

ENRICHING GRADUATE STUDENTS' SPEAKING SKILL THROUGH TASK BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract

Technology and globalisation have greatly accelerated worldwide businesses to grow immensely and rapidly. As businesses have grown, corporate organisations have also expanded their commerce internationally. This has led to a universal language to communicate for business purposes. For this purpose, the English language has been accepted as a widespread language for communication. Of the language skills like listening, speaking, reading and writing, the speaking skill has gained prominence for business communications. But, the speaking skill of many corporate employees are not up to the expectation of the corporates. This problem needs to be confronted in the tertiary level itself. Thus, the onus lies on the educational institutions to equip their graduate students with effective speaking skill. This research paper has addressed this concern. Five speaking tasks were conducted with first year BTech students to enhance their speaking skill. This paper focuses on the task based language teaching pedagogy to augment students' speaking skill.

Introduction

Twenty first century has witnessed immense growth in the business and education sector. Corporates have expanded tremendously and businesses have developed bountifully. The growing businesses have given rise to the importance of communication. "English is now spoken in over forty countries as a first language and in over fifty-five countries as a second language, and the language seems to be on an ever increasing and unstoppable trajectory of use." (Graddol, 1997, p. 47)

Communication (which happens predominantly in English) in the corporate houses takes place at various levels. It can be between the peers, hierarchy, clients, customers etc. Most of the employees in the business organisations are affluent in their technical knowledge. But, they are not adequately equipped with effective oral communication or the speaking skill, which has become a great impediment for their professional growth.

There is a lacuna in the corporate employees with regards to speaking skills. They are unable to communicate orally without errors. Most of their utterances are either in the form of broken sentences or structurally erroneous phrases. This has greatly affected their professional advance, since they are at a constraint to communicate with peers, seniors, clients, customers etc. To build their oral communication or the speaking skill, corporate employees depend on spoken English institutes or hire speaking trainers.

It is to be noted that corporate employees hunt for ‘speaking’ training institutes at a time when they have to establish their career. Thus, it has become the dire responsibility of educational institutes to cater to the corporate need. Corporate sectors need employees who can speak English fluently without errors. Educational institutions should provide ample training for their graduates, so that the graduates will not be at stake when they are employed. Institutions need to provide training in speaking skills, so as to make their graduates develop their employability and sustainability skills.

Engineering and Arts and Science colleges have English as a subject in the first year of the degree course. In engineering colleges, the English course syllabus deals with the Language skills - Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. Though various teaching methods have been implemented to teach the language skills, yet there is a need to bring in innovative teaching methods. Various teaching methods have been employed in English language teaching, like the grammar translation, direct, Audio-lingualism, Humanistic, communicative and task based language teaching.

The task based language teaching gained momentum in the 1980 s. N.S Prabhu (1987) brought the teaching fraternity to focus on the task based approach to teach the language skills. “Under task-based language teaching (TBLT), language learners engage in purposeful, problem-oriented, and outcome-driven tasks that are comparable to real-world activities” points out Chien, Chin-Wen (2014, p. 36). “Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is a teaching approach which focuses on offering learners tasks so that they can actively engage in using and practicing language in communicative situations, and on measuring the language outcomes that will arise from those tasks” (WANG Qian 2013, p. 98). Skehan, Peter (1996, p. 38) considers task based approach as an arrangement that helps teachers to apply task-based pedagogy to language learning and teaching. He opines three phases in task based teaching (pre task, during the task and post task phase) (Skehan Peter, 1996) says that “task-based learning is an attempt to address one of the dilemmas of language teaching how, on the one hand, to confront the need to engage naturalistic learning processes, while, on the other, to allow the pedagogic process to be managed in a systematic manner” (p 58).

For teaching business English, Wenzhong & Wan Muchun, (2015) advocate the task based learning methods. “The teachers of Business English teachers should try best to create a classroom environment in which real business communication can take place and can be practiced” (Wenzhong& Wan Muchun, 2015, p. 115).

The speaking skill, which is essential for communicative purposes in the corporate arena, can be enhanced through the task based language teaching.

Methodology

The task based teaching was employed to enhance the speaking skills of a class of 50 first year BTech students. The tasks were adopted from Norman Whitby (2014)’s book on business English. Five speaking tasks were conducted and the time taken for each task was one and half hours. The cluster sample of 50 was divide into 10 groups. The speaking tasks were:

Task 1 – An Interview Context

Task 2 – Describing objects

Task 3 – Describing products

Task 4 – How to Speak When Marketing a Product

Task 5 – Presenting a Project Idea

All the speaking tasks were divided as pre task, main task, and post task phases.

