

The Practice of Teaching Speaking Skills: the case of three Secondary Schools in Gedeo Zone, Ethiopia

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Abstract: The primary purpose of this study was to explore the practice of teaching speaking skill in selected secondary schools in Gedeo Zone, Ethiopia. To achieve this objective, the research used descriptive survey research design. The participants of the study consist of 11 (9 male, 2 female) secondary school teachers and 272 grade 9 students. Questionnaire, interview and classroom observation were the data collection tools. The data analysis, interpretation and discussion of the findings indicated the practice of teaching speaking skill depends on few interactive activities named group discussion; brainstorming and pair work with little follow up discussion on the side of the teachers. The balance between the accuracy and fluency aspect of speaking skills lacks equilibrium with more emphasis placed on accuracy practice. The factors that challenge the practice of teaching speaking skill include large class size, use of mother tongue during discussions, inhibition and fear of making mistake on the side of the students and shortage of practice time.

Keywords: Speaking skill, Speaking, teaching speaking, secondary school, Ethiopia, fluency

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I. INTRODUCTION

In Ethiopia, English language plays vital role in the education system beginning from grade one up to tertiary level. It is a compulsory subject from grade one onwards and a medium of instruction starting from grade nine throughout the education system of the country. As mentioned in the Education and Training Policy of the country, it is again one of the fields of study in tertiary level education (ETP, 1994). Moreover, as indicated in (MoE, 2005:1), "English is a corner stone in the development of Ethiopia's commerce, communication systems, technology and education". Furthermore, English language plays a significant role in the socioeconomic and political system of the country. It is a means of communication in a number of governmental and non-governmental organizations. In this regard, a study by Abebe (1997) confirmed that selected governmental organizations, Banks, Insurance corporations, Hospitals and Airline are using English for their communication with both local and international customers.

However, regardless of these social, economic, political and educational functions of the language, there is a claim that asserts Ethiopian students and teachers are poor in their English language proficiency. The problem is getting worse over time and the younger students are getting even worst in their English. It is common to hear complaints of teachers that students' English language proficiency is terribly low although there is again an equal dissatisfaction of students about their teachers' proficiency in English language. Most teachers do not feel confident in their English and fail to use it effectively for instruction. It is a normally observed phenomenon that teachers frequently shift to a local language during instruction while English is the medium of instruction. At the same time, students code switch to Amharic and other local languages during conversation or in group discussions in class (Abenga, 2005; Gudu, 2010). The study by Hailom and Woldu (1998) explained that having passed through several years of learning English beginning from primary grades up to higher levels of learning, subject teachers are found to be deficient in their mastery of English language, and this problem applies to English language teachers too. Of course, the inability to express oneself in English isn't limited only to Ethiopia. It is becoming a common problem among countries where English is taught as a foreign language. Consequently, majority of high school graduates cannot speak English language properly (Alonso, 2014; Alharbi, 2015).

There are various problem associated with the problem indicated above. For example, Haregewain (1993) stated the teaching methods as factors among others. She pointed out that Ethiopia public schools practice teaching speaking skill traditionally and emphasizing on the mastery of grammar rules. This kind of practices, however, doesn't allow the students to practice the language as means of communication. The same

practice persists in Gedeo Zone secondary schools where this study was carried out. However, the nature and causes of the problems were not expected to have identical futures.

Therefore, studying the issue in secondary schools, where the use of English language as a medium of instruction would start helps to explore the practice of teaching speaking skills. That was the intent of this study.

Purpose of the study

The objective of teaching and learning a foreign language is to achieve an effective communication in the target language at the end of the day. And for communication to happen, speaking is the most frequently used mode of communication by its very nature. For instance Ur (1996, p. 120), states that “of all the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), speaking seems intuitively the most important.” She adds that classroom tasks that develop learners’ ability to express themselves orally are, therefore, an important component of language course. The primary motivation to learn a foreign language is also probably to be able to converse with the language for communication purpose (Oradee, 2012; Achmad, D. & Yusuf, 2014). In the same vein Mede, Cosgun & Atay, (2019) stated that the ability to speak a language is regarded as the most important skill because speech is the backbone of human communication. However, in relation to the teaching of speaking skill, the extent to which the interactional approach to teaching speaking skills has been adopted by classroom teachers remains under researched (Marlina, 2018). The stern limitation of using language for communication at a desirable level of accuracy and fluency has also resulted mainly from ineffective teaching techniques and learning strategies in schools. The same problem persists in the Ethiopian context, experience shows the performance of students to express themselves orally is declining from time to time over the last decades. This led the researcher to explore the existing reality in the practice of teaching speaking skill in sample schools.

