Speaking in ELT Pedagogy in the Context of Bangladesh: An Overview of Problems and Recommendations

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In this paper, I have endeavoured to review some issues and strategies encompassed within the speaking pedagogy in ELT and consider their application in the context of classroom teaching of speaking skill in Bangladesh, where some pitfalls are frequently encountered such as learner's shyness to speak in English, his ineluctable mental habit of thinking in Bangla and translating them in English, insufficiency of need-based English courses, a felt absence of an enhancing environment for the promotion of this particular skill both inside and outside the classroom. Keeping these issues in perspective, the theoretical review is followed by an analysis of the prevalent scenario in Bangladesh, some problems inherent in the psychological and institutional dimensions that make the implementation of the skill difficult. The essay is concluded with contemplation on some new points of departure from the already established practices of the day with some suggestion for new measures that hopefully will impart to the teaching of the speaking skill far greater scope and success.

Key Words: Pedagogy, communicative competence, learner's shyness, teacher talking time, student talking time, simulation
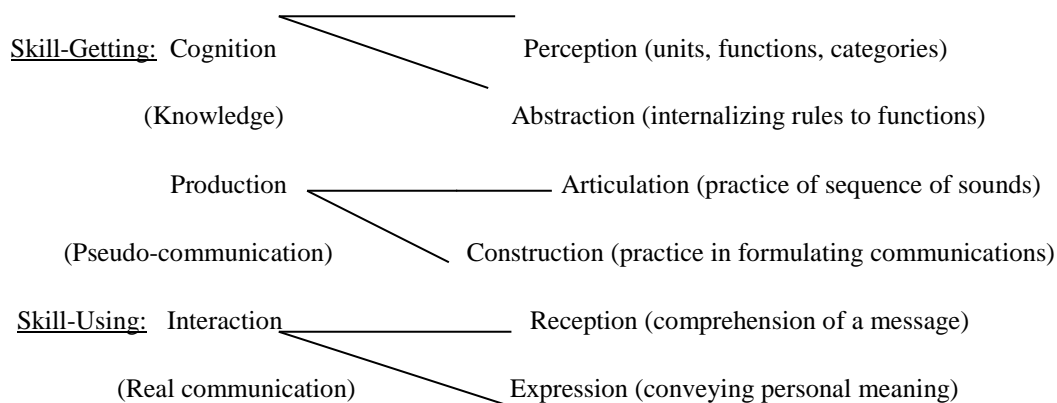
Introduction

Speaking as one of the two productive skills requires a very special treatment with regard to the teaching and practising of it within ELT pedagogy. This treatment should be highly focussed and should address some of the perennial issues underlying the scenario of general failure in the practice and teaching of this particular skill in Bangladesh. Any approach to this skill, based within the parameter set by the competence theories and theories of communicative values of speaking has the potentiality to yield effective results. It is also important to keep the approach allied with the recent trends and innovations in ELT that have seen the transference of emphasis from the teacher cantered approach to learner centred approach that ensures maximum exposure of learners to a variety of creative tasks, routines, role-playing, improvisations and help them internalise the values of spontaneity and immediacy so integral to this skill. Moreover, an approach which reviews the cultural disposition of the learners, their areas of sensitivity sympathetically and incorporate those observations in a theorised framework will have a greater chance to be met with resounding success than one without it. Keeping these in mind, I have been moved to carry out an independent research to find out a suitable method in ELT pedagogy in speaking. Realizing that English is fast gaining in scope and eminence as an important second language in Bangladesh, it is not enough, I believe, to approach speaking through angles of conventional theories. That is why, while I have used classical theories as paradigmatic limit, I have also stressed on the continuous assessment of learner's need, orientation of cultural values and the importance of customized teaching tasks often incongruent with the classical theories but profoundly relevant vis-à-vis our socio-political limitations and manifold inhibitions. This paper, therefore, avoids making any solid entrenched prescriptive method to speaking but tries an innovative and improvisatory approach to it to see how successfully it can be implemented in our context.

