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## The Nature of Speaking in the Classroom: An Overview

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### ARTICLE INFORMATION

**Received:** 08 November 2021

**Accepted:** 25 November 2021

**Published:** 01 December 2021

**DOI:** 10.32996/bjpsh.2021.1.1.4

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### KEYWORDS

Communicative competence,  
Fluency, teacher's role, Speaking,  
Speaking activities

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### ABSTRACT

This article is a short review of a vital asset in the language acquisition process. It addresses speaking as a language skill that is used to be disregarded for many years with traditional instructional approaches to language acquisition or learning. This article probes into the main two types of speaking which are speaking in terms of use and speaking in terms of usage. It also addresses the significance of speaking activities in improving learners' language proficiency. To achieve this aim, the present paper is divided into seventh subsections. The first subsection provides an operational definition of speaking. The second subsection tackles two major types of speaking, namely speaking in terms of use and speaking in terms of usage. The third deals with the significance of adopting speaking activities in the classroom. The fourth probes into the various roles teachers play during speaking activities in the classroom. The fifth reviews the main components of communicative competence as cited by Canale and Swain (1980). The sixth explores the different conversational strategies speakers and students can resort to while speaking. The last subsection looks into the major speaking performances employed by teachers in their classrooms namely imitative, responsive, transactional, and interpersonal, to name but a few. The paper concludes with a sketchy sum up of what has been reviewed and addressed in this paper.

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### 1. Introduction

Speaking is a crucial component of language learning and teaching. Back then, speaking activities took the shape of repetition and drilling. Ancient ELT approaches and theories' main concern was to form good language acquisition habits. Errors committed during the stages of the acquisition were corrected promptly for future avoidance. Consequently, these methods are used to prioritize reception over production. They, hereby, focused on reading and listening more than speaking. Nonetheless, with the emergence of novel ELT approaches and methods, including the communicative language teaching approach which has emerged in the 1970s, speaking has taken a new shape.

This shift has focused on improving language learners' fluency and accuracy, respectively. Teachers, hereby, have adopted a variety of speaking practices, namely dialogues, role plays, storytelling, and picture description, to name but a few. The significance of speaking, therefore, lies in enabling teachers to diagnose their learners' speaking proficiency level; the difficulties learners encounter during speaking namely pronunciation and provide remedies to enhance students' speaking proficiency.

This paper is a short overview of the nature of speaking in the classroom. It hereby tends to shed light on the major aspects related to speaking in the classroom. This paper is divided into seventh subsections. Section one deals with the definition of speaking. Section two introduces the major criteria that characterize speaking. Section three sheds light on the significance of speaking in the classroom. Section four addresses teachers' roles during speaking activities in the classroom. Section five discusses communicative competence and its prominent components. Section six provides insights about a set of strategies speakers resort to keep the flow of communication smooth, and the last part represents a set of speaking activities that are used by teachers in their classrooms.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Definition of Speaking**

Generally, language is taught and assessed in terms of the four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These skills are divided into two categories: receptive and productive. Be it a productive skill, speaking is complex to be taught. Sakale (2012) describes speaking as a dormant skill that has been neglected for a long time in EFL classrooms (p. 1). This claim is also noted in Brown and Yule (1983) who have stated that "for most of its history, language teaching has been concerned with the teaching of written language" (p. 1).

Speaking is "simply the physical embodiment of abstract systems" [15]. In other words, speaking is the physical realization of ideas, concepts, and assumptions existing in the human schema. It transforms abstract ideas into sounds and utterances that form meaning. Widdowson (1978) differentiates between two types of speaking: speaking in terms of use and speaking in terms of usage (pp. 58-59). The latter is only productive as it involves the production of the phonological or the grammatical systems in isolation with no reference. Hence, this type of speaking requires no interaction between speakers. The former, on the other hand, is both productive and receptive as it requires the interlocutors to receive, decode, and produce messages. It aims to have a successful reciprocal interaction: "an act of communication through speaking is commonly performed in the face to face interaction and occurs as a part of a dialogue or other form of verbal exchange" [15].

Speaking is also perceived to be an interactive process as it embodies an interaction between two or more interlocutors in a given situation. It, therefore, differs according to the social situations; the language used in formal settings differs from that used in informal context [10]. Significantly, novel approaches to learning and teaching, e.g. situational language teaching, highly advocate the use of authenticity to make learning more effective and approachable.

