

The Impact of Activating Oracy Skills on Developing Students' Overall Language Proficiency

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the impact of activating oracy skills on developing students' overall language proficiency. The study design is an experimental which consists of pretest-posttest to collect the data of interest. Accordingly, sixty students of a preparatory school were selected to represent the sample of the study. This sample was divided into two groups: an experimental and a control group, each with thirty students. Instructions on activating oracy skills were done on the experimental group only. The control group was taught conventionally. The collected data from pretest-posttest were analysed by using some statistical tools. The study findings show that activating oracy skills leads to a development of students' overall language proficiency, and the process of language learning/teaching has several dimensions which cannot be separated as they complete each other.

Keywords: *impact, activating, oracy skills, developing, language proficiency.*

THE PROBLEM

First and foremost, there is a wonderful statement related to our subject matter and I would like to start with: "There is no gift like the gift of speech, and the level at which people have learned to use it determines the level of their companionship and the level at which their life is lived" (Newsome report, 1963 cited in Wilkinson, 1970, p.73). This statement has demonstrated the importance of improving the learners' ability to listen and speak in schools (Brown, G.1990 cited in Richards and Renandya, 2002, p.238).

The tendency of human being in the past, which regard language as writing/reading skills, caused us to think very literary (reading-based manner or writing-based manner) about the process of English language teaching. But we now have proof to the contrary; a good deal of speaking and listening are used in most of our communication, whereas reading and writing are rarely used (Wilkinson, 1970, p.72-73).

In respect of interaction, speaking is regarded as a crucial part of our daily communication, and

someone's initial impression is underlied by her/his strength to speak in a comprehensive and fluent way (Brown and Yule, 1983). It is worth mentioning that most of EFL/ESL learners prefer to learn how to speak; they judge success depending on how much their ability in spoken language has developed (Richards 1990).

In terms of psychology, Psychologists attracts our attention to the importance of the spoken language to flourish the personality, cognition, and the ability to speak and communicate. Moreover, speaking is thought to be connected to someone's joy and wellness (Wilkinson, 1970, p.73-74).

From the other hand, listening is as important as speaking, but it is often underestimated for two reasons: firstly, most of instructors see that listening arises naturally in the course of time (Bostrom, 1990, Brody, 2004), secondly, because of the tendency of emphasizing on active (productive) skills only. But listening is not passive; it is a process that makes a sense of sounds (Richards & Renandya, 2010). According to Mendelsohn (1994) listening receives

40-50% from the complete time of communication, and speaking comes next with 25-30%, whereas reading and writing receive about (11-16%) (9%) successively.

The claims above lead us to the fact that listening and speaking skills are vital in the classroom in order to get a complete acquisition of the foreign language. As stated by Ur (1996) speaking involves the other skills by which we figure out that language. Therefore, it is preferable to integrate oracy skills with the other two skills, namely reading and writing. Throughout my experience as a teacher of English, I have noticed that oracy skills are the most neglected ones among the others. Teachers of English shade light particularly on reading and writing, and rarely on speaking and listening whenever possible. This will lead to an incomplete learning/teaching process since the language is a means of communication and when English learner cannot communicate then this language is worth nothing. To help making the present situation better, the researcher suggests activating oracy skills in English language classrooms.

Aim

This paper aims to activate oracy skills in the classroom in order to develop the students' overall language proficiency.

Hypothesis

It is hypothesized that activating oracy skills in the classroom does not have a significant impact on developing students' overall language proficiency.

Value

It is hoped that this study will be of value in the following aspects:

1. EFL teachers and supervisors to regard oracy skills as vital in the process of teaching and learning.
2. Researchers who work in the field of language teaching and learning.
3. Textbook writers in determining the objectives of the curricula that conform with the learners' needs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Oracy skills

The term oracy has been presented for the first time by Wilkison (1970) to define speaking and listening skills. Regardless of all difference, oracy has been used as a parallel term to literacy (Wilkinson, 1970, p.72-73). The ultimate purpose of inventing the term oracy is to make a comparison with literacy, and to relate to speaking and listening abilities (Crystal, 2008, p. 344).

