

USING DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES TO INCREASE MOTIVATION FOR LEARNING ENGLISH SPEAKING OF FIRST YEAR EFL STUDENTS IN VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

The article presents findings of a recent study which investigated the possible effects of discussion activities on enhancing motivation for learning speaking skills of the first year English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students at a university in Vietnam. Discussion activities were applied for eight weeks during the English lessons of a class with 59 students. Two survey questionnaires and class observation were used to collect data for analysis. Results of the study showed that students' motivation for learning speaking was improved with the employment of frequent discussion activities in the teaching and learning process. Students felt more relaxed and enjoyable in learning speaking; while their level of anxiety was lowered, their confidence was enhanced when discussion activities were integrated in their class sessions; therefore, they became more active and attentive in learning speaking lessons.

Keyword: *Speaking motivation, discussion activities, English speaking skills, first year EFL students.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Speaking is an important part of our daily life. According to Nunan (1993), the significant role of speaking skill is obvious as human depend themselves more on speaking when interacting with others. On average, a person “produces tens thousands of words a day” (Thornbury, 2005, p.1). Communicative competence is unanimously considered an ultimate goal of the majority of English language learners, in which speaking is a crucial component. Speaking can be considered as an indicator for students' success in mastering a language; however, achieving the ability to speak is what even native speakers also have to struggle to (Thornbury, 2005, p.1). Therefore, EFL learners are also supposed to do it all over again in learning a language.

According to Woolfolk (2013), motivation is “an internal state that arouses, directs and maintains behavior” (p.431). Similarly, in academic learning, motivation has been identified as an attribute to students' success. Great motivation can make students become more determined, raise their willingness, improve students' responsibility; thus, increase the chance to succeed. On the contrary, limited motivation can lead to negligence in learning and possible failure. This is also true to the learning of speaking skills in the process of acquiring English; therefore, a number of measures to keep students fully motivated so that they are actively engaged in their lessons have been experimented by teachers. Among those, the employment of discussion activities in teaching speaking was proved to be a potential practice. Therefore, an investigation into the use of groupworks and their possible impacts on enhancing speaking motivation was in demand.

2. STATEMENT OF PROBLEMS

Speaking skill appeared challenging to the majority of students in my classes. Through teaching, I recognized that they were a lot more willing to sit silently doing grammar and vocabulary exercises but showed great reluctance when being asked to speak. A number of students, though could construct answers to questions

raised during a lesson in written form, refused to express them orally. Their unwillingness to speak and lack of frequent practice indispensably led to their poor speaking performance in speaking lessons and oral exams, which then lowered their confidence and made them feel even more demotivated. However, speaking ability cannot be improved without practice. Besides, listening to students' speaking performance help teachers identify students' difficulties more exactly so that they can plan more suitable teaching activities and give better advice to help students overcome their problems and step by step build up their confidence. Therefore, as a teacher, I found a need to experiment different methods to encourage my students to practice speaking more. Applying discussion activities were a potential treatment.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Speaking skill and its role in language acquisition

Speaking is commonly perceived as the process of making and sharing meaning by using verbal and non-verbal symbols in different contexts (Brown, 1994; Burns & Joyce, 1997) defined speaking as an interactive process of making meaning that includes producing, receiving, and processing information. Though different authors defined speaking ability in different ways, they commonly referred to speaking as the ability to use a language as a means to achieve some communicative purpose.

Speaking plays a crucial role in language acquisition. According to Flohr and Paesler (2006), the focus of a foreign language learning is communication activities and expressive abilities so that learners become a fluent speaker.

Motivation

Motivation is viewed as the efforts learners put into learning because they need or desire to learn (Ellis, 1997). Motivation, therefore, reflects the extent to which a learner works or strives to learn and how satisfied he or she is in doing the activity. According to Gardner (1985), motivation involves four aspects including goals, efforts, desire to attain the goals and a favorable attitude towards the activity. Motivation can be indicated through the levels of concentration and enjoyment in learning (Crookes and Schmidt, 1991).

Motivation has two types, which are intrinsic and extrinsic (Ryan and Deci, 1999). The former is defined as the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfactions while the later refers to whenever an activity is done to attain some separable outcome. In learning, students' extrinsic motivation could be positively or negatively affected by the outside factors such as rewards or punishment. The risk is, extrinsic motivation could disappear if these factors are taken away. On the contrary, intrinsic motivation could last for longer because it comes from students' internal desire. In this study, discussion activities were relied on with a view to enhancing intrinsic motivation for long-term effect. To increase intrinsic motivation, teachers are supposed to create classrooms with supportive environment to facilitate their learning. Some motivational strategies that teachers should consider include encouraging students to set their own goals in learning, increasing learners' self-confidence by providing regular experiences of success and emphasizing what students can do, promoting self-motivating by raising students' awareness of relevant strategies, using visual aids in teaching, diversifying activities and ensuring the relevance of the curriculum (Harris, 1991; Dornyei, 2001; Chamber, 1999).

