



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 8. Issue.1. 2021 (Jan-Mar.)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

COMMUNICATIVE ACTIVITIES FOR ENHANCING THE SPEAKING ABILITIES OF
SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN BAHRI, SUDAN

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Article information

Received:06/1/2021

Accepted: 19/1/2021

Published online:21/1/2021

doi: [10.33329/ijelr.8.1.9](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.8.1.9)

ABSTRACT

The following paper is a sequel to a documented study we conducted in Bahri, investigating the linguistic barriers that hinder the secondary school students' communicative abilities in English, highlighting the causes of the students' poor oral proficiency, and making some recommendations at various levels: political, institutional, pedagogical, and so on. Through communicative activities, the paper comes up with practical solutions for the EFL teachers in Bahri as many of them give no importance whatsoever to the speaking skill. The communicative activities are models EFL teachers in Bahri can either literally adopt, or adapt to their context and environment. They can also be a source of inspiration for designing didactic tasks meant for improving the learners' speaking skill.

Keywords: abilities, activities, communicative, competence, instruction, learners – oral, proficiency, secondary, speaking

Introduction

Language teaching is grounded in the idea that the function of language is communication. People use language as a social tool to express opinions, and to convey information, ideas, meaning and so on. They communicate about a subject matter and for some purpose (Berns in Savignon 1997: 6). This view of language as a communication tool is in line with both the "tool-making source" and "the social interaction source" viewed by some theories as the origins of language. The proponents of the social interaction source associate the birth of human language with social interaction, they place the development of language in a social context (Yule 2014: 4). On the other hand, just as they had created tools to make life easier, early humans, gifted with tool-making abilities, had also created language as they had felt the need for it. Such is the theory expounded by the proponents of the tool-making source (Yule 2014: 5-6). There is no gainsaying that these theories do not garner absolute support from all linguists, as other language specialists come up with their own speculations about the origin of language. In any case, the communicative approach to language teaching abides by the function of communication of language as it seeks to develop the learners' communicative abilities. The advent of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) took place in a context of reformation regarding existing didactic approaches and methods that failed to develop the learners' communicative abilities, particularly their speaking skills. Oral proficiency is a long-standing issue in ELT, especially in an EFL

context. In Bahri, northern Sudan, the speaking skill is a crucial issue among secondary school students. The following paper is a sequel to a documented study we conducted in Bahri, investigating the linguistic barriers that hinder the secondary school students' communicative abilities in English, highlighting the causes of the students' poor oral proficiency, and making some recommendations at various levels: political, institutional, pedagogical, and so on (Abuzaid et al 2020).

Through communicative activities, the present paper comes up with practical solutions for the EFL teachers in Bahri as many of them give no importance whatsoever to the speaking skill. The paper is divided into three parts. The first part deals with a survey of ELT in Sudan and sets the specific context in which instruction is conducted, with a focus on the place of the speaking skill in teacher practice. The second part is a review of EFL literature regarding the speaking skill. The third and last part presents samples of communicative activities that can contribute to enhancing the secondary school students' oral proficiency. The communicative activities are models EFL teachers in Bahri can either literally adopt, or adapt to their context and environment. They can also be a source of inspiration for designing didactic tasks meant for improving the learners' speaking skill.

1 – A Survey of ELT in Sudan

The introduction of the English language in Sudan dates back from the late 19th century, when the British colonial army settled in this country located in northeastern Africa in 1898. This date marks the beginning of British colonialism in Sudan, which deployed a western-type education policy in the country through government education and Christian missionary education (Elnoor 2003: 8). Great Britain granted independence to Sudan in 1956, but left as heritage an education and language policy that aimed at installing cultural, regional and social division. The successive postcolonial governments failed to achieve a new language policy, notably with the switching to Arabic as language of the education system throughout all Sudan, as recommended by the International Commission for Secondary Education (Elnoor 2003: 38).

The Arabicization of the Secondary level started in 1965 and continued up to 1969. This naturally caused a continuous decline in the standard of the English language in the country compared to its status during the period British rule, causing much concern among the Sudanese political and educational authorities. The 1966 "English in the Sudan Conference" diagnosed the existence of a wide gap between the linguistic abilities of both intermediate and secondary level students due to the absence of a national syllabus, which led to the teachers' use of a wide range of various materials, some of which were either childish or obsolete (Elnoor 2003: 42-43).

The Educational Conference held in 1984 in Sudan released conclusions among which the English language was almost declared dead in the country; the level of deterioration was such that "*nothing positive could be achieved in the field of ELT*" (Elnoor 2003: 52). Yet, four years before the 1984 Conference, an integrated English language syllabus entitled "The Nile Course" had been initiated nationwide. In 1990, reforms were initiated under the auspices of the General Education Conference, which made some recommendations. The education ladder was reformed, the time schedule allotted to ELT was increased to 6 periods a week.

