

INFORMATION GAP ACTIVITIES IN ENHANCEMENT OF SPEAKING SKILLS

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Abstract

The aim of this contribution was to test to what extent the implementation of Information Gap Activities could improve students' speaking ability. Classroom action research procedures (plan, act, observe and reflection) were used to identify, test and find out outcomes of the research. Data was collected by pre-test and post-test of the learning speaking ability and by the observation of the class performance during the tasks.

Keywords: Task-based approach in learning and Teaching (TBLT), Information gap activities (IGA), Speaking, English as Foreign Language (EFL).

1. Introduction

The primary purpose of learning any language is to communicate in this language fluently and understand the speaker. According to Halliday, people do three things with language: "people use it to exchange goods and services, we use it to socialize with others, we use it for enjoyment" (Nunan D, p19). The teaching syllabus of an English language class in public schools of Uzbekistan is more dedicated to teaching grammar in order to enhance the English language fluency of a high school student and allow them to pass the national university entrance exam. However, there are growing number of international universities that are establishing their colleges in Uzbekistan and the number of Uzbek students applying to these universities and universities abroad. To be admitted to such universities, students must demonstrate not only knowledge of English grammar, but also exhibit listening, reading, writing and speaking comprehension. Accordingly, the demand for fluency in English language is also growing. English language teaching centers are using various methods and techniques to improve the speaking skills of high school students. Information gap activities are one of the effective techniques that are used in language teaching. This technique is also becoming popular in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms.

The term "Information gap activity" started being widely used in general discourse starting from approximately 1960s. Various collocations were used in different sources like "jigsaw activity" or "Communication activity/games".

Information gap activities are usually conducted in a group of two or as a group work. Usually, the learners are given two different worksheets with some information missing in them, so the

students' job is to complete the missing information by asking and answering questions and making role-plays. Sometimes, the learners are expected to find a solution to real-life problems.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Speaking skills

Speaking skills is the aspect in the language learning that helps the user to communicate with each other, to express their thoughts and feelings and to understand others' as well. The target of learning any language is to being able to ethically and clearly use verbal and non-verbal communication for collaborative processes. Speaking is interactive and it requires the people the ability to cooperate with the listener. This skill needs to be developed and practiced independently (Thonbury, 2005). While Nunan believes that speaking is the most essential aspect of learning any language. It is the productive skill in which the learner produce systematic verbal utterance to transfer the meaning (Nunan, 2003). From the information above, the speaking skills is the process of interaction of people, in which they construct the meaning. And, to enhance the speaking skills, the learner need to receive the information, process the speech and produce the language using appropriate words that convey meaning. Wide variety of techniques and activities are suggested to enhance the speaking skills of the learners. One of the approaches of teaching language is task-based language teaching (TBLT).

2.2. Task-based language teaching

"Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is a type of instruction that relies on the use of authentic target language to do meaningful tasks" (RHALMI, 2018). TBLT is a branch of communicative language teaching, where aim is teaching communication rather linguistic competence. The task outcome is more important is TBLT, so it is considered to be effective approach in teaching target language fluency and it builds students confidence. So, TBLT is one of student-centered approach in language acquisition. This approach emphasis on communicative language use in which the learner is concerned about the meaning that he/she convey, rather than grammatical form (Nunan, 2003). While Dewey believes that real-life, experiences can be used in the classroom to enhance speaking skills (González-Lloret, 2017). According to him, if students are allowed to have practical activities in the classroom, it makes them to become more productive in their future workplaces (Andon, Dewey and Leung, 2018). In TBLT learners are engaged to the lesson plan that interactive which aid them in manipulating and comprehending the target language. (Ellis, 2009). Also, tasks embrace a cognitive process that implies selecting, classifying, reasoning, sequencing information of the learner (Ellis, 2009). Ellis gives four characteristics for the TBLT, according to him: The task is pragmatic that is, student focuses on the primarily on the meaning. Next, the task is non-linguistic outcome. And, the students are free to choose any linguistic resource to complete the task and finally, the task need to have procedure or steps, that enables learners to fill in "gaps" to understand whatever they are learning (Ellis, 2009). Prahbu claimed that there are three types of gaps: information gap, reasoning gap and opinion gap are basis of TBLT.

2.3. Information gap activities

Information gap tasks are the activities in teaching speaking in which the learners complete the task (problem solving) by filling the missing information by communicating with their peers, classmates (Larsen-Freeman, 2003). For instance, learners share their information to about their families and they draw each other's family tree. So, in this type of tasks, there is space or blank to be decoded or encoded by the learner through communicating with their classmates. People communicate when they need information that they do not possess this is the information gap according to Richards (Richards, 2002). This is effective technique as it requires the students to express her/his thoughts orally, and this technique requires the learner to communicate by using only target language to share the information (Richards, 2002). Thornbury supports this idea as he noted that students have to use speaking skills in target language in order to attain the outcome of the information gap task. (Thornbury, 2005). According to Education and Humanities research (2011), information gap activities minimized students' fear, it created a warm atmosphere in the classroom and it gave the opportunity to the learners to practice the language with their classmates.

2.4. English as Foreign Language (EFL) classroom

EFL classroom is educational setting where students' native language is not English; rather they may use their mother tongue during their lessons (IGI Global, 2020). So, the speaking ability of Uzbek 10-11th grade students' speaking skills is weak. Various factors cause to this problem. Therefore, demand for fluent users of English is growing, as the employers offer good vacancies for the competent users. Thus, English as a global language is impacting to the EFL language learners. According to the survey that was taken in the Asian-Pacific regions, survey participant countries claimed that TBLT and techniques in this aspect was central principle in the curricula (Nunan, 2003). The Uzbek government is paying attention to the improvement, development of the teaching curricula, the cabinet Ministers of the Republic Uzbekistan provides the educational institutions with modern equipment, and it is offering scholarships for the personal development of the teacher. (Lex.uz, 312-con) Thus, I applied TBLT in my research, to aid for the development of the teaching English through innovative ways. TBLT is a central point in enhancing students' English Proficiency, especially in terms of speaking skills.

3. Benefits/ limitations/ reflections

Using TBLT is quite new approach in teaching English language in Uzbekistan. Since Uzbekistan is concentrating on the development of language acquisition, several Presidential decrees and resolutions has been issued that require the educational institutions to focus on enhancing the language teaching programs. Besides, the Ministry of Education is providing opportunities in the form of teacher training programs to improve the teaching system. One of the major problems that is occurring in the classroom is the reluctance of the teachers to part with the traditional way of teaching which focuses on teacher-centered approach. In contrast, TBLT is more student-centered way of teaching that is slowly but steadily penetrating the educational system of Uzbekistan. Thus, I conducted this research in order to find out whether TBLT, in particular information gap activities, can benefit the learners' speaking skills and whether these activities can enhance their oral communication.

This study investigated the effectiveness of information gap activities in teaching speaking skills. The findings will be of benefit for wide variety of people, including teachers, academics and postgraduate students who are seeking a practical technique in their academic pursuits and in enhancement of speaking skills of their students in their teaching path. However, I would recommend future researchers to research other aspects of TBLT using the methods described in my research paper. The researchers may investigate the effectiveness and benefits of other activities in TBLT approach such as opinion gap activities and reasoning gap activities in other skills as well.

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