DEVELOPING SPEAKING SKILLS THROUGH STORIES

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Abstract:
Teaching speaking skills is always considered difficult activity. Therefore, choosing an appropriate teaching methodology to help students improve speaking skills is really important. This paper is going to discuss personal experience of taking advantage of stories to enhance students' speaking skills. Besides, the researcher expects to explore the effectiveness of stories in most of English classes. The researcher also illustrated an example of how to conduct the lesson by storytelling in a real class.

Keywords: speaking skills, storytelling, English classes

1. Introduction

No one can deny the popularity of English because of its importance and role in life. In modern life with many opportunities and desires to participate in international activities or events, English language learning becomes an ultimate need for most people in the world. Also, English is considered the main foreign language, and it is used for the purposes of academic advancement, career advancement and good prospects in the future in Vietnam.

I am a lecturer in English at Ho Chi Minh City Industry and Trade College (HITC) with 16 majors including English. In my teaching process, it is found that most Vietnamese students whose English is non-major and HITC students (non-English major students) are not an exception, cannot speak English correctly and fluently. In fact, they hardly communicate in English successfully. Generally speaking, in the students' learning process, they always find it very difficult to speak out to express their feelings, thoughts, emotions, except for quite a few students who are good at English in each class. I am teaching English in the world of globalization of era, I always wonder how to develop speaking skills for my students so that they can speak English proficiently without hesitation even at school and in their future job environment. In other words, how the speaking skill is taught can always be questioned in my mind with my desire to help my students speak English better and better. This is the reason I chose the topic "Developing speaking skills through stories".

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The objects in my study are the first-year non-English major students whose majors are different from a class at HITC. They come from many provinces of Vietnam with their different background of English. They are trained to become bachelors for the renovations and integration of the country with their chosen majors. They spend 3 years learning at this college. The students at HITC generally are mostly not good at English. Their English modules consist of Basic English, English 1, English 2, and English for specific purposes. The modules of Basic English, English 1 and English 2 are general English level with four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. English 3 only referred to speaking skill. The last module is English for specific purposes. At the end of each module, the students are assessed based on the writing test and oral test for the English 1 and English 2 modules and only the oral test for English 3 module and the written test for English for specific purposes one relating to major fields.

My study is related to the theoretical and practical benefits of storytelling in teaching the speaking skill. For the theoretical benefits, input and findings of the research can be used as a reference for those who want to conduct a research. The practical benefits involve readers who will get much knowledge from storytelling to become proficient in communicating in English. Moreover, it is hoped that I can share the storytelling method in teaching speaking with my colleagues with the aim to develop myself in teaching speaking skills better and help improve my students' English-speaking skills. When mentioning aspects of language, we can ignore language experts or linguistics' ideas or comments with so thorough studies. Theoretical literature is the first mentioned priority in the study.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Importance of Speaking Skills
According to Rahman (2010), speaking is the most important skill for communication to share ideas, express thoughts, give explanations, convey information and argue. Shumin (1997, as cited in Aliakbari and Jamalvandi, 2010 (says that speaking is an aspect that requires learners' attention and teachers' instructions.

It is recognized that speaking ability is one of the abilities of language. (Mc Carthy, 1998; Nunan, 2001, as cited in Aliakbari and Jamalvandi, 2010) indicates that in learning a foreign or second language, the ultimate goal of acquiring a language is mastering the speaking skill, Paulton and Brunder (1975, as cited in Rohmanwati, 2009) state that the language teaching objective is making speakers produce their communicative competence in the target language.

It is clear that English is important for everyone, especially speaking skills. So, the goal of teaching speaking must be much concerned and invested to develop students' communication skills effectively, because, only in that way, students can talk about themselves and express what they know or think. However, it is very difficult for the students to speak English while learning speaking skills with the other basic skills in a module at the same time. Some problems are found from students' speaking learning are their motivation and interest lack. Also, they are too shy and afraid of taking part in the

conversation. Personally, the material, teachers' techniques or tasks are also the factors causing the problem of speaking skills for the students, but it is their English background that causes difficulty in speaking English. It is true that many research findings say that the storytelling method is effective not only for me but also for language teachers in developing speaking skills for students.

