

IN - SERVICE LEARNERS' LEARNING OF ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS AT FLD, HPU: SITUATION AND SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

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Ngày nhận bài: 07/5/2021

Ngày PB đánh giá: 23/5/2021

Ngày duyệt đăng: 28/5/2021

ABSTRACT: The learners who are taking an in-service university course in English at the Foreign Language Department (FLD) – Hai Phong University (HPU) share the ambition to be able to speak English well to communicate at work and in real life and at the same time to get the degrees to meet the requirements in their careers. While doing the course, these learners expose both strengths and weaknesses in English learning in general and in English speaking lessons in particular. Therefore, it is the teachers' essential tasks to understand these types of learners and then create more adaptive learning activities so that we can help them boost their strengths and overcome their weaknesses in their English learning. In this way, we help the learners to fulfill their learning ambitions and make a great contribution to the improvement of training quality of FLD, HPU.

Key words: *in – service learners, strengths, weaknesses, speaking skill, adaptive learning activities*

VIỆC HỌC KỸ NĂNG NÓI CỦA HỌC VIÊN HỆ VỪA LÀM VỪA HỌC TẠI KHOA NGOẠI NGỮ, TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC HẢI PHÒNG: THỰC TRẠNG VÀ GIẢI PHÁP

TÓM TẮT: Học viên các lớp đại học ngôn ngữ Anh hệ vừa làm vừa học tại khoa Ngoại ngữ, trường Đại học Hải Phòng mong muốn có thể sử dụng tiếng Anh thành thạo trong công việc và trong cuộc sống, đồng thời được nhận bằng đại học để đáp ứng yêu cầu công việc. Trong quá trình học tập, họ bộc lộ nhiều thế mạnh và hạn chế trong học tiếng Anh nói chung và các giờ học kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh nói riêng. Vì vậy, trách nhiệm của người dạy là cần hiểu rõ đặc điểm của học viên, từ đó tổ chức các hoạt động học tập phù hợp và hiệu quả giúp học viên phát huy sở trường, khắc phục sở đoản trong học tiếng Anh. Bằng cách này, chúng ta giúp học viên đạt được nguyện vọng học tập và góp phần nâng cao chất lượng đào tạo của khoa Ngoại ngữ, trường Đại học Hải Phòng.

Từ khóa: *học viên vừa làm vừa học, điểm mạnh, điểm yếu, hoạt động học tập phù hợp*

1. INTRODUCTION

In such a flat world where many people live, study and work overseas, English is not only a means of communication but also an effective tool for them to live and work in harmony with the locals. In Viet Nam, certificates and a good

command of English are also among the indispensable requirements for those who apply for jobs, have their career standardized or pursuit the higher ranks in the career. There are many options for the people to acquire a satisfactory command of and certificates in English, and taking an in – service English course

is a feasible solution. This accounts for the remarkable number of in - service learners who have graduated from university and are working in various sectors in the society and are struggling to learn English for different purposes.

While the reasons for and the purposes of mastering a satisfactory command of English are obvious, how to do it is another matter. Besides having a lot of advantages, adult learners may face such difficulties as personal and psychological obstacles, work related problems, unsatisfactory knowledge in English language and insufficient basic language skills.

The research aims to investigate the situation of the in - service learners' learning English speaking skills at FLD, HPU so that solutions would be suggested to help them to learn improve speaking skills and realize their learning ambitions. This article aims at answering the three questions:

1. What strengths do the in-service learners at FLD, HPU have?
2. What are their weaknesses related to their learning speaking skill?
3. What are the suggested solutions to help the in-service learners at FLD, HPU to learn English speaking skills better?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review only consists of the theoretical issues related to learners' participation and communicative approach in teaching speaking skills as follows.

2.1. Student's participation in class.

2.1.1. Definition and Classification

Students' participation is an important aspect of classroom interaction and

possesses many benefits for both learners and teachers.

In *Collins English Dictionary (2015)*, student participation means "the extent to which students participate or involve themselves in a class, course, etc."

Participation can be seen as both physical and mental involvement. Physical participation refers to students being in class. The fact is that students may have full attendance in class but their mental participation is very poor, they make little or no contribution to the learning activities in class. On the other hand, mental participation means that the students show both their physical presence and mental involvement in the learning activities. This leads the teachers to consider the ways to get the students involved as much as possible in class activities.

Classroom participation can also be classified into two types: verbal participation and non-verbal participation. Verbal participation means students speaking in class, answering and asking questions, making comments, and taking part in discussion (Lee, 2003). It means that students who do not participate in the above-mentioned ways are often considered to be passive in the classroom activities. Non-verbal participation, on the other hand, is related to behavioural responses while the students are in class.

