

The role of speaking skills and practice methods to improve students' speaking ability

Nguyễn Ái Thi

ThS. Khoa Ngoại ngữ, Trường Đại học Hải Phòng

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Abstract: *Teaching foreign languages at the present stage requires many changes in methods compared to the past. With the increasing need for communication in a flat world and the strong development of technology, foreign language learners have many opportunities to develop their ability to use the target language. Therefore, communication language teaching and practice methods need to be strengthened to support learners in a more positive and effective way. In this article, the author mentions the objectives of teaching speaking along with some recommendations for interactive practice methods and technological support to help learners achieve their goals more quickly.*

Keywords: *Speaking skills, teaching speaking, learning speaking, practice methods*

1. Introduction

When learning a foreign language, speaking is often viewed as the most important skill to master because of its crucial role in communication. It involves several simultaneous processes - cognitive, physical, and socio-cultural - and a speaker's knowledge and skills need to be rapidly activated in real time (Burns, 2019). Furthermore, speaking ability is a clear indicator of an individual's language level, and their ability to use the language in practice demonstrates their language competence. In countries where English is a foreign language, such as Vietnam, the majority of students are unable to engage in authentic communication in the language on a daily basis. This can lead to reduced confidence, avoidance, and communication breakdowns when interacting with native speakers. Therefore, it is essential to develop students' communicative competence by teaching English based on fundamental principles and providing regular practice to facilitate fluency acquisition.

2. Content

2.1. Literature Review

2.1.1. Speaking skills

We all know that speaking skills allow us to communicate effectively. It involves an interactive process of generating, receiving, and processing information (Brown, 1994). It requires language competence of the speakers. Florez (1999) contends that verbal activity construction depends on situational context, including participants, backgrounds, physical surroundings, and reason for communicating. In brief, effective communication in conversations relies on

language ability and awareness of how information is produced, received, and understood in specific context in which the conversation takes place.

2.1.2. Teaching and learning speaking skills: defined goals and difficulties

In today's world, the main goal of spoken language teaching is to improve learners' ability to communicate effectively, allowing them to express themselves competently and adhere to societal and cultural norms in a variety of communication settings. Proficient speaking skills are also vital for meeting professional and future life demands. Therefore, teachers must create clear goals, plans, and strategies to help their students become proficient communicators in the language they are learning.

While learning to speak, students may face difficulties. The challenges may come from themselves or due to external factors, which can result in feelings of unease, powerlessness, or hesitation when speaking. This is due to the fear of making mistakes or failing. Additionally, some may not fully appreciate the importance and urgency of improving their speaking skills, leading to insufficient levels of motivation and determination. From an objective standpoint, students could face negative effects, such as a limited speaking environment which restricts their chances to converse in the target language and inadequate guidance. The challenges can arise due to unhelpful educators, uncooperative peers in developing speaking skills, or a lack of learning facilities.

Therefore, to promote a positive and equitable learning environment, it is essential to ensure that teachers themselves are actively engaged in efforts

to eliminate both subjective obstacles and objective barriers that could hinder student success.

2.1.3. Objectives of teaching speaking

In any course, teachers need to bear in mind the goals that their students must reach and language courses are not exceptional. When teaching students to speak a foreign language, it is important for educators to put a focus on: (1) developing students' intellectual capacity through the study of the language; (2) enhancing understanding of the fundamental principles of communication in the target language in order to broaden students' cultural knowledge; (3) improving students' comprehension of language functions and raising their awareness of language skills; (4) and finally, providing students with the necessary skills to communicate effectively through oral and written forms (Rivers, 1968).

Therefore, language teachers should create a practice environment that allows students to engage in realistic communication, participate in interactive activities and perform meaningful tasks that develop their speaking skills. Students can effectively achieve this through cooperation to accomplish their objectives.

2.2. Recommendations:

2.2.1. Using interactive teaching methods

Vietnamese educational system has gone through many traditional methods of teaching which mostly involve students passive learning. Although there have been great changes in teacher's thought and viewpoints, not all teachers have adopted modern activities and strategies of teaching speaking in their lessons, so they cannot help their students get maximum involvement in the lecturing process and actively acquire maximum knowledge, skills and values. From personal experiences, the author has compiled some following interactive activities.

2.2.1.1. Learning speaking through role play

Role-play is an effective and easily designed tool for teachers to facilitate students' interaction in real-life settings. As role-plays mirror real-life, they help inculcate practical speaking abilities in students by having them imagine and take on different roles, such as the role of a manager and a clerk in an office, a teacher and a student in a class, a shop assistant and a customer in a shop, etc. These scenarios necessitate the illustration of students' proficiency in handling and communicating in real-life situations, thereby cultivating intellectual aptitude, language competence, and cultural understanding.

