Using Creative Strategies to Promote Students' Speaking Skills

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Introduction

This paper describes an investigation that was conducted over the course of my final year teaching practice placement in a Girls' Primary School in Fujairah. The research was carried out in a classroom of twenty Grade Five Arabic-speaking girls where English is taught as a foreign language. I decided to investigate the teaching of speaking, and this topic was chosen because I noticed over the four years of teaching practice placements in my degree program that reading and writing skills are mostly emphasized in EFL classrooms in Emirati state schools, but speaking and listening are largely ignored.

In addition, English language teachers in state schools in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) tend to give priority to finishing the course book, and they do not concentrate on speaking activities that much. Furthermore, students do not have the opportunity to communicate in English because Arabic-speaking parents, family and friends surround them, so I decided to engage these ten and eleven year old students in communicative activities that would improve their speaking, specifically by using songs and puppets.

Research questions

My preliminary investigation in the first semester revealed that teachers regard teaching speaking as a waste of time, and therefore it is a neglected skill, as they feel pressured to finish the course book. In addition, teachers do not use interesting activities to practise speaking; therefore students perform badly in this skill. I decided to implement some creative strategies to develop students' speaking skills, based on the use of songs and puppets, and to find out the effect of these activities on students' spoken language, on their motivation, and on their participation in class.

My research questions were as follows:

> o   To what extent do songs and puppets improve speaking?
>
> o   What is the effect of using songs and puppets on students' motivation to speak?
>
> o   What effects do songs and puppets have on students' participation?

Literature Review

The skill of speaking skill is as crucial as any other language skill. The four skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) naturally appear together in every English class, even in the EFL context. As Peregoy and Boyle (2001) state, "Listening, speaking, reading and writing also occur naturally together in learning events in school at all grade levels, even though traditionally they were taught separately" (p. 107). In addition, Shumin (1997) states that learning to speak a foreign language requires more than knowing its grammar and vocabulary. Learners should acquire the skill through interaction with each other. However, it is difficult for EFL learners to speak appropriate English in the classroom because of the limited language use in their real lives.

Affective factors are the most important issues that may promote students' speaking. Affective factors include self esteem, emotion, attitude, anxiety, and motivation. Shumin believes that "L2 or foreign language learning is a complex task that is susceptible to human anxiety, which is associated with feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self doubt, and apprehension" (1997, para. 2). These are the factors that affect students' speaking in most EFL contexts and there are other issues as well. For example, the language level may be too difficult, or too much is given at once and the amount of the language the teacher gives the students in each session may be too much, according to Shumin (1997).

Motivating Students to Speak

To motivate students in EFL contexts, teachers should include many activities and strategies that attract students' attention and make them interested in the lesson. As Peck (1978), cited in Celce-Murcia (2001), states "Activities need to be child centered and communication should be authentic. This means that children are listening or speaking about something that interests them, for their own reasons, and not merely because a teacher has asked them to" (1978, p.139). Also, Peck (1978), cited in Celce-Murcia (2001, p.139), outlines some points that the teacher should consider in the activities: a focus on meaning and value, not correctness; a focus on collaboration and social development; the provision of a rich context, and teaching the four skills through a variety of activities. A superior teacher encourages her/his students to speak English as much as possible inside and outside the classroom.

EFL teachers must encourage students to use language for social interaction in the classroom. Brown (1994) advocates that students get enough opportunities to practise the language. This helps them to acquire the language in more natural contexts. Through interaction, students can build their own conversations and create meaning that they understand, and that supports and helps them. Krashen & Terrel (as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 1999) find that communication provides students with opportunities for them to focus on using the language rather than talking and learning the structure of the language. Therefore, the topics or themes around which students learn language should capture their attention and encourage them to interact more with each other. Teachers' emphasis should be on making meaning, not on error correction.

Strategies that Encourage Participation

The strategies the teacher should focus on should be interesting and should capture students' attention. In the young learners' classroom, these activities are usually centred on songs, poems, chants, drama, stories, games and Total Physical Response (TPR) activities. All these activities can affect young learners and enhance their learning the language. Deesri (2002) believes that many teachers consider games as merely fun activities that are a waste of time, but he states that games in the EFL context are much more than that. He believes that games include many factors such as rules, competition, relaxation, and learning which are all useful in promoting speaking. Games are useful because they offer situations that lower students' stress and give students chances to engage in real communication. It is asserted that students are encouraged

when they have friendly competition with each other, so each student will participate in the classroom. Consequently, teachers can use these games to present and review new knowledge, vocabulary, and grammar. Games are good teaching tools that can be used to develop students' language learning and practise communication.