Research Questions

The main objective of the study was to explore the practice of teaching speaking skills in three secondary schools in Gedeo Zone, Ethiopia. The following questions led the study:

1. What techniques do teachers employ to present speaking skill lessons?
2. To what extent the accuracy and fluency aspects of speaking skills are balanced in the course of teaching speaking skill?
3. What are the impediments, which hinder the practice of teaching speaking skill in classrooms?

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Generally speaking, the practice of teaching in a classroom setting have to keep in mind the fact that we have a mixed class where there are varied abilities, expectations, motivation, background, knowledge and learning styles. In teaching speaking skill we need much more consideration on such differences among our students because the development of speaking skill requires the development of the different aspects of the language. In this regard Spratt, Pulverness and Williams (2005:35) state that “teaching speaking means developing learners’ speaking skills by focusing regularly on particular aspects of speaking (fluency, pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, and body language)”. Teaching the above mentioned aspects of speaking skill is not an easy task. It requires engagement in lots of practical activities where learners are the main actors under the guidance of the teacher in order to help the students grow as effective as possible in using the target language for communication purpose. In line with this idea Brown and Yule (1983) say that the purpose of teaching speaking is to enable students to express their ideas and to engage in communication endeavor comprehensibly. However, in the process of teaching speaking skill, there are lots of challenges that the teacher face in their day to day practice. For instance, the exposure the students have for the target language is almost none in countries where English is taught as a foreign language. Exposing learners to the target language artificially in a classroom setting for a single period of 45 minutes in a day takes long term for the students learning. To maximize the students learning in such situations using Engage, Study, and Activate (ESA), a model suggested by Harmer (1998), is one teaching models that can help motivate students to get involved actively in the teaching learning process within the given time and to encourage learnersto practice even outside the classroom setting. The suggestion by Willis (1996) is important here. In order for the students to be motivated there are certain principles that teachers should follow according to argument of Willis. In the first place teachers have to make sure that the students are exposed to the target language within the available time. Secondly, provision of opportunities for learners where they can use the language for authentic communication is helpful. In Willis’s argument the third principle that teachers have to consider is motivating students to engage in the learning process from the start to the end of classes. To summarize the main points, exposure to the target language, using the target language and motivating learners in the learning process are the three essentials for successful language learning. Explaining the same issue Richards and Rodgers (2001) further elaborated that exposure, use and motivation cannot be used effectively in isolation in our teaching practice. One without the others, or even two, might not be enough for successful language learning engagement.

Fluency vs Accuracy

In the practice of teaching speaking skill one of the challenges of many teachers is balancing the fluency and accuracy aspect of the language. In this regard Lindahl (2018) argued

“...pedagogical decision that teachers need to make when designing and selecting tasks for teaching speaking to beginners is how to balance *accuracy* (i.e., being able to create utterances and pronounce words relatively error-free) and *fluency*, (i.e., being able to speak in a fluid manner to convey meaning). It is important to provide feedback to students so they understand when they have made an error and what they might do to correct it” (pp.2).

Therefore, it is always mandatory for teachers to thoroughly consider the balance between these two aspects of speaking skill in their practice. The imbalance between fluency and accuracy affects the language development of learners. Because the fluency as the ability to express oneself in an intelligible and reasonable way without too much hesitation is very important as the ability to use the language as accurate as possible without too much errors.

III. METHODS

Research Design

The aim of this study was to assess the practice of teaching speaking skills in three secondary schools, grade 9 in particular. For such purpose of exploring the situation as it happens descriptive survey design involving both qualitative and quantitative techniques is helpful. Sharma (2000) describes that a descriptive survey is helpful to identify present conditions and point to present needs.

Research Setting

The site of this study was in Gedeo Zone. It is one of the Zonal administrations in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNPR) of Ethiopia. The study focused on three secondary schools in this Zone.

