

Certain factors affecting students' English-speaking skill in a Mongolian university's context

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Abstract:

English has been taught only for three decades significantly in Mongolia as a foreign language. As a landlocked country with limited opportunities to practice English, learners usually lack authentic circumstances to improve their language skills. Out of the four macro skills, speaking has been addressed as the most challenging skill in our context. Hence, learners face problems to express themselves and communicate with other English speakers because of their weak speaking skill. The modern world of media and mass communication demands decent knowledge of spoken English. In this article, we are concerning the term speaking, the importance of attaining speaking skill, characteristics of speaking performance, confronting problems in speaking and some factors influencing speaking performance. This study could be used as a fact to reveal the needs of English speaking in the frame of the EAP course in Mongolian context. Moreover, the study aimed at investigating factors affecting learners' English speaking skill. The researcher randomly chose 48 students who are taking English as Academic Purposes (EAP) courses in the university of Finance and Economics, Mongolia. The result of the survey showed certain factors that influence students' speaking performance in English, such as social factors and educational context factors.

Keywords: characteristics, confronting issues, educational context factors, social factors, speaking,

1. Introduction

Most of the English learners aim to learn speaking skill beforehand and give importance to attain the ability. Language learners tend to evaluate their success in language learning based on speakers' ability to express themselves orally. (Leong and Ahmadi, 2017). Lecturers and study materials such as course books use either direct methods which focus on particular aspects of oral interaction; for instance, turn-taking and topic management or indirect approaches that take speaking skill by group work, task based work and other strategies (Richards, 1990).

According to Harmer (2007) the communication of mankind is a complex process. Speakers use language in order to express themselves or transmit information to others and get necessary information from others as well. Consequently, speakers are listeners as well in order to run their communication smoothly. Speaking is vital in both the second and foreign language learning. Despite its importance, speaking has been disregarded in schools and colleges because of various reasons such as emphasis on grammar and some curriculum related issues. In fact, the speaking section was excluded in the exams due to the problem in assessing it objectively (Clifford, 1987). However, it doesn't mean that speaking had been less important in the previous decades.

Speaking is one of the most important skills out of the four macro skills because learners who learn a language are referred to as the speakers of that language (Ur, 1996). One of the most important goals of English language teaching is to give learners the ability to use English language effectively and correctly in communication. Yet, learners find it challenging to communicate fluently and accurately due to their lack of knowledge in this field.

2. Definition of speaking

A number of definitions about the word “speaking” is linked in the sources. For example, in the Webster New World Dictionary: speaking is to say words orally, to communicate as by talking, to make a request and to make a speech (Nunan, 1995). According to the fact, speaking is an interactive process of making meaning that includes producing, receiving, and processing information.

3. The importance of speaking skill

Mankind are programmed to use their spoken skill before learning reading and writing and oral skill is used far more than any other skills. Hence, in all languages the speaking skill is the most desired one to be attained by language learners. Acquiring speaking skills in English is not an easy task. Because speakers should know various important components like pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Without this knowledge, speakers cannot have effective and smooth communication with others. In 1981 a researcher called Rivers studied the use of language outside the classroom circumstance and found out that speaking is used twice as much as reading and writing. Moreover, it is mentioned that listening and speaking are learners’ language tools. Now, an argumentative question comes out “Can all English classes run activities and tasks to support students’ speaking skill?” Of course the answer is very controversial. By the confirmation of many researchers’ study, it was proved that teaching approaches and learning success have an inseparable connection. It means, if we want to motivate students to use English, we teachers ought to facilitate the language in real communication and ask them to use English as well. Briefly, the more authentic language is used in the classroom, the more opportunities to practice English will be opened to our students.

From my personal observation, English teaching methods have changed significantly in the last two decades. Teachers tend to use more communication oriented approaches rather than grammar-translation. Hence, authentic tasks and real life like practices backup students’ communication abilities well. Furthermore, students are aware of the importance of learning English well and tend to try as much as possible. It is obvious that the better communication skills students have, the more successful the future is waiting for them. Due to these reasons, attaining speaking in English is the most desired skill of the learners in the 21st century.

4. Characteristics of speaking skill

According to Mazouzi (2013), classroom activities should be based on an equivalence between fluency and accuracy achievement. Both of these elements are significant in a communicative approach. Hence, practical activities and tasks in the classroom can support

learners to enhance their communicative competence. In order to fulfill their goals, it is vital to know how the language system works appropriately.

The first characteristic of speaking performance is fluency and it is accepted as the most important goal of teachers'. According to Hughes (2002), fluency is the learners' ability to speak in a foreign language in an approachable way in order not to interrupt communication because communicators may have trouble to get what the speaker meant.

The second characteristic of the speaking performance is accuracy. Although many teaching methods, for instance task-based language teaching imply that fluency is more important than accuracy. It is impossible to ignore the accuracy related issues. Therefore, teachers should emphasize accuracy in their teaching process. Also, students ought to consider the exactness and the completeness of language form when speaking (Mazouzi, 2013).

5. Common problems in learning speaking skill

According to the fact, the following are accepted as the most common problems in speaking skill. They are inhibition, lack of topical knowledge, inactive participation and native language use.

Everyone knows it's challenging to express ourselves in foreign language, especially because the speaker lacks confidence and is not good at speaking. So, they tend to inhibit and participate in the communication limitedly. Students are worried about making mistakes and criticism from others. In many contexts it is very typical to create inhibition and apprehension for students.

Next common problem is lack of topical knowledge. Because of cultural differences or personal reasons, students tend to avoid answering some questions. It can be explained that students don't know much about the given questions indeed, or they may have limited use of language or even some psychological conditions. Whatever the reason is, it negatively influences students' motivation and learning process negatively.