In Sudan, the education ladder is divided into two levels: the Basic Level (Grades 1-8) and Secondary Level (Grades 9-12). ELT starts as early as Grade 3 (basic level) and continues up to Grade 12, the last year of secondary education. A new English syllabus called "SPINE Series" was introduced in the academic year 1992-1993 in replacement of "The Nile Course". Based on a series of six textbooks called *SPINE (Sudan Practical Integrated National English)*, the new curriculum is distributed over the education ladder as follows: three in Basic Level and three in Secondary Level (Elsheikh 2013: 7). *SPINE* textbook, which supposedly abides by the principles of the communicative approach to language teaching, is organized into units which, in turn, are subdivided into lessons. In terms of content, the lessons essentially focus on reading comprehension, with texts dealing with aspects of Sudanese life and culture in most cases, as illustrated by the topic "Houses in Sudan", in the opening unit of *SPINE 4* – in the first year of secondary school. Little or no place is left for the students' discovery of foreign culture – be it global or specific. In addition to vocabulary points, grammar and

writing activities back up the study the texts in the post-reading phase (Elsheikh 2013: 7). Unlike basic school teachers, secondary level teachers lack guidance as they do not have at their disposal manuals – teacher's manuals. To take but one example, *SPINE 3 Teacher's Book* duly sets the objectives of the lessons, provides an answer key, gives suggestions on how to teach the lessons: revising the previous lesson as a warm-up activity, vocabulary pre-teaching, silent reading, loud reading, answering questions, pair work, group work, etc. *SPINE 3 Teacher's Book* sometimes suggests that teachers encourage students to use their L1 (Arabic) when working on some reading activities: "*Sometimes the suggestions have also included encouraging students to talk in Arabic to complete certain tasks*" (Elsheikh 2013: 8).

The 1990 "wind of reform", so to speak, also blew over the higher education sector, with the decision to impose Arabic as medium of instruction in Sudanese universities and colleges, in accordance with the recommendations of the Conference of Higher Education held the same year. In other words, after secondary education, the process of Arabicization had spread its tentacles into higher education (Elnoor 2003: 55).

Among the repercussions of the Arabicization process started in 1990 by the political leaders, one can mention the students' relationship to English: they do not take it seriously anymore (Elsheikh 2013: 7). Because Arabic is the language of instruction in higher education, and because the system only required a passing grade for university admission, students are only interested in passing college entrance English exam; they are not interested in skills and knowledge acquisition regarding the English language. Teachers encourage this practice since they gear their instruction to help students achieve this end. Indeed, instruction mainly focuses on reading comprehension, grammar and writing as students are tested on these components during the English exam: "[...] *pedagogical practices have included, for example, emphasis on testable components such as reading comprehension, grammar, and writing*" (Elsheikh 2013: 7). The consequence is that both teachers and students who have been educated in this system fail to achieve sufficient communicative competence to interact efficiently with people in English: "*Students and teachers who have been products of this system enjoy low levels of English language proficiency*" (Elsheikh 2013: 7). Al-Busairi confirms this diagnosis as he has noticed that some students are admitted to university with a poor level in English, others with practically no knowledge of English at all. Furthermore, hardly can most of the students write a short paragraph in simple English; not to mention the fact that one in four university entrants is incapable of building an elementary sentence in English (in Elsheikh 2013: 7). In such a context, Arabic (L1) comes as a godsend because it rescues both students and teachers in the classroom.

The 1991 school curriculum makes it clear that English is taught as a "foreign language" in Sudan (Elnoor 2003: 102). The current ELT program in Sudan aspires to achieve communicative competence among the learners. There is a lack of clarity in the aims and priorities of ELT in Sudan; apparent contradictions undermine the objectives of the new English program born from the education reforms. Furthermore, the objectives – both general and specific – are full of contradictions and stated vaguely regarding linguistic skills. For instance, for the Secondary Level, which this paper is concerned about, the educational aims are stated as follows (Elnoor 2003: 92-94):

- i) To develop further the four skills acquired at the Basic Level.
- ii) To give reading and writing more emphasis because of their preparatory nature to any further studies and to develop self-learning abilities.
- iii) Since exposure to English depends upon experiencing and communicating in the language itself, the learner must be given the chance to compensate for this loss by reading selected texts from English literature.

As can be seen, nothing is said about the techniques, methods and strategies used to further develop the four skills acquired at the Basic Level, and the reading and writing skills are given precedence over the speaking and listening skills.