Theoretical Perspective of Speaking

Successful speaking is the integration of language (sound, lexis, and structure), social knowledge and strategies of communication. In order to be a good speaker, a learner needs to transfer his knowledge to actual use that means "skill-getting to skill-using". He also needs to be flexible in communication in terms of interpersonal interaction---adjust language, sharing turns or remaining silent. There is a framework proposed by Rivers and Temperley (1978) which shows and outlines the ideas of skill-getting and skill-using where they point out that there is a gap between skill-getting and skill-using and those pseudo-communication activities would be ideal in bridging that gap. The framework is given below:

Skill-Getting: Cognition   Perception (units, functions, categories)

(Knowledge)   Abstraction (internalizing rules to functions)

Production   Articulation (practice of sequence of sounds)

(Pseudo-communication)   Construction (practice in formulating communications)

Skill-Using: Interaction   Reception (comprehension of a message)

(Real communication)   Expression (conveying personal meaning)

Rivers and Temperley (1978) make the point that there is a goal to be kept in mind when activities are selected in that students are to be able to interact freely with others regarding understanding what others want to communicate and to be able to communicate information or ideas which they wish to share with others and in order to do this second language learners need to understand how the English language works and to be able to use the language system.

In recent years, communicative language teaching and learning has become a salient feature in ESL/EFL contexts across many countries. And the adult learners, especially in the target language situation directly benefit from the use of communicative skills. . From the practical perspective speaking strategy is one of the most important aspects in dealing with communication skills, particularly in second or foreign language situation, as it enhances learners' confidence and fluency. The communicative approach implicitly encourages learners to take greater responsibility for their own learning and to use a wide range of language learning strategies.Speaking is a prime medium of communication. Therefore speaking skill is connected with the view of communicative competence. Hymes's (1972) theory of communicative competence is a definition of what a speaker needs to know in order to be communicatively competent in a speech community. In Hymes's view, a person who acquires communicative competence acquires both knowledge and ability for language use. When we teach speaking, we need to focus on some characteristics of this communicative view of language which are given below:

- Language is a system for the expression of meaning.
- The primary function of language is to allow interaction and communication.
- The structure of language reflects its functional and communicative uses.
- The primary units of language are not merely its grammatical and structural features, but

categories of functional and communicative meaning as exemplified in discourse.

The implications of these points are quite evident-when speaking skill is aimed at the maximisation of the benefits of the communicative competence; it has to take into account both discursive and functional dimensions of language. While the discursive dimension pertains to the social and cultural knowledge of the language, the functional one deals with a set of strategies and devices that a speaker deploys while facing the contingencies of speaking such as time- constraint, contextual adjustment, anticipation, compulsory reciprocation etc. The theoretical aspect of speaking is notably underpinned by Bygate (1987, 3) who views speaking as revolving around two fundamental components- production and interaction. While making the oral production, the speaker undergoes the process of either 'facilitation' or 'compensation', both of which requiring the speaker to use adjustive tools to the context such as simplifying structures, formulaic expression, ellipsis, fillers, hesitation devices or self correction etc. However, the objectives of the facilitative and compensatory devices are to lend a sense of ease to the oral production and make the speaker feel at home about the task of speech delivery. The interactional component within speaking focuses on the aspect of good communication and the management of the communication by which the message is made explicit and understandable to the listener. The theoretical component, according to Bygate, includes therefore, two features- routines and negotiation. The routines aim at shaping the conversation with comprehensive patterns such as description, comparison, instruction, whereas negotiation introduces choice of the topic or involves the turn-taking between the speaker and listener. The view that speaking is sophisticated skill depending on synthesis of certain necessary factors for successful operation is also upheld by Harmer (2001) who thinks that the success of speaking, among all other skills, is directly contingent upon the knowledge of language teaching and the ability to process information on

the spot, which means the speaker's social perception and his instant mental reflex to it. What is important here is that he, like Bygate, stresses on the need for the management and negotiation of language through discreet measures like connected speech, expressive devices and suggests, thereby, a consistent programmatic approach in teaching speaking skill in ELT pedagogy.

It can be observed here that what Harmer and Bygate prescribe for the efficacy of the teaching and learning of the speaking skill- discursive awareness of language and access to well-thought out strategies- gets a generalised exposition in Canale and Swain's(1980) four dimensions of communicative competence- grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence. While these four dimensions set out formal scopes and objectives for all four skills to aim at, speaking logically deserves to be treated with special attention than the rest for the element of urgency involved in it. Hence, it explains the fact that teaching and learning of speaking skill, when oriented to the inclusive sense of competence, constitute one of the arduous tasks in the whole range of ELT pedagogy and entails the necessity of having the logistical and instrumental facility in place for performing, practising and administering this skill.

