

METHODS FOR TEACHING SPEAKING SKILL AT THAMAR SCHOOLS AND THEIR IMPACTS ON LEARNERS' ORAL COMPETENCY

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Abstract: In the Republic of Yemen, English is taught as a foreign language (FL) in schools and universities. It is a compulsory subject in the curriculum of Yemeni schools and universities and it is the only foreign language that is taught in all Yemeni Public Schools. However, teachers and educators complain about students' lack of oral competency. Hence, this paper attempts to evaluate the current teaching methods, approaches, techniques and activities used for teaching English speaking skill at Thamar Secondary Public Schools. Besides, it also investigates the utilization of instructional aides as well as technological resources and facilities available at schools in Thamar city. Three different data collection techniques were used, namely observation, questionnaire, and interview. The results revealed that English teachers in Thamar still follow the traditional teaching methods. Above all, speaking skill is almost neglected. The lack of proper teaching methods and activities coupled with the absence of instructional aides stand behind students' deficiency in English speaking. Thus, it is recommended that several training sessions for in-service teachers to be held in order to familiarize them with the methods, techniques, and activities used for teaching English speaking skill.

Keywords: *communicative approach; instructional aides; oral competency; speaking fluency; teaching methodology; Thamar public schools.*

INTRODUCTION

The teaching and learning of English as a foreign language has grown enormously. More specifically, the focus has recently been on how to speak and use the language effectively. The concern is not only about 'knowing English', but also significantly about 'speaking English' and using it for communication. Accordingly, the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language gives priority to speaking skills. For this purpose, several methods, approaches, and techniques were innovated. The most popular and recognized approach is the communicative approach (CA) which stresses the development of communicative skills. It is revealed that communicative activities force learners to activate their linguistic repertoire and increase the possibility of integrating the new forms of the target language. However, more failures have always marked the English teaching worldwide when attempts are made to communicate. Many learners know about the language, but only some of them understand how to use it in daily conversation. Of course, there is a good deal of unanimity of views that the teaching and learning of speaking skills could only succeed by

having good learning facilities, such as competent teachers, various English books, teaching aids and teaching media as well. In transferring language to students, appropriate techniques are needed in order to create a new and effective atmosphere for classroom interaction. In other words, by implementing various techniques and activities, teachers will be able to stimulate students in the teaching and learning process. Brown and Lee (1994, p. 63) state:

Techniques should cover the spectrum of learners needs, from language-based focus on accuracy to message-based focus on interaction, meaning and fluency. Technique use should also encourage the use of authentic language in meaningful context; provide appropriate feedback and correction; capitalize on the natural link between speaking and listening; give the students opportunities to initiate oral communication; and encourage the development of speaking strategies.

From the statement, it can be assumed that English teachers are required to be well-prepared before performing the lesson through supported activities in order to arouse the students' motivation so as to achieve the desired objectives.

As reported by Fareh (2010), EFL programs in the Arab world still fail to deliver as expected and the EFL learners' proficiency in English remains inadequate and below expectation which are caused by several factors, such as improperly trained teachers, inadequate teaching methodology, use of teacher-centered rather than learner-centered activities, and lack of exposure to English. Thus, communicative approach is believed to run more effectively and efficiently. Integrated and multi-skill instructions usually follow the principles of communicative approach with various pedagogical emphases, goals, instructional materials, activities, and procedures playing a central role in promoting communicative language use (Hinkel, 2006).

In addition to the revolution in teaching methods, the waves of technology have also affected the teaching and learning of FL to a great extent. Computers have proved their pedagogical worth in foreign language classroom. Learning technologies have given the students and teachers unparalleled access to authentic written and spoken English. As stated by Dede (2002), there is a world of teaching materials available in the Internet that can enliven any lesson. Hence, educational technology has a positive impact on students' attitudes and on teacher's teaching practices towards more cooperative group work and less teacher-centered.

Technology has really become an inseparable element of learning a foreign language as it enhances students' achievements. Al-Mekhlafi (2004) also remarks that teaching English in the Arab world has been characterized by the use of traditional and grammar-oriented approach with limited information resources (e.g. the teacher, the textbook and the chalkboard), but recently, several studies have been conducted and their findings have confirmed that the introduction of computers into EFL classroom enhances language learning as well as enriches the teaching and learning environment.

