

THE EFFECT OF APPLYING “SMALL TALK AS WARMING-UP TECHNIQUE” IN EFL CLASSROOMS ON STUDENTS’ IMPROVEMENT IN ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILL

Nguyen The Binh^{1*}

¹Phan Rang - Tháp Chàm Department of Education and Training

*Corresponding author: binhthe892@gmail.com

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Abstract

So far junior high school students have dealt with obsolete English speaking topics in textbooks developed by the MoET. They are often fed up with speaking lessons, and thus their speaking skill fails to improve after many years studying English at school. Stimulated by this reality, the current study was carried out to investigate the effect of applying “small talk as warming-up technique” in EFL classrooms on students’ speaking skill improvement. A schedule of applying “small talk as warming-up technique” in English language classrooms was developed; then a training program with seventeen appropriate topics aside from the prescribed curriculum of “Tiếng Anh 9” by the MOET was conducted. Within a term of nearly four months, the results have showed that, after the treatment, students’ achievement was proved to be significant in improving English speaking skill.

Keywords: Small talk, speaking skill, warming-up technique.

“ĐỐI THOẠI NGẮN - THỦ THUẬT KHỞI ĐỘNG” TRONG LỚP HỌC TIẾNG ANH

Nguyễn Thế Bình^{1*}

¹Phòng Giáo dục và Đào tạo thành phố Phan Rang - Tháp Chàm

*Tác giả liên hệ: binhthe892@gmail.com

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Tóm tắt

Cho đến nay, học sinh trung học cơ sở được học kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh với các chủ đề rất cũ từ sách giáo khoa của Bộ Giáo dục và Đào tạo. Học sinh không hứng thú với những bài học nói, do đó kỹ năng nói của các em không được cải thiện sau nhiều năm học. Từ thực tế đó, tác giả thực hiện nghiên cứu làm sáng tỏ hiệu quả của việc áp dụng “đối thoại ngắn - thủ thuật khởi động” trong lớp học tiếng Anh đối với việc cải thiện kỹ năng nói của học sinh. Kế hoạch áp dụng “đối thoại ngắn - thủ thuật khởi động” trong lớp học tiếng Anh được hình thành; và chương trình dạy học với mười bảy chủ đề phù hợp ngoài chương trình giảng dạy theo quy định của “Tiếng Anh 9” của Bộ Giáo dục và Đào tạo được thực hiện. Với thời gian học gần bốn tháng, kết quả cho thấy, sau thực nghiệm, kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh của học sinh cải thiện rất đáng kể.

Từ khóa: Đối thoại ngắn, kỹ năng nói, thủ thuật khởi động.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

With reference to the current trend of language teaching in Vietnam, English Language Teaching (ELT) is supposed to primarily aim at developing the learner's communicative competence. Therefore, the design of most textbooks as well as the teaching approaches is somehow based on training four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Of these, speaking is the most significant but not easy to develop for learners of all levels. The mastery of speaking skill in English is a priority for many language learners (Richards, 1990, as cited in Richards, 2008). Learners often evaluate their success in language learning as well as the effectiveness of their English course on the basis of how much they feel they have improved in their spoken language proficiency (ibid.).

Relating to this aspect of language teaching, an argument by Gower et al. (2005) is that every opportunity for speaking in the classroom should be taken. It is by trying to communicate that students realize their need for language and by speaking that they increase their fluency and confidence. Numerous attempts have also been made to classify the functions of speaking in human interaction. Richards (2008) mentions these functions as three parts of a framework: *talk as interaction*, *talk as transaction*, and *talk as performance*. Of the three, *talk as interaction* is the most difficult since interactional talk is a complex and subtle phenomenon that takes place under the control of unspoken rules. Included in *talk as interaction*, "small talk" or "chatting" to the class is preferentially discussed. Doff (1998) argues that chatting to the class about topics of interest creates an opportunity for real language practice, and creates an English language atmosphere in the class. Even more important, it establishes contact with the class and helps students to feel relaxed and ready to learn.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

In the reality of Vietnam, students often

feel that, after many years of studying English at school, their speaking skill has improved just a little or even not at all. This reality originates from the fact that most of speaking topics and tasks embraced in the curriculum are outdated. This truth is proved by the researcher's years of experience in teaching English, through his hundreds of class observations and daily personal communications with his practitioners and the students.

