

DEVISING SPEAKING ACTIVITIES BASED ON THE TEXTBOOK FOR IMPROVING READING COMPREHENSION AT INTERMEDIATE LEVEL

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Abstract

Speaking and listening skills are significant in any language of the world. They are oral skills and come before reading and writing. Yet unfortunately in most of the Pakistani public schools and colleges these two very essential skills are considered secondary. The focus of teachers and even of syllabus designers of government colleges in Pakistan is on reading and writing skills and little importance is given to speaking and listening skills, especially in the public schools. The situation is even worse at intermediate level, where the learners are deprived of learning English language using all four skills together, especially speaking skills. The present research explores how devising speaking activities related to core text can help students enhance their reading comprehension skills. Learning language skills in connection with each other is also supported by the integrated skills approach which suggests that all four skills of language must be taught in a combined form rather than in isolation. The purpose of this research is to observe the usefulness of devising speaking activities based on core text of English for developing language proficiency in English specially in reading comprehension skills. The research has been conducted at Federal Government College Bahawalpur and the participants were students of Intermediate level and teachers from private and Government colleges.

Keywords: Pakistani public schools and colleges, learning English language, developing language, Bahawalpur, language proficiency.

INTRODUCTION:

If we take into consideration a classroom situation, most of the time the teachers and students are either speaking or listening, and these two skills hold key importance. Students listen and speak to understand thoughts, ideas, concepts or information, and express thoughts or convey messages etc. Speaking and listening skills are of noteworthy importance in any language of the world, and they come prior to reading and writing, as far as learning a language or practicing it is concerned. Yet, unfortunately in most of the Pakistani schools these two very essential skills are considered as less important. In Pakistani system of education and more specifically if we investigate the core text of intermediate classes, we see that reading passages and authentic text are being used. There's a lot of reading practiced in the classroom.

Listening skills and speaking skills have no scope and value in this kind of English language teaching system and thus these two skills are overlooked.

To improve the spoken expression of our students, a major change in our syllabi is needed. Pakistani students who study in private schools and some public schools are in fact taught how to speak and communicate fluently in English, but most Pakistani students in different schools and colleges do not get this opportunity. In most of the government schools and colleges listening and speaking skills are not an area of concern for the teachers and the main objective of the English language teachers is completion of the course.

A solution to this problem can be to exploit the already present material included in the syllabi of English in such a way that it fulfills the task in question that is; it paves a way towards the improvement of speaking skills of the pupils which in turn improves their reading comprehension.

The present research will explore how devising speaking skills activities based on the core text can help the learners enhance their reading comprehension skills, hence covering the prescribed syllabus as well as achieving the additional objective of improving their speaking skills. Some theories support this notion such as Schema Theory which suggests that knowledge is organized into meaningful units called schemata. These units or components of memory help in remembering and learning (Bartlett, 1995). Hence speaking about the material included in the core text (English book 1 for Intermediate) may be easier as the relevant content schemata will already be present in the minds of speakers. Learning language skills in connection with each other is also supported by the integrated skills approach which suggests that all four skills of language must be taught in a combined form. In this way,

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the language learner is exposed to language in the most genuine, natural and realistic manner as in daily life an individual encounters all four skills of language together, interlinked with each other (Oxford, 2001). Jalolova (2023) remarks that language skills are not used in isolation, but in tandem with other skills. He explains that conversation happens when we speak and at the same time listen to others. Similarly, the texts that are produced by writers when they are writing in isolation stir debates which take place in form of other writings or public speeches, and people read or listen to those writings and speeches, respectively. He also explains that the language input is received in form of what we hear and see, and we provide the output in form of what we say or write, hence leading to the event we call comprehension. These examples explain how language skills are integrated and point to the fact that they need to be developed in tandem, rather than in isolation.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study intends to achieve the following objectives:

- *To analyse the types of speaking activities based on the core text the students are comfortable with.*
- *To study the effect of speaking activities based on core text on reading comprehension of students.*

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. *Which speaking activities based on the core text are the students of Intermediate level comfortable with.*
2. *How do the speaking activities based on the core text affect reading comprehension of the Intermediate level students?*

SIGNIFICANCE

The outcome of this research will guide the teachers of English of Government colleges who want to employ speaking activities in their classrooms about the kind of activities they can design from the core text being taught to the students, to improve their speaking skills. The English language teachers can use the prescribed textbooks as resource material and use them to create their own activities about the neglected skills such as speaking. They can make use of the activities employed by the researchers in their experiment and design similar activities themselves. In this way their students not only become good speakers but also, they are better able to understand the text that they read from their textbooks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