The Present Situation of Teaching "Speaking" in our Country

In Bangladesh, since the introduction of communicative language teaching to different levels of education, where English is taught as a compulsory subject, the listening and speaking skills are neither seriously taught nor formally tested. Communicative language teaching is based on the inductive method of teaching which gives importance on the process of communication. Local teachers, however, resort to deductive methods that focus on grammatical structure of sentences without paying much attention to any sort of genuine communication. What is clear from the theories of communicative competence, on which the concept of CLT is based, is the success of the integration of the genuine function and usage of the language by the students. But in Bangladesh, the vast majority of students have no scope to use the language outside the classroom and teachers' reluctance and the absence of provision for a speaking component in the examination system, make genuine usage negligible. In the perspective of Bangladesh, most of the teachers are not fully aware of the ways and the media their students prefer to learn for speaking. It is undeniably true that, in most cases, language teachers are not perceptive of the following problems for a language learner in Speaking:
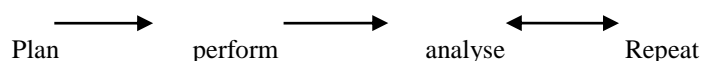
- Shyness of the learner
- Pronunciation: students are worried about mistakes
- Lack of practice and opportunities
- Limited vocabulary and syntax
- Influence of Grammar Translation method: students are over conscious of Grammar
- Low or uneven participation
- Use of mother tongue
- Lack of training environment
- Insufficient knowledge of target language.

Even if some are a bit aware of them, they hardly pay or have little scope to pay attention to it, which naturally leads to the failure of the instructional program to attain its general as well as specific goals and objectives. Traditionally, our teaching system is exam- oriented. There is a conflict between the curricula and the examination system regarding the speaking and listening skills. Although these are integral and vital parts of the communicative approach, there is no provision for testing them in the examination system. These result in lack of motivation in acquiring these skills. Nearly all English classrooms in the public sector in Bangladesh are overcrowded and often have as many as 130 students in them. This makes the communicative activities impossible. The lack of audio-visual equipments and basic materials need to be noticed also. The duration of the class often does not last more than 45 minutes and this contact time is hardly enough for effective communicative activities. One very common scenario in Bangladesh is that teachers can start teaching without any formal training. In addition to this factor, very limited in-service training programmes are offered to teachers. Also, local teachers have little opportunity to develop and update their linguistic knowledge and teaching skills. Although the CLT approach has been launched in language classroom, a large number of teachers do not fully comprehend the concepts of communicative competence and CLT. Coupled with inadequate awareness of Canale and swain's (1980) four dimensions of communicative competence, there is only a partial implementation of them. What is evidenced is a disproportionately larger emphasis on grammatical competence, while other three areas of competence are hardly approached with equal eagerness and figure less prominently in tasks for the teaching of speaking. A speaking class in Bangladesh is lamentably short of creativity and improvisation which are very essential for stimulating learners into meaningful interaction with teachers. Instead of being learner-centred, classroom activities are governed by the solo performance of the teacher, who spends the lion share of the time talking himself. Lack of efforts to minimise TTT (teacher talking time) and maximise STT (student talking time) eventually results in the general failure of the speaking

classroom and in the gradual atrophying of the enthusiasm in learners. One very negative impact of this one- directional approach to speaking is that the learner at one point start to associate classroom with boredom and a phase comes when he completely withdraws from the speaking tasks. This scenario is quite endemic in Bangladesh, where teaching of speaking skill is concerned and the problems remain unresolved.