In the Yemeni context, the improvement of language teaching has not done much for the learner who nowadays faces so many challenges. Using the old-fashioned method of teaching can cause frustration, insecurity, and low self-esteem in the learners. The latter is thereby bound to be vulnerable and incapable of not only passing tests but is also coward enough not to face any challenge in his/her life. In addition, technology has not yet found its way to the Yemeni

classroom. This situation is not satisfactory for the development of Yemen and needs more improvement to keep pace with the technological development in the world (Shan'a, 2009). The Yemeni English language teaching (ELT) reformation was, as noted by Bataineh and Thabet (2008), merely confined to the replacement of the syllabi. Reportedly, no beneficial orientation has been held on the principles of CLT and, thus, teachers and supervisors have kept on using conventional teaching strategies with ECCFY (English Crescent Course for Yemen) making no reference to most of the communicative techniques of classroom activities, language teaching aids and teacher questioning proposed by CLT and widely touted for enhancing learners' foreign language proficiency (Murshid, 2001).

Generally, it seems that English teachers in Yemen focus on grammar and structures, and that is what makes students almost "deaf and dumb" and show little ability to speak and understand English. Students are not learning enough realistic and whole language so that they do not know how to communicate using appropriate social language, gestures or expressions. In brief, students are not able to communicate in the target language. It is felt that the current teaching techniques applied by teachers do not produce satisfactory teaching results which mean that they probably have not achieved the objectives of teaching English in Yemen. Along with different studies carried out all over Yemen, it is the purpose of this research to dwell on and investigate the currently applied methods and techniques as well as technological resources utilized for teaching spoken English at Tamar Secondary Public Schools, reporting and providing the concerned bodies and institutions with adequate information and well-framed picture about the situation of teaching English in order that actions of remedial intent are to be taken.

Despite the fact that Yemeni students learn English for six years, starting from grade seven and up to grade twelve, there have been several complaints about the weaknesses in spoken English of secondary public school graduates who join universities as English majors or as English language learners. Tamar secondary school graduates are not exempted. The majority of Tamar secondary public schools' graduates find it difficult to hold a conversation in English for even five minutes. This can be attributed to

the nature of teaching or the lack of appropriate educational and technological resources. According to Al-Sharafi (2010), ELT in Yemeni Public Schools has been suffering from a serious problem. It is the same problem that Widdowson (1978, p. 117) had recognized for EFL, where he says:

The problem is that students, and especially students in developing countries, who have received several years of formal English teaching, frequently remain deficient in the ability to actually use the language, and to understand its use, in normal communication, whether in the spoken or the written modes.

Al-Sharafi (2010) describes this problem as serious since it means that Yemen has not yet been able to achieve its goal of teaching English in its public schools despite the fact that it spends a lot of money in this regard. A little bit closer, Rashed (2009) drives home the fact that large classes is a major problem for teaching spoken English in Yemen. As he points out, “most students sit passively for 45 minutes and only the teacher speaks explaining the lesson, without giving a chance to the students to practice or think” (Rashed, 2009, p.94).

Due to the importance of communicating in the target language, the exercise of speaking skills has received increasing attention among educators during the past two decades. The need for communication has been relentless, leading to the emergence of the communicative language teaching (CLT). In reaction to the grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods which did little in promoting communication skills, CLT came to existence, emphasizing communicative activities which involve real use of language in real day-to-day life situations.

Because of its merits, communicative approach has dominated English language teaching; it has firmly established itself on a worldwide basis and there are good historical reasons for this (Jarvis, 2005). The adoption of this approach was based on several factors that obliged linguists, psychologists, and educationalists to provide it with applicable techniques, procedures and theories as well. Communicative language teaching (CLT) makes use of real-life situations that students are likely to encounter in real life. Here, students' motivation to learn comes from their desire to communicate in meaningful ways about meaningful topics. In common consent, students' ability to engage in meaningful conversational interaction in the target language is considered

an important, if not the most important, goal of FL education. In connection with this aim, Hass (2000) assures that students need opportunities to be active participants in tasks requiring them to negotiate meaning and practice language in communication with their teachers, their peers and others.