Definition of Listening Skill

Mendelsohn (1994) gives a general definition of listening by regarding it as the power to grasp the native speakers' language or the materials produced authentically on purpose. Gary Buck (2001, p.31) adds that listening is an active process of meaning construction, this process is done by applying knowledge to the incoming sound. He mentions two types of knowledge that are involved: linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge. He also thinks that listening is affected by many variables such as the speaker, the listener, or the situation. Clark and Clark (1977, p.43-44) recognize two familiar senses with listening. In its narrow sense it means the mental processes of understanding utterances, and constructing messages to the speaker in its broader sense.

Importance of Listening

Rost (1994, p.141-142) attracts attention to the vitality of listening in the language classroom, he says that listening provides learners with an input. One should understand the input at the right level, otherwise he we will not begin any learning. Thus, listening is considered fundamental to speaking.

Generally, the ability to understand spoken words is prior to speaking, reading, and writing. Therefore, listening should be acquired first in learning any language. Unfortunately, listening skill isn't paid enough attention in language teaching for many years, and it is regarded as a Cinderella skill in learning of a foreign/second language (Richards and Renandya, 2002, p.235-238).

In respect of foreign language classrooms, listening is believed to have greater importance. There

are two reasons for this increasing popularity. Firstly, to emphasize the comprehensible input role. Secondly, researches in the field of foreign language acquisition have given a massive focus on listening (ibid). However, the teaching of listening has been neglected and poorly taught in many EFL programs (Feyten, 1991, p.7).

Processes of Listening

It has been classified the process of listening into bottom up and top down, basing on how the listeners process the input.

Bottom up

In bottom-up process, a listener tries to make a sense of what he/she hears by focusing on vocabulary, sounds, functional phrases, or grammar (Nunan, 1998, p.6). Bottom up is a decoding sound process that someone hears in a linear way, from the tiniest meaningful constituents to full texts. The listener starts from words, syntax to grammar in order to reach target (Rubin, 1994, p.20).

Top down

Top down is the process by which listener uses his/her background knowledge or textual schema to make a sense of what he/she hears. The background knowledge varies from life experience, previous learning, to the knowledge of language and content used before (Anderson and Lynch, 1988, p.13).

As a matter of fact, bottom up and top down cannot be separated throughout listening, because listening is an interactive process by which listener uses knowledge to understand (ibid).

Definition of Speaking Skill

Bygate (1987) considers speaking as a process of producing utterances to respond to different verbal signals. It combines systematic sounds to form meaningful word groups. Burns and Joyce (1997) define speaking as an interactive process that constructs meaning, and involves receiving, processing, and producing information. The speaking's meaning and form depend thoroughly on context, participants, and purpose of speaking. Thornbury and Slade (2006, p.17) tackle speaking

from a social point of view, they state that speaking is "a social speech event whose topic is unpredictable". Since speaking is social, it establishes channel and reciprocal agreement, keeps social identity, and includes interpersonal skills. The social element can well be shown through judgments, opinions, attitudes, feelings, and wishes.

Importance of Speaking Skill

In terms of the dominant role in communication, speaking is second only to listening. Reading and writing come after it (Feyten, 1991, p.6).

Alongside the other skills, speaking seems to be fundamental. Therefore, Teachers of English language need to make sure that all the students adequately practice speaking. They also need to decrease their classroom talk in order to give their students chances to have more time talking (Hedge, 2000, p.20).

Speaking skills can well be developed if teachers encourage students and provide them with comfortable environment. Teachers can make use of pair work and group work to reduce the students' stress, and encourage the reluctant and shy ones to communicate freely (Littlewood, 1998, p.40).

Integration of Skills

Integration of different language skills seems to have a great effect in the success of any language task. Thus, listening and speaking needs not to be separated from other skills. In real life talk, listening and speaking are often integrated together. In a telephone conversation or any interaction everyone plays a double role: as a listener and as a speaker (Shumin, 2002, p.87). Therefore, teachers should offer their students chances to practice listening and speaking, and to implement them in daily life (Anderson and Lynch, 1988, p.63).

In the communicative classrooms, interaction should be student-centred, and concentrate on learners listening/speaking to one another "for a specific reason in order to achieve a specific outcome" (McDonough and Shaw, 2003, p.121).