When learning a new language, learners find speaking skills more difficult to master than listening, reading and writing, because speaking has to be done on the spot, with no choice of editing and reviewing. Hence it requires a lot of practice (Bailey in Nunan, 2003, p.48). Speaking skill is one of the oral skills, along with various other oral skills such as listening, comprehending, lexis, knowledge of sound system etc. In a classroom situation, a student's command over a language is usually seen in the form of reading and writing (Branstetter, 2013). In Pakistan, the oral skills are ignored even more, and most students are neither taught nor tested on these skills at all. As syllabi are lengthy and students need to work only on reading and writing for the exam, there is no time left to cover the oral skills. Hence the present research will explore how the core text, which the students are already studying, can be taught with speaking activities. These activities will help in improving not only their reading comprehension but side by side, students can practice their speaking as well.

This study gives useful insights for the present research, as it investigates speaking activities like role plays and group discussions. Moreover, it also tells us how these activities are integrated with a given curriculum. However, it does not explain how these speaking activities can improve reading comprehension, and the focus of present research is on intermediate rather than secondary school students.

POPULAR ACTIVITIES TO DEVELOP SPEAKING SKILLS ROLE-PLAYS

The research question of the present study explores which speaking activities are more successful in the given context.

Another inquiry into role play by Wood (2000) suggests that role play is a beneficial method for making learning practical and can be successfully used for adult learning. Another research based on upper secondary EFL students in Malaysia recommends using role plays for teaching speaking skills, which is also a point of focus in the current research (Adnan, 2013). Long M.H and Richards J.C (1987) say:

“Incorporating role-play into the classroom adds variety, a change of pace and opportunities for a lot of language production and a lot of fun! It can be an integral part of the class and not a 'one-off' event. If the teacher believes that the activity will work and the necessary support is provided, it can be very successful.”

According to Henry W. Maeir (2002), role- plays are educational tools

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that bring life into classroom. Much action, movement and liveliness are involved in the classroom.

GROUP DISCUSSIONS AND PUBLIC SPEAKING

Research on group discussion suggests that it is a useful method for teaching speaking skills in an ESL classroom. Students feel more confident participating in oral activities in small groups, rather than speaking individually in front of the whole class. Moreover, these group activities improve their individual speaking skills as well (Hamzah and Ting, 2010). Another research on grade 11 students shows that discussions, role play and problem speaking activities are successful in developing speaking skills (Oradee, 2012). A study by Fairley (2010), explores gender differences in public speaking activities in Egyptian EFL classroom. The findings show that females hesitate and are interrupted by male students in speaking activities, and there is a need to use varied techniques to equalize participation. Another study shows that having debates in classroom can improve speaking skills a lot.

Debates make students more active, and they develop a sense of competition, therefore they are more motivated (Rubiati, 2010). These studies offer us insights for the present research while assessing group discussion and public speaking as activities for developing speaking; however, they do not provide a comparison between the two, or with other speaking activities.

In a case study conducted at University Technology Malaysia, Lu Ye Ting worked on a group of 33 students at Intermediate level and figured out that when judged individually, they performed very well, and they showed marked improvement in reading comprehension skills. The research also proved that the element of fear of classroom learning also vanished from the minds of the students.

INFO- GAP ACTIVITIES

Information gap activity is one which involves an exchange of some information between two or more people, for which they need to communicate (Nunan, 1989, p. 66). A study in Iranian EFL classroom revealed that integrating information gap activities in the lesson plans can markedly improve the speaking skills of students (Watamni and Gholami, 2012). One interesting method of implementing information gap task in the classroom is through tango seating. In this method, students are seated in pairs, adjacent to each other, but facing different sides of the room. Then they are given an information gap task, and they can only communicate by listening and speaking, as they can't see what

their partner is doing or writing (Bailey in Nunan, 2003, pg. 57). These works provide useful ideas for the present study, while assessing the effectiveness of information gap tasks to develop speaking at intermediate level. However, these studies do not reveal whether these activities are workable in Pakistani classrooms.

QUESTIONING

According to research by Qashoa (2013), questioning by the teacher in an EFL classroom is an influential method, if conducted in the right way. Simple yes/no questions are also important, however questions requiring longer answers and exploring the views of students on a particular topic or in reference to the lesson helps them interact more and gives them more speaking practice. The response of teacher towards the answers is also very crucial and should be motivating to encourage the learners to speak more.

