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ISSUES IN TEACHING SPEAKING TO EFL LEARNERS

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Annotation: Speaking as a skill constitutes a real hurdle to overcome by both the teacher and the learner. In other words, the teacher has to find appropriate procedures to help the learner with while the latter has to find a way to master the language. Thus, this article attempts to highlight the concept of speaking; likewise, it tries to deal with the issues relevant to the appropriate teaching of speaking to learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) such as consciousness-raising strategies and oral error correction.

Keywords: EFL teaching, Speaking skills, Consciousness-raising

Introduction

Language is used in our daily interactions to fulfil many different goals such as communicating information, ideas, beliefs, emotions and attitudes to one another. When using language for communication, both the interlocutor and the addressee are involved in two major processes: transmitting ideas and interpreting the message produced. Thus, developing the oral skill is considered as one of the major building blocks in language
learning as it requires a combination of knowledge of the target language with skills and strategies that enable to use it effectively. This skill is also very complicated as it relies not only on the teachers' competence in promoting knowledge and giving feedback on the oral outcome but needs as well the learners' willingness and acceptance of teachers' oral correction to refine their performance.

We deal in this piece of work with the issues related to the teaching of speaking which constitutes a priority for many foreign language learners by looking at the spoken language and highlighting the contrast existing between spoken and written languages. Furthermore, we shed light on teachers' intervention to improve this skill by considering the concept of consciousness-raising, the approaches relevant to the teaching of speaking appropriately as
well as oral error corrections implemented in the language classroom.

Main part

The Oxford Pocket Dictionary of current English (2009) defines speaking as "the action ofconveying information or expressing one's thoughts and feelings in spoken language". It is considered as one of the most difficult skills in language learning besides writing, listening and reading ones. According to Tarone (2005: 485), speaking is usually viewed as "the most complex and difficult skill to master".

Thus, the basic idea in any oral interaction is that the speaker has the objective of transmitting his ideas, feelings, attitudes and information to the hearer through speech. However, in such oral communication, any faulty production may lead to mismatches and misunderstandings which could derive from lack of the target language, difference in the background knowledge and socio-cultural diversity Olshtain and Celce-Murcia.

Consequently, in order to ensure proper interpretation by the hearer, Harmer listed some elements necessary for spoken production. According to him, "the ability to speak fluently presupposes not only knowledge of language features but also the ability to process information and language 'on the spot'". Likewise, many prerequisites for speaking in another language were suggested by Celce-Murcia and Olshtain namely knowledge of vocabulary, knowledge of syntax and the ability to use discourse connectors.

In addition, speaking as a skill constitutes a real hurdle to overcome by both the teacher and the learner. In other words, the teacher has to find appropriate procedures to help the learner with while the latter has to find a way to master the language. In this context, Brown and Yule state: "Spoken language production, learning to talk in the foreign language, is often considered to be one of the most difficult aspects of language learning for the teacher to help the students with". Furthermore, Celce-Murcia and Olshtain claim that oral communication can be considered as challenging and easy at the same time. On one hand, it requires command of listening and production subskills as vocabulary and pronunciation. On the other hand, one can make oneself understood by adopting communication strategies as repetition and body language.

Therefore, in an attempt to master speaking as a skill, learners have to develop, in addition to he linguistic competence, compensatory strategies. These would consist of paraphrasing, illustrating with examples and explanations to clarify one's ideas. These strategies can be developed by ample exposure to authentic language in the classroom and by implementing intensive practice activities.

In sum, it is obvious that the spoken language is very difficult to acquire; therefore, contrasting spoken and written languages, which will be developed in the next section, constitutes a must to improve EFL learners' conversational competence.

Although the speaking skill shares the production process with the writing skill, it is very different from the act of writing. In fact, Cook claims that: *Spoken language, as has been pointed out happens in time, and must therefore be produced and processed 'on line'. There is no going back and changing or restructuring our words as there is in writing; there is often no time to pause and think, and while we are talking or listening, we cannot stand back and view the discourse in spatial or diagrammatic terms…*

Indeed, current literature indicates that spoken and written languages are different not only in terms of being means of communication but also in terms of the way meaning is conveyed. The terms "spoken language" and "written language" do not refer merely to different mediums but relate to partially different systems of morphology, syntax, vocabulary and the organisation of texts. Moreover, meaning according to Bailey in spoken language is "conveyed in part through the suprasegmental phonemes (including rhythm, stress and intonation), whereas punctuation marks and type fonts convey such information in writing".

Spoken and written languages also differ in terms of the demands they make on the listener or reader. In other words, as speaking happens in real time" unlike reading or writing, it requires the interlocutor; ie, the person we are talking to, to listen, understand and wait to take his/her turn to speak. In this context, Lazaraton supports this idea by saying that in oral communication many demands are in place such as decoding what is transmitted and thinking
at the same time about how to contribute in the conversation.