1.1 – Statement of the Problem

In Sudan, English is taught from Grade 3 (Basic Level) to Grade 12, the last grade of Secondary Level. In addition, ELT occupies 6 periods a week in the secondary school students' time tables. Despite the early teaching and learning of English as a foreign language (EFL), Sudanese secondary students face a lot of difficulties when it comes to speaking English. This problem is common to many Arab countries and Arabic-speaking nations like Sudan. As a case in point, Sheshsha shows that in the Saudi context, students cannot communicate accurately and fluently in English despite the 1100 hours of English classes they take in public schools (1982: 14).

Research conducted in Bahri shows that 94% of the EFL teachers state that students cannot speak English fluently and deplore the students' poor speaking abilities (Abuzaid *et al* 2020).

Various reasons account for the oral communication difficulties Bahri secondary school students face in English. Linguistic competence, a sub-component of communicative competence, as defined by Hymes (1972), is part of the causes. Students have communication problems regarding vocabulary use and grammar rules. And yet, grammar and vocabulary are among the key constitutive elements of linguistic competence. According to the figures, 98% of the teachers state that students face grammatical difficulties when they speak English. The students' poor level in grammar adds up to their already existing vocabulary problems, acknowledged by 94% of the teachers.

The learning environment and the teaching approach in EFL classrooms in Sudanese public schools are part of the causes. With over 60 students in the classroom, the teaching-learning process is affected, the teaching techniques and strategies fail to yield the expected results, and the teachers' efforts are hampered. For instance, the feasibility of pair work or group work is seriously questioned; consequently, teachers either rule them out or practice them minimally. Furthermore, the opportunities to address the speaking and listening skills are limited. Not to mention the students' reluctance to give importance to these skills as they are not tested. Furthermore, instructions are based on a teacher-fronted approach (Elsheikh 2013: 8). The students' education seriously suffers the consequences of this situation.

Sudan's multiculturalism has an impact on the teaching-learning process. Language alternation, known as "code-switching" naturally invites itself in the classroom as 96% of the EFL teachers use the Arabic language during the English class. In so doing, they undeniably participate in setting up language barriers that absolutely hinder the students' oral competence in English. The multicultural environment in which students live is a key factor in the little use of English observed both in and outside the classroom.

The use of Arabic in the EFL classroom is an issue. Teachers succeed in capturing the students' interest when the lessons are geared to test preparations with the frequent use of the Arabic language. Teachers stick to the guidelines in the textbook *SPINE* regarding the progression of the lessons. Some teachers give the meaning of English words in Arabic when they deal with vocabulary during a reading comprehension lesson. They also explain in Arabic the text under study as well as the instructions when the students fail to answer the comprehension questions properly. It is mostly in Arabic too that grammar points are explained (Elsheikh 2013: 8).

Most teachers ignore the speaking skill, they focus on the improvement of the reading and writing skills; 92% of the teachers give little importance to the speaking skill, hardly do they teach it (Abuzaid *et al* 2020). Speaking is undeniably the least favoured skill in the teaching of English in Sudan. A survey of research conducted in ELT in Sudan over the past years clearly evidences the fact. Sudanese researchers tackle various topics, but they show no interest in the speaking skill. In his book *Teaching English in Sudan: A Practical Approach* (2003), Elnoor discusses the approaches and methods of ELT in Sudan, teaching aids, testing, grammar teaching, the reading skill and the writing skill. When it comes to dealing with the speaking skill, he focuses on English phonetics and phonology, exploring pronunciation, organs of speech and production of sounds, vowels, consonants, aspiration, places and manners of articulation, stress, rhythm and intonation. Elnoor even devotes a section to Arabic vowels (2018: 111-113). The ways to teach the speaking skill are completely eluded. Yet, it could have been very useful to explore the teaching of the speaking skill according to

the instructional approach adopted in Sudan: the communicative approach. Researchers tackle topics such as investigating some strategies for improving secondary school students' vocabulary learning (Nheid 2018), the effectiveness of learning vocabulary through TV programs in English (Gibriel 2017), vocabulary learning strategies among Sudanese EFL learners (Hamza 2015), evaluating the professional diploma program for substitute English language teachers at Sudanese secondary schools (Misbah 2012), intercultural competence and language teaching (Lemya 1999), the evaluation of the new English language program for the first-year students in Sudanese secondary schools (Hassan 1989), the development of higher education in Sudan (Elhuri 1982), to give but these examples.