With his practitioners, they assert that the obsolete English speaking topics in the curriculum do not stimulate their interest in dealing with their teaching process. However, teachers are quite satisfied with the current language materials because they are available to apply; they do not require any endeavor from teachers. For the students, when being asked about the reality of speaking lessons they have been experiencing, most of them are depressed. They state that it is not an enjoyable job to tackle with the speaking topics because they either intensely dislike or have nothing to say on these topics.

In a word, on the basis of the reviewed background and the mentioned problem, small talk with diverse informal topics as warming-up technique is applied in English language classrooms so that the improvement of English speaking skill will be more effective. Thus, a decision to conduct a study to help students get improved in English speaking skill is made.

1.3. Purpose of the Study

It is quite clear that though the choice of favorite topics as well as how to put them into practice give a big trial to English teaching, it does benefit students. It helps to develop students' English speaking skill. In order to examine this theory and thus affirm its rightness, the current study is conducted with the aim to investigate the effect of applying "small talk as warming-up technique" in EFL classrooms on students' improvement in English speaking skill.

1.4. Research Questions

To obtain the above purpose, the study addresses the research question “*Does applying small talk as warming-up technique in EFL classrooms affect students’ improvement in English speaking skill?*”

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Subject

The study is carried out over the students of grade 9 in Le Van Tam Junior High School. The reason for this choice of the subject is that, of all grades in junior high schools, grade 9th students are the most mature. The chosen topics may be attractive and appropriate to the subject; also, the 9th graders may have enough experience to deal with the topics.

2.2. Participants

For this study, two classes of 9¹ and 9² were

selected to take part in the experiment as the control group and the experimental one. This choice was based on the participants’ equivalence in English capability; and certainly, it had to be under the school administrators’ permission. Till the time right before the experiment, two groups were somehow equivalent in several aspects: learning environment, learning conditions, learning chance, and learning aptitude. They were all at the age of fourteen and had compulsorily learnt English for six years at school (from grade 3 till grade 8). They were supposed to be equal in English proficiency of elementary level. For more details of this issue, a summary of participants’ characteristics is displayed in Table 1. The statistical data is retrieved from the naming and scoring books of grade 8¹ and grade 8², school year 2017-2018 (Le Van Tam Junior High School, 2018).

Table 1. Summary of participants’ characteristics at the beginning of the treatment

Group	N	Gender		Final scores on English subject at the end of grade 8				
		Male	Female	< 3.5	3.5 - 4.9	5.0 - 6.4	6.5 - 7.9	8.0 - 10
Control (9 ¹)	33	19 57.6%	14 42.4%	3 9.0%	4 12.1%	10 30.3%	12 36.4%	5 15.2%
Experimental (9 ²)	34	19 55.9%	15 44.1%	4 11.8%	4 11.8%	9 26.5%	11 32.4%	6 17.6%

As can be seen in Table 1, both groups had the approximate total number of students: thirty-three and thirty-four. The numbers of females between the two groups were not far differential: fourteen in the control group and fifteen in the experimental one. The figures from this table indicate that there was no considerable disparity in English capability between the two groups. Assuming that the final scores on the English subject of grade 8 were valid, they were used for establishing equivalence in English proficiency between the two groups at the beginning of the treatment.

2.3. Design of the Study

This research was designed to examine whether an intervention of applying “small talk as warming-up technique” in English language

classrooms towards junior high school students’ improvement in English speaking skill would be effective. For this purpose, the study followed a quasi-experimental study design in the form of mid-test and post-test with a control group. The design of study is succinctly displayed in Figure 1.

