

INVESTIGATING YEMENI EFL LEARNERS' INVOLVEMENT IN CLASSROOM ORAL ACTIVITIES AND ITS CORRELATION TO THEIR SPEAKING PROFICIENCY DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: This study investigated Yemeni EFL learners' involvement in classroom oral activities and its correlation to their speaking proficiency development with a reference to three rural faculties of education affiliated to Aden University. The data was collected through a questionnaire which targeted 120 fourth-year EFL learners. The results revealed that the students' involvement in classroom activities is pretty low. It has been unveiled that pair work and group work activities are not implemented in a regular basis and it is limited to a few students. The findings also showed a significant correlation between learners' involvement in classroom oral activities and their speaking proficiency (p. value < 0.05%). As per these findings, this study recommends the concerned faculties to implement communicative language teaching in their EFL programs to ensure students' engagement in classroom activities and promote their oral proficiency.

Keywords: *Communicative language teaching; classroom activities; speaking proficiency.*

INTRODUCTION

Classroom is the cornerstone in foreign language learning since it is in many FL contexts the only place where students learn and get exposure to their target foreign language. Hence, EFL teachers should work hard to create good learning atmosphere which encourages students to interact in English and enhance their English proficiency. In this regard, Lightbown and Spada (2013) distinguished between two types of instructional settings in teaching a foreign language in classroom, namely *the structure-based instructional settings 'traditional setting'* and *the communicative instructional settings 'communicative setting'*. The traditional instruction focuses on teaching the language itself (its structures and vocabulary) through translation and traditional audio-lingual drilling. With this type of instruction, learners are expected to learn linguistic items that are presented and practiced in isolation, errors are frequently corrected, accuracy is the major goal of learning, learners feel pressure to speak in the foreign language and teachers may use students' mother language. The communicative instructional setting, on the other hand, focuses on communication, both between teachers and students and among the students themselves. It highlights the importance of

engaging students in pair and group work activities where meaning is the primary focus. In this setting, grammar is focused on only in order to clarify the meaning, a limited amount of error correction is permitted when it is necessary, and modified and authentic inputs are used to facilitate language learning. It is clear from these features that the former setting does not help students achieve high language proficiency as its activities and events differ from those students are supposed to encounter outside classroom. It can help them mastering some linguistic forms and vocabularies but it does not necessarily guarantee their ability to use such linguistic knowledge in their real communication. On the other hand, the latter puts an emphasis on communication. It employs communicative activities which engage students in interaction and it helps them to achieve higher language communication proficiency.

This study aims at achieving these two objectives: (1) To investigate Aden University EFL undergraduate students' involvement in speaking classes. (2) To investigate the correlation between students' involvement in speaking classes and their development of their speaking proficiency.

Littlewood (1981) categorized EFL classroom activities into two types, namely: pre-

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communicative activities and communicative activities as shown in the fig. no. 1. While the latter is more recommended for developing students' spoken communication proficiency as it engages students in a meaningful and purposeful language use, the former can be used as a step towards preparing students for communicative activities and equipping them with the part-skills required for communication.

The pre-communicative activities refer to those controlled and cued activities which are usually used in classroom to practice the production of some specific language structures or to relate structures to their meanings. The more freedom given to students in these activities to say whatever they want to say, the more they move towards the communicativeness or the end of the communication continuum in the words of Harmer (2001). On the other hand, communicative activities are those activities which engage students in interaction for achieving communicative purposes.

Communicative activities, according to Littlewood (1981), help language learning through four contributions: providing whole-task practice, improving motivation, allowing natural learning, and creating a context that supports learning. Both types of activities are usually very important as they complete each other and contribute to learners' spoken communication proficiency development. While the communicative activities help language learners to enhance their oral proficiency, the pre-communicative activities provide beginners with opportunities to practice language part-skills and fuel them with the language required for their engagement in the communicative activities. For this reason, EFL teachers have to think well about the activities they use in their teaching of English generally and spoken English particularly as limiting classroom teaching to pre-communicative activities deprives students of such opportunities of using language efficiently to communicate. Communicative activities should be given a priority in language teaching while the pre-communicative activities should be wisely used in a way that supports language learning to proceed.

