



Factors Affecting Learners' Oral Communication and Coping Strategies

Shiny K.P., Principal, Department of English, JMJ College for Women, Tenali, A.P

Abstract : English language is widely accepted as the major language because of its demand in the current job markets and also it equips the graduates with content knowledge as well as communication skills and competencies. In the case of English in India, more than two centuries, India has been directly and indirectly had influence of English language on all the fields, such as Education, Medical Science, etc. Today success of an individual depends upon his command over English language. Learning to speak a second or foreign language requires more than knowing its grammatical and semantic rules. Learners must also acquire the knowledge of how native speakers use the language in the context of structured interpersonal exchange, in which many factors interact. Therefore, it is difficult for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, especially college students those who are first generation learners, to speak the target language fluently and appropriately. In order to provide effective guidance in developing competent speakers of English, it is necessary to examine the factors affecting learners' oral communication and coping strategies to develop oral communication. This paper explores these aspects so that the teachers can effectively help the learners to develop their abilities to communicate in the target language.

Key words:

Introduction

Speaking seems to be the most important skills of all the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) because people who know a language are usually referred to as speakers of that language (Ur, 1996). The major goal of all English language teaching should be to give learners the ability to use English effectively, accurately in communication (Davies & Pearse, 2000). However, not all language learners after many years studying English can communicate fluently and accurately because they lack necessary knowledge.

Speaking a language is especially difficult for foreign language learners because effective oral communication requires the ability to use the language appropriately in social interactions. Diversity in interaction involves not only verbal

communication but also paralinguistic elements of speech such as pitch, stress, and intonation. In addition, non-linguistic elements such as gestures and body language/posture, facial expression, and so on may accompany speech or convey messages directly without any accompanying speech. In addition, "there is tremendous variation cross- culturally and cross- linguistically in the specific interpretations of gestures and body language" (Brown 1994:241). Furthermore, different cultural assumptions about the purposes of particular interactions and expected outcomes of encounters also affect communication. Consequently, due to minimal exposure to the target language and contact with native speakers, adult EFL learners in general are relatively poor at spoken English, especially



regarding fluency, control of idiomatic expressions, and understanding of cultural pragmatics. Few can achieve native-like proficiency in oral communication.

The importance of Speaking

Of the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), speaking, as most researchers agree, seems the most important. Wilson (1997) claimed that children who can translate their thought and ideas into words are more likely to succeed in school. He also pointed out that speaking skill does not need to be taught as a separate subject, but the four skills can be smoothly integrated. Pattison (1992) confirms that when individuals learn a language, they aim to be able to speak that language.

The nature of speaking

The nature of speaking has been discussed by many researchers. Byrne (1986:8) states that: Oral communication is two-way process between speaker and listener (or listeners) and involves the productive skill of speaking and the receptive skill of understanding (or listening with understanding). For him, speaker and listener participate in oral communication process, and they use a productive skill which is speaking and receptive skill which is listening, because speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving and processing information. Speaking is also a multi-sensory activity because it involves paralinguistic features such as eye-contact, facial expressions, body language, tempo, pauses, voice quality changes, and pitch variation (Thornbury, 2005, p.9) which affect conversational flow. It seems that culture is integral in how speaking is constructed which has implications for how English speaking is taught and learned. Brown and Yule

(1983:13) also drew a useful distinction between two basic language functions. These are the transactional function, which is primarily concerned with the transfer of information, and the interactional function, in which the primary purpose of speech is the maintenance of social relationships.

Another basic distinction when considering the development of speaking skills: distinguishing between dialogue and monologue. The ability to give an uninterrupted oral presentation is quite distinct from interacting with one or more other speakers for transactional and interactional purposes. While all native speakers can and use language interactionally, not all native speakers have the ability to extemporize on a given subject to a group of listeners. Brown and Yule (1983:19-20) suggested that most language teaching is concerned with developing skills in short, interactional exchanges in which the learner is only required to make one or two utterances at a time.

Factors contribute to communication apprehension

A) Age or maturational constraints

The interactive behavior of Second Language learners is influenced by a number of factors. Perhaps age is one of the most commonly cited determinant factors of success or failure in L2 or foreign language learning. Krashen, Long, and Scarcella (1982) argue that acquirers who begin learning a second language in early childhood through natural exposure achieve higher proficiency than those beginning as adults. Oyama's study (1976) also shows that many adults fail to reach native-like proficiency in a second language. Their progress seems to level off at a certain stage, a phenomenon which is usually called "fossilization"-the permanent



cessation of second language development. This shows that the aging process itself may affect or limit adult learners' ability to pronounce the target language fluently with native-like pronunciation (Scarcella and Oxford 1992). Even if they can utter words and sentences with perfect pronunciation, problems with prosodic features such as intonation, stress, and other phonological nuances still cause misunderstandings or lead to communication breakdown. Adult learners do not seem to have the same innate language-specific endowment or propensity as children for acquiring fluency and naturalness in spoken language.

B) Aural medium

The central role of listening comprehension in the L2 or foreign language acquisition process is now largely accepted. And there is little doubt that listening plays an extremely important role in the development of speaking abilities. Speaking feeds on listening, that precedes it. Usually, one person speaks, and the other responds through attending by means of the listening process. In fact, during interaction, every speaker plays a double role-both as a listener and a speaker. "While listening, learners must comprehend the text by retaining information in memory, integrate it with what follows, and continually adjust their understanding of what they hear in the light of prior knowledge and of incoming information" (Mendelsohn and Rubin 1995:35). If one cannot understand what is said, one is certainly unable to respond. So, speaking is closely related or interwoven with listening, which is the basic mechanism through which the rules of language are internalized.