Recommendations

From my two years of teaching experience in EFL classroom, it appears to me that Students are often reluctant to speak because they are shy and are not predisposed to expressing themselves in the front of other people, especially when they are being asked to give personal information or opinions. Frequently, too, there is a worry about speaking badly and therefore losing face in front of the classmates. In such situations there are a number of things we can do help. Wilson (2005) is describing the value of planning and rehearsal for speaking success, students, too, will perform much better if they have the chance to think about what they are going to say and how to say it, or it may mean letting them practise dialogues in pairs before having to do anything to do more public. At the initial stage of speaking activity, sometimes repetition works even better if students get a chance to analyse what they have already done. This analysis may come from fellow students or fellow teacher, but if they get a chance to evaluate what they have done-or at least get feedback about it- their performance second and third time round can only get better. Paul Howarth (2001a) describes this as process speaking, characterised by the following pattern:

Plan $\longrightarrow$ perform $\longrightarrow$ analyse $\longleftrightarrow$ Repeat

Besides this, the language teachers should ensure a classroom of successful speaking activity where students will be active participants and self motivated. Classroom discussion is not to be dominated by minority of talkative participants. We should manage a classroom where all get a chance to speak, and their contributions need to be appreciated. Learners express themselves in utterances that are relevant, easily comprehensible to each other, and of an acceptable level of language accuracy.

Jeremy Harmer (1991) suggests some classroom activities for speaking that can be followed in a language classroom:

- *Acting from a script:* we can act our students to act out scenes from plays and their course books, sometimes recording the results. Students will often act out dialogues they have written themselves.
- *Playscripts:* it is important that when they are working on plays or playscripts, they should treat it as 'real' acting. In other words, we need to help them to go through the scripts as if we were theatre directors, drawing attention to appropriate stress, intonation and speed. By giving students practice in these things before they give their final performances, we ensure that acting out is both a learning and language producing activity. According to Mark Almond (2005), "Quite apart from the benefits for pronunciation and general language use, drama also helps to build students confidence, contextualise students, develop students empathy for other characters, involve students in appropriate problem solving and engage them as 'whole' person.
- *Communication games*: there are many communication games like information-gap games, television and radio games, all of which aim to get students talking as quickly and fluently as possible.
- *Instant comment*: another way in which we can train students to respond fluently and immediately is to insert 'instant comment' mini activities into lessons. This involves showing them photographs or introducing topics at any stage of a lesson and nominating students to say the first thing that comes into their head.
- *Unplanned discussion:* some discussion just happen in the middle of the lessons which students are not prepared for by the teacher, but, if encouraged, they can provide some of the most enjoyable and productive speaking activities in language classes.
- *Reaching a consensus:* one of the best ways of encouraging discussion is to provide activities which force students to reach a decision or a consensus, often as a result of choosing between specific alternatives.
- *Formal debate*: in a formal debate, students prepare arguments in favour or against various propositions. when the debate starts, those who are appointed as panel speakers produce well rehearsed 'writing-like' arguments, whereas others, the audience, pitch in as the debate progresses with their own (less scripted) thoughts on the subject.

- ***Simulation and role play:*** simulation and role play can be used to encourage general oral fluency or to train students for specific situations, especially where they are studying English for specific purposes. When students are doing simulations and role plays, they need to know exactly what the situation is, and they need to be given enough information about the background for them to function properly.

If we wish to achieve an optimum result from the above mentioned classroom activities, we have to follow the instructions of David Nunan on teaching speaking. In his book *"Practical English language teaching"* he (2003, ch03) talks about the principles for teaching speaking that are given below:

- Giving students practice for both fluency and accuracy.
- Providing opportunities for students to talk by using group or pair work, and limiting teacher talk.
- Planning speaking tasks that involve negotiation for meaning.
- Making a careful choice of topic and task to stimulate interest.
- Keeping students speaking the target language
- Designing classroom activities that involve guidance and practice in both transactional and interactional speaking.
- Making proper selection of appropriate material for the learner to enhance the possibility of the success of teaching speaking. A teacher should make sure that the materials are suitable for the learners' level of competence, their age and experience.