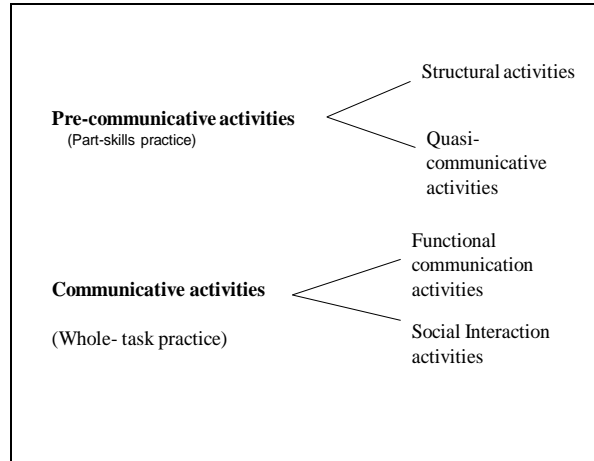


Figure 1. *Littlewood's categories of classroom activities (Littlewood, 1981, p. 86)*

Prior to this, Broughton, *et al.* (1978) classified classroom activities into four categories, namely: a. controlled oral work, b. guided oral work, c. free oral production and d. class conversation. While the first two are somehow similar to Littlewood's pre-communicative activities and can be used to practice specific language features, the latter two are similar to the communicative activities that help in developing learners' fluency and promoting communication proficiency. In this regard, Harmer (1982) also categorized classroom activities into communicative activities and non-communicative activities and attributed some characteristics for each category as shown in the fig. no. 2. In the communicative activities, students should have a desire to communicate and there should be a communication purpose. The students also focus on meaning 'content' rather than 'form' and they are free to choose from a variety of language. Teachers usually do not intervene in such communicative activities unless there is a need for their intervention to help their students continue their communication. On the other hand, in the non-communicative activities the students may have no desire to communicate and their purpose of communication is more institutional, i.e. to learn how to use language for communication. In these activities, more attention is paid to language forms and the students have to practice the language forms as prescribed in syllabus and teachers' instructions. In these activities, teacher's interventions are very common as the teacher has to tell his students what to do, correct them whenever they make mistakes and direct them when they deviate from the objectives of the task.

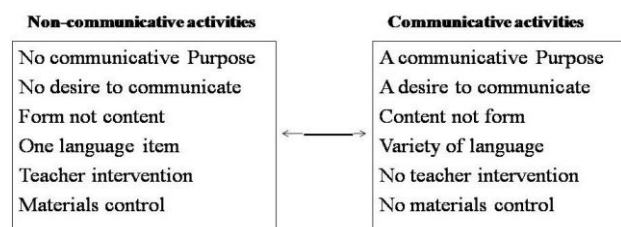


Figure 2. Harmer's *communicative vs. non-communicative activities* (1982, p. 167)

Harmer (2001) also argued that students may face some difficulties when dealing with oral communicative activities and for this reason the teachers should think about some issues to help them participate in oral tasks and develop their spoken communication proficiency. They have to plan tasks in advance, supply key languages, provide necessary information, select interesting topics, create interest in topics and vary the topics they offer to their students. The main purpose behind doing so is to ensure having learners engaged in these activities. It is important to remember here that the essence of the communicative language teaching is the engagement of learners in meaningful communication that allows them to enhance their communication proficiency (Savignon, 2002). Thus, it is the responsibility of the teachers and the curriculum designers to include various activities

(pre-communicative and communicative ones) that help learners to gradually develop their communication proficiency.

METHOD

Pertaining to the population of this present study, it targeted three rural faculties of Aden University. Three faculties, namely AL-Dhala and Toor Albaha were selected as a sample for this study by the method of convenience sampling. This study employed a questionnaire in its data collection. The questionnaire was designed by the researcher and then checked well in terms of its validity and reliability (Cronbach's Alpha > 0.70). The data collected through the students' questionnaire were computed into the SPSS 21st version and then some statistical procedures, such as Cronbach's alpha coefficient, frequencies description, means, one-way anova comparison of means were run to analyze it.

The data collected through the questionnaire regarding students' engagement in classroom oral activities and the correlation between their participation in classroom oral activities and their development of their speaking proficiency as will be shown below.

Teachers' and students' roles in classroom

Table 1. *Nature of spoken classes*

Class nature	Frequency	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Mean
a. Teacher-centred (The teacher speaks most of the time and performs most of classroom activities)	8	41	70	1	0	3.4667	
	6.7%	34.2%	58.3%	.8%	0%		
b. Student-centred (Students speak most of the time and perform most of classroom activities)	0	2	67	51	0	2.5917	
	0%	1.7%	55.8%	42.5%	0%		

The above table no. 1 shows that spoken English classes in the concerned faculties are more teacher-centred than being student-centred. It can be seen from the results presented in the above table that the teachers spend more time speaking and performing classroom activities while the students have less time in comparison to their teachers. The nature of spoken classes does not differ from one faculty to another as the results showed no significant differences in students' responses to these items that can be attributed to their faculties. From the students' responses to these items, it can be said

that the teaching climate in these concerned faculties is more traditional than being communicative and such a type of classroom where students' roles are not active enough in their learning does not help students develop a good level of communication proficiency. In the next items, further issues are to be explored to reach a decision about the nature of classroom teaching and learning in the concerned faculties and its role in students' spoken communication proficiency acquisition.