Today, a number of creative language learning software exist and is quite accessible from any part of the world. The aim is to engage the learner with interactive content to facilitate learning. In addition, multimedia is integrated into the newly emerging software which makes learning process more interactive. Recently, computer technology has become more available and more affordable to learners and schools (Liu 2005). Many instructors have become better aware of the great potential computer software has for English language learning. Liu (2005) states that attention has been recently moving away from computer software technology toward methodology and therefore teaching has become more elevated, and research has begun to focus on English language learning through the use of interactive software.

It has been argued that computer technology has made language learning and teaching more effective because it can provide various repeatable stimuli which are not available in a single package in the past. Zhong and Shen (2002) indicated that the use of technology in EFL has gained a great deal of momentum in China. They have labeled the process of technology integrated English instruction as “Multimedia EFL Teaching”. In Yemen, there have been some initiatives regarding integrating computer technology into schools. In February, 2005, a workshop was held in Sana'a by iEARN to introduce secondary school teachers to how they can apply the connective power of the Internet and other technologies to their classroom curriculum subjects. Having the same purpose, INTALEQ (Innovation in Technology-Assisted Learning for Education Quality) project, sponsored by USAID, Ministry of Education and other organizations, was launched in 2009, targeting Mukla, Taiz, Aden and Sana'a. This program aimed at measuring the effects of teaching by using technological means on students' achievement. Thus, it was agreed between EDC (henceforth, Educational Development Centre), Intel and MOE (henceforth, Ministry of Education) that the MOE would endeavor to select items (largely from the Egyptian digital content) that would not

need extensive adaptation for use in Yemen, both for time and budgetary reasons. The Yemeni MOE has made a solid start on compiling a library of authentically Yemeni digital materials, keyed to the Yemeni curriculum, which can be used by teachers and students, yet there is still a long way to go.

In Yemen, the environment and family background are very important factors that determine the success of learning English. As stated by Al-Sohbani (2015), the opportunity to learn English in Yemen through natural interaction with native speakers is rare and English is merely taught as a subject. Such situations negatively affect students' oral competency as the need to communicate in English in daily lives is not fulfilled. It can be stated that socio-economic prestige is a crucial factor behind the strong integrative tendencies and the high motivation levels of the Yemeni EFL students (Attamimi & Rahim, 2011).

In Tamar, we cannot say that secondary schools are fully equipped with modern technologies. According to the manager of instructional aides and educational technology at the office of the Ministry of Education, Tamar branch, there are eight schools in Tamar city out of eighty which are equipped with educational and technological facilities, such as computers, data shows, and other variants of visual aids. One of these equipped schools is Ogba School which has been visited by the researcher several times. This school has 20 computers connected to the Internet plus a science lab. Yet, no real advantage is driven from the availability of these technological facilities. The English language teachers at this school grumble that one of the reasons preventing them from using computer lab in teaching English speaking is the problem of large classes. In reality, the problem of large classes is a critical one, but this does not mean that these teachers should give up and remain blind followers of the old traditional methods of teaching. They should think of possible solutions and cooperate with the concerned persons to tackle such problems.

METHOD

This study involves teachers and students of Tamar Secondary Public schools. From the list of school names obtained from the office of Ministry of Education in Tamar, four schools were selected in a stratified random way (including both boys' and girls' schools). The

boys' schools are Ogba Bin Nafa and Haile Saeed Educational Complex and the girls' schools are Al-Methaq and Al-Shaima'a. In each of the boys' selected schools, two teachers from each grade were selected as respondents. Meanwhile, from girls' schools, only one teacher from each grade was selected as respondents, i.e., three teachers from each school of the selected girls' schools.

For collecting data, the researcher used some instruments, ranging from closed ended questionnaire, open-ended questionnaire, observation checklist, and interview. Open and closed ended questionnaires were constructed, developed, and then administered to 18 teachers. Moreover, a number of 120 students were also given closed-ended as well as open-ended questionnaires. To ensure better understanding of the nature of teaching speaking, the researcher developed and made use of observation checklist, noting down some points about the teachers' performance while teaching speaking. The observation checklist was constructed on the basis of the pertinent literature, and then reviewed by an expert at Education College, Tamar University. Regarding the educational facilities and aids, the researcher arranged some interviews with the head of the department of educational technology and visual aids, the office of the Ministry of Educations, Tamar Branch. These interviews sought to obtain official data about the facilities offered to schools.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The guiding question is whether the methods, techniques and activities used by English teachers at Tamar Secondary Public Schools are effective to enhance students' oral competency. To answer this question, an observation checklist was prepared. Actually, six teachers of tenth grade were observed during the teaching of four periods, i.e., four lessons were observed. The observed teachers were not from a single school but they were selected from three schools. The observation showed that the performance of the observed teachers is very poor. It is to be drawn here that those observed teachers do not give any priority to the teaching of English speaking skills, nor do they give it any consideration or significance. In their classes, the teaching of English speaking skills is largely ignored. Clearly, the absence of the simple and common methods, techniques and activities in the teaching of this skill is evidence