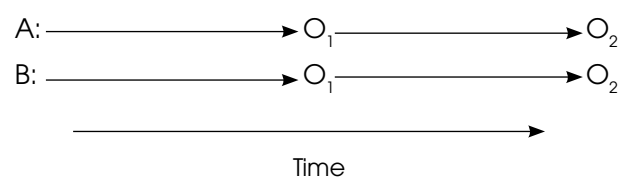


Figure 1. Design of the study

Note. A = Experimental group; B = Control group; X = Treatment; O₁ = Mid-test; O₂ = Post-test

2.4. Procedure of the Study

The study lasted almost four months from the beginning of September to the middle of December 2018, including test administrations. The seventeen chosen topics were in turn taken into the treatment. The full description of study procedure is going to be chronologically illustrated as the two stages of pre-training and training phase.

2.4.1. Pre-Training

Before the treatment, all preparations were carefully made. First of all, dealing with the job of choosing topics, numerous possible topics are taken into consideration. Here are some suggested by Doff (1998) and Richards (2008): an interesting TV program, a school performance (a play, a concert), a local sports event, a piece of local news, holidays, things students did the previous day, weather, entertainment, family, travel, school work, school subjects, hobbies, hometown, friends, food and drinks, spare time, environment, etc...

Next, some popular course-books that were currently used as official language manuals in many language centers, typically Connect and New Interchange, were taken for reference so that various native dialogues were adapted and then can initially be given to students as proposed by Richards (2008). This helps to make the chatting in English language classrooms more successful. Besides, as suggested by Levy (1997) that pre-introducing vocabulary is one of the strategies of organizing conversations in English language classrooms, key words around the chosen topics were concurrently prepared and offered to students beforehand.

Finally, the mid-test and the post-test were taken into process of scoring and statistics. Naturally, the scores of spoken test sections were converted into the scale of ten-points for easy statistics later.

2.4.2. Training Phase

The procedure of training took place from week 2 to week 15 of the school year 2018-2019.

This includes the distributions of two tests. One week after the last treatment, two spoken tests of the two groups were gathered and analyzed for the research findings afterwards. The whole procedure of study is briefly described in Table 2.

Table 2. Schedule of study procedure

Week	Periods	Topics
2 (03/9 - 08/9/2018)	3	1. Family
	4	
3 (10/9 - 15/9/2018)	5	2. Friends
	6	3. Hobbies
4 (17/9 - 22/9/2018)	7	
	8	4. Weather
5 (24/9 - 29/9/2018)	9	5. Holidays
	10	6. Music
6 (01/10 - 06/10/2018)	11	7. Sports
	12	
Mid-test		
7 (08/10 - 13/10/2018)	13	One-period test (curriculum)
	14	8. School subjects
8 (15/10 - 20/10/2018)	15	9. School work
	16	
9 (22/10 - 27/10/2018)	17	10. Things students did the previous day
	18	
10 (29/10 - 03/11/2018)	19	11. Food and drinks
	20	12. Traffic
11 (05/11 - 10/11/2018)	21	13. Spare time
	22	
12 (12/11 - 17/11/2018)	23	14. An interesting TV program
	24	
13 (19/11 - 24/11/2018)	25	15. Fashion clothing
	26	One-period test (curriculum)
14 (26/12 - 01/12/2018)	27	16. Hometown
	28	
15 (03/12 - 08/12/2018)	29	17. Environment
	30	
Post-test (the 1 st -term test according to the curriculum)		

2.5. Instruments and Data Collection

As mentioned in the part of research design, test-instrument was utilized to collect data. The final scores on English subject at the end of grade 8 were used to examine the students' equivalence in English language capacity. The mid-test and the post-test aimed at measuring the students' improvement of English speaking skill development after a certain period of treatment. The results were then investigated to assess the effectiveness of the treatment. The mid-test was designed by the researcher himself while the post-test was available and embraced in the first-term test by Ninh Thuan Department of Education and Training (2008).

