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POSSIBILITIES OF IMPROVING ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS IN A SELF-ORGANIZED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

Learners of English as a second language often face problems related to fluency and lack confidence when they are required to produce spontaneous speech in the target language in real life situations. While educational researchers believe that authentic speaking activities that encourage communication and interaction between the learners can enhance speaking skills, students are seldom provided the time or the opportunities to practice such activities in the classroom. Self Organized Learning Environment or SOLE is an emerging pedagogical tool that encourages group work, spontaneous discourse, meaningful communication, and provides opportunities for negotiation, collaboration, interaction within the classroom utilizing the learners classroom time effectively is Self-Organized Learning Environment or SOLE.As learning happens in a real-life like environment where interaction and communication come naturally, SOLEs can help improve oral communication skills of second language learners.

This paper discusses some of the challenges related to teaching and learning of speaking skill and explores the possibilities of using SOLE as a pedagogical tool to improve uponthe speaking skill of second language learners in a classroom environment.

KEY WORDS – English, second language, communication and interaction, pedagogical tool, Self Organized Learning Environment (SOLE) teaching and learning of speaking skill, real-life communicative method.

1. INTRODUCTION

Oral communication skills enable speakers to take decisions English, the 'Lingua Franca' in Government, business and society for many countries, has emerged as one of the most widely spoken languages in the world with over a billion speakers. English is seen as a means to modernization, development and the language of business and tourism (Vinke, 1995). Due to the globalization of English and it's widespread acceptance as a medium of communication everyone seeks to acquire English communication skills.regarding what to say, when and how (Bygate1987:6). Speaking has been considered also as "the most important part of an EFL course" (Knight1992:294) and the most observable among other types of participations including listening, reading, writing and also physical or body language (Tsou 2005).

However, speaking is often not given the importance that it deserves in language classrooms. There is either a lack of time or sufficient tasks allocated to practice and improve speaking and oral communication skills. While students learn grammar, vocabulary, reading and writing, speaking hardly gets noticed. Students are rarely exposed to real life/everyday language use that they may have to engage in outside of the

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classroom environment.

As a result of this, ESL learners often find it difficult to get across their ideas and thoughts in authentic real-life communicative situations. Learners' speech often lacks fluency and is punctuated with pauses, repetitions, and hesitation along with mistakes.

This paper emphasizes on some ofthe problems related to teaching and learning of speaking skills and explores the possibilities of using SOLEs or self-organized learning environments to provide authentic and real-life speaking opportunities to second language learnersand thereby improving upon their ability to expresses themselves in the target language.

2.CHALLENGES IN TEACHING AND LEARNING OF SPEAKING SKILLS -

Various studies conducted on second language speaking skills discuss a number of challenges in acquiring the ability to produce fluent, accurate and relevant speech. In a study conducted on Finnish and Japanese language learners, Paakki(2013) states that the second language learners find speaking skills challenging as the formal study involves a great deal of grammar and theory and a lack of real practice. Richardson (2008) asserts that in second language teaching and learning not enough attention is given to the factors that influence speaking skills.

D' Anglejan (1978) is of the view that cognitively mature learners want to comprehend and express ideas, which need a wide range of syntactic structures, verb tenses, or vocabulary. Their communicative requirements will quite likely not concur with the programmed presentation given by the instructional materials or syllabus. Furthermore, the limited exposure to native speaker's spontaneous speech in the classroom setting gives little opportunity for the formation and induction of syntactic and morphological rules.

Ur (2001) states that in most classroom situations speaking sessions are taken over by dominant students and many do not get the opportunity to speak. Students are not really motivated to take part in speaking activities, as they do not see a real purpose in speaking. Scrivener (2005) states that without practice and experience students may be nervous and worried about completing tasks. Ur (2005) describes inhibition as a major issue in speaking skills. Students suffer from anxiety and fear of 'losing face' in front of their peers while engaging in speaking activities. Learners often complain that they have 'nothing' to say or use their mother tongue instead of the target language during the speaking activities in monolingual classrooms

Many studies (Upshur, 1968; Mason, 1971; Saegert, Scott, Perkins, and Tucker, 1975) cited by Alison d' Anglejan (1978) appear to indicate that the number of hours, or years which are spent on formal second language study is not in itself a strong predictor of second language achievement as measured by proficiency tests, particularly ones measuring oral fluency. He further says that the words and structures learned in the classroom may be sometimes unrecognizable when they occur in the normal discourse of native speakers. This lack of transferability of classroom learning to unstructured situation is one of the prime criticisms of the methods used to teach speaking skills.