The last typical problem is students' low participation in the speaking class. In a class with a large number of students, an individual student will not have enough time to express themselves. Also, some better English speakers dominate and don't give chances to the students in the lower level. Precisely, mixed language level matters a lot in learning English speaking. Sometimes, it can be decent soil to learn from peers, but in other cases it can be harmful to lower levelled students.

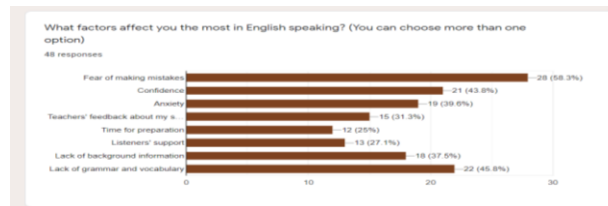
6. Factors affecting Speaking skill

In order to help our students to overcome challenges related to speaking skill, we need to find out what factors are affecting. Hence, the researcher has conducted a survey and collected data which shows the influencing factors of speaking difficulty of our students in the University of Finance and Economics. There are 48 participants in this survey (18.8% male and 81.3% female). Approximately, the biggest number or 67% of the students have been learning English for 5-10 years and the next ratio (22.9%) belongs to the learners who

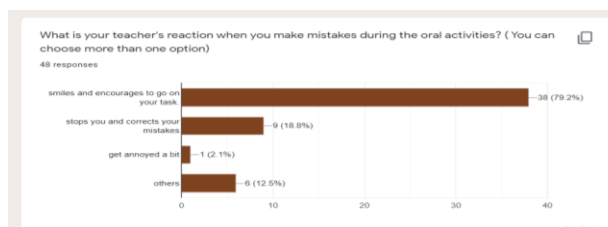
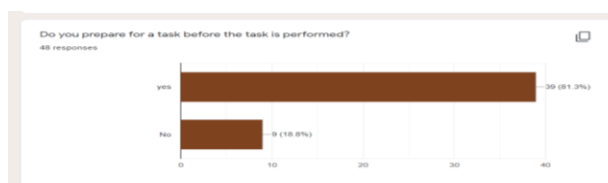
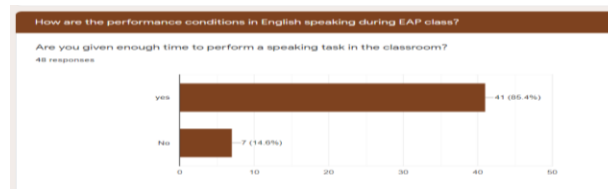
have been learning English for less than five years. The lowest percentage (10.4%) shows the number of students who have been learning English for more than 10 years.

The result of the survey is reflected below:

1. Most of the survey respondents claimed that fear of making mistakes; lack of confidence and lack of grammatical and lexicological knowledge are the main factors which affect their English speaking performance.

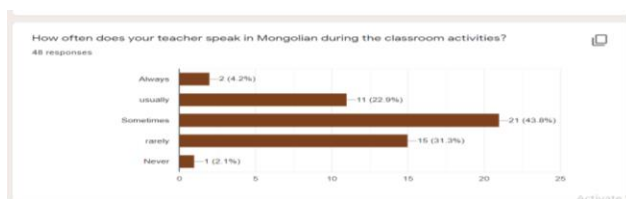
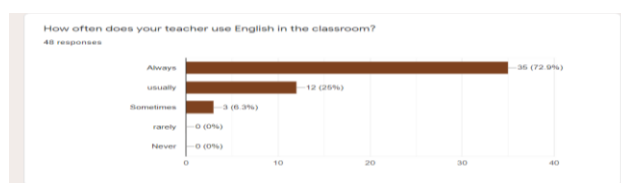
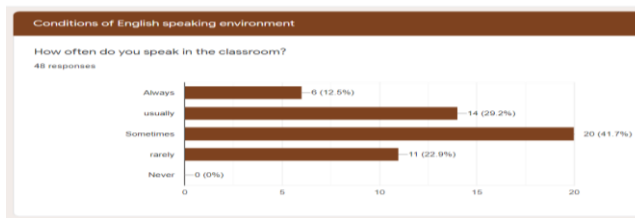


2. In order to clarify the performance related condition, the below mentioned four questions were asked and the result was quite positive. In the EAP class, 85.4% of the students answered they are given enough time to prepare for their speaking task; 39.6% of the students said their teachers correct their mistakes; and 79.2% of the respondents admitted their teachers show supporting reactions when they make mistakes.



3. The third section of the questionnaire addressed the conditions of the English speaking environment of the students. Out of the 48 participants 20 of them stated that they sometimes participate in the speaking activities. The rest of them have chosen the answers usually and always. About 73% of the students admitted their

teachers use English during the class. And 43.8% of them said their teachers sometimes use Mongolian in their class.



8. Conclusion

This paper reviewed the factors that affect students' English speaking performance and mentioned important factors in the role of developing learners' speaking skill. Concluding from the survey results, the lower the students' self-confidence the less their participation is in the English speaking activities.

As it was mentioned above, learners have limited chances to practice authentic language in real life, so one of the best ways to enhance spoken English skill is the English classroom and teachers are the one who can assist students to gain knowledge in this field. That's why in order to track the performance and learning process of students the survey was conducted and the result was relatively positive. Furthermore, those social and educational context factors are accepted as vital ones in the learners' English speaking process (Leong and Ahmadi, 2017).

The implication of this article is teachers and the relevant bodies should consider the improvement of social and education context factors, hence there will be more progress among students in English speaking skill.

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