### **2.2. Typology of Speaking**

Speaking is characterized by three main criteria: purpose, participation, and planning [6]. The first criterion is two-folds: transactional purpose and interpersonal purpose. Transactional facilitates the process of transacting or conveying information, whereas interpersonal sustains good social relationships. Participation, the second criterion, is either interactive or non-interactive. The former takes place commonly in dialogue; it requires reciprocal participation from the interlocutors. The latter refers to a situation that highly relies on recording speech; leaving a message on the phone. Third, speaking is either planned or unplanned. Planned speaking requires the speaker to plan his/her speech; delivering a presentation or a lecture. Unplanned speaking, on the other hand, is any spontaneous conversation that occurs with no pre-preparation or planning.

### **2.3. The Significance of Speaking in an EFL Context**

Speaking in the classroom is significant for three main reasons [9]. First, speaking activities provide teachers with information about the level of students, and the kinds of problems students struggle with the most in speaking. Second, speaking tasks provide students with the opportunity to practice "real-life speaking". Last, the more students are involved in speaking; activating their knowledge about language structures and functions, the more they acquire an automatic use of language elements (parts of speech, word order, and tenses). Therefore, speaking enhances students' fluency and accuracy.

### **2.4. Teacher' Role in Speaking Activities**

Teachers play a prominent role in students' language learning process [12]. Hence, they can positively or negatively shape students' learning. In other words, the teaching methods adopted deeply affect students' attitudes towards language(s) learning. To involve students in different speaking activities (discussion, debates, dialogues, role play, communication games, etc), teachers need to diversify their roles. These roles are; a prompter, a participant, and a feedback provider [6].

First, teachers as prompters offer suggestions during the speaking activities without interrupting students' interaction. Thus, they can help students when facing some difficulties in expressing their ideas by providing cues. Second, as participants, teachers can take part in carrying out different speaking activities. In that sense, they can implicitly introduce new information, ensure students' engagement, and maintain a positive atmosphere to help the activity along. Providing feedback is the third role. Ultimately, knowing when and how to give feedback is the key agent in any speaking activity [13]. Thus, overcorrection can negatively affect students and decrease their willingness to accomplish the tasks. Helpful and implicit correction, on the other hand, positively develops students' awareness about the treated mistakes [14].

### **2.5. Communicative Competence**

Speaking encompasses a variety of skills which are grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies. These competencies are embraced in communicative competence. Communicative competence is a term coined by Hymes in 1972. It emerges as a reaction to Chomsky's view of the theory of language. This view implies that linguistic competence is all that a learner needs in acquiring language. Competence in the chomskyan's view is regarded "as an ideal speaker-hearer, who masters

the system of the language, who does not display performance variables as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interests, errors and hesitation phenomena" [3]. On this view, Hymes argues that Chomsky's theory does not account for the social and functional rules of language. He suggests that learning a second language does not only rely on mastering the rules of grammar, but also the ability to know how to communicate using those rules. Consequently, the term communicative competence comes into existence. In Hymes' view, communicative competence is "that aspect of our competence that enables us to convey and interpret messages and to negotiate meanings interpersonally within specific contexts" [3].

In 1980, Canale and Swain suggest that communicative competence has four main components. These components are divided into two categories; one deals with the linguistic system, the grammatical, and discourse competencies, and the other deals with the functional aspects of communication, the sociolinguistic, and the strategic competencies [3].

### **2.5.1. Grammatical Competence**

Grammatical competence goes beyond the recognition and the mastery of the grammatical rules to include the ability to use them correctly. In this context, Canale and Swain (1980, 1981) denote that grammatical competence consists of knowledge of lexis and morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar, semantics, and phonology. In other words, grammar is that language in which a learner needs to master its rules and can use them accurately in specific situations.

### **2.5.2. Discourse Competence**

Discourse competence focuses on intersentential relationships. It addresses the relation existing between words, utterances, and phrases that form a text. It tends to relate sentences with each other to form a meaningful text. On this view, Brown (2007) refers to discourse competence as "the ability to connect sentences [...] and to form meaningful whole out of a series utterances." (p. 220). This means that discourse competence deals with larger language units including paragraphs, conversations, etc. Applied to language learning, to achieve language proficiency, a learner has to know how to construct meaningful conversations by relating coherent sentences to form a holistic meaning.

### **2.5.3. Sociolinguistic Competence**

Sociolinguistic competence is the ability to know how to use language appropriately, the roles of the speakers, and the function of the interaction in different social contexts. This means that a learner who possesses this type of competence will be able to differentiate between the types of language; formal and/ or informal, used in different situations with different addressees.