1.2 – Purpose Statement and Significance of the Study

The purpose of the following paper is to enhance the secondary school students' speaking skills in Bahri, Sudan, through communicative activities that aim to lift the language barriers they face when they are engaged in a conversation in English. To achieve this, the study aims to present a set of speaking activities designed according to the communicative approach to language teaching, commonly known as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Speaking activities based on well thought-out strategies backed up by the CLT approach can progressively build up the learners' communicative competence and definitely bridge the gap between their poor oral performance and the standards set up by the Sudanese education act. Among the barriers that obstruct the students' communicative competence stand out the irrelevant methods, approaches, strategies and activities used in the classroom to teach the speaking skill.

This study draws its significance in the fact that it raises the teachers' awareness of the students' problems to communicate properly in English and of the existence of communicative activities that could be implemented to help develop the speaking skill. As 92% of the teachers do not give enough importance to oral communication in the classroom, the paper comes up with practical models of oral activities they can either follow or get inspiration from to design similar tasks capable of overcoming the learners' communicative incompetence. In this regard, the significance of the study also lies in the fact that it provides guidance to the untrained English teachers on the way to teach the speaking skill as well as on the types of didactic activities relevant for enhancing the learners' communicative abilities. Indeed, according to the figures, 96% of the EFL teachers in Bahri consider that lack of training contributes to setting up barriers against the students' oral proficiency.

The paper can greatly contribute to overcoming the teachers' current resort to systemic translation during the teaching-learning process, as it is a well-established fact that 84% among them openly acknowledge that they usually translate English words into Arabic during the EFL class. Not to mention that 96% of the teachers sometimes use the Arabic language to English (Abuzaid *et al* 2020). The paper can provide an opportunity to discuss didactic activities for enhancing the speaking skill within the framework of training workshops and seminars during which teachers further explore strategies, activities, methods and approaches to teach the speaking skill.

To conclude this section, the significance of the study is grounded in the fact that it can contribute to providing insight and assistance to course material, syllabus and curriculum designers, and help them to do their work with acumen.

2. Literature Review

This section sheds light on the terms of reference of the study by discussing the key concepts that lay its theoretical foundations; then, it explores the literature review about the issue.

2.1 Conceptual Framework

Communication is the process of sharing information with another person. Oral communication is achieved through the vocal-auditory channel, and it is based on the principle of reciprocity, that is, any speaker can also be a listener, vice versa, as shown in the picture below.

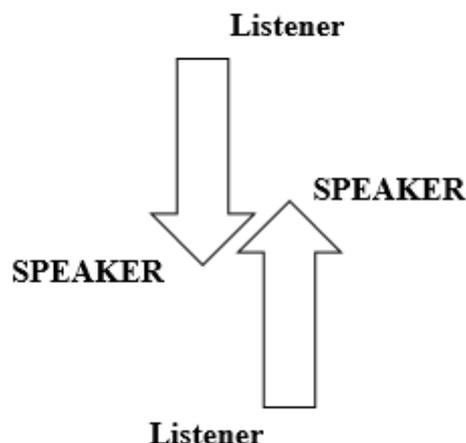


Figure 1: Principle of Reciprocity

The effectiveness of communication involves two important factors, the delivery and perception of information. It is therefore important to develop communicative skills to bypass the potential barriers that hinder the delivery-perception relationship. The communication process takes place in a specific context and is based on the speaker's sending of encoded message in his utterances, which the listener receives and decodes. Through the act of speaking, both speaker and listener build up a relationship.

Listener / SPEAKER

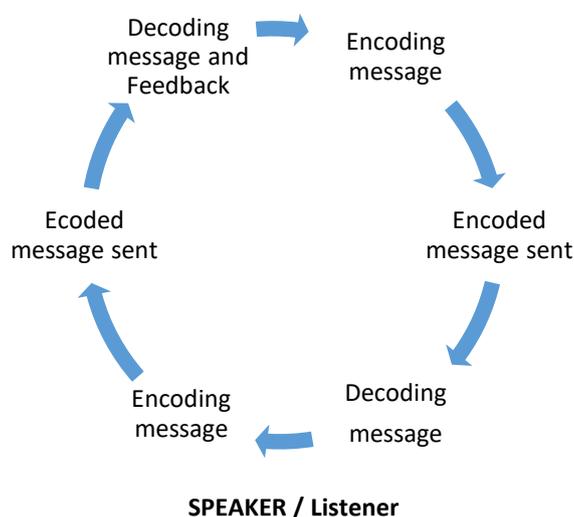


Figure 2: The Communication Process

In the specific context of ELT, English is used for communication; therefore, teachers must equip students with skills that allow them to communicate properly, as they are expected to use the language both productively and receptively in unrehearsed real-life contexts (Brown 2001: 43). For this reason, it is important to give importance to the speaking skill in the classroom, notably with the Communicative Language Teaching approach (CLT), as building the learner's communicative competence stands out among its goals. Developing the student's communicative competence is developing his ability to use the language adequately for various purposes and functions (Richards 2006: 2). Notions and function are given utmost importance as they appear to be central in oral communication.