Discussion activities

Discussion activities can be conducted in different forms at different stages of a lesson. Ur (2001) suggested that task-centred discussions had three types including brainstorming, organizing, and compound. As suggested by the author, common brainstorming activities includes guessing games, finding connections, giving ideas from a central theme, and exploring the implications and interpretations. Organizing activities refer to such activities as comparing, detecting differences, putting in order, deciding priorities, choosing candidates, layout problems. Ideas about compounding activities include composing letters, debates, publicity campaigns, surveys, planning projects. In this study, activities of different types including comparing, putting in order, deciding priorities, debates, surveys, planning projects were used. The choice of activity for in each class session was made by the teacher of the class based on the appropriateness of an activity with a particular lesson.

Previous studies

The effects of discussion technique on English speaking motivation were acknowledged by Menggo (2013). Participants of his research included 124 young learners at a primary school for the duration of three months, following the experimental research design. After the research period, he pointed out that there was a significant interactional effect between the discussion activities and students' motivation toward speaking ability. In Vietnam, Dinh Thuy Linh (2011) investigated the impacts of using communicative activities in improving 11th grade students' motivation in English speaking lessons at a highschool. She used discussion activities for six weeks in her class, following the action research model, collecting data using questionnaires and class observation sheets. Data collected from her researched showed that students' motivation was enhanced significantly. La Thi Huong (2013) had the same positive findings about the effectiveness of discussions activities in her class with 14 second-year EFL

students at tertiary level. The review of studies showed that discussion activities had the potential to increase students' motivation for learning English speaking, even though they were of difference age groups.

4. METHODOLOGY

Research aims and questions

The research goals were to investigate the impacts of discussion activities on the first year EFL students' motivation for learning to speak English to answer the question to how effective discussion activities are in motivating first year EFL students in learning speaking skill.

Participants

The study was conducted with the participation of 59 first-year EFL students in an English class at Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration in Vietnam. Students in the class were mostly at basic level of English according to the teacher's evaluation based on the results of an initial test conducted before the research period began. Students had a number of difficulties in speaking resulted from the lack language knowledge, skills, confidence and time for practice. The study was conducted during the second English term, also the second semester of their first-year at university.

Data collection instruments and analysis

To measure students' level of motivation before and after the use of discussion activities, survey questionnaires following the suggestion from Dornyei (2001) which addressed motivational issues and contained a scale assessing the participants' willingness to communicate and participate in the speaking sessions were used. The pre-questionnaire was intended for getting to know students' attitudes towards speaking lessons and their challenges in learning speaking skills. The post-questionnaire items were designed to investigate students' opinions regarding the discussion activities and the effectiveness that their application had on improving students' motivation for learning English speaking.

As Hopskin (1985) suggested, observation can be employed to measure the level of motivation among students. Therefore, the observation sheets for the teacher to make notes about students' classroom behaviour and evaluate the overall class motivation were also used. The observation sheet in this study was adapted from Peacock (1997), with eight items, designed to check the overall level of class motivation including students' interest, concentration, enjoyment, enthusiasm and persistence with the learning task. The data collected was synthesized and analyzed to point out the impacts of discussion activities on students' motivation for learning English speaking.

Procedures

The research lasted for eight weeks. Each week, students had three periods of English, one of which was scheduled for discussion activities as planned by the teacher. Before discussion activities were applied, the researcher collected information about students' initial opinions using the pre-questionnaires. Then, discussion activities were applied to promote motivation for learning speaking. Observation sheets were filled by teachers in all speaking lessons. After eight weeks of application, the post-questionnaires were distributed to students to track any significant changes in students' motivation for learning speaking under the impacts of discussion activities implemented in speaking class and their attitudes towards the use of these activities in their class sessions.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students' interest in learning speaking before and after the application of discussion activities

The comparison of students' interest in learning speaking before and after the use of discussion activities is visualized by the chart below.