In details, the mid-test was administrated to collect data on the students' competence of English speaking skill development after six weeks of treatments. Three topics were chosen to put in the mid-test (your family, your hobbies, your favorite sports/music). The mid-test was designed in the form of three sections: (1) Introduction oneself, (2) Topic presentation, (3) Examiner - Student interaction around the chosen topic. The three sections in turn made up 20%, 50%, and 30% of the total score. A bit differently from the mid-test, the post-test was distributed to collect data on the students' capability for English speaking skill after the whole training process. It included 5 topics (your family and friends, your weekend, the place you go to, your English class, your school). The post-test was developed in the form of two parts: (1) Examiner - Student interaction around the chosen topic, (2) Student - Student interaction. Each part made up 50% of the total score.

With respect to the scoring, four raters from the English language staff were invited

for marking. They, of course, had been clearly explained the purpose, the significance of the test data beforehand, and well trained in scoring tests. They thus willingly gave help to the researcher; and the expected results were later returned to the researcher for the coming analysis. The scoring rubrics used for marking the two oral tests are developed on the basis of the theory of language testing by Heaton (1989) that is student's production is required to meet three criteria: accuracy, fluency, and comprehensibility. In other words, speaking ability is assessed according to various criteria, including comprehension, ability to produce a prompt, appropriate and accurate response, interactive communication, and pronunciation (Ninh Thuan Department of Education and Training, 2018).

3. Data Analysis and Finding Discussion

After being collected, the data were calculated and analyzed in order to seek evidence for answers to the research question. In this part, the results of collected data analysis are illustrated and the research finding is figured out thereby. These are going to be laid out along the research question "*Does applying small talk as warming-up technique in English language classrooms affect students' improvement in English speaking skill?*"

To respond to this research question, the descriptive statistics data that stemmed from the two tests were calculated and analyzed. In this study, the measurement of mean (M) were taken into analysis to find out the effectiveness of the treatment on students' improvement in speaking skill. The illustration of data analysis and finding discussion is going to be laid out along the two periods of time: mid-test and post-test.

3.1. Mid-test

Table 3. Summary of mid-test results of the two groups

Group	N	Mid-test scores			
		M	S.D.	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Control (9 ¹)	33	5.26	0.94	-0.345	0.73
Experimental (9 ²)	34	5.35	1.27		

The results of the mid-test of the two groups, as shown in Table 3, indicate that the experimental group got slightly higher scores than the control one ($M = 5.35$ vs. $M = 5.26$; however, there was no statistically significant difference between the two mean scores ($p = 0.73 > 0.05$). Thus, it was clear that the two groups were quite equivalent

in speaking development till the time of mid-test after the six-week treatment. A possible explanation for the above finding might be that the treatment within six weeks is not sufficient for the evident improvement.

3.2. Post-test

Table 4. Summary of post-test results of the two groups

Group	N	Post-test scores			
		M	S.D.	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Control (9 ¹)	33	5.61	0.79	-4.977	0.00
Experimental (9 ²)	34	6.70	1.16		

The results of post-test of the two groups, as shown in Table 4, indicate that the experimental group got strongly higher scores than the control one ($M = 5.61$ vs. $M = 6.70$), and the difference between the two mean scores was statistically significant ($p = 0.00 < 0.05$). Thus, it was definite that the experimental group surpassed the control one in speaking skill development after the treatments that lasted nearly fourteen weeks from

week 2 to week 15.

3.3. Mid-test and Post-test of the Control Group

This section will give information about the difference in results between the mid-test and the post-test within the control group. Thanks to the aid of Pair samples t-test, the collected data were calculated and summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Summary of mid-test and post-test results within the control group (91)

Test	N	M	S.D.	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Mid-test	33	5.26	0.94	-1.935	0.06
Post-test	33	5.61	0.79		

From the data in Table 5, we can see that, on average, the control students achieved higher scores in the post-test than in the mid-test. The mean score of the post-test was 5.61 compared with 5.26 of the mid-test. Nevertheless, the variance was insignificant ($p = 0.06$). This shows that the students of the control group did not get improvement in speaking skill after a term of nine weeks studying with the obsolete English speaking topics in textbooks. Hence, it was more reliable to state that applying “small talk as warming-up technique” in English language classrooms was actually effective in improving students’ English speaking skill.