The advent of the CLT approach took place in a context of search for an alternative to the behaviorist approach to language teaching known as the "audio-lingual method", which failed to develop the learners' communicative skills. Chomsky and other linguists initiated the objection to the audio-lingual method which, in

their view, failed to fulfill the exigencies and expectations of the communicative agenda in language teaching. Indeed, as a behaviorist method, the audio-lingual method is based on the assumption that learners will be able to successfully achieve communication in similar real-life situations if they are exposed to true-to-life speech patterns they assimilate in the classroom through repetition, imitation and intensive practice (Leaver and Willis 2004).

Yule (2014: 190) considers that "*communicative approaches are partially a reaction against two the artificiality of "pattern-practice" and also against the belief that consciously learning the grammar rules of a language will result in an ability to use the language*". Communicative approaches give precedence to the functions of language over the forms of language. The functions of language refer to what language is used for, whereas the forms of language refer to grammar, phonology and other rules. Communicative approaches advocate toleration towards the students regarding the errors they make when they use the language. Errors are no longer regarded negatively, they are view as part of the learning process. They are an evidence of the students' use of the language as well as their "*active learning progress*" (Yules 2014: 191).

The notion of "communicative competence" refers to the general ability to use the language accurately appropriately and flexibly. Communicative competence goes beyond the simple aspect of *linguistic competence*, which refers to the accurate use of grammar structure and words; it includes *sociolinguistic competence*, that is, the ability to use appropriate language; *strategic competence*, which refers to effective organization of messages and the use of strategies to compensate for difficulties occurring in communication (Yule 2014: 194).

2.2 – Literature Review

A survey of the ELT literature shows that the speaking skill is a major concern in this field; it is one of the most difficult skills for the majority of English learners. There is a set of factors that contribute to making it difficult. Ur (1996) lists among them:

- 1 – Inhibition: Students dread making mistakes, they are afraid of criticism, or they are just shy.
- 2 – Nothing to say: Students are not motivated enough to express themselves.
- 3 – Low or uneven participation: Because of large classes, students are not given equal speaking time; some students tend to dominate the class while others speak very little or not at all.
- 4 – Mother-tongue use: Learners from the same culture tend to use their mother tongue because they feel more confident when they do so.

Rababa'h (2005), in turn, comes up with a list of factors that account for the Arab EFL learners' difficulties to speak English properly. These factors include the teaching strategies, the curriculum and the environment. For example, many learners lack the "linguistic baggage" to keep the oral interaction going. Inadequate strategic competence can be another reason as well. Because they do not see the real need to learn or speak English, some learners display a serious lack of motivation in the classroom. Littlewood has very well highlighted the crucial force of motivation; it determines whether or not a learner is involved in a task, the level or degree of involvement, and the duration of the involvement (1984: 53). The development of communicative skills cannot take place unless learners are motivated enough and willingly feel the need to express themselves and communicate with people around them (Littlewood 1981).

Teaching the speaking skill requires a good approach, adequate techniques, relevant strategies and well-designed communicative activities. In other words, the role of the teacher is important.

As Harmer (2007: 345) points out, it can sometimes be easy to get the students to speak in the classroom if the atmosphere of the class is good enough, if the students have good relationships and an appropriate level in English. However, a number of factors can undermine the teacher's efforts. For instance, as Harmer states, the teacher will find it hard to make the students speak if they are reluctant to do so, if the topic chosen is not appropriate, if the organization of teaching plan is at fault, or if an unpredicted event occurs.

Brown (2001: 275-276) suggests some principles for teaching the speaking skill:

- 1) Use techniques that cover spectrum of learner needs, from language-based focus on accuracy to message-based focus on interaction, meaning, and fluency.
- 2) Provide intrinsically motivating techniques.
- 3) Encourage the use of authentic language in meaningful contexts.
- 4) Provide appropriate feedback and correction.
- 5) Capitalize on the natural link between speaking and listening.
- 6) Give students opportunities to initiate oral communication.
- 7) Encourage the development of speaking strategies.

Language learning and language teaching have taken new perspectives concretely illustrated by "*a gradual shift from an emphasis on teaching and a teaching-centered classroom to an emphasis on learning and learning-centered classroom, with special attention to the individual learner as well as the group of learners*" (Morley 1991: 483). Concomitantly, there has been a crucial paradigmatic change in ELT: coined by Hymes (1972), the notion of "communicative competence" has become the new target, and it has absolutely overshadowed the long-standing focus on linguistic competence in the classroom. The new paradigm has put the principles of ELT on shaky grounds as it has given way to new approaches, methods, techniques and strategies, all seeking to address the communicative problems of both EFL and ESL learners.