to the deficiency of students in communicating in English. Besides, tenth grade teachers do not make any use of instructional aides or technological resources. It was also observed that no one of the sample employed any of the out-put oriented activities, such as role-play, simulation, debate, etc. This condition has a negative influence on students' oral competency. In other words, this is one of the reasons that lie behind the deficiency of Tamar Secondary Public School students in English speaking skills.

Grouping techniques are popular in the teaching of speaking skills. However, none of the observed teachers made use of any sorts of grouping. All of the teachers were observed teaching the whole class as one single group. About learning from and with peers, 16.7 % of the teachers were observed encouraging such a way of learning, while the other teachers did not do so. It was also observed that 33.3% of the teachers were able to create a non-threatening environment by being tolerant, ongoing, friendly and above all not meticulous about making mistakes. Similarly, 33.3% of the observed teachers prompted cooperative group work, practicing exercises in the class, answering some questions, etc. On the contrary, none of the teachers was observed requiring his students to work cooperatively with each other.

Coming to the extent of using English in the classroom, it was observed that only 16.7% of the teachers used English fairly well in the classroom. The other teachers were all observed using Arabic most of the time. In this area, the researcher has been aware about teachers' presence that they may exhibit during the observation process, so he questioned some other teachers who were not observed. In addition, the students were also asked to measure the extent to which their teachers use English in the classroom.

As speaking class (or specifically oral production) requires many motivational cues to be used so as to motivate the students and stimulate them to speak, it was found that 33.3% of the observed teachers took advantage of such a technique, whereas the other teachers did nothing of this type. As it was observed, only 16.7% of the teachers of the observation sample were seen sequencing their speaking lesson according to PPP (Presentation, Practice, Production) procedure, whereas the other teachers were observed focusing only on presentation from the beginning to the end of the

teaching session. Regarding class participation, there were no activities held or performed to see to what extent the teachers allow class participation. Thus, as there were no activities, there was nothing to be observed with respect to class participation. The same thing recurred with directed discussions. There were no directed discussions, so there was nothing to be observed.

Collaborative learning, also called peer learning, is considered one of the established, popular and effective approaches, and active class participation is considered an essential element of this type of learning. Peer learning refers to the acquisition of knowledge and skills through active help and support among status equals or matched companions (Topping, 2005).

With reference to this, students' interaction was also limited. Only 33.3% of the teachers were observed allowing and activating students' interaction, but the other teachers were seen dominating most of the time. It was also observed that no one of the teachers cared about students' involvement, nor did the researcher observe any teacher teaching speaking English with the help of instructional aides. In this regard, both the teachers and the students were also asked about the use of instructional aides in the classroom. This situation creates anxiety as the students remain constantly silent. Dewaele and Al-Saraj (2015) studied the correlation between self-perceived oral proficiency in English and the frequency of use of English. They also investigated the socio-biographical variables and five multicultural personality traits that reflect the classroom anxiety. Their investigation revealed that participants who felt more proficient in oral English and used the language frequently were significantly less likely to suffer from foreign language classroom anxiety.

Generally, it is advisable to minimize the use of students' L1 during speaking classes. What was observed is not in harmony with the principles of CLT, which require decreasing the use of L1 during speaking classes. The observer did not see any teacher trying to limit the use of L1 so as to push the students to struggle to communicate in the target language.

In short, the results of the observation conducted on tenth grade teachers indicated clearly that the teaching practice adopted by them is not compatible with the techniques, methods, and activities used for teaching spoken English. It can be said that tenth grade teachers' way of teaching is among the factors that do not

contribute to the improvement of students' speaking skills, but conversely to limiting and discouraging the students to have good speaking skills in English.

