

Problems in learning English Speaking Skill: A study of Higher Secondary

Students in Srinagar, India

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Abstract

Speaking is fundamental to human communication. English language learners, no matter how much they know about the English language, still face many speaking difficulties. Many studies have indicated that oral language development has largely been neglected in the classroom. Nunan (1991) wrote 'success is measured in terms of the ability to carry out a conversation in the (target) language'. Therefore, if students do not learn how to speak or do not get opportunity to speak in the language classroom they may soon get de-motivated and lose interest in learning. Given this backdrop the present paper attempts to explore the significant difference in the results of speaking skill with the help of t-test. The sample for this study was taken from various higher secondary institutes of Srinagar city. The sample comprised of a total number of 160 respondents. A questionnaire was prepared for the elicitation of linguistic data which was designed to test the student's knowledge of speaking skill. The test took around 20-30 minutes in the form of an interview. The responses of the students were recorded using a tape recorder. The scores of speaking skill were graded on a scale of 0 to 5. The quantitative data was captured in a software program called Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 14.0 for its final analysis and tabulation purposes.. The present study also included classroom observation in order to find out the speaking difficulties that are encountered by higher secondary students.

Key words : English, Speaking skill, proficiency, vocabulary, grammar, exposure

Introduction

In the era of information technology communication skills in English language, particularly in speaking, have assumed vital significance. Speaking is considered to be the most important language skill. "A large percentage of world's language learners study English in order to develop proficiency in speaking. We may use speaking to describe things, to complain about people's behavior, to make polite requests, or to entertain people with jokes." (Richards and Renandya 2002). Hornby (1995:37) states that through speaking language learners will be judged upon most in real life situation. Tarigan (1990:3-4) defines speaking as a language skill which is developed in childhood preceded with listening skill. It means that speaking is the basic skill in learning language.

English language is regarded as most spoken language around the globe, and many people learn this language in order to have better career, job security or communicate more effectively with more people. English might be a popular language to learn, but this doesn't mean it is a simple to master, there are many challenges people face when learning English. This paper will focus on the problems in learning English speaking skill at higher secondary level. Fauziati (2010:15) points out that "mastering the art of speaking is the single most important aspect of learning a second or foreign language and success is measure in term of ability to carry out a conversation in the language" It has been observed that Learners do not get any chance either in the class room or outside to speak English. There is also lack of exposure to authentic English language environments that allow them to use English for communication and expression. Learning to speak also demands a lot of practice and

attention. They often stammer when speaking English. Furthermore, learners are not exposed to the cultures of the native English speakers. As a result second language learners at higher secondary level are poor in speaking skill.

Methodology

The sample for this study was taken from various higher secondary institutes of Srinagar city. The sample comprised of a total number of 160 respondents. It included equal number of male and female respondents. The sample was divided into 2 groups. From each group 40 respondents were taken

A questionnaire was prepared which consisted of two parts. Part one was designed to elicit information about the student's exposure to English language. The other part was prepared for the elicitation of linguistic data which was designed to test the student's knowledge of speaking skill.

To collect the required data, the researcher also acted as a participant observer. The observation part was used to observe students' activities in the teaching and learning process, and to observe the teaching material and activities used by the teacher in the classroom.

The speaking test took around 20-30 minutes in the form of an interview. The interview was more like friendly conversation which typically covered some aspects of past, present and future situations. The speaking test contained three sections. The first section comprised of an interview during which respondents were asked about their hobbies, interests, and other general topics like sports and family. In the second section candidates were asked to read the given passage. The third section involved a picture story which a learner had to describe in his/her own words. The responses of the students were recorded using a recorder.

Data Elicitation

The respondents were contacted in their respective classrooms and information about the purpose of study was provided to them. After obtaining their consent, the research questionnaire was administered to them. Furthermore clear instructions were given to respondents before filling the questionnaire. In this way the data collection was carried out in all secondary schools under study. A similar test was conducted after a gap of six months involving the same informants.