The Subjects

The research was conducted on a sample of eleven (9 male and 2 female) Grade 9 English language teachers from Dilla, Yirgacheffe and Chelektu High Schools. In these three secondary schools, according to the information obtained from the principals, these eleven teachers were assigned to teach English language in Grade 9. Thus, the researcher took all the available grade 9 English teachers in the sample schools as subjects of the study. The study also took 272 students from the three high schools who are studying in grade 9 using simple random sampling technique.

Data Collection Tools

The data collection instruments this study used are three. These are questionnaire, classroom observation and interview. Two sets of questionnaires (one for students and another one for teachers) were designed and administered, as a main data collection tool. The teachers' questionnaire contained both open-ended and close-ended questions; and it was divided into three parts. Part one aimed at gathering the teachers' background information. Part two of the questionnaire was intended to find out the teachers' theoretical orientations and understanding of teaching speaking skill. The last part of the teachers' questionnaire was about practice of teaching speaking skills and impediments that hamper teaching the skill in the sample schools. The students' questionnaire contained only close ended items. The study also gathered data by interviewing purposefully selected participants. The last, but not list instrument used was classroom observation. In this regard Robson (2002:310) states that "data from direct observation contrast with and can often usefully complement information obtained by virtually any other techniques". To this end, the researcher prepared classroom observation checklist and made the observation to enrich the data.

Methods of Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods of data analysis. That is to say the collected data were tabulated and simple statistical techniques—percentages and frequency distributions were used for the numerical interpretation. The data from the classroom observation was used to triangulate the data obtained through questionnaires; the data gathered classroom observation was described in connection with the data gathered through questionnaires. The data gathered through interview was narrated in a separate section. Finally, based on the findings, conclusions were made.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Theme-1: Techniques of teaching speaking skills employed by the teachers

In the practice of teaching oral skill using varieties of activities is good opportunity for the learners to practice the language in different contexts. In most cases teachers use brainstorming, discussion, debating, role play, storytelling, information gap, problem solving and presentation activities. However, the delivery style and preferences of each teacher was distinct and is limited to few common activities. The data collected in this study depicts the same reality as shown in the table below.

Students' response on the activities of teaching speaking skills their teachers use

Table 1

No	Items	No. Resp.	Responses in Percentage and Frequency									
			Never		Rarely		Sometimes		Usually		Always	
			F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1	Brainstorming	272	14	5.2	17	6.3	40	14.7	93	34	108	39.7
2	Group discussion	272	3	1.1	7	2.5	35	12.8	104	38.2	123	45.2
3	Role play	272	48	17.6	43	15.8	83	30.5	58	21.3	40	14.7
4	Pair work	272	27	9.9	18	6.6	32	11.7	103	37.8	92	33.8
5	Problem solving	272	78	28.7	90	33	57	20.9	29	10.7	18	6.6
6	Storytelling	272	81	29.8	74	27.2	62	22.8	31	11.4	24	8.8
7	Presentation	272	10	3.6	22	8	118	43.3	75	27.5	45	16.5
8	Debating	272	88	32.4	101	37.1	34	12.5	30	11	19	6.9

As shown in the table, the most widely used classroom activities for teaching speaking skill included *group discussion* which was confirmed by 83.4% of the students, *brainstorming* (73.7%) and *pair work* (71.6%). Other activities that are sometimes used include *presentation* (44%) and *role plays* (36%), whereas *problem solving*, *storytelling* and *debating* are the list used activities in the classrooms under study. The data obtained through classroom observation again indicated that the teachers spend the class times for discussion in pairs and in small groups with little instructions and support. This finding accords with a study by (Gudu, 2015) who argued that discussion the mostly used teaching activity teachers like to use in their teaching practice. It is could be argued that discussion is interactive and good way to engage students in their learning so that students can practice speaking the language. However, the data obtained from the observation indicated students use their mother tongue instead of English during discussion times which is very difficult to manage in classes where there are more than 50 students sit.