Task 1 - An Interview Context

Pre task Phase

In this stage, the faculty gave an introduction to interview, its importance and interview etiquettes. Also, the faculty conducted a mock interview. This enabled the students to gain insights on how interviews are conducted. Adding to this, the main task phase gave them an opportunity to practise interview sessions.

Main Task Phase

In this phase the student groups practised interviews amongst themselves. The interview contexts given to the students were a Programmer interview, Marketing manager, Medical representative interview etc. The students enthusiastically participated in the mock sessions. Though the class was noisy, yet it was a time for learning.

Post Task Phase

This third phase enabled the students to demonstrate their learning from the pre task and main task phases. Each group came forward and did their interview sessions. Every student in the groups was given equal opportunity to speak. The class was immensely benefited from this task and it was a creditable learning opportunity. Finally, the faculty gave inputs on interviews and feedback on the interview sessions.

Task 2 - Describing Objects

Pre task Phase

In this phase the faculty explained about Adjectives (Parts of speech) and the importance of using the correct words while describing objects. The faculty showed the image of a computer and described it using adjectives.

Main Task Phase

Each student group was given images pertaining to classroom, workplace, house etc. The students practised describing the images given to their respective groups. This gave the students an opportunity not only to learn adjectives but also develop their speaking skill. This phase focussed on the speaking expositions given by the student groups. Each student group showed the images and described the objects in it. The descriptions were interesting, since the objects were described using adjectives.

Post Task Phase

The faculty briefed on use of adjectives in describing objects and also gave inputs to cultivate the speaking skill.

Task 3 - Describing Products

Pre task Phase

The pre task phase brought in ideas about the workplace environment. The faculty briefed on product description in a workplace context. The student groups were asked to visualize themselves as the executives of a corporate company and describe their products to a customer or client. The student groups can choose any product as per their discretion.

Main Task Phase

This was a very motivating phase. Each group came forward with the product of their choice and described their products. The workplace atmosphere was set in, as the groups described

their products. The class also had an inspiring experience to see their classmates describe the products by playing the role of an executive. The students described their respective products with enthusiasm and eagerness.

Post Task Phase

The faculty briefed on the importance of effective speaking in the corporate world and the importance of using the right vocabulary in describing products.

Task 4 – How to Speak When Marketing a Product

Pre task Phase

The faculty briefed on the significance the speaking skill in the field of marketing. The students were given a brief on how to express oneself effectively when marketing a product.

Main Task Phase

The student groups actively involved in practising the nuances of speaking efficiently when marketing. The style, tone and language involved in marketing was given utmost importance in this phase. It was a lively phase and the student groups put in sincere efforts to learn the art of speaking in the marketing context.

Post Task Phase

The post task phase was a briefing session by the faculty on the nuances of speaking in the marketing environment. The student groups presented their ideas on marketing and also did demos on marketing products.

Task 5 – Presenting a Project Idea

Pre task Phase

In this phase, the faculty focussed on the importance of speaking skills in presenting a project. The faculty stressed the point that BTech students need to excel in their speaking skill in order to present their project ideas effectively.

Main Task Phase

The main task phase involved practice sessions wherein the student groups actively participated in giving their project ideas. Each group took a particular project idea and detailed it.

Post Task Phase

The faculty emphasized the importance of effective speaking when presenting and finally shared the observations that were made when students presented their project ideas.

Discussion

Effective speaking skill has become a requirement for professional growth and sustainability. Excellence in the speaking skill has become mandatory for students to be employed in international organisations and also sustain their employment. It has become the dire need of educational institutions to equip their learners with adequate speaking skill that is essential to progress in the corporate arena. The five tasks that were conducted amongst a class of 50 students enabled them to enhance their speaking skill. The students' active involvement showed the feasibility of conducting task based language teaching amongst graduate learners.

The faculty facilitated the students to express their ideas spontaneously and appreciate the value of the speaking skill.

Conclusion

“Job aspirants face several tough challenges in the global job market if their communication skills are not up to the mark. Inadequate proficiency in English language, lack of exposure, low level of confidence and weak soft skills do not let them uphold in the global marketplace”, says Tewari, Richa, (2011, pp. 41). Enhancing the speaking skill of graduate students has become the need of the hour. Thus, this research paper focused on enhancing their speaking skill through the task based language teaching pedagogy.

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