After collecting the data from a survey instrument, it was converted into numbers before transferring to an Excel spreadsheet. So the data was codified and then quantified. The quantitative data was captured in a software program called Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 14.0 for its final analysis and tabulation purpose.

The speaking skill was graded on a scale of 0 to 5. A score of 0 means no response, likewise a score of 1 means that the student is very weak in English. A score of 5 shows that the student possesses excellent English language skills. An average student shows score of 2 to 3 in the test.

Table 1: Scoring Scale

Skill	Range score	Level	Scale
Speaking	(0-30)	Excellent (25-30)	5
		Good (19-24)	4
		Fair (13-18)	3
		Average (7-12)	2
		Weak (1-6)	1
		no response (0)	0

The response of the student was independently rated by two qualified evaluators. This test was a measure of speaking skill. Although, their levels of speaking skill will also depend on other factors, such as their present schooling, the schools they have attended, educational background of family, use of English and so on.

Results and Findings

The findings and the results of the study is presented in three sections. The section 1st will focus on the claimed proficiency acquired as a result of exposure to English language. In section 2nd, the proficiency of respondents in speaking skill was explored by using paired t-test. T- Test is generally applied, For example, in the context of the present study, to find out the proficiency of respondents at initial level and final level after giving a certain kind of input. Section 3rd deals with the observation part of the study. This part was used to observe students and teacher activities in the classroom.

Interpretation of Result

The detailed interpretation and discussion of the descriptive analysis of the data is given below. The results are explained and presented in tables and figures.

Section 1st

English occupies a prominent place in our society and has the position of a Lingua Franca in the world. It is the language of trade, media, market, and internet and so on. So respondents were asked about exposure to English language.

Watch English News

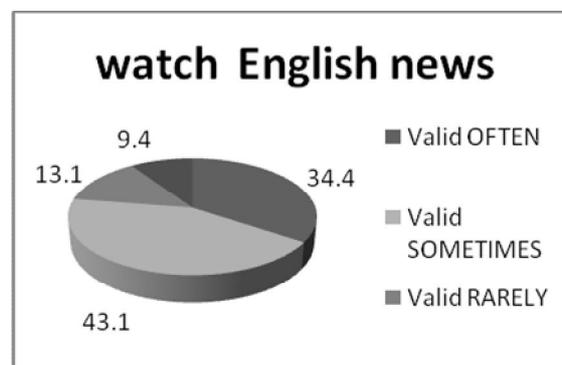


Fig 1(a): Watch English News

The respondents were asked do they watch English news, it was observed that 34.4% of respondents often watch English news and 43.1% of respondents watch it sometimes. While as 9.4% never watch English news and 13.1% of respondents are those who rarely watch it.

Watch English Movies

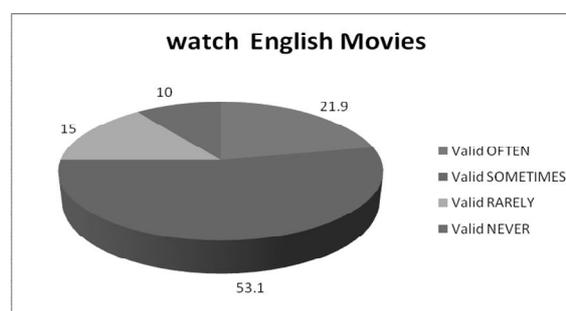
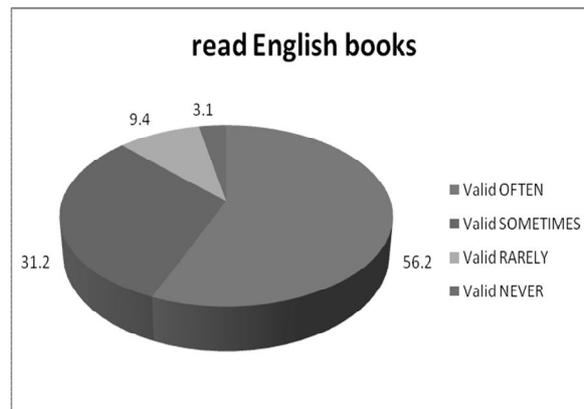
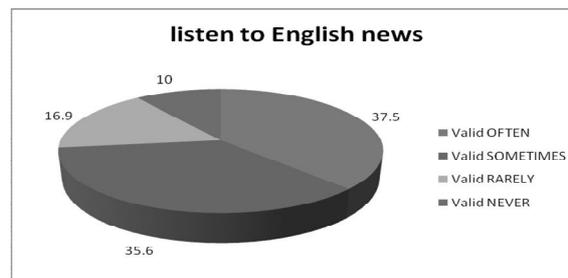