2.1.2. Benefits of students' participation in class

There are so many benefits of student participation in class. In his article, Weimer (2011) presents several benefits as follows.

First, participation increases interest. It's hard to maintain students' focus and attention when all they hear is the teacher talking. Getting students to talk gives the

class a chance to hear another voice as well as an answer or another point of view and thus increases the interest of whole class.

Second, participation gets students engaged in the class activities. With a good question, the teacher can attract the students' attention on the content of the lesson and ready to participate in the learning activities.

Another benefit is that when students take part in the lesson by asking questions or answering the teacher's questions, both the teacher and students get the feedback. The teacher can see the extent of students' understanding and they also understand what the teacher is satisfied about their opinion. Thus, participating in class discussions improves students' comprehension of the learning materials. It can also help them become more interested in the class materials.

One more good thing about students' involvement in class is that it in turn promotes students' preparation before class. If a teacher regularly calls on students and asks questions about assigned reading or what is in their notes from the previous class session or homework, this can get students coming to class prepared. Students who participate in discussions show their teachers that they're prepared and interested in class contents. These students tend to score higher in class participation and at the final exams.

Participation can also be used to control what's happening in class. If a student is dozing off, texting, quietly chatting, or otherwise not attending to what is happening, that student can be called on or the student next to the offender can be asked to respond. In this way, the teacher

can manage the class more effectively.

Last but not least, participation can be used to develop communication skills, especially public speaking skill. In many professional contexts, people need to be able to speak up in a group. They may need to offer information, ask questions, or argue for a different solution. If students actively take part in learning activities in class, they will get these skills because the more students participate in class, the better they will develop these skills. Then they will be well-prepared for the future and meet the job requirements.

2.2. Communicative Language Teaching

2.2.1. Definitions and characteristics

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which is an approach to the teaching of second and foreign languages, emphasizes interaction and problem – solving skills as both the means and the ultimate goal of learning a language. It is also referred to as “Communicative Approach”. Historically, CLT has been seen as a response to the Audio-Lingual Method (ALM), and as an extension or development of the Notional-Functional Syllabus.

CLT makes use of real-life situations that necessitate communication. The teacher sets up a situation that students are likely to encounter in real life. Students' motivation to learn comes from their desire to communicate in meaningful ways about meaningful topics.

CLT tends to emphasize activities such as role play, pair work and group work. It switched traditional language teaching's emphasis on grammar and the teacher-centered classroom to that of the active

use of authentic language in learning and acquisition.

CLT is interested in giving students the skills to be able to communicate under various circumstances. As such, it places less emphasis on the learning of specific grammatical rules and more on obtaining native-speaker-like fluency and pronunciation. Students are assessed on their level of communicative competence rather than on their explicit knowledge.

In a CLT class, learners are given opportunities to negotiate meaning in class. A CLT class is learner-centered. Far from being a transmitter of knowledge, the teacher is a facilitator. Far from having minimal teacher-student interaction, a communicative classroom holds such interaction to be indispensable. Characterized by high participation, the CLT classroom becomes a place for students to engage in meaningful language use. Authentic materials, functional tasks, and group and pair work are significant aspects of CLT.

Actually, CLT is more of an approach or philosophy than a highly structured methodology. Nunan (1999) famously listed five key elements to the communicative approach:

- An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
- The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.
- The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on the language but also on the learning process itself.
- An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.

- An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activation outside the classroom.

2.2.2. Changes in the role of teacher and students

Teachers in communicative classes will find themselves talking less and listening more - becoming active facilitators of their students' learning (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). The teacher sets up the exercise, but because the students' performance is the goal, the teacher must step back and observe, sometimes acting as a referee or a monitor. A classroom during a communicative activity is far from quiet, however. The students do most of the speaking, and frequently the scene of a classroom during a communicative exercise is active, with students leaving their seats to complete a task.

Because of the increased responsibility to participate, students may find they gain confidence in using the target language in general. Students are more responsible managers of their own learning (Larsen-Freeman, 1986).

Communicative language teaching emphasizes "self-direction for the learners" (Oxford, 1990, p.10). As the teacher will not be around to guide them the whole time, especially not when the learners speak the language outside the classroom, they are expected to take on a greater degree of responsibility for their own learning. The learner should enter into situations where communication takes place as much as possible to increase his or her communicative proficiency.

Teachers no longer rely on activities that require repetition, accuracy and the memorization of sentences and

grammatical patterns; instead, they require the learners to negotiate meaning and to interact meaningfully in the new language. Learners have to participate in classroom activities based on a cooperative rather than individualistic approach to learning; they need to listen to their peers in order to carry out group work successfully.

