology for education. Last but not least, the teachers should monitor the gradual development and achievement in the speaking skills.

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Appendix-A
Sample=14

	Statements	agree	undecided	disagree
1	I use Arabic when you are teaching English in the EFL classroom	3	4	7
2	I have any reservations over the textbooks' content in terms of cultural appropriateness	5	3	6
3	Role plays and simulations are useful learning strategies	10	4	-
4	I employ bilingual strategy.	4	4	6
5	Direct method is a better strategy than bilingual strategy	9	3	2
6	I integrate technology for EFL teaching.	10	2	2
7	Online learning is very useful.	7	4	3
8	There is only a need of technology orientation for teachers.	5	3	6
9-	Learning difficulties can be minimized by fruitful strategies	7	3	4
10	Speaking skill can be developed by active participation and skillful techniques of teaching.	10	4	-

Appendix-B
Graphical presentation

perception of the teachers on teaching strategy
statement.1 statement.2 statement.3 statement.4 statement.5 statement.6 statement.7
statement.8 statement.9 statement.10