2.2 Importance of Storytelling

Puspani (2011) suggests that a story is a useful tool for teaching English because it has good words and rhythmic refrains. Soin & Scheytt (2006, as cited in Barker and Gower) say that stories help people to understand what they are, where they are from, and what they like to be. (Harris & Barnes, 2005, as cited in Barker and Gower, 2010) indicate that stories have a special power which makes people learn well through hearing the others' experiences.

Guber (2006) suggests that it is true for stories to the teller, listener, and listeners will be motivated to action through moment and mission from stories. According to Jones (2001, as cited in Nicholas, Rossiter and Abbott, 2011), stories and the narrative are very popularly used in language teaching and learning because they have special power to help learners interested in learning.

Denning (2005) notes about storytelling from Gill (2011) that storytelling is a foundation which makes all nations, societies to be closer, it also builds the rapport through communication between mankind. Denning (2005) and Simmon (2006) notes that narratives from Gil (2011) that narrative is used to share personal opinions, own experiences. Through stories, people can have ideas about problems, explanations and solutions.

I am also aware of storytelling's importance in academic and daily communication. Storytelling is seen as a communication method which recognizes all human as storytelling with their ability to send and get messages that build a value-laden reality, common ground among all people who take part in storytelling and supplies a faster method of building the rapport in the daily life.

The findings from Nicholas, Rossier and Abbott's (2011) study, indicated that stories are powerful techniques to use in the English-speaking language classroom and they have a great impact on learners' speaking skills. According to these researchers, in the language classroom, stories and storytelling are used to provide learners with the means to find their voice in their target language, first by listening to others telling stories and then telling their stories.

I think that stories are somewhat related to human culture and of course, they are means of communication. Storytelling is an important aspect of life. It helps people understand one's experiences and oneself very deeply. This is why I used stories to teach speaking skills in my English language classroom. In fact, stories stimulate students' imagination and stimulate the students can acquire good language resources. It is a good language resource that makes them attentive to the lesson with the hope to make relaxing moments after hard work hours in class so that they can acquire their knowledge in the

lesson effectively. In summary, through stories, the students can have a large size vocabulary to develop their communicative ability.

Eggins and Slade (1997, as cited in Gilmore, 2007) said that, over 40% of everyday conversation contains storytelling but it is not mostly presented in language teaching materials. As Afrilyasanti and Basthomi's (2011), there is no doubt that digital storytelling is seen as a technique for teaching speaking. When mentioning activities relating to storytelling, Tavakoli and Foster (2008) say that a task as anything that learners do in the classroom when they are attentive to what they want to share with other people or what other people are trying to share with them. As Willis and Willis (2007), a story task is an activity used to share personal ideas, and own experiences.

3. Teaching Procedures

First, the students were asked to look at the pictures shown on the slides with the given words of the first story without the story title so that they guess the content of the story and its title. Second, they were asked to tell the story. The students told the story while I was listening to them as a participant-observer to observe the activities happening during their speaking activities. The procedures to tell the second story were done the same as the first one. The second story was realized with the picture and the given words on the slides and with the story title. The title of the story was seen on the slide by the students because I think that this story is more difficult than the first one.

The storytelling approach was used in class for the observations with a clear purpose. In the first session, after the detail of each story was shown on the slides, the students were asked to read and discuss the story with other members of the group. Later, the story was told by one student on behalf of each group. In the second session, 5 students were randomly chosen among the subject students in five groups to retell the story. In the third session, the storytelling approach was used for 5 other students from these 5 groups. After their student's telling, I gave them some comments on their mistakes, for example, their use of language or pronunciation. In the last three sessions, storytelling was used for the students who did not tell the first story.

The study was conducted by means of observations, questionnaires and the semi-structured group interview to collect data. Observations were used because I would like to have an overview of the students' speaking activities in a class by observing and recording the students' activities during their speaking activities using storytelling. Specifically, six observations were conducted to observe the students' enthusiasm, interest in learning to speak as well as their speaking ability. I also used the observation sheets to note all necessary information involving the class observations. In addition, I prepared the observation checklist. During the observations, the students' responses to the lessons were observed and recorded based on the observation checklist at the end of the lesson to get data. Besides, a teaching diary was used to note what was related to students' speaking activities.