Teachers should take into consideration that songs can develop language skills, and bring enjoyment and fun into the classroom. As Schoepp (2001, Para. 8) suggests "The enjoyment aspect of learning language through songs is directly related to affective factors." The affective filter is one of the five hypotheses that Krashen presents. Krashen (as cited in Schoepp, 2001, Para. 6) explains that for optimal learning to occur the affective filter must be weak. A weak filter means that a positive attitude towards learning is present. Schoepp (2001, Para. 6) adds that songs are one of the methods that achieve a weak affective filter and promote language learning, and can be used to present a topic; practice language; stimulate discussion of attitude and feelings; provide a comfortable atmosphere and bring variety and fun to learning.

In addition, using puppets helps students to interact with each other. As Gronna, Serna, Kennedy and Prater (1999, Para.1) believe, puppets can be used to teach the language functions and the social skills of greeting, responding to conversation, and initiating conversation. Using puppets in the classroom is one of the ways to encourage students to learn English. Ozdeniz (2000, Para. 9) has stated that "Puppets can encourage your students to experiment more with the language and "have a go" when they may have otherwise remained silent." In EFL classrooms students are not comfortable and feel hesitant to speak English because they are not sure of the words. So as Ozdeniz (2000, Para. 9) states, "when a child speaks through the puppet, it is not the child who is perceived as making errors but the puppet, and children find this liberating."

The strategies the teacher uses can be fun and enjoyable, and at the same time achieve academic goals. Teachers should choose activities that enhance students learning, and avoid ones that are a waste of teachers' and students' time. Good & Brophy (2000, p. 30) state that "learning should be fun and motivation problems appear because the teacher somehow has converted an inherently enjoyable activity into drudgery." It can therefore be concluded that interesting and fun strategies can be used to promote speaking in the EFL classroom. According to Brown (1994), if strategies are intrinsically motivating and appeal to students' goals and interests then it can have a positive impact on their speaking.

The Teaching Strategy

I decided to implement the use of songs and puppets as everyday activities to encourage students to speak about the set themes in their course book of "Days and Dates" and "It's Fun". The students sang the songs that I created, which were related to the units, as warming up activities. For each unit I created one or two songs, songs which were based on the language structures and vocabulary of the unit. In addition, I had puppets made for each group that represented different characters e.g. grandma, grandpa, father, mother and daughter. Students used the puppets to talk, using dialogues that they were given to practise and then present to their colleagues. After that, the students had to create their own dialogues and practise them, and then present

them to their classmates. The songs were used everyday during my teaching practice placement, and the puppets were used twice a week.

Research Approach

Mills has defined Action Research as "any systematic inquiry conducted by a teacher …in the teaching/ learning environment to gather information about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how well their students learn" (Mills, 2003, p.5). This makes it an ideal research approach for teachers as it gives them an opportunity to solve problems in the classroom. It inspired me and provided me with a framework to investigate the use of creative strategies to encourage students' speaking, especially the use of songs and puppets. Action research is made up of a four step process: identifying an area of focus, collecting data, analysing and interpreting the data, and developing an action plan, which is again evaluated, and the process continues until a satisfactory result is reached. It follows a reflective cyclic pattern which makes it an ideal approach to improve teaching.

Burns (1999) has stated that there are three principles in the ethical conduct of action research: "Responsibility" (p. 71), therefore I explained my research to my mentor school teacher in whose classroom I was conducting my research; "Confidentiality" (p.71), so I assured the participants that their names or identities would not be disclosed, and thirdly, "Negotiation" (p. 71), therefore before I started collecting data I sought permission by letter from the school's administration, from the classroom teacher, and from the parents.

Data Collection Tools

The data collection tools that I chose to give me information on the effectiveness of my teaching strategy were observations, surveys, questionnaires, interviews, and a research diary. For the observations, a non-participant observer was invited into the classroom once a week for about four weeks to record students' reaction toward using the songs I was teaching them. Bell believes that it is difficult to observe your own classroom, because as a participant observer, you can be biased and subjectivity can occur while observing. Also, as a student teacher, I was familiar with the students' personalities, strengths, and weaknesses and this may create a biased response (Bell, 1999). Through observation guidelines that were given to the non- participant observer, I was able to find out the effect of the songs in promoting and improving students' speaking.

According to Burns (1999), a survey is a form of collecting data where the same questions are asked to acquire information from a representative range of participants. In the third week I used an attitude scale survey to figure out students' attitudes towards the songs I was teaching them. A questionnaire, which is very similar to a survey, was used also. Burn and Hood (1995, as cited in Freeman, 1998) define a questionnaire as a set of questions to which respondents write out their responses to the questions provided. This questionnaire, which I used in the fifth week, was used to find out the students' opinions and reactions to using puppets to encourage them to speak. The difference between these two tools is that the questionnaire was used to get a response

from a selective group, whereas the survey was used to collect data from a large group quickly; the reason behind choosing the survey and the questionnaire methods of data collection is that they are relatively quick ways to collect data.