POSTER PRESENTATIONS

A study reveals that if oral presentations are appropriately conducted and proper guidance is given, they can help students gain confidence in speaking. Students should be trained in giving oral presentations, and they should be made aware of the aids they can use to make their presentations more effective. Moreover, evaluations of these presentations, as well as discussions about them are also necessary (King 2002). According to a study by Yusbido (2011), oral description of pictures can be extremely helpful in enhancing speaking skills of students. There can be varied activities that involve oral description of pictures.

The above-mentioned studies and research regarding various activities used for developing speaking skills give useful insights while addressing the first research question of this study. They give us awareness about the various ways in which these activities can be conducted in a classroom, and what should be kept in mind while doing so. However, a comparison between these various activities when implemented on the sample under study and their effectiveness in Pakistani context is yet to be found.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research follows Pragmatic Research Paradigm. In other words, it is a Mixed Method Research. The research makes use of an observation followed by experimental research involving a Control Group and an Experimental Group. The research was conducted at F. G. Inter College Bahawalpur situated at Noor Mahal Road, Bahawalpur. The researchers chose this college as one of the researchers teaching here observed that the students remained weak in

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reading comprehension of the text as well as in speaking skills. The researchers wanted to explore how the given text, i.e. the prescribed textbook could be utilized to not only develop reading skills of the learners but also how speaking activities could be based on the same reading text, helping to improve both speaking as well as reading skills.

Total number of students in Intermediate (HSSC-I) at F.G. College was 62. The researcher divided them into two groups of 31 students each, through convenience sampling. One group was treated as an experimental group while the other as control group.

PROCEDURE

The first step of this research was to answer the research question about which speaking activities are successful with the learners of Intermediate level. For this purpose, six different speaking activities were used to teach both groups.

The activities were conducted separately in both classes/ groups so that the number of students per activity does not exceed 31, as in an ideal ESL classroom, the number of students should not exceed 30-35. To find out that which speaking activities were successful with the students of Intermediate level, general reading passages were selected and speaking activities based on the following six categories were devised: role plays, info-gap activities, poster presentation, public speaking, group discussions and question answers.

With the help of the technique of Observation and the tool of observation check list, it was judged that which of the above categories of speaking activities were successful with the students of Intermediate. The criterion for judgment was as follows.

Observation Sheet

Parameters	Give (0) points if you don't find the parameter and (1) if you find the parameter
<i>Level of interest/ motivation</i>	
<i>Level of confidence</i>	
<i>Level of fluency/efficiency</i>	
<i>Use of correct structure/ grammar</i>	

Connection of ideas	
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Two activities were performed for each category namely role plays, info-gap activities, poster presentation, public speaking, group discussions and question answer session. For each activity each of the three observers filled in the observation sheet.

Two colleagues of the researcher from Federal Government College Bahawalpur acted as observers and check-marked the above-mentioned chart while observing the six speaking activities while the third one to mark the above-mentioned table was the researcher herself, whose role was also to instruct about and conduct these six activities. The responses of observation of all three participants have been presented in the analysis section.

Based on these responses, four activities were selected that were more successful namely role-plays, group discussions, info- gap activities and verbal question answer session (hot seat). However, poster presentation and public speaking were considered as less successful with students of intermediate of F.G College Bahawalpur.

PRE-TEST AND POST-TEST OF EXPERIMENTAL AND CONTROLLED GROUPS

The second step of this research was to see that if speaking activities are devised on core text, do they help in improving reading comprehension of the students of Intermediate or not. For this purpose, the researcher first devised a pre- test based on the story entitled, 'Overcoat' selected from their English textbook for class 11. They had already read the story in class. Both the groups were treated as one large group, and they appeared in a pretest conducted by the researcher. The results were tabulated. The next step was to devise 10 lesson plans based on short stories taken from the same core textbook.

The lesson plans were implemented only on the experimental group while the control group was taught with the same traditional method i.e. read the story and answer the questions given at the end of the story in 'exercise' section in written form.

The lesson plans were conducted in 30 working days. For each short story, on day one, the story was read in class. On day two, the speaking activities were implemented and on day three, a post test to check the level of their reading comprehension was taken on the same story. The results were then tabulated. Similarly with the control group the lesson plan was conducted in the same way. On day one, the story was read in class. On day two, they did written exercises (question answers) of the same story given at the end of the story in their books

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and on day three, the researcher took their post-test as well.