Our language teachers need to be careful about their roles in a speaking classroom. When students are involved in classroom activities, a language teacher needs to perform his duty efficiently, encouragingly and supportively. According to Breen and Candlin (1980:99), "the teacher has two main roles: the first role is to facilitate the communication process between all participants and the various activities and the texts. The second role is to act as an independent participant within the learning- teaching group". The language teacher should bear in mind that engaging learners intellectually with clear, systematic and relevant instruction will make them able to transfer their knowledge and the skills they gain from the English language classroom to the outside world. For teaching speaking, materials should be related to the needs, age and interests of learners. Topics should be related to "real life" that will include language- based 'realia', such as signs, magazines, advertisements, and newspapers, or graphic and visual sources around which activities can be built. There should be variety of activities that will cover speaking and listening skills. Littlewood (1981), talks about two types of activities: "functional communication activities" and "social interaction activities". Functional communication activities include such tasks as learners comparing sets of pictures and noting similarities and differences, working out a likely sequence of events in a set of pictures, discovering missing features in a map or pictures; following directions; and solving problems from shared clues. Social interaction activities include conversation and discussion sessions, dialogues and role plays, simulations, skits, improvisations and debates.

Negative words from the teacher can demotivate and cause substantial harm to his initiatives and enthusiasm to speak at all. For learners with unusual sensitivity of shyness, a special motivating session can be arranged; a carefully devised different routine of tasks such as planning, rehearsal can help him become regular in speaking. The teacher should be watchful about learner's disposition to use complex structures and look impressive. The use of complex structure in speaking redresses fluency and spontaneity among learners at the beginning level and retards his thought process. The teacher can encourage the learners to take to some formulaic expression – words that are considered stock in language. This strategy is meant to heighten the learner's awareness of popular use of words, while making him contestable in speaking. The learner should also be given the liberty to take back upon fillers or hesitancy devices like 'well', 'erm', 'I think', 'you know', 'if you see what I mean', and so on. These devices will help learners to manage some additional time for reflection while remaining connected to the topic. In Bangladesh, this measure can work to some realistic ends. Normally, students with hesitancy are considered bad speaker but the fact is the use of fillers and hesitancy devices are part and parcel of the speaking skill. Teacher should carefully mind the setting of tasks. The efficacy of speaking task depends on the manipulation of it for generating a 'situation' which the learners would be required to project from different perspectives or angles- description, comparison, instruction etc. This is meant to test the linguistic ability to certain limit and develop tenacity. The topic of speaking can be anything- global and local but it should be thought-provocative and engaging so that everyone gets his or her turn to speak.

It would be very premature of me to say that the measures suggested above are all that can be taken to solve the speaking problem in Bangladesh, but it can be confidently stated that the suggestions are made within a theoretical framework with sustained methodical consistency. However, methods can not be the key to success alone. In Bangladesh, the success of ELT must also count on the sincerity, cooperation and patronisation all around from the highest body of authority.

Conclusion

Although, there is a perceived need in Bangladesh for substantial improvement in the speaking component of the skills, meaningful initiatives in this field are yet to be seen for some important reasons- although ELT theories of speaking are taught at the Universities of Bangladesh with seemingly much interest, theories exclusively based on competence are not well comprehended and consequently do not get translated into a holistic practice with harmonious integration of learner's styles, teaching styles and strategies; pure academic interest for research activities in ELT constitute significant barrier to setting dynamic strategies for speaking as the concern of the researchers overwhelmingly concentrate on academic privileges and prerogatives; cultural uniqueness of Bangladesh also problematise the issues of ELT here; access to English is seen as an index to class distinction/ elitism and people living in the metropolitan centre, especially the affluent, well-to-do class have the greater exposure to English than people living in the rural area. As I have tried to show in the essay, this disharmonic gap between theory and practice must be eliminated as the first priority in the ELT pedagogy in Bangladesh; if needed, classical theories that have failed to hold relevance with the ground reality of ELT in Bangladesh must be modified for strategic success; attitudinal specifities of learners-shyness, non-receptivity, prejudice against English should be seriously considered as efforts should be made to facilitate the implementation of a learner centred approach than teacher centred one. Last but not the least, I have also emphasised on the vital institutional help with inspirational and logistical support from the highest authority that can truly make things happen in Bangladesh. So far as it has been evidenced in Bangladesh, all efforts to develop the speaking have been very academic, therefore, very formal and often very unrealistic.

They do not take into account the prevalent reality and very frustratingly fall far short of the target. Only an approach that is based on proper theoretical vision and continuously reinforced by creative contextual adjustment along with institutional exhortations from policy makers, think tanks and the relevant authority can ring in new success in this hitherto neglected skill.

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