4. Study Instrument

After six observations, 50 questionnaires were directly distributed to all the participants. The questionnaires were prepared in Vietnamese language so that the students could not have any misunderstandings in reading the questions and I could get enough relevant information and accurate data. The English language for the questionnaires is not important as long as it helps the students to understand the purpose of the research. Of course, the questionnaire was translated into English in the study. The students were instructed to read all the questions first in order to understand the purpose of the questionnaire. I did not give any comments or explanations influencing on the student's response. The questionnaires were collected in about 15 minutes, as soon as all the students completed them. By using questionnaires, the respondents' privacy is protected and they are able to provide an honest response to facilitate the study. The data collected from the questionnaires are analyzed by paraphrasing to the themes in the short paragraph.

The questionnaires consist of two parts. The first part is the questions relates to students' personal information. The second part includes 10 multiple choice questions which require the students to give their opinions about storytelling with various options is chosen for reasons of convenience and efficiency focusing on the following aspects: students' interests in learning English speaking with stories, students' opinions about advantages of storytelling, students' confidence in learning English by using storytelling. Furthermore, a semi-structured group interview of 5 students was used to obtain data about using storytelling in learning speaking. These students as participants were randomly chosen. Interviews were included because I think that they have the following advantages: examining and investigating students' clear and frank responses to the view of telling stories in the English-speaking classroom. Five semi-structured interview questions were prepared before the interview. The Vietnamese language was used to interview students.

5. Study Method

The study was carried out to determine the effectiveness of storytelling in the English-speaking learning classroom. I used the storytelling lessons to assist students first, to become more engaged, motivated, and less bored in learning English speaking and second, to improve their speaking skills to become proficient English speakers. In fact, there are many techniques used effectively in teaching speaking skills including the storytelling technique as mentioned above. Specifically speaking, storytelling can help students understand the story easily through varying the voice and the body language use, and the students develop their speaking skills through storytelling eventually.

Before conducting the study, I spent a period of 45 minutes for pre-observations to present the objective of the study. I conducted a study with a class of 50 first-year non-English major students who learn general English at pre-intermediate level. The students were chosen to participate in the study were the first-year students as mentioned in the

introduction because they are very active and eager in exploring new things in teaching methods in a new educational environment – at college or university in comparison with their high schools.

The study was conducted with six observations during six weeks in a class at HITC. There were six sessions with 90 minutes for one session. 50 students in a class of mixed majors learning English 1 were observed as participants and I was a participant observer in the speaking activities in the classroom.

Two short stories were chosen including the legend and detective stories. One legend story called "The Snow White" and the other called "The man with the golden gun". The first story is a story in the storybook published by the Youth Press, Vietnam. It was chosen since it is a good and famous story, and it is very familiar to students who have heard or read in Vietnamese. The second story is a thrilling one in relation to James Bond spy in the New Headway book (pre-intermediate - the third edition) was written by John and Liz Soars. The first story was used for the first three observations and the other one was used for the last three observations.

I used the qualitative method to collect data because I wanted to gain insight into students' attitudes, concerns, interests and aspirations towards learning speaking skills by storytelling. Moreover, the qualitative method has some advantages, for example, I can interpret and better understand the complex reality of a given situation.

6. Result and Discussion

I would like to give comments on what I could observe in class, what I collected from the questionnaires and interviews by summarizing in a short paragraph. After observing students' activities in the classroom in the first three sessions with the first story, it was found that the students participated in the activities in the lesson in understanding the story content and the main character involved illustrated in the pictures. The students worked very actively in groups, for example, they talked loudly and laughed happily. They were confident in speaking and very eager in speaking with great interest too. Through telling stories, their use of body language was performed well and their voice with the high and low intonation was very good. This proved that they liked using storytelling in class. After observations, I used the checklist to check whether how my given information was with what I observed. It was discovered that what I observed made clear what I predicted before observations.

After observing activities happening in the classroom for the last three sessions with the second one related to the detective story, it could be well recognized that the students were also active in speaking by telling stories. They spent a long time preparing to tell the story because of the difficult words, expressions and the voice of the different characters involved. They performed their body language and the voice of different characters very well. In general, the students also liked storytelling but most of them preferred listening to stories to telling stories because the story is more difficult than the first story. In comparison to legends, they were less confident in telling detective stories. It suggested that the students have a view that detective stories are more difficult to tell.