3. DEVELOPING SPEAKING SKILLS-

Speaking, as a skill, is both cognitively and linguistically complex. It requires more than the knowledge of grammatical rules and vocabulary. Speakers are required to monitor and understand other speakers, think about ones own response or contribution and producing the right kind of response or effect and so on (Lazaraton, 2001). Richard and Rogers (1986) say that oral communication is much more than transmitting a message from the speaker to the listener. The goal involves understanding as well as giving a meaningful reply in the target language. Curtin and Dalberg (2001) assert that the meaning is much more important than the form in a communicative perspective.

In real world conversations the process of meaning making happens only when speakers interact. Brown (2001) also suggests that speaking is fundamentally an interactive task that happens under real-life processing constraints. It is not natural to produce pre-determined responses in real-life communication

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context. Therefore, learners need to be engaged in independent decision-making in terms of word choice, use of fillers, and communication strategies to be able to communicate effectively in the target language. It also means that the teacher should not completely control the language produced in the classroom and instead allow the learners to make independent choices and take control of the language they produce while expressing themselves.

4. STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE SPEAKING SKILLS

In order to develop speaking skills, learners should be given time, opportunity and relevant activities to practice speaking in the classroom. According to many educators, speaking skill can be developed through a number of communicative and interactive activities such as information gap, a jigsaw puzzle, games, problem-solving, and Role-playing to name a few. Hedge. T (2008) says that free discussion and role-playing can also help to improve speaking skills. In order to develop fluency, and to be able to produce spontaneous speech, learners need to be engaged in activities that are both authentic and meaningful.

4.1. Self Organized Learning Environment and speaking skills

Although learners can improve their speaking skills by taking part in oral activities to exchange spontaneously their thought in second language, students are not provided with enough time or opportunities to practice such activities (Derakhshan et al., 2015). Richard and Renandya (2002) suggest that teachers should facilitate learners with meaningful communication activities and opportunities for learner-to-learner interactions.

In this context, SOLE (Self-Organized Learning Environment) provides a learning environment that can encourage spontaneous discourse, meaningful communication, negotiation and opportunities for collaboration within the classroom.The concept of Self Organized Learning Environments stemmed out of the "Hole in the Wall" experiment conducted by Prof. SugataMitra, Professor of Educational Technology at the School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences at Newcastle University, where by computers were embedded into the walls in a slum at Kalkaji, Delhi in India and children were allowed to use it freely. In the study that lasted for over 5 years it was observed that students have the ability to self-learn complex concepts without any guidance of support from an expert.

Mitra and his colleagues (Mitra et al., 2005) found that children invariably worked in groups, interacting constantly with each other in a noisy and chaotic way. The results of this experiments led to the formation of SOLEs or Self-Organized Learning Environments, where the "outside" environment of the "Hole in the Wall" experiment is created within the classroom setting.

4.2. SOLE in the Classroom

Dolan (2013) defines self-organized learning environments as models of learning in which students self-organize in groups and learn using a computer connected to the Internet with minimal teacher support. Students work in groups to find the answer to a 'Big Question'. The approach makes use of 'Inquiry Based Learning' and provides students with a big question that is open, interesting and motivates students to look for answers.

A SOLE consists of a facility with one computer, with Internet connection, for every four students, approximately. The students are given a question and asked to research the answer. Students are not provided with any information other than the question itself. While they are expected to work in groups, they are not instructed to do so. They are allowed to move around, talk within their groups and also with other group members. There is no intervention or instruction from the facilitator/teacher during the SOLE session. At the end of about 45 minutes, each group is asked to present their results briefly.
Mitra and Crawley (2014) suggest that SOLEs can be set up in four different ways.
1. Time tabled usage, where each class is provided with a scheduled SOLE session every week.
2. The curricular SOLE session, where the driving question is connected to the curriculum and students usually answer a past exam question.

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3. Aspirational usage, where learners watch a TED talk or surf an interesting website. They then research the topic extensively and present their findings to the whole class.