### **2.5.4. Strategic Competence**

Canale and Swain (1980) claim that strategic competence refers to communication strategies: verbal or non-verbal that are used to compensate for insufficient language competence or some performance variables (p. 30 as cited in Brown, 2007, p. 220). Students can make use of the communication strategies whenever they feel lost, uncertain about a sentence structure, fail to say what they exactly know, etc. Similarly, Widdowson (1978) has claimed that body language is also one of the prerequisites that any speaker needs to possess. Taking into account that speaking is no longer associated with the aural-oral medium, he has pinpointed that "the act of speaking involves not only the production of sounds but also the use of gestures, the movements of the muscles of the face, and indeed of the whole body" (p. 59).

### **2.5.5. Speaking Strategies**

Harmer (2007) has suggested a variety of conversational strategies that speakers, specifically learners, can use to make their face-to-face interaction (conversation, dialogues) successful. These conversational strategies are; *conversational rules and structure*, *survival and repair strategies*, and *real talk* (pp. 343-344). First, the conversational structure includes four main stages: conversational openings, interrupting, topic shift, and closing. Second, survival and repair strategies keep a conversation going. They are mostly used by the listener in the interaction situation. Such strategies embody asking for repetition or clarification politely. Third, real talk involves engaging learners in spontaneous interactions in the classroom as in real life. Harmer (2007) has claimed that these strategies develop students' conversational skills especially when they are presented in an authentic language classroom context.

Likewise, Brown and Yule (1983) have stated that "the speaker uses the resources of pausing and, to a lesser extent, intonation, to mark out for the listener which parts of his speech need to be co-interpreted" (p. 4). These refer to strategies that learners should use as well. It can be deduced that a good speaker possesses a wide repertoire of such strategies that enable him/her to achieve successful interaction.

## **2.6. Speaking Activities**

There are six types of classroom speaking performance that students can engage in. These categories are: imitative, intensive, responsive, transactional, interpersonal, and extensive [2].

### **2.6.1. Imitative**

In imitative classroom activities, the focus is not on meaningful interaction, but rather on studying language elements, separately. Students are usually exposed to authentic listening materials such as native speaker recordings. In doing so, students are supposed to imitate what they hear and pinpoint a certain vowel sound. Drilling also plays an effective role in imitative classroom speaking tasks. It, hereby, provides students with the ability to listen and repeat orally the grammatical and phonological language forms in question. Taking into account that drillings rely on repetition, they should be short, simple, controlled, limited, and comprehensive for learners.

### **2.6.2. Intensive**

Intensive speaking surpasses imitation to include any speaking performance to practice phonological or grammatical language forms. In other words, students practice intensive speaking by focusing on words or sentences instead of one specific sound. This type of performance can be practiced either individually or in pairs.

### **2.6.3. Responsive**

Students' participation in the classroom is mainly responsive. Simply put, responsive speaking takes the form of responding to students' and teachers' questions and comments. This type of response does not include any kind of information exchange. Consequently, responsive practice does not extend to dialogue as it only offers replies to the teachers' questions.

### **2.6.4. Transactional**

Transactional speaking goes beyond being a responsive practice. The transactional practice has a negotiated nature based on conveying and exchanging information in a form of dialogue. This type of classroom speaking performance can be carried out either in pairs or in group work.

### **2.6.5. Interpersonal**

Instead of transmitting facts and information, interpersonal practice tends to maintain social relationships. Taking this fact into consideration, interpersonal dialogues seem to be more complicated for students to decipher due to the use of slang, colloquial language, or ellipses. However, such type of authentic practices in the classroom enables learners to use language in its real context and, therefore, lead to improving learners' fluency.

### **2.6.6. Extensive**

Intermediate and advanced levels' learners are requested to deliver extended monologues namely speeches, reports, or summaries formally.

## **3. Conclusion**

The main objective of this paper was to review speaking about language instruction. Given such an account, speaking has been viewed as a tool to communicate, think, and learn a language. Through speaking, learners can widen their vocabulary, learn concepts, and express their ideas fluently. Communicative competence has been perceived as a vital language asset that enables learners to achieve language proficiency. This review has also shed light on the vital role of the instructor in developing or boosting learners' social-emotional learning. These roles vary according to the types of speaking activities adopted and depend on the objective of each speaking activity. The paper has also provided different types of speaking activities that teachers can make use of to diversify their teaching mode and style.

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