I interviewed the classroom English teacher to find out her opinion about students' improvements in speaking after implementing my strategies. As Macintyre states, an "interview is a face to face interaction which allows the interviewer to ask carefully prepared questions and in addition to probe the respondents so that further information is obtained" (2000, p. 84). I conducted a semi structured interview because I could add some more questions that popped up as we spoke, and at the same time I could probe further if there were gaps in the data.

I also filled in a daily diary to record my private thoughts from specific observations made each day where I could express my feelings and judge any situation without fear of any criticism, and where I could reflect on the effectiveness of my lessons while implementing my action plan. According to Wallace (1998), a diary is a private document wherein the writer can keep and write his/her feelings and thoughts.

Data Analysis

Three themes emerged as a result of my analysis of the data collected. First, it seems that my use of songs and puppets resulted in more language being produced by students; that students' speaking actually improved; and that students were more motivated to participate in class as a result of the introduction of these activities.

More Language Production

Reflections noted in my daily diary show that I believed that the students started to produce more oral language. At first I noticed that they were memorizing their dialogues to present to their classmates, but after using songs and puppets in the classroom to help students to produce and acquire more language, they were able to speak more spontaneously. Using puppets twice a week and songs daily seemed to make them more relaxed and confident, and therefore they gradually started to speak without memorizing, and began to create their own dialogues. My daily diary observations are supported by the semi-structured interview with the classroom teacher. When I asked her what she thought of the students' level before and after implementing the songs and puppets, she replied,

> Before they hesitated to answer a simple question and they were struggling to complete one correct sentence. They refused to speak English in the class; they only used Arabic. I think this is because they were afraid of making mistakes. But after implementing your strategies I am little bit jealous and surprised at the results. They can even create their own simple dialogues. I can see my students are producing more language than I expected. I think this is big step that you took and succeeded.

This impression is further supported by a non-participant observer who attended my sessions once a week for about four weeks. To get another perspective, I asked

another English teacher in the school to observe the implementation of my strategies, and she noted that the students enjoyed the songs, and that they helped the students to produce the language related to the prescribed units in an enjoyable way.

Improvement in Speaking

In the questionnaire the students were asked to give their opinion about using puppets in conversation twice a week, and whether it helped them to improve their language. One student responded that using puppets increased her vocabulary, and that she had learnt how to create her own dialogues. Another student remarked:

> First I was afraid of making mistakes, but when we started working with the puppets in groups, it gave me a chance to improve my language and I learnt from my classmates.

This showed that the students felt confident when they worked with the puppets as a group, and suggests that social interaction and an enjoyable approach helps the students to acquire the language more naturally.

The interview with the classroom teacher also showed that the students' levels had improved. Answering a question regarding the benefits of the songs and puppets, she answered:

> I admit that students' speaking improved. Students can now speak and make conversation. I notice that students are more confident to work in groups. I think this is the reason behind the improvements in students' speaking.

This again illustrated that students felt confident about speaking in groups while using the puppets, and working collaboratively with the puppets built their confidence and increased their self-esteem, and they therefore took more risks and produced more language.

More Motivation to Participate

The attitude scale survey results showed that attitudes towards using songs in the classroom were positive. Everyone in the class said that she was motivated to participate in singing the songs. The classroom teacher also commented on the students' level of participation during my interview with her, saying that:

> Students' participation is better when you use these strategies. In my class they do not participate so much. This could be because I do not use these creative strategies.

Furthermore, I realized through my reflective daily diaries that having a variety of interesting activities and strategies encouraged students to participate. Through reading the reflection in my diary, however, I saw that while they enjoyed songs and puppets, they preferred puppets because it was a new activity for them.

Conclusion

The time allowed by the class teacher for me to implement my strategies was limited, as she was under pressure to cover her course book, and time was also a limiting factor in this research insofar as it would be better if the strategies were implemented over a longer period. Time was also a limiting factor due to the fact that data collected over a longer time period produces results that can be considered to be more reliable and valid. None the less, conducting this action research made me aware of the importance of the teaching of speaking in the EFL context. I recommend that teachers of language to young learners should use a variety of strategies that encourage the students to speak in the classroom. Materials from the prescribed course book can be adapted to include more speaking activities. Additionally, I recommend that teachers encourage students to work collaboratively on speaking tasks. I also strongly recommend that teachers consider implementing other strategies to promote students' speaking skills, such as presentations, interviews, role plays and show-and-tell sessions.

Through this research, I learnt about many strategies that help to promote speaking in the young language learners' classroom, and it gave me an opportunity to implement the use of songs and puppets to enhance students' speaking skills. The data collected seem to support my assumptions that using songs and puppets would have a positive impact on students' spoken production, and would increase students' confidence in acquiring the language, and would improve their speaking skills.

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