Morely has devised a "*dual-focus framework*" for the teaching of the speaking skill in both an ESL and EFL context. This dual framework encompasses two levels of focus regarding speech:

- 1) A microlevel focus on *speech production*, which deals with discrete elements of pronunciation in a bottom-up sense. The elements of this "*microfocus*" are: articulation, elisions, assimilations, reductions, contractions, intonation, rhythm, stress and so on.
- 2) A macrolevel focus on *speech performance*, which deals with the general elements of oral communicability in a top-down sense. The elements of this *macrofocus* are: overall clarity of speech, overall fluency, speech intelligibility level, general communicative command of grammar general communicative command of vocabulary, and so on.

Morley draws attention to the fact that either priority can be given to the microlevel or the macrolevel at a given time, or both of them can share the classroom focus (Morley 1991: 497).

Table 1: Dual Focus Speech Production and Speech Performance (Morley 1991: 497)

SPOKEN ENGLISH	
SPEECH PRODUCTION	SPEECH PERFORMANCE
A focus on specific elements of pronunciation	A focus on general elements of communicability
Pronunciation: Microfocus	Oral Communication: Macrofocus
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarity and precision in articulation of consonants and vowel sounds • Consonant combinations both within and across word boundaries, elisions, assimilations, etc. • Neutral vowel use, reductions, contractions, etc. • Syllable structure and linking words across word boundaries, phrase groups, and pause points • Features of stress, rhythm, and intonation • Features of rate, volume, and vocal qualities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall clarity of speech, both segmentals, and suprasegmentals • Voice quality effectiveness for discourse level communication • Overall fluency and ongoing planning and structuring of speech, as it proceeds • Speech intelligibility level • General communicative command of grammar • General communicative command of vocabulary words/phrases • Overall use of appropriate and expressive nonverbal behaviors

For maximum effect, both pronunciation and speech instruction must go far beyond imitation, to encompass a mix of practice activities (Morley 1991: 505). Three kinds of speech practice that can be introduced at the very beginning:

- 1) imitative practice (dependent practice)
- 2) rehearsed practice (guided self-practice and independent self-practice)
- 3) extemporaneous speaking practice (guided and independent self-practice)

A speech curriculum should include a cognitive dimension; it should pay attention to selected information about both language and study procedures. The curriculum should also encompass a practice dimension, with speaking tasks and activities that help learners to modify pronunciation and speech patterns spoken English (Morley 1991: 507).

The involvement of the teacher is central in the teaching of the speaking skill. Morley (1991: 507) recalls that programs that aim to develop effective communicable speech skill are often based on a philosophy of learner/teacher partnership. In this partnership, the teacher acts as a coach – a speech coach and a pronunciation coach – assisting learners. The work of the "teacher-as-coach" is similar to the work of a debate coach, a drama coach, a voice coach, a music coach, or a sports coach in the sense that he supplies information, gives models, offers cues and suggestions, provides constructive feedback regarding performance, sets high standards, proposes a wide range of practice activities, overall supports the learner and encourages him.

Morley (1991: 508) has sketched the following outline of the teacher-as-coach's responsibilities regarding speech instruction:

- 1) Conducting pronunciation/speech diagnostic analyses, and choosing and prioritizing those features that will make the most noticeable impact on modifying the speech of each learner toward increased intelligibility.
- 2) Helping students set both long-range and short-term goals.
- 3) Designing program scope and sequence for an entire group of learners; designing personalized programming for each individual learner in the group.
- 4) Developing a variety of instructional formats, modes, and modules (e.g. whole-class instruction, small-group work, individual one-on-one tutorial sessions; prerecorded audio and/or video self-study materials; both in-class and out-of-class self-study rehearsal recordings in audio and/or video formats; work with new computer program speech analysis systems, and more). Overall, providing genuine speech task activities for practice situated in real contexts and carefully chosen simulated contexts.
- 5) Planning out-of-class field-trip assignments in pairs or small groups for real-world extemporaneous speaking practice, with panel discussions as follow-up.
- 6) Structuring in-class speaking (and listening) activities with invited NS and NNS guests participating.
- 7) Providing models, cues, and suggestions for modifications of elements in the speech patterning for each student.
- 8) Monitoring learners' speech production and speech performance at all times, and assessing pattern changes, as an ongoing part of the program.
- 9) Encouraging student speech awareness and realistic self-monitoring.
- 10) Always supporting each learner in his or her efforts, be they wildly successful or not so successful.