2.2.1.2. Learning speaking through story telling

The Storytelling Cube is an activity suitable for individual, pair, or group play, allowing students to narrate a story. The cube features different images on each side, such as a hero, a broken heart, or a king, etc. When rolling the cube, the student generates a story associated with the image that appears. This task improves students' speaking skills, problem-solving abilities, rapid response, memory, creativity, and imagination.

2.2.1.3. Using Pair work and Group Work

Working in pairs or groups is an effective technique for acquiring fluency in a foreign language for several reasons. First and foremost, practicing speaking in pairs or small groups can boost students' confidence by allowing them to use English with their peers without fear of making errors. Additionally, engaging in pair or group work increases the total amount of time students use the target language during lessons. Finally, students can enhance their vocabulary by exchanging ideas with friends.

Teachers can assign their students to take on a variety of roles that they themselves typically perform such as asking questions, raising problems, explaining problems, or summarizing in their groups. Thus, the teacher's speaking time will be less and the students' speaking time will be more, increasing opportunities for students to practice and interact.

2.2.1.4. Attending discussions or seminars

One way to improve speaking skills is to take part in pre-planned discussions and seminars. Students can participate in or lead a discussion where they can develop key qualities such as confidence and creativity in a supportive and collaborative environment. Vocabulary related to specific topics is expanded and confidence in communication is enhanced. Students are therefore encouraged to strive for effective communication in such a relaxed and supportive atmosphere, free from constraints or pressure.

2.2.2. Using technological devices

In the current era of significant technological advancements, it is a missed opportunity not to use technology in teaching and learning. The rapid development of technological devices has provided education with many advantages, including effective learning support devices for foreign language learning, such as smartphones and smart TVs with countless applications that learners can use to practice and improve their language skills. Smartphones are the most popular gadgets among students and have greatly benefited the regular practice, and development of foreign language learners' speaking

abilities. Therefore, the use of technological devices is not only a current trend but also a necessity for language learners. Below are some examples of how technology can be applied to speaking practice.

2.2.2.1. Applying Audio-visual approach

Effective language use involves both verbal and non-verbal communication. This includes elements such as pitch, stress, and intonation, as well as non-linguistic cues like gestures, expressions, and body language. These elements play a crucial role in conveying messages during social interactions. Thus, the use of audio-visual aids like smart televisions in teaching speaking is highly advantageous. This method enables students to learn about intonation, emphasizing important words, using language in a spoken context, and how body language contributes to effective communication. To facilitate this, teachers can use listening exercises or videos as a model for students to study initially. Then, they can provide similar situations with strategies for the students to handle.

2.2.2.2 Using voice recording

Assigning voice recordings as homework is an effective method for improving learners' speaking skills. With the prevalence of smartphones, this task has become much easier. Students can share their recordings with teachers and classmates for feedback on accuracy of content, sentence structures, intonation, and pronunciation. This activity can help students overcome confidence issues by allowing them to practice and record privately. It is particularly useful when class time is limited and the focus is on fluency rather than accuracy.

2.2.2.3. Utilizing Social Networks and Online Video Conferencing Software

Students can engage in online conversations using social networking platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, or conferencing software such as Zoom, Trans and Meet. In addition, teachers can invite students to participate in self-directed learning by creating private social networking groups on platforms such as Zalo or Facebook to upload recordings of individual or small group discussions. This feature allows group members to share their thoughts, recommendations and knowledge, and allows teachers to respond to, monitor, review and assess their students' self-directed learning activities.

2.2.2.4. Learning speaking through listening

"Listening and speaking are two sides of the communication coin", emphasizing the integral relationship between these skills in effective

communication (Madylus, 2023). In fact, listening to native speakers can provide valuable learning opportunities for vocabulary, grammar, intonation and pronunciation, as well as cultural nuances of communication. Learners can imitate the language used by native speakers. It is, therefore, highly recommended that speaking in a professional environment be taught through active listening. Students can listen to *podcasts*, a popular form of digital media with millions of new episodes released every day. In this way, language teachers can bring the outside world with authentic linguistic and cultural learning materials into the classroom through the use of online audio.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the role of teaching speaking skills in foreign language courses is undeniably essential. The ability to communicate will greatly assist students in their academic pursuits and future careers. Therefore, it is crucial for teachers to have a good understanding of the principles and objectives of teaching. As organizers and leaders of pedagogy, teachers need to demonstrate openness, enthusiasm and friendliness in order to cultivate a culture of proactive collaboration among learners. They should seek to refresh themselves and engage learners in a variety of speaking practice activities, including interactive and technology-supported activities in class and at home, to best facilitate the development of communicative competence.

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