In short, after observing students' activities in taking part in the process of learning to speak in class, I found that most students become more and more active. In all sessions, they found the storytelling interesting. They were very attentive to the lesson, excited about telling stories and listening to others telling stories. After observations, questionnaires were used to get data. I grouped the information of questionnaires into themes such as students' interest in learning speaking with storytelling, students' views about the advantages of storytelling in learning speaking, and students' confidence in storytelling. 50 questionnaires were collected with positive results.

The findings from the questionnaires indicated that 49 students liked learning speaking with storytelling and only 1 student said that he did not like learning with storytelling because "I do not understand what the others mean". So, only one person demonstrated disagreement with storytelling in English language learning classroom. In summary, the collected data suggested that students generally had a great interest in using storytelling in the speaking classroom.

The students mostly demonstrated that storytelling has many advantages such as stimulating their use of language easily, their imaginations and developing the students' listening and speaking skills. They were more active in learning speaking, and more attentive to the lesson due to storytelling.

For students' confidence of storytelling in English language classrooms, almost of the students said that they were confident in telling stories. There was only one student said that he was not still confident in telling stories.

The result from the semi-structured group interview pointed out that all students had a positive view about learning speaking English through storytelling because it makes them excited in learning. They said that they could understand stories easily through storytelling due to letters' voice and body language and they also said that stories containing good words which are the beautiful language that they need to use so that they could communicate successfully.

5 interviewees said that they like learning English with stories because they stimulated their imagination and made them to speak out what they know in a new language. They were also frank to speak that they wanted to learn speaking with the storytelling method all the time, but the time for storytelling only lasted 45 minutes for them to learn and relax at the same time.

In short, the students involved in the study liked the storytelling approach more than reading silently by themselves because storytelling helped them become excited, active in learning and understand stories very easily. Although there were 3 interviewees said that they were not very confident in telling stories, they liked learning English with the storytelling task.

After using these three methods to collect data, I found that the students' liked learning English speaking by storytelling very much. The results collected based on observations, questionnaires and the semi-structured group interview were valid and reliable. The findings proved the effectiveness of storytelling. The problem of storytelling was also pointed out that the weak learners felt less confident in speaking because of their ability to language use and their voice.

My research has some limitations related to some objective's reasons. First, with only 50 students participated in the study is not a large amount so the reliability of the data collected is a little less persuasive. Second, 50 students were in each observation is a large amount and not appropriate for speaking learning class. So, it is difficult for me to observe all participants' speaking activities. Third, the data collected from the questionnaires in comparison to the interview was not reliable. The research interviewed 5 students to check how the data collected from the questionnaires was in comparison to the data from the interview. The finding stated that three students as interviewees said that they were not confident in telling stories. Forth, the participants are English non-majoring students whose English language knowledge, and storytelling experiences are limited. Fifth, with class observations, the teacher might have prepared the lesson better and focused more on teaching vocabulary than usual, therefore what I observed in the classroom was not very reliable. Another limitation involves the time, if the time is allowed the study should be conducted with more observations to data obtained more triangulate.

Based on the findings, it is clear that teachers should be careful when selecting stories for their students, especially those who do not learn English as their major. The chosen story is good with simple words and not too much difficult. So, course books should contain many more stories using activities for learning speaking skills. The findings, the implications and the suggestions given in the study, to conclude, are in a hope to contribute to the English language teaching, especially the speaking teaching becomes better and better.

It can be said that the findings from the study will serve as a foundation for further research in the area concerning teaching speaking, developing communicative skills for learners or building up students' interest in learning English and speaking skills in particular. The research paper might be a reference resource for people who are going to conduct research, and those who are teaching speaking skills.

7. Conclusion

My study was conducted with the hope to develop speaking skills for my students. I think that it is very important for them to learn English well and speak it effectively. The findings from the study determined the effectiveness of the storytelling method in English teaching and learning. It is true that students like telling stories and listening to others' stories very much because storytelling makes them more motivated, active and interested in the lesson and helps them make rich in their size of the vocabulary. This will develop their speaking skills. I will motivate my teachers to adapt to the teaching context in Vietnam. I think that it is very important and necessary for teachers to do research and evaluations that make their knowledge and methods improved in boosting their teaching better and better.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

Tran Thi Ai Huong is now a lecturer of English at Ho Chi Minh City Industry and Trade College, Vietnam. She has been teaching both English-majored and non-English majored students, who are studying at Ho Chi Minh City Industry and Trade College. Her research interests include speaking skills, teaching methodologies and teaching technology.

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