Teachers' response on their preferred activities of teaching speaking skills

The sample teachers' response to same question as that of the students resulted in more or less the same answers. 8 of the 11 teachers indicated that they would like to engage their students in group discussions believing that this gives them the opportunity to practice the language purposefully. 2 of the teachers think presentation helps students to practice the language in a more natural setting and favor it in their classroom practice whereas one of the teachers response shows pair work and role play are the classroom activities in use

most of the time. These responses of the teachers are not far different from the responses of the students. The observation data also proved that discussion is what the teachers do in most of the observed classes.

Theme-2: Response on the balance between accuracy and fluency

Speaking a language involves using the components correctly – making the right sounds, choosing the right words and getting constructions grammatically correct. Pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary tasks will focus on the need for practice in language accuracy. At the same time, we also need to get a clear message across without long pauses and difficulties to put our feelings or ideas in words that suit a situation. This involves practice in language fluency. Both types of practice seem to be equally important, although some traditional approaches concentrate rather too much on accuracy tasks which result in students speaking like a grammar book. Below is the students’ response about the balance between fluency and accuracy in their classrooms. See table 2 below.

Table 2: Students’ Response

No	Items	No. Resp.	Responses in Percentage and Frequency									
			Never		Rarely		Sometimes		Usually		Always	
			F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1	Pronunciation	272	49	18	77	28.3	102	37.5	33	12.1	11	4
2	Vocabulary	272	3	1.1	9	3.3	39	14.3	114	41.9	118	43.4
3	Grammar	272	4	1.5	3	1.1	83	30.5	98	36	84	30.9
4	Fluency	272	7	2.6	42	14.4	101	37.1	116	42.6	6	2.2

Pertaining to the balance between the accuracy and fluency aspects of speaking skills, table 2 presents the frequency and percentage of the students’ response on how often pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and fluency are practiced in the teaching of speaking skills in the classroom. Accordingly, when responding to how often pronunciation is practiced in their classroom 37.5% of the student respondents reported that pronunciation is practiced sometimes in their classes. The other 28.3% reported that pronunciation is rarely part of their classroom practice.

As far as vocabulary is concerned, 85.3% of the student respondents reported that their teachers frequently emphasize the teaching and testing of vocabulary in English classes. Only few students mention vocabulary as infrequent classroom practice. Similarly, the majority of the student respondents, 66.9% reported grammar is their usual classroom practice in their attempt to learn speaking skill whereas 30.5% respondents claimed that they do grammar in their speaking classes sometimes.

Likewise, all of the teachers (11 teachers) reported that vocabulary is one of the frequently practiced components of speaking skills in teaching practice. Moreover, the classroom observation showed that in most of the observed sessions the teachers tried to integrate vocabulary in their practice of teaching speaking skills. This was done focusing on commonly used expressions or useful expressions and important phrases given on the blackboard. The teachers write the words and expressions board so that the students practice on it. This classroom practice shows the teachers concern for accuracy more than that of fluency. Their engagement in controlled and guided activities dominates throughout the lesson. The teaching practice undervalues fluency as compared to the accuracy aspect as indicated by the student respondents as well. See table 2 above.

Student’s response on what impeded their practice of learning speaking skills

Table 3

No	Items	No. Resp.	Responses in Percentage and Frequency									
			SDA		Disagree		Undecided		Agree		SA	
			F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1	Inhibition	272	20	7.4	31	11.4	84	30.9	76	27.9	61	22.4
2	Lack of interest	272	94	34.6	107	39.3	36	13.2	24	8.8	11	4.0
3	Uneven participation	272	10	3.7	6	2.2	65	23.9	88	32.4	103	37.9
4	Large class size	272	8	2.9	16	5.9	45	16.5	111	40.8	92	33.8
5	Use of mother	272	17	6.3	9	3.3	51	18.8	221	44.5	74	27.2

Normally, teaching speaking skills requires significant participation of students in every classroom activity for the teaching learning process to take place, but as it is depicted in table 3 above, inhibition (fear & shyness) of students emerged as a serious constraint challenging their practice of learning speaking skills. Statistically, 50.3% of the respondents admitted shyness and fear of making mistake is inhibiting their participation in classroom activities whereas 30.9% respondents remain with doubt. However, the students' indicated in their response that they are interested in learning and developing their speaking skills. On the other hand, large class size remains a problem as shown by 74.6% of the respondents. This in turn created a classroom environment where few active students dominate the majority less active students during class discussion as reported by 70.3% student respondents.