The teacher adopts different roles. On the one hand he/she is a “facilitator, a guide and a helper” and on the other hand a “coordinator, an idea-person and a co-communicator” (Oxford, 1990, p.10). He/She talks less and listens more to the students’ output. In addition to that, the teacher also identifies the students’ learning strategies and helps the students to improve them if necessary and shows them how to work independently. Instructional tasks become less important and fade into the background. That does not mean that they are not used at all, but with less significance.

These changes give the teacher more scope for variety and creativity and she gives up her status as a person of authority in a teacher-learner hierarchy. It is the teacher’s responsibility to be creative and prepare appropriate materials at home. The teacher can also assume other roles, for example the needs analyst, the counselor or the group process manager (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

100 English majors chosen randomly from the in – service English classes took part in the survey. They finished the second term of the English course at FLD, HPU. They were aged from 25 to 48, owned at

least one university degree in one or two other majors other than English and are working in various sectors in Hai Phong and the neighboring provinces.

3.2. Data collection instruments, procedure and preliminary results

A questionnaire consisting of 3 questions was designed and delivered to 100 chosen learners. Question I consisting of 4 minor questions gathered the information about the learners’ background such as their age, their work and their purposes of doing the English course at FLD, HPU. Question II sought the information about the learners’ strengths as language learners. Question III looked for the data about the participants’ weaknesses in their language learning.

The results from the survey questionnaire provided the author with an overall picture about the in - service learners: their background, their strengths and weaknesses as language learners. Basing on the findings, the author would suggest the most suitable ways to help them to make great use of their strengths and to minimize their weaknesses in their English speaking classes.

4. FINDINGS, DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This section presents the information about the learners’ background information, their strengths and weaknesses and the solutions to boosting their good points and minimizing their limitations in their language learning.

4.1. Findings and discussion

4.1.1. Findings from Question I

The information gathered from Question I gave an overview on the in - service

learners' background.

First, they are between 25 and 48 years old. This wide range of age probably has accounted for the mixed learning abilities and speeds of the learners in English speaking classes. While many can speak English fluently, some find it difficult to speak out what they want to say in English.

Second, most of the learners work in various sectors in Hai Phong while some of them work in the neighboring provinces. This seems to be a big advantage for the former to attend classes in the evenings and at the weekends whereas it may be difficult for the latter to do so.

As far as learning purposes are concerned, these adult learners are doing the English language course for many purposes. Most of them (62%) are learning English so that they can pass the exams of standardization or get promoted to the higher rank in their career. 15% of the participants said that they are doing this course in order to be exempted from the entrance examination into master course or the application into doctoral degree. More than 20% reported that they are taking this course because they would like to be able to communicate with foreign colleagues and foreigners. The rest confessed that they are in this English class just because they liked English and wished to be able to enjoy entertainment in English. For example, they wish they could sing English songs, watch films without subtitles or to read books in English etc.

It is obvious that whatever their purposes of learning English are, they share the features that they wish to be able to use English at work and in real life. Thus, the solutions should be found to help these

adult learners to fulfill their learning tasks in an adaptive way.

4.1.2. Findings from Question II

The information collected from Question 2 showed that the adult learners at FLD, HPU have many strengths that can be made great use of in their language learning. Most of the learners (85%) reported that they were very good at using modern technology at work. They were able to use the internet as an effective tool at work, which gives the hints for the teachers to ask them to use the internet in their English study.

More than half of the learners revealed that they had broad knowledge about almost all areas of life and rich experience in working in teams. This is very useful because the learners can contribute their rich knowledge and life experience to the lessons.

In addition, most of the participants (73%) reported that they were very good at communicating with people of different ages and very confident in speaking (Vietnamese, not English) in public. These strengths could be a very big advantage in English speaking classes because they help the learners to overcome their psychological obstacles when speaking English. This can be seen clearly in the next section.

4.1.3. Findings from Question III

Besides the great positive qualities as language learners, the in - service learners at FLD, HPU revealed a variety of weaknesses, which hindered them from acquiring the speaking skills and using them effectively for the desired purposes.

The biggest limitation that most adult learners (86%) shared was that their vo-

cabulary was limited and their grammar was not sufficient for them to express themselves in English. Therefore, they made countless mistakes in pronunciation, word use and grammar when they speak English, which turns out to be both the cause and the effect of their psychological difficulties. Most adult learners, especially those who were at a certain high rank in their career revealed that they were very afraid of making mistakes in speaking lessons and losing face. This explained why they were inclined to refuse to speak English in front of the class, which exemplified another difficulty for the teachers in the sense that the learners themselves hardly had full physical attendance in speaking lessons, but even if they managed to come to class, they failed to give mental or/and oral participation.