In addition, Bailey maintains that the opportunities for the speaker to plan and transmit the message are limited "whereas in most written communication, the message originator has time for planning, editing, and revision". Furthermore, with written language there is no opportunity for the readers to signal that they do not understand as in face to face interaction in which non -verbal behaviour can convey non-understanding.

This idea is emphasized by Bailey where she notes that "verbal interaction typically involves immediate feedback from one's interlocutor, whereas feedback to the authors of written texts may be delayed or nonexistent".

Written language has also certain features that are not shared by spoken language. As signalled by Nunan, both differ in terms of grammar and lexical density. Regarding grammar, written and spoken languages comprise complex clauses; however, they differ in the ways they joined together. As far as lexical density is concerned or what is referred to by Nunan as "the number of content words per clause, it is highly present in written language than in the spoken one".
From what had been mentioned before, it is clear that spontaneous spoken language differs importantly from the standard written form; thus, it is essential to highlight these main differences existing between spoken and written languages in order to develop EFL learners' spoken skill.

English language is so vast and varied that it is hard for a teacher to provide the learners with a precise and comprehensive description of it. Therefore, if learners wish to gain fluency in spoken English, it is essential for them to have exposure to features that are typical of spoken language and that they have time to reflect on these features. Thus, in order to activate learners' knowledge about spoken grammar forms and make them available for face-to-face talk, it is necessary to raise their awareness about the British and the

American spoken grammar features through the implementation of special activities. The latter will, according to Willis and Willis (1996), encourage them to think deeply about examples of language and to infer how language functions. The general term allotted for activities of this kind is "consciousness-raising" or "awareness-raising activities". In this respect it is necessary to elucidate this concept.

Indeed the term consciousness-raising has been given various definitions. Ellis, for instance, defines it as *"an attempt to equip learners with an understanding of a specific grammatical feature, to develop declarative (describing a rule of grammar and applying it in pattern practice drills) rather than procedural (applying a rule of grammar in communication) knowledge of it.*

Likewise, Richards, Platt and Platt (1992) view consciousness-raising as an indirect approach to instruct grammar through form focused activities including drills and grammar explanation where the learner is very active. This view is contrasted with traditional approaches to the teaching of grammar in which the learner is given the grammatical rules directly.

The concept of awareness-raising is adopted from the cognitivist learning theory which rejects the behaviourists view about the learners who are considered as "empty vessels waiting to be filled, and instead credits them with an information processing capacity, analogous to computers". In teaching terms, cognitivist theory called for some degree of conscious awareness about the rules of the system. Consequently, it replaced the three-stage PPP model (presentation, practice and production) with one that progresses from "awareness-raising, through proceduralization to autonomy".

The main characteristics of consciousness raising activities proposed by Ellis (2002) involve isolating specific linguistic features, explicit rule description, using intellectual effort to understand and articulating the rules describing the grammatical feature. To summarize, in consciousness-raising, learners are required to pay attention, to notice and to understand certain features of language, "but there is no requirement to produce or communicate certain sentence patterns taught".

There are a variety of ways in which consciousness-raising activities might be achieved. Willis and Willis (1996) listed some steps to achieve them. These include identifying the patterns, classifying them, hypothesising, exploring language cross-linguistically and finally manipulating language to extract the underlying patterns.

In the same context; i.e., applying consciousness-raising activities to the teaching of grammar in the language classroom, Thornbury (2005) outlined, in his examination of the knowledge and skills needed for the students to speak, a three step programme to develop EFL learners' spoken skill involving: "awareness-raising activities; appropriation; and Autonomy".

According to the same source, one way to help learners uncover the gaps of their language begins with presenting learners with or letting them discover features of spoken language.

After understanding the rules and their use, they can apply them in different spoken genres. Having dealt with what to develop during the teaching process, we must now turn our attention to how to teach the spoken skill appropriately which is elaborated in the following section.

Conclusion

Using English language for communication involves two major processes from the part of both the interlocutor and the addressee: transmitting ideas, beliefs, emotions and attitudes to one another and interpreting the message produced. Therefore, this study looked at the productive aspect of communication and focused mainly on how to develop EFL learners' spoken performance. Accordingly, this piece of work dealt with the teaching issues relevant to the spoken skill by highlighting the concept of spoken language and the difference existing between the latter and the written one. This work also addressed teachers' intervention to improve EFL learners' outcome as far as this building block is concerned. Thus, it tackled the approaches dealing with the teaching of speaking as well as the strategies adopted by teachers to involve learners in the learning process and correct their oral errors.

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