In short, the present study found that the application of small talk as warming-up technique in English language classrooms was

effective in improving students’ English speaking skill development. This was owing to such factors as the sensible choice of topics and the flexible classroom management within English language classrooms.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

4.1. Main Conclusion

The study was conducted with the purpose to investigate the feasibility as well as the merits of the implementation of small talk as warming-up technique in English language classrooms to the students of Le Van Tam Junior High School. It was successful in seeking evidence for the effects of this application on students’ improvement in English speaking skill. The finding discussed in the previous part show that, in general,

the application of small talk as warming-up technique in English language classrooms indeed helped the students improve their speaking skill. Specifically, the major conclusion which could be drawn from the finding on the research question of the present study is going to be summarized as follow.

The finding on the research question *“Does applying small talk as warming-up technique in EFL classrooms affect students’ improvement in English speaking skill?”* reveals that, being warmed-up by chatting on topics of interest, the students achieved better outcomes in oral production. This was evidently demonstrated by the results that the students who were warmed-up by chatting on topics of interest got higher scores after the whole treatment than before. Furthermore, the results on the speaking tests of the students who were under the treatment far outweighed those of the students who were out of the treatment. This finding reveals that the implementation of small talk as warming-up technique did benefit the students in improving English speaking skill; hence, it well deserves application in teaching English language within the context of Le Van Tam Junior High School.

4.2. Limitations of the Study

Though the study got certain success, its several important limitations due to practical constraints need to be acknowledged. First, small talk with topics of interest was taken into the treatment within a brief time limit (just 5 - 7 minutes of warming-up stage). It would have provided more convincing results if it had included in all the curricular speaking lessons. Second, it was beyond the scope of this study to examine the topic through all the students of four grades, so just 9th graders were involved. Additionally, the study was conducted in a small scale of subjects - Le Van Tam Junior High School - a little one in the city environs; hence, the findings are not intended to be generalized to other schools.

4.3. Suggestions for Vietnamese Teachers of English

In this study, the application of “small talk as warming-up technique” in English language classrooms with the aim of helping junior high school students develop their English speaking skill was successful. The training procedure and the research findings provide teachers of English in Vietnamese junior high schools with a specification of the effect that the implication of “small talk as warming-up technique” in English language classrooms brings about. Thus, teachers who are interested in how to help improve students’ English speaking skill effectively in the constraints of their current condition can take into consideration the following suggestions that are summarized by Lindstromberg (2004), Gower et al. (2005), and Richards (2008).

Firstly, a warm-up is a brief activity to do either at the beginning of a lesson to get students’ attention, to help students get in the mood to work, or at the break of a lesson to cheer students up if they seem tired or bored. *Secondly*, during the chatting, the comment should elicit agreement since agreement is face-preserving and non-threatening. *Thirdly*, many mistakes are inevitably made; they can be seen as part of learning to communicate; thus, teachers should ignore them during a warmer but afterwards, feedback might be appropriate. *Fourthly*, giving feedback involves responding to a conversational partner with expressions that indicate interest and a wish for the speaker to continue. Last but not least, in order to have successful conversations in English language classrooms, the topics given should be of students’ choice.

4.4. Recommendations for Further Research

Despite the mentioned limitations above, it is hoped that this study will bring an innovation to English language teaching in junior high schools, or at least in Le Van Tam Junior High school. However, in order to get more comprehensive understandings of this application of “small talk

as warming-up technique” in English language classrooms, more research on this topic needs to be undertaken and takes these recommendations into serious account. *First*, further experimental investigations are needed conducting on such a large scale as the whole grade or even the whole school. *Second*, it may be more interesting to assess the effect of applying “small talk with topics of interest as warming-up technique” in English language classrooms if it is treated in all the speaking lessons of the curriculum. *Third*, the further research should be conducted to explore students’ attitude towards the application of “small talk as warming-up technique”. *Finally*, further research might investigate effects of this in the field of improving students’ listening or writing skill./.

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