Another weakness or so – called difficulties these adult learners had was that they were so busy that they had to work online during the time they were in class. This means that they were showing their physical attendance in class but not very much mental/oral participation in the learning activities organized by the teachers. Most of the female learners were also engaged in their parental roles in the sense that they had to leave the class much earlier to pick up their children from school or to do shopping for food etc. The author's informal talks with the learners and her observations on the actual lessons also confirm this fact.

4.2. Solutions

The findings from questionnaire have provided an overview of the positive and negative features of the in – service learners at FLD, HPU in learning English speaking

skills. Therefore, the author would suggest some solutions to boosting their strengths and minimizing their weaknesses in their learning speaking skills as follows, which serves as the answer to the final research question.

4.2.1. Application of pair work and group work

First, pair work and group work help to make use of the learners' strengths such as their ability to use technology, rich general knowledge and life experience. When they work in pairs and groups, they can benefit from each other. For example, when the learners are put in pairs and groups to do a speaking task, they can share with each other not only what they know about the topic but also about the skills of searching for the ideas in the internets and from other sources. This is very useful in the speaking lessons because those who are very good at technology and have rich general knowledge can look for ideas very quickly and share what they know about the topic with the weak ones. In this case, what the teacher has to do for them is to instruct them how to identify key words when googling for information, how to sort out the information they find and how to organize ideas into an outline. In this way, the learners actively get more involved and show more mental participation in creating the learning materials and make them more authentic and closer to the real life situations.

Second, pair work and group work increase learners' speaking time in speaking lessons. When they are put in pairs or groups, they have more time and more turns to participate in speaking activities because instead of listening to one speaker in front of the class, almost

all of the learners speak in their pairs or groups. In this way, the learners' talking time increases and the teacher's talking time decreases. Moreover, in pairs or groups, the learners speak to, listen to and correct each other with the teacher becoming a facilitator, a guide and a helper, a coordinator, an idea-person and a co-communicator. As a result, the learners' speaking skills improve.

Furthermore, pair work and group work activities also help to solve the learners' psychological difficulties such as shyness, fears of making mistakes in speaking English and losing face. Learning in pairs and groups creates a much friendlier learning environment so that the learners feel safe and confident. Instead of having to perform an individual speech in front of the class and getting the feedback from the teacher and the classmates, they are put in pairs and groups where they work with their partners with the help of the teacher if necessary. If they make mistakes, they are corrected by their partners or have the mistakes corrected in the small group by the teacher. This also helps to create a much more close relationship between the teacher and the learners and among the learners themselves.

4.2.2. Application of technology during the learning process.

As mentioned in Section II. 1.3, many learners find it hard to have full physical attendance in speaking classes because of their workload and personal difficulties. This seems to be the most difficult problems for the teacher to solve because it is out of the question in terms of

teaching methodology. Instead, it requires the problem – solving and sharing skills in real life and once more modern technology can help. Apart from the physical lessons in which the teacher and the learners work face-to-face, several groups should be created on such social networks as Facebook, Zalo, Zoom...so that the learners can catch up with the missing parts of the physical lessons and they can share with each other what they know and explore about the lessons. Moreover, the learners have the opportunities to watch their classmates speaking and compare with theirs and learn from each other. This is also an effective way for the teacher to work with the learners. He/she can watch the learners speaking and give them feedback in the form of comments. In this way, learning takes place not only inside but also outside the physical classes, not only during but also beyond the official hours. As a result, both the learners and the teachers benefit and the training quality improves.

5. CONCLUSION

FLD, HPU has good opportunities to work with various types of learners and in – service learners are the ones that benefit, inspire and challenge the teachers a lot.

As far as the benefits are concerned, these adult learners have a lot of strengths such as good ability to use modern technology, rich knowledge and experience at work and in life that both the teacher and their classmate can benefit from. The teacher and the learners learn from each other and the former can get the latter involved in the process of adjusting the learning materials to make them more authentic and useful.

In terms of inspiration and challenges, the learners' weaknesses at first seem to be incompatible with their ambition but later turn out to be the inspiration and encouragement for the teachers to be creative in teaching. It is the learners' ambition to learn and their seemingly insurmountable difficulties that inspire and motivate the teachers to create the more adaptive learning activities such as pair work and group work. In this way, the learners can obtain their learning purposes and the teachers can prove their good ability to provide a flexible training service to various types of learners and meet the demands of the society for the all-rounded human resource.

This article discusses the detailed description of the in - service learners' strengths and weaknesses as language learners when they are learning English speaking skills at FLD, HPU and suggests some solutions to promoting their strengths and reducing their limitations. The limitation of this research is that the number of the participants is small and

the solutions are to some extent based on the author's own reflection of her teaching experience. This means that there should be a more extensive and intensive research on this issue so that the results would be more reliable and persuasive.

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