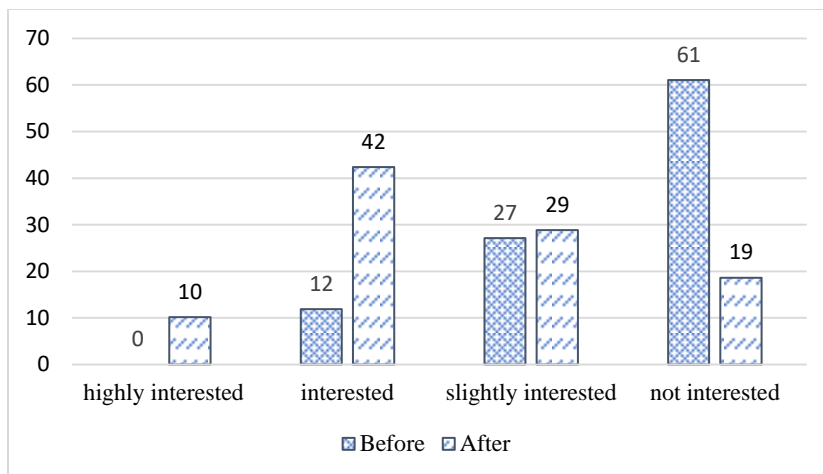


Figure 1. Students' interest in learning English speaking

Figure 1 shows the changes of students’ interest in learning speaking before and after the application of discussion activities. Before the introduction of discussion activities, the number of students who were only slightly interested or not interested outweighed the number of those who were attractive to the learning of speaking. More specifically, the majority of student (61%) did not find speaking interesting, 27% thought that it was slightly interested. On the contrary, very few students found highly interested (0%) or interested (12%) in speaking. A change of opinion was witnessed after the use of discussion activities in class sessions. The total number of students who became highly interested in learning speaking raised from 0 to 10%, and the number of those interested gained 30%, from 12% to 42% after the implementation period. By contrast, the number of students who were not interested in learning speaking reduced remarkably from 61% to 19%, a significant drop of 39%.

Students’ opinions discussion activities

In the post-questionnaires, students also shared about their opinions regarding discussion activities. Data about their opinions are summarized in the table 1 below.

Table 1. Students’ opinions discussion activities

Opinions	No. of Students (n=59)					Mean
	1 (strongly disagree)	2 (disagree)	3 (neutral)	4 (agree)	5 (strongly agree)	
Discussion activities make me feel relaxed and enjoyable when learning.	1	4	11	19	24	4.0
Discussion activities help lower my anxiety and develop my confidence.	2	8	7	22	20	3.8
Discussion activities give me more opportunities to speak English.	2	5	14	19	19	3.8
Discussion activities make the speaking lessons more interesting; therefore, I am more engaged and concentrated in learning.	3	8	11	20	17	3.7
Discussion activities improve my motivation for learning to speak English.	4	6	10	21	18	3.7

The figures from the table showed that all of the mean scores presented are close or equal to 4, which means more students had positive attitudes towards the use of discussion activities in their speaking lessons. The total of 43 students, accounting for 73%, strongly agreed and agreed that discussion activities made them feel relaxed and enjoyable in learning. A similar number of students (42, accounting for 71%) strongly agreed and agreed that discussion activities helped reduced their anxiety and raise their confidence. For all other opinions, the number of students who held positive attitudes were also higher than those with negative attitudes. 38 students out of 59, accounting for 65% thought that discussion activities give them more opportunities to speak English. The total of 63% (including 17 students who strongly agreed, and 20 students agreed) said that they were more engaged and concentrated in learning speaking because discussion activities made the speaking lessons more interesting to them. Concerning the overall motivation, the proportion of 66% students (39) unanimously agreed that discussion activities enhanced their motivation for learning to speak English. Results from the overall class observation made by teachers through eight weeks of the research period also showed that students' motivation was improved. They seemed to be more relaxed, were more attentive in the class sessions, and more willing to share their opinions with other members in their groups though sometimes still showed shyness when being asked to present groups' ideas in front of the whole class.

Discussion activities, a type of communicative activities, proved to be highly motivating for students. This appears to come from the fact discussion activities provided students more opportunities to practice speaking skills (Brooks and Wilson, 2015). Discussion activities, with a lot of group-work, were supposed to be a motivating factor that also encouraged quiet students to participate more in communicative activities (Harmer, 2007). This may be from the fact that discussing with classmates regularly helped lowered students' anxiety because they were less shy than talking to the whole class or talking to the teachers. Discussion also means that students had more time to prepare their ideas and could get helps from other students to find ways to express what they wanted to say in English. Therefore, the use of discussion activities made students felt more relaxed, comfortable and confident to share their opinions, which then encouraged them to be more engaged in learning.

6. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrated that discussion activities were useful for improving students' motivation in the speaking lessons. Thanks to the application of the discussion activities, most students were interested in speaking lessons than before. This could result from the fact that the use of discussion activities in teaching speaking made the lessons more interesting and enjoyable to students. Besides, discussion activities provided students more opportunities to practice speaking. While discussing, they could share their ideas and get help from their friends. Continuous practice and supports from peers helped lower students' anxiety, increase their willingness to speak, build up their confidence speaking, thus encouraged them to be more active in learning. Therefore, discussion activities are suggested to be used in teaching speaking to promote students' motivation.

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