As far as the modes of practice are concerned, a speech syllabus based on speaking and listening activities integrating the three modes of practice known as *imitative speaking practice*, *rehearsed speaking practice* and *extemporaneous speech practice*, can be introduced (Morley 1991: 509-510).

3 – Communicative Speaking Activities

There is a wide range of communicative activities that can be used to develop the students' oral abilities. Unfortunately, space constraints due to editorial reasons do not give us the chance to present all the speaking activities we have designed. As a result, we just present a sample of activities, representative enough,

and classified into two categories: guided practice and free practice. Speaking activities can be an opportunity to teach vocabulary, grammar, etc. In addition, oral production in an EFL context cannot be dissociated from errors and, therefore, it is important that teachers act with tact when giving feedback so as not to cause inhibition among learners.

3.1 Guided Practice

We present here a sample of four guided activities, with instructions for both teachers and students. Expected answers are only provided as guides; for open-ended questions, any meaningful answer from students is valued.

3.1.1 – Questions and Answers

The teacher sets the topic, makes sure that students understand, then asks questions. He can start from short and simple questions, then progressively move to long and complex ones. The degree of complexity depends on the average level of the class. Depending on the topic, two types of interaction are possible for this activity: teacher-student interaction and teacher-class interaction.

Example 1: Teacher-student interaction.

The teacher can teach the simple past through this activity. To give the students the opportunity to speak English, the teacher can ask as many questions as he wants, using various questions words in English. If the student has some problems of linguistic competence (vocabulary, grammar point, etc.) to answer a question, the teacher can sometimes involve his classmates.

Topic: *Your activities over the past weekend.*

Teacher: Did you spend a nice weekend?

Student: -----

Teacher: Where did you spend the weekend?

Student: -----

Teacher: What activities did you do over the weekend?

Student: -----

Teacher: When did you last visit your relatives?

Student: -----

Teacher: Did you do anything special over the weekend? What was it?

Student: -----

Teacher: On which day of the weekend did you have fun the most? Why?

Student: -----

At times, the teacher can prompt his interaction with the student by asking extemporaneous questions arising from the student's answers, to further challenge the latter's communicative skills. The teacher stops the questions when he esteems that the student has enough expressed himself or herself; then he corrects the student's mistakes, gives feedback, and takes another volunteer. The teacher can conduct this activity with the whole class provided that he chooses a topic of common interest such as a football match of the national team, a social phenomenon, a social situation, or any other topic that might be of interest to students.

3.1.2 – Picture Description and Comment

This speaking activity is a good opportunity to deal with critical thinking and problem solving.



Picture 1

The teacher chooses a picture that he finds relevant for the speaking class. Through questions and answers, he makes the students describe the picture, then he progressively leads them to makes comments on what is shown in the picture. For instance:

Teacher: What can you see in the picture?

Students: ----- (Expected Answer: We can see a group of women)

Teacher: How many women can you see?

Students: ----- (E. A.: 8 women)

Teacher: Good! But how many people are there in the picture altogether?

Students: ----- (E. A.: 10 people altogether, 8 women and 2 babies)

Teacher: What are the women doing?

Students: ----- (E. A: They are working in a farm)

Teacher: What about the babies?

Students: ----- (E. A: They are lying on their mothers' back)

Teacher: What kind of tool are the women using?

Students: ----- (E. A: They are using hoes)

Teacher: Apart from the hos, do you know other types of farming tools?

Students: ----- (E. A: a plough, a harrow, a seeder, a hand seed drill, etc.)

- Teacher can show the different pictures of the farming tools.

Teacher: Where do you think these women are from?

Students: ----- (E. A: They are from Africa)

Teacher: What makes you think they are from the African continent?

Students: ----- (E. A: They are black women; their clothes...)

Teacher: Why are there only women in the farm? Where are the men?

Students: ----- (E. A: Maybe they have their own farms; maybe they have jobs in the capital city of the country; etc.)

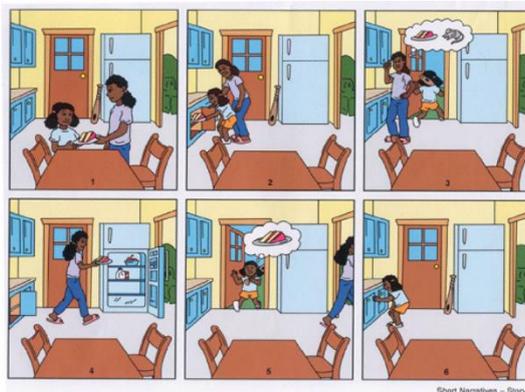
Teacher: These women are doing hard work. What do you suggest to improve their living conditions?