4. Free usage, where the SOLE facility is available free for students to use before and after regular school hours.

SOLE in the classroom can also pose some challenges to the teacher in terms of giving complete control to the students. As students take control, move around and discuss freely, without any intervention from the teacher, there is a lot of noise and chaos around the SOLE sessions. However, as students engage in a series of these sessions, they settle in groups, make changes according to their research topics and present their learning in a medium of their choice. Mitra (2014) terms it as learning at the edge of chaos.

SOLE in the classroom encourages the role of students in the learning process. If the curriculum in presented through a series of motivating and interesting big questions, SOLEs can provide students the opportunity to recycle target vocabulary, integrate all language skills as they read for gathering information, communicate with their peers and use written and spoken language in the final presentation.

4.3. SOLE and Speaking Skills

Mitra and Crawley (2014) observed that in a SOLE setting the discussions around the big question continue even after the SOLE session, at home in the playground or on their personal computers and phones. Discovery, sharing and spontaneity of individuals and groups characterize SOLE sessions. This approach encourages students to learn from an environment that is dynamic, chaotic with constant communication and interaction as students engage in of collaborative learning.

Evidence shows that speaking should incorporate group work (Oradee, 2012). When students work in a SOLE they naturally form groups and pairs. While there is no instruction from the teacher,students may initially even choose to work alone. However, there is the possibility of still engaging in collaborative learning as they discuss and summarize their research findings for the final presentation.

Peck (1978) cited in Celce Murcia (2001) that speaking activities need to be student-centered and communication should be authentic. Brown (1998) states that students should be given opportunities to practice the target language in authentic situations in order to improve their speaking and listening skills.

By bringing the students to the forefront of the learning process, the teacher takes the backseat and plays the role of an observer in the SOLE approach. As a result, students take control of their learning; they choose their own groups, they can move groups and also move around the classroom to see what other groups are doing, maximizing their learning. During the session, students are also encouraged to take responsibilities of checking group behavior and ensure that everyone is participating (Mitra& Crawley, 2014). While doing so, students are engaged in authentic, real life conversations, where they use the target language to ask questions related to the topic of research, they raise questions, engage in discussions to look for solutions regarding behavior or group work issues which they are expected to resolve on their own.

Stanfield. J (2008) says that SOLE is an inquiry-based approach where students work together and solve problems together. During the research on SOLE educators observed how conversations between students developed without any guidance from the facilitator. Learners learn from one another, they begin initiatives, redesign schedules, and split up responsibility. Students are constantly engaged in free and natural communication throughout the process. The researchers also concluded that the SOLE approach has potential to improve fluency and confidence in language learners (Stanfield. J, 2008).

As speaking is a complex skills that includes accuracy, fluency, communicative competence etc, one should ensure that students have a minimum required knowledge about the topic, understand the basic vocabulary and can make use of functional language to communicate politely, to ask for information, to give, agree or disagree with a suggestion etc before proceeding with the SOLE session.

While accuracy, grammatical correctness and language rules are vital to speaking skills, as Krashen and Terrel cited in Lightbown and Spada (1999), real life and authentic communication tasks can provide the

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opportunities to use the language rather than focusing on the structure and form. SOLE sessions provide students with ample opportunities to engage in authentic real life situations to practice their speaking skills.

5. CONCLUSION

Speaking is one of the most important language skills as it enables one to communicate effectively in the target language. However, speaking skills do not get the importance they deserve in the language classroom. Classroom based speaking activities most often do not prepare the learner for spontaneous real life oral communication leading to a lack of confidence, fluency and increased anxiety during real-life speaking situations amongst the second language learners.

Educators and researchers suggest that Interactive and communication based authentic learning activities that include group work can help develop speaking skills of the second language learners. In that context, Self Organized Learning Environment (SOLE) built into the classroom schedule and connected to thecurriculum can provide ample opportunities for students to practice the target language in real-life like situations.

SOLE based studies discuss improved communication, interpersonal skills as some of the benefits of the approach and see potential for using it to improve fluency and confidence in second language learners. The past few years saw a number of researches based on SOLE as a pedagogical tool. While researchers do see the potential to improve speaking skills through SOLEs, more focused and rigorous research is required to explore this in depth.

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