C) Socio-cultural factors

Many cultural characteristics of a language also affect L2 or foreign language learning. From a pragmatic perspective, language is a form of social action because linguistic communication occurs in the context of structured interpersonal exchange, and meaning is thus socially regulated (Dimitracopoulou 1990). In other words, "shared values and beliefs create the traditions and social structures that bind a community together and are expressed in their language" (Carrasquillo 1994:55). Thus, to speak a language, one must know how the language is used in a social context. It is well known that each language has its own rules of usage as to when, how, and to what degree a speaker may impose a given verbal behavior on his/her conversational partner (Berns 1990). Due to the influence or interference of their own cultural norms, it is hard for non-native speakers to choose the forms appropriate to certain situations.

In addition, oral communication involves a very powerful nonverbal communication system, which sometimes contradicts the messages provided through the verbal listening channel. Due to a lack of familiarity with the nonverbal communication system of the target language, EFL learners usually do not know how to pick up nonverbal cues. As a result, ignorance of the nonverbal message often leads to misunderstanding. The following example is a case in point. One day, when an Indian student heard, "Let's get together for lunch sometime," he immediately responded to fix a specific date without noticing the native speaker's indifferent facial expression. Undoubtedly, he was puzzled when his interlocutor left without giving him an expected answer. It is evident that the student had not understood the nonverbal message, which illustrates that



the socio-cultural factor is another aspect that affects oral communication greatly.

D) **Affective factors**

"The affective side of the learner is probably one of the most important influences on language learning success or failure" (Oxford 1990:140). The affective factors related to L2 or foreign language learning is emotions, self-esteem, empathy, anxiety, attitude, and motivation. L2 or foreign language learning is a complex task that is susceptible to human anxiety (Brown 1994), which is associated with feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, and apprehension. Speaking a foreign language in public, especially in front of native speakers, is often anxiety-provoking. Sometimes, extreme anxiety occurs when EFL learners become tongue-tied or lost for words in an unexpected situation, which often leads to discouragement and a general sense of failure. Adults, unlike children, are concerned with how they are judged by others. They are very cautious about making errors in what they say, for making errors would be a public display of ignorance, which would be an obvious occasion of "losing face" in some cultures. Clearly, the sensitivity of adult learners to making mistakes, or fear of "losing face," has been the explanation for their inability to speak English without hesitation.

Coping strategies to develop oral communication skills

Second Language learners need to practice the language regularly inside the classroom through performing different activities. Thus, effective teacher should vary the oral activities to encourage and involve the learners in the classroom interaction. Scriverener makes an important point that supports this idea,

he said that: "the aim of communicative activity in class is to get learners to use the language they are learning to interact in realistic and meaningful ways. Usually involving exchanges information or opinion." (152) There are many different activities that can be done inside the classroom and help the learners to develop their speaking skill.

The following are some of the strategies or techniques that can be used in the classroom to enhance the oral communication of the learners;

1. Group Discussion

The most common activity used in speaking classes is group discussion. This activity gives the students the opportunity to talk and share their interests, opinions, and experiences. As **Hedge** said that the discussion must be limitless i.e. free discussion, here the students can use their background knowledge about that specific subject. Students often are unwilling to give their opinions in front of the whole class. So, to avoid such problems the easiest solution is dividing the class to groups because when getting into groups, the students will exchange ideas, offer suggestions, give remedies or even ask each other about a word or expression in their target language etc.

Teachers should be careful in planning and setting up a discussion activity. First of all, the topic must be interesting, easy to talk about, and touching their real-life situations. **Celle-Marcia** stated that "students need to be clear about what they are to discuss, why they are discussing it, and what outcomes is expected" (106). Second, well grouping or pairing students is a step for a successful discussion, and finally students should be reminded that each one should participate and have a specific responsibility in the discussion in order



to make all the students speak and use the target language.

2. Role-play

It is an enjoyable activity for most of the students particularly those who like to imitate the others. Role play is an authentic technique because it encourages a large number of students especially if it is based on real-life situations; moreover, it helps them to reduce their fears in front of the whole class because usually it should be performed in pairs or groups. Thus, each student has to perform a role. In addition to that, role play activity gives the students the opportunity to practice and develop variety of socio-cultural speech acts that are appropriate to the situation and to the characters. For example, when requesting, apologizing, complaining, thanking etc. This activity can be performed from prepared scripts, student's imagination or experience. The success of the role play depends on the choice of the topics and to the teacher's motivation. Hedge (280) argues that "it will depend on the willingness and motivation of the students to change the personae".

3. Communicative tasks

Those activities are very entertaining for both students and teachers because they make a sense of humor in the classroom, in addition they are directed to achieve some extra linguistic goals. Thornbury (79) proposed that communicative activities are characterized by some features such as a) the tasks should be from real-life situations b) achieving some outcome by using language in funny way c) make the students practice and interact. These communicative tasks enable the learners speak and engage in the classroom interaction.

4. Chain story

This activity is very interesting because the teacher tries to create a story with his/her students. First of all, s/he must make their students motivated to do such activity. Then s/he will begin the story after that he gives turns to the students. Each student should create a new sentence from his imaginations and by the end they finish with a new story.

Conclusion

In conclusion, speaking is one of the central elements of communication. In Second Language teaching, it is an aspect that needs special attention and instruction. In order to provide effective instruction, it is necessary for teachers of Second Language to carefully examine the factors, conditions, and components that underlie speaking effectiveness. The importance of oral communication, the nature of oral communication; factors contribute to communication apprehension like age, aural medium, socio-cultural factors and affecting factors together with sufficient language input and speech-promotion activities like **group discussion, role play, communicative tasks and chain story** would gradually help the learners speak English fluently and appropriately

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