Proficiency

Palmer and Bachmann (1981) define proficiency as a concept that can be divided into mini-units, for instance, divergent skills (listening, speaking, reading or writing) and divergent features of linguistic/pragmatic competence. Canale and Swain (1981) add that language proficiency is three-fold process which involves the ability of a language user, information frameworks, and, skills. There is one generally approved definition by Council of Europe (2001) which states that proficiency pertains to user's knowledge about a particular subject which can be applied in real life (p.183). This definition chime in with Richards and Schmidt's claim (2010) which believe that language proficiency is the extent of skill to which someone can exploit a language, for instance, how someone good at understanding, speaking, reading or writing a particular language (P. 321).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A pretest-posttest control and experimental group design has been adopted as a research design of this study. This kind of research presents two groups: an

experimental group and a control one. Both groups were firstly pretested. The independent variable (activating oracy skills) was applied to the experimental group only. The traditional method of teaching English to the fourth preparatory classes was used to teach the control group. Thereafter, the two groups were post-tested to measure the dependent variable (students' overall language proficiency). Both groups' scores in the post-test were compared, and if the experimental group scores are found to be significantly different from those of the control one, then the difference is attributed to the independent variable (activating oracy skills).

Participants

This study consists of (60) preparatory school students at Dr. Ali Al-wardi high school in Najaf-Iraq for the academic year 2020-2021. The participants were selected randomly and divided into two groups, each with (30) students, the experimental group (activating oracy skills) and the control group (using the conventional method of teaching English). It is worth mentioning that before giving the treatment both groups were equalized according to their pre-test. The table below shows the statistical results.

Table 1: The pretest statistics of both groups on students' overall language proficiency

Variable	Control		Experimental		t-test	Sig.(tabulated)	Levene's Test	Sig.
	Mean	S. D	Mean	S. D				
Language proficiency	11.55	2.35	11.78	2.00	0.23	0.60	0.10	0.59

Instrumentation

Proficiency test is a measurement tool of what amount of language users have learned. In other words, it measures the complete skills/knowledge of someone (Tavakoli, 2012, p.494, Richards and Schmidt, 2010, P.464). The required data of this study was collected by a test of four questions which was constructed by the researcher. Since a proficiency test can be used to assess proficiency (Richards and Schmidt, 2010, P. 321), this test was conducted in accordance with the frameworks of the proficiency test. The Test was used as pre-test and post-test. Specialists in ELT reviewed the test for its validity.

Kuder-Richardson 20 was exploited to measure the test reliability. It was (0.801) which means that the test is reliable according to Tavakoli (2012, p.542). The collected data were analyzed by the use of SPSS.

Instruction

The experiment started on 28th of Nov. 2021 and ended on 28th of Jan. 2022. It lasted eight weeks. Both groups were taught by the researcher the same materials specified for fourth preparatory class.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A posttest was applied on both groups to examine the impact of study treatment. The students' language

proficiency was assessed in post-test. The results of the post-test were compared with that of the pre-test. Table 2 shows the results.

Table 2: The post-test statistics of both groups on students' overall language proficiency

Variable	No. of students		No. of students		T-Value		Sig.	D. F
	30		30		Computed	Tabulated		
	Control		Experimental					
	Mean	S. D	Mean	S. D				
Language Proficiency	20.55	5.57	29.78	7.00	5.42	3.02	0.05	60

The table above shows that the mean score of the control group is (20.55), and that of the experimental group is (29.78). The tabulated value (3.02) is lower than the computed value (5.42) at the level of significance (0.05), and degree of freedom (60). The results indicate that there is a significant difference between both groups in language proficiency post-test in favour of the experimental group.

This significant difference shows that the students in the experimental group do better than those in the control group. The difference also indicates the impact of activating oracy skills on students' overall language proficiency. Thus, the null hypothesis which claims "activating oracy skills in the classroom does not have a significant impact on developing students' overall language proficiency" is rejected. This means that activating oracy skills has an overt impact on EFL students' overall language proficiency than that of the traditional method.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion which has been reached according to the study results is that activating oracy skills has an important role in developing students' overall language proficiency. The results of the post-test, especially in the experimental group, give an actual proof of the concluding statement above. It is of a considerable importance to sum up by saying that each of the four main language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) should be taken equal opportunities in order to achieve integrated learning. Yet, the process of language learning/teaching has

several dimensions which cannot be separated as they complete each other.

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