Students' involvement in classroom oral activities

Table 2. *Students' involvement in classroom oral activities*

Item	Its frequency	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Mean
a. How often did your teacher of speaking skill involve you in classroom pair work and group work communicative activities?	0 0%	9 7.5%	39 32.5%	72 60%	0 0%		2.4750
b. How often did your teacher of speaking skill involve you in role-play and simulation activities?	0 0%	0 0%	32 26.7%	88 73.3%	0 0%		2.2667
c. How often did your teacher of speaking skill provide you with opportunities to interact with him in English?	0 0%	13 10.8	29 24.2	78 65%	0 0%		2.4583
d. How often did your teacher of speaking skill involve you in activities like describing pictures, giving directions and asking for information in English?	0 0%	0 0%	37 30.8	83 69.2	0 0%		2.3083
Total Means							2.3770

Any other activities: Reading stories then narrating it to the class. (66 students)

Preparing description about oneself, villages, college...etc. then presenting it in class. (92 students)

Reading dialogues at home then presenting it in classroom. (25 students)

The above table no. 2 shows how the concerned students are involved in classroom activities. The means given to these activities indicate that students' involvement in classroom activities is pretty low. The majority of the students rarely participate in classroom spoken activities. There are some activities and tasks running in the concerned classrooms but it seems to be limited to some few students (no more than 40%) while the majority (approximately 60%) rarely participate in such activities. The students were also requested to list any other activities their teachers engage them in to develop their spoken communication proficiency and some of them have highlighted some activities, such as a. reading stories and then presenting it to the class, b. reading dialogues at home and then acting it in classroom, and c. preparing descriptions of some places and presenting it to the class.

Students' involvement in classroom activities in correlation with their speaking skill self-evaluation

When comparing students' involvement in classroom activities to their self-evaluation of their speaking skill, the results showed a significant correlation between students' involvement in classroom activities and their self-assessment of their speaking skill in the favor of those students who often or sometimes participate in classroom activities as shown in the table no. 3 below.

Table 3. *Students' involvement in pair and group work activities in correlation with their speaking skill self-evaluation*

How often did your teacher of speaking skill involve you in classroom pair work and group work activities?	Students' self-evaluation of speaking skill	N	P. value
Rarely	1.7917 (Very poor)	72	
Sometimes	3.1026 (Satisfactory)	39	0.000
Often	4.3333 (Excellent)	9	
Total	2.4083	120	

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students' involvement in classroom activities is a primary condition for developing their speaking proficiency as classroom can be the only place where FL learners can get exposure to their target language. For this reason, the EFL classroom teaching and learning classroom should be as much communicative as possible to allow language acquisition to take place and this can be achieved through various communicative activities and tasks that engage students in communicative language use (Broughton *et al.*, 1978; Canale, 1983; Ellis, 1994; Harmer, 1982; Harmer, 2001; Kumaravadivelu, 1993; Littlewood, 1981; Nunan, 1987; Prabhu, 1987; Oxford, 2006; Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Savignon, 2002; Thornbury, 1996). Even in contexts where EFL learners are beginners and they may lack linguistic knowledge, teachers should engage them in pre-communicative and

communicative activities that help them to develop their linguistic system and use it for communication simultaneously (Broughton *et al.*, 1978; Harmer, 2001). They should exploit any opportunity for language use created by learners and work hard in motivating students to interact in English (Kumaravadivelu, 1993; Thornbury, 1996). They should also encourage English use in classroom leisure time and classroom discipline as such a language use is viewed to be a kind of genuine and purposeful communication similar to the communication existing outside classroom (Littlewood, 1981).

When looking at the students' responses to the questionnaire regarding classroom activities and their involvement in such activities as shown in the tables presented earlier, it can be seen that the EFL teaching in the concerned faculties is somehow far from the features of communicative teaching. The teachers play dominant roles in speaking classes and the students' participation is pretty low. It has also been found that there is a significant correlation between students' participation in classroom oral activities and their development of their speaking proficiency in the favor of those students who often participate in classroom oral activities. Students' lack of participation in communicative activities in EFL contexts was also highlighted in some other studies (Abdellah, 2011; Adam, 2016; Al-Hosni, 2014; Ezzi, 2005; Zakaria, 2015). It was found as one of the major factors responsible for students' poor proficiency in spoken English.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated Yemeni students' involvement in classroom oral activities and its impact on their development of their speaking proficiency with a reference to three faculties of Education, affiliated to the University of Aden. The findings revealed that the students' involvement in classroom oral activities was pretty low. A significant correlation was also found between students' involvement in classroom oral activities and their self-evaluation of their performance in speaking skill by the time of their graduation in the favour of those students who were often and sometimes involved in classroom oral activities. As per these findings, this study recommends the concerned faculties to implement communicative language teaching in the EFL programs to ensure

students' engagement in classroom activities and promote their oral proficiency.

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