Students: ----- (E. A: They should be helped by their husbands; they should have modern farming tools; etc.)

The teacher can ask as many questions as he wants to elicit answers from the students.

3.1.3 – Picture Story

The teacher selects a picture story he finds relevant for the speaking class. He divides the students into groups and asks each group to tell the story. Each group reporter will go to the board to tell the group’s version of the story from the picture stimulus.



Picture 2

3.1.4 – Sharing a Past Experience or a Planned Activity Using Prompts

A student goes to the board to share a past experience or a planned activity. He does not talk about it straightforwardly. His classmates’ ask questions by using the teacher’ prompts; he answers the questions giving details.

Past experience or planned activity

Teacher’s prompt for questions:

- 1 – When -----?
- 2 – Where -----?
- 3 – What -----?
- 4 – Why -----?
- 5 – Which -----?
- 6 – How -----?
- 7 – How many-----?
- 8 – How much -----?
- 9 – How long -----?
- 10 – How often -----?

3.2 – Free Practice

Here is a sample of four unguided activities, with instructions for both teachers and students. Activities are all open-ended so as to tickle both the students’ freedom of thought and speech.

3.2.1 – Learner-learner description

This activity is a good way of dealing with descriptions, both physical and moral. It consists in sending to the board a volunteer who stand up in front of his or her classmates, and let himself or herself be described, first physically, then morally. In lower levels, it enables to learn new words (adjectives, nouns, verbs etc.). The great advantage of this activity lies in the fact that it motivates students as they are eager to take the floor to describe their classmates.

3.2.2 – The Hot Chair



Picture 3

The Hot Chair is a speaking game. A student sits on a chair placed by the teacher beside the board, facing the students. One by one, his classmates ask him all the questions they want. There is no censorship at all. What makes the chair hot is that questions keep coming without respite, and they are sometimes indiscreet. If the student who volunteered to sit on the chair finds some questions private, he has to find communicative strategies to escape these hot questions. There is only one rule: both questions and answers must be in English! At the end of the time allotted to the student, the teacher gives feedback regarding the mistakes, then takes another volunteer.

3.2.3 – Discussion

The teacher asks the students to decide on a topic they would like to express themselves about. After concentration, the students select a topic of their own. The teacher supervises the class discussion. He takes notes regarding the mistakes and carefully listens to the ideas developed here and there. At the end of the session, he gives feedback regarding the mistakes and gives his opinion about the ideas democratically raised by the students.

3.2.4 – Critical Thinking and Problem Solving

The teacher asks the students to identify a set of problems in their district, Bahri, Sudan. After selecting the most common problems with the students' agreement and writing the list on the board, the teacher organizes the class into groups, then asks each group to discuss and give the causes and the consequences of each problem, and to propose solutions. For instance:

Problems	Causes	Consequences	Solutions
1 – Traffic jams			
2 – Frequent power cuts			
3 – violence			

Conclusion

This study was conducted as a sequel to a previous one that investigated the linguistic barriers encountered by high school students in Bahri, Sudan, and that documented the existence of language barriers hindering the secondary school students' speaking abilities in English. The speaking skill is ignored in Bahri

secondary schools for various reasons. These reasons are related to the history of the English language in Sudan, the education system, the cultural environment, teaching approaches and methods, and so on. This paper is a call for a reconsideration of the speaking skill in EFL classrooms, as oral communication is the basic communication channel in society. Speech acts are at the core of social interaction. In addition, Clark and Clark call speaking an instrument act in so far as people speak in order to create an effect on their listeners (in Nunan 1991: 23).

The sample of communicative activities proposed in this study are based on the communicative approach to language teaching. They aim at showing EFL teachers in Bahri models of activities from which they can seek inspiration to design didactic tasks capable of engaging their students in oral practice. These activities are a way of counterbalancing the importance given to the reading and writing skills in their classes on the one hand, and of controlling the frequent recourse to the Arabic language in the EFL classes in the medium run on the other hand. Such speaking activities are of great immediate benefit as they contribute to raising the learners' low oral proficiency in English and building their communicative competence in this language if they are introduced on a regularly basis.

Notes

Picture 1 is borrowed from Vani Swarupa Murali's article "In India and Africa, women farmers lack land rights", in *The Interpreter*, published daily by *The Lowy Institute*, June 3, 2020, p. 1. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/india-and-africa-women-farmers-need-land-rights>, retrieved on January 5th, 2021.

Picture 2 is retrieved from *researchgate.net* on January 5, 2021.

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