All in all, the majority of the teachers are not familiar with the methods, techniques and activities which are commonly used for teaching English speaking skills. This is really one of the major causes that lie behind the deficiency of Tamar Secondary School students in English speaking skills. None of the teachers employed speaking techniques and activities, such as simulation, role-play, discussion, prepared talk, and story-telling. While observing, the researcher found no one of the observed teachers initiating any activity or using any common technique used for teaching speaking, nor were their students satisfied with their way of teaching. This is in accordance with the results of the study done by Thabet (2002) and Bataineh and Thabet (2008).

With respect to the instructional aides and technological facilities, it is actually another depressing finding. Only six teachers said that they have the cassettes that accompany the textbooks. When coming to using them for teaching purposes, it was found that only two teachers of the sample claimed to use them in teaching speaking skills. However, this is not only the problem with the teachers, but it is also the result of the negligence exhibited by the concerned persons at the office of the Ministry of Education, Tamar. When these concerned bodies were interviewed by the researcher, they disclosed the bitter fact that they had nothing to support English language teaching at schools. This is an indication of the apparent negligence from the part of the teachers, inspectors and the higher bodies as well. Information and communication technologies have given the students many opportunities to practice English in and out the classroom and they have time and freedom to understand, reflect and analyze what have been exposed (Ibrahim, 2010). Tamar public schools seem to be stuck in traditional methods and the teachers have not been able to shift their classrooms into the digital age.

Although some schools are equipped with some computers, yet no single benefit is driven from the presence of these magical tools. Those sets are just for decoration and no one knows when they might be used in teaching English, particularly English speaking skills. The suffering of the other schools is even worse. They are not even supplied with the basic

instructional aides, and this has its direct influence on the students' achievements in general. Undoubtedly, the burden is all put on the students. Such a situation-with poor performance of the teachers in the classroom and the lack of instructional aides and technological facilities-deeply impacts on the final oral attainment of the students.

In general, Yemeni students encounter difficulties that hinder mastering the basic skills of English as a foreign language. As the study reveals, the adherence to traditional methods of teaching remains a detrimental factor in student's poor competency. In addition, the unavailability of the advanced technological facilities and the scarce of well-designed instructional aides impact the students' attempt to improve their fluency in English. Besides, the currently civil war that broke out has paralyzed the educational system in the whole country. Since 2011 till today, public schools in Yemen have been struggling to remain open regardless of maintaining educational standards. What remain are individual attempts by students themselves. Some students who are well off go to language institutes in Tamar city, while many others lose interest in the subject as a whole.

CONCLUSION

From the analysis, it is concluded that the widely recognized methods, approaches, techniques and activities used for teaching English speaking skills have no place at Tamar Secondary Public Schools. Teachers still adhere to the traditional teaching methods. Above all, speaking skill is almost neglected by a large number of teachers, if not by all of them. In all the observed lessons, students were not interacting cooperatively with their teachers, nor were their teachers using any productive activities that may enliven the lesson and arouse the students' motivation. Lack of proper teaching methods and activities is among the factors that stand behind students' deficiency in spoken English. Beside, lack of instructional aides and technological facilities is also one of the main factors leading to the poor performance of secondary school students in speaking English. English teachers at Tamar Secondary Public Schools are aware of the significance of instructional aides and technological facilities for improving their students' ability to use English. However, they are not bold enough to adopt any. This can be ascribed the

organizational hierarchy in the education system, lack of funding, and motivation.

In the light of the findings, certain recommendations are proposed. Teachers at least should use and read the Teacher's Guide thoroughly and try to apply the instructions and methods mentioned in it. Teachers should not only teach grammar and isolated words most of the time because English is a language and not a course of mathematics. They should give space in their teaching for the other learning skills, particularly speaking skills. It is hoped that teachers would move their focus to helping students to understand and speak the language they learn. More importantly, the use of Arabic in the classroom should be decreased and more attention should be given to the interactions among learners and with their teachers. Urgent in-service training courses are needed for English teachers in order to familiarize them with the recent concepts and latest development in English teaching. Schools should be provided with supplementary materials, such as posters, pictures, flashcards, journals, short stories, dictionaries cassettes and recorders, video tapes, well-designed software, data shows, language labs, etc. There is urgent need for teachers to change their teaching methods and strategies to be in harmony with CLT, the one which is largely recommended for teaching speaking skills all over the globe. School authorities are expected to implement measures that lead English teachers to provide the opportunity for students to use English for real communication.

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