

Speaking ability of L2 learners

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Students' communication skill must be improved because that is the only way students can express themselves and learn how to follow the social and cultural rules appropriate in any circumstance. Communicative skill can be emphasised based on accuracy, fluency, appropriacy, coherence and cohesion, use of language functions, managing discussions and task fulfilment. Abdel Salam (2002) defines speaking as a collection of micro-skills which include syntax, grammar, morphology, pragmatics or social language, semantics and phonology. Gaudart (2003) defines oral proficiency as the ability to handle with confidence, accuracy, clarity and precision, a large number of communicative tasks; to participate in most informal and formal exchanges on a variety of concrete and familiar topics and to narrate and describe all major uses. Kayi (2006) writes that speaking is the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols in a variety of contexts. Speaking is also about organising one's thoughts in a meaningful and logical sequence, using language as a means of expressing values and judgments and using the language quickly and confidently with few unnatural pauses. The knowledge dimension of speech is reflected in learners' ability to express and articulate or the ability to hold a conversation or discussion. Brown and Yule (1983) point out that short and long turns taken by the speakers are closely related to the task type.

Behaviourists believe that language learning is habit formation. Speaking is learned through modelling, repetition and drilling. According to Counihan (1998), in a classroom, there are two major types of talk; the teacher usually talks in the form of a question or a request to practise a structure and the L2 learner usually talks in a straight answer to the question posed by the teacher or a drill-type operation which sees the L2 inserting his own information into the gaps provided. This is evidence of verbal exchange but surely at its very minimum. This is also closely related to audiolingualism which is originally used to train army personnel. There was a abundant use of language laboratories, tapes and visual aids to help rote learning. Skinner (1957) proposes Stimulus-Response (S-R) psychology to describe the verbal learning. According to S-R psychology, learners are likely to produce desired behaviour. Behaviour becomes automatic when there is positive reinforcement and avoided when there is negative reinforcement. Negative reinforcements are aimed at modifying the verbal behaviour so that the preferred result may eventually be achieved.

Lado et al. (1964) refer to language learning as Law of Learning and Law of Intensity. The Law of Learning states that if an act was followed by a satisfying state of affairs, the probability of its occurrence in a similar situation increases, whereas the Law of Intensity says that the more intense a response is practised the better it is learnt and remembered. According to Mackey (1965) the process of learning L2 should commence as early as possible in order to tap the natural learning capacity of the young children. Learners of L2 must imitate native-speaker speech as much as possible for successful real-life learning. Behaviourist views L1 interference could ease the language learning or act otherwise. Lado (1957) explains the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) where some differences in L1 and L2 exist. Similarities will ease the L2 learning while the differences (errors) will hinder the language learning.

Innatists argue that language learning is innate. Learners are born with a natural ability to learn the language. According to Mc Laughlin (1978) parents do not correct their children's grammatical errors but children eventually eliminate errors while speaking. Parents and caretakers in most parts of the world modify their speech when talking to young children. The language they use is called "Motherese" (Krashen, 1982). Children are born with LAD (Language Acquisition Device) or Universal Grammar (UG) which enables learners to form correct sentence structures. According to Krashen's Natural Order Process (1982), grammatical structures are acquired in a natural and predictable order by children and adults. Krashen believes rules are learned in sequence of order for example present progressive (-ing) is learned first and followed by others. A lot of input is needed to trigger the LAD. However, it is crucial to keep the affective filter low because the affective filter is a kind of mental block that can prevent the input from reaching the language acquisition device (LAD).

This belief is also agreed on by the Interactionists. They believe that it is essential for children to receive and comprehend as much input as possible. Interactionists further expound that comprehensible input is not enough for children's language development therefore learners must be pushed to produce output in the form of speaking or writing. Long (1985) believes that output is produced because interlocutors tend to modify interactions to make the interaction more comprehensible. Group work or student-centred activities enables the participants to exchange information with each other. Interlocutors modify social

interaction regardless of unequal linguistic proficiency to meet their needs and fulfill their obligations. Some of the modified interactions are comprehension checks, clarification requests, confirmation checks, self-repetition or paraphrase and use of extralinguistics features (such as use of pointer and eye gestures). Swain (1997) believes that learners must be “pushed” to produce comprehensible output.

People in general use several “registers” in different social settings (Snow & Ferguson, 1977). Speech to children is slower, shorter, in some ways (but not all) simpler, higher-pitched, more exaggerated in intonation, more fluent and grammatically well-formed and more directed in content to present situation compared to speech among adults. Many parents also expand their children’s utterances into full sentences or offer sequences of paraphrases of a given sentences.

Research also have proven that language learning is related to communicative competence. American linguist, Noam Chomsky discusses the distinction between competence and performance in his Aspect of the Theory of Syntax in the late 1950’s. According to Chomsky, a speaker has internalized a set of rules about his language which enables him to produce and understand an infinitely large number of sentences and recognize sentences that are grammatical and ambiguous. Dell Hymes (1985) argues that language is a socio-cultural viewpoint with the aim of studying the varieties of ways of speaking on the part of the individual and the community. It is found that speakers vary their performance not at random but in a regular way. Thus it is possible to extend the notion of competence, restricted by Chomsky to knowledge of grammar to incorporate the pragmatic ability for language use.

Communicative competence is most popularly made known by Hymes (1972), Canale and Swain (1980) and Bachman (1990). According to them, the theory of basic communication skills which underlie these communicative teaching approaches emphasizes the minimum level of communication skills needed to cope in a second language situation and concomitantly de-emphasizes concerns with appropriateness, rules of discourse and grammatical accuracy. Hymes original idea was that speakers of a language must have more than grammatical competence in order to be able to communicate effectively in a language.

They also need to know how language is used by members of a speech community to accomplish their purposes. He stressed the importance of linguistic aspects and pragmatic aspects such as functions and cultural variations. Canale and Swain (1980) agreed that besides sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence, communicative competence is associated with the grammatical competence which is related to words and rules. Goh and Silver (2004) believes interaction feedback slips into conversational patterns to emphasize meaningful way as well as correct form and function. Learners not only acquire meaning but also shape the meanings based on their experiences and understandings.

Competence in oral skill is essential for effective communication and social interactions. Students who struggle with oral skills have difficulty negotiating with peers and resolving conflicts. Learners are said to have speech problems when they do not achieve adequately for their age or meet the approved grade or standards when provided with learning experiences and instructions appropriate for their age or grade. They do not make sufficient progress to meet age or approved grade or standards.