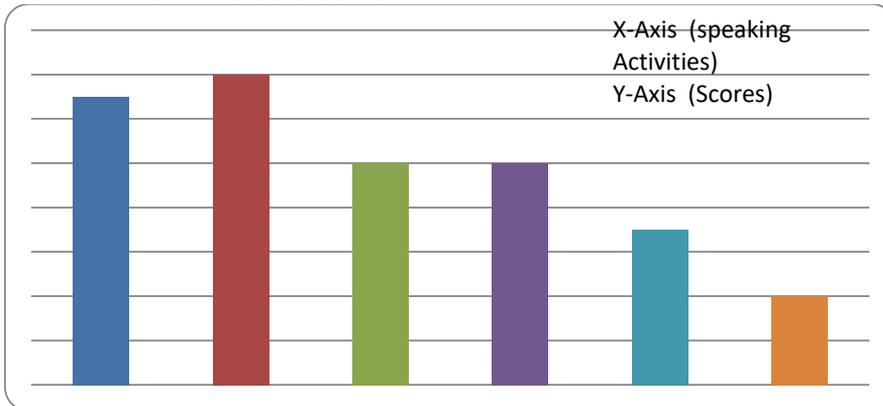
DATA ANALYSIS

The following table and graph give us a clear view of the success of the six speaking activities devised by the researcher. It shows how far which activity was successful; which one was at the top and which one at the bottom giving low scores. The results are entirely based on the data taken from the observation sheets of the three observers.

TABLE OF SCORES OF OBSERVATION SHEETS

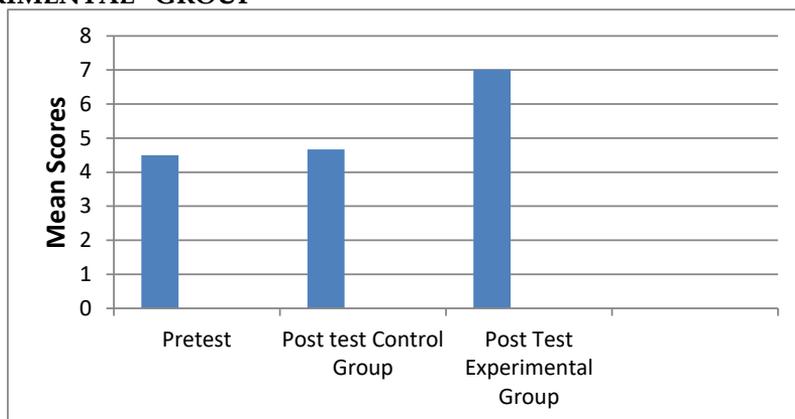
<i>Speaking Activity Type</i>	<i>Scores of Observation Sheets</i>
<i>Role plays</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Group discussions</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Info-Gap</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Question Answer session</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Poster presentation</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Public Speaking</i>	<i>4</i>

GRAPH OF OBSERVATION SHEETS SHOWING WHICH SPEAKING ACTIVITIES ARE SUCCESSFUL



It can be observed from the above-mentioned bar chart that the highest score has been given to 'Group Discussion activities'. It is very natural as the students mostly feel comfortable to work in groups. It can also be seen that the most unsuccessful speaking activities with students of intermediate of F. G. Inter College, Bahawalpur were public speaking and poster presentations giving only score values of '4' and '7' respectively. However, the two speaking activities that are question answer session and info gap gave the same results.

GRAPHIC REPRESENTATION OF MEAN SCORES - CONTROL AND EXPERIMENTAL GROUP



The above graph shows the mean scores of pretests for both control and experimental groups, in comparison with mean scores of post-test, of control and experimental group. The graph shows that mean score of control group's post-test show a minor raise from pre-test mean. Whereas experimental group's post-test mean is markedly high as compared to pre-test mean.

CONCLUSION

The findings show that group discussion is the most successful activity to be conducted with intermediate students. Other successful activities are role plays, question answer sessions and information gap activities. The mean scores of post-tests, as compared to those of pre-test show; that students taught through speaking activities based on core text develop better reading comprehension of the text

The results of this study reveal that the learners' reading comprehension skills enhance if speaking activities are devised based on the lessons of their core text (syllabus). The study also sums up that the popular speaking activities among the students of Intermediate level are group discussion and role plays, as they seem to enjoy them while being engaged in them and like to interact with their fellows. Least popular or less successful one is public speaking. In the focus group discussions, we found that the teachers at private colleges really prefer and encourage speaking activities based on text, while teachers of Government colleges also want to devise these activities but they have concerns with the system, administration and management. However, this point can be further researched in detail in a different study aimed at exploration of the attitudes of

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primary and government college teachers towards innovation in language teaching techniques. The study draws attention to the fact that a major change towards curriculum and syllabus design as well as exam paper pattern is required to run the race of modern era in which lack of attention to communication needs losing the battle of progress and prosperity at national and international levels.



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