On the side of teachers, 4 of them reported students' lack of interest as serious problem, and they mention the students' use of mother tongue during classroom discussions as evidence; but the other 7 teachers couldn't take students' lack of interest as a serious problem. Rather they considered serious the case in which few students dominate the classroom discussion and participation. However, all the teachers reported that class size is a serious problem in their context where there is a minimum of 50 students per class.

Presentation and analysis of data obtained through Interview

The analysis of data gathered through interview from purposefully selected student and teacher participants have shown consistent results with the findings presented above. The interview made with the students indicated that the teachers use activities of teaching speaking skills like discussion, debate, brainstorming, dialogue and presentation frequently. The teachers also confirmed that the activities of teaching speaking skills they use are student-centered, primarily focusing on discussions and debate, brainstorming, dialogue. Interviewees also confirmed that they spend much time focusing on the structural aspects of the language- grammar and vocabulary are their day to day classroom practice. In countries like Ethiopia where the teaching of English language is mainly confined in classroom context, focusing only on the accuracy aspects of the language learning affects the communicative skills of the learners. The teachers' interview implies the problem is deep-rooted because the teachers themselves were taught in the same fashion. Therefore, it won't be an easy task to solve such problems in the education system. The problem in teaching practice is a reflection of the ways the teachers themselves were trained and pass through.

In their interview about the problems they faced in the learning process of speaking skills, the students mainly raised their own fear of making mistake and shyness. In addition to this, the students pointed out that their teachers don't motivate them to get involved in the classroom activities. They also mentioned lack of practice time as a problem challenging their learning. The teachers were also asked about the problems that impeded the classroom practice of teaching speaking skills. According to their interview response, students' poor language background, mother tongue use, lack of motivation to participate in the classroom activities and uneven participation are the major problems faced in teaching of speaking skills.

V. CONCLUSION

Teaching speaking as a Foreign Language holds several challenges for teachers, nevertheless, careful planning and the use of active learning activities can make teaching speaking possible (Safargalina, 2018; Macknish & Tomas, 2018). As shown in the finding of this study, the activities used for teaching speaking skill are mostly interactive (discussion, pair work and brainstorming), but very much limited in variety. Instead teachers have to employ more varied activities that enhance engagement of learners in real communication and where learners get ample opportunity for practice. Thus providing students with opportunities for interaction and the negotiation of meaning can impact language proficiency (Braden, 2018). However, the teachers focus only on certain types of activities namely discussion, brainstorming and pair work bounds the opportunities the students could experience via using other interactive activities (Dejong, 2014; Nunan, 2018). A Study conducted by Karim & Richards, (2015) in the Iranian context also reported similar case of using discussion for teaching speaking skill over the other activities. Although discussion is an interactive activity for fostering speaking skill, this study agree using different types of activity would benefit students to experience and to practice the language in a meaningful context. In addition to this, absence of teacher follow up during discussion also limited students' benefit from the activities. For example, in the context of this study, teachers didn't give students specific roles, such as scribe, presenter, leader and reader. This affects the most valuable benefits of interactive speaking tasks is the principle of collaboration, which features the components of positive interdependence and individual accountability of students and this finding is in line with a arguments of Christison & Murray (2014) and Braden (2018), who value the role of each students in group discussion.

The balance between accuracy and fluency is also crucial for teachers when teaching speaking skills. The study depicted the dominance of accuracy practice over fluency. Researchers, however, emphasize the importance of keeping the balance between fluency and accuracy because successful speaking requires more

than being able to produce a comprehensible utterance (Nunan, 2018). These two dimensions of language teaching are not separable. Emphasizing one and ignoring the other affects the overall speaking performance of the students. Similarly, a research by Leonard & Shea (2017) also reported that there is positive correlation between fluency and accuracy; and these dimensions of speaking ability all develop together.

Regarding the challenges that impeded the practice of teaching and learning speaking skills, large class size, student' poor language background, use of mother tongue during discussions, inhibition and students' fear of making mistakes and shortage of practice time are found to be major obstruction in the context of Ethiopian secondary schools.

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