Fig 1(b): Watch English Movies

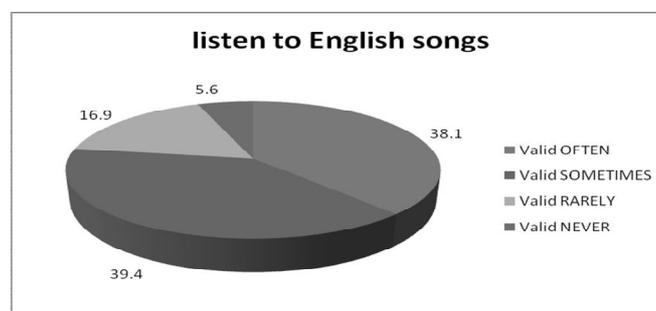
In response to the question regarding students watching English movies, it can be elicited from the above pie chart that 53.1% of respondents watch English movies sometimes and 21.9% watch English movies often. However there are only 10% of respondents who never watch English movies, and 15% of respondents are those who rarely shows interest in watching English movies.

Read English Books*Fig 1 (c): Read English Books*

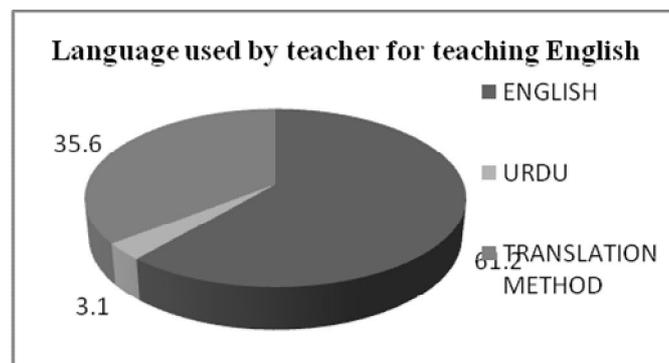
Regarding students interest in reading English books, 56.2% of respondents reported to read English books often, while as 31.2% of the students claimed to read English books sometimes, 9.4% of respondents have reported reading English books rarely. While as only 3.1% of the respondents did not show any kind of interest in reading books.

Listen to English News*Fig 1(d): Listen to English News*

In response to the question regarding students listening English news, it can be elicited from the above pie chart that 37.5% of respondents often listen to English news and 35.6% listen English news sometimes. However there are only 10% of respondents who never listened to English news, and 17% of respondents are those who rarely listen to English news.

Listen to English Songs*Fig 1(e): Listen to English Songs*

When respondents were asked about listening to English songs, the results showed that 38% often listen English songs and 39.4% listen them sometimes. There were only 5.6% of respondents who claimed that they never listen English songs while as almost 17% of respondents claimed to listen English songs rarely.



Language used by Teacher for Teaching English

Fig 1(f): Language used by Teacher

Respondents were asked about the language teacher uses for teaching English. It was observed from above chart that most of the teachers (61%) use English language, 35.6% use translation method while as only 3.1% uses Urdu language.

Use of English Language

The respondents were asked questions about the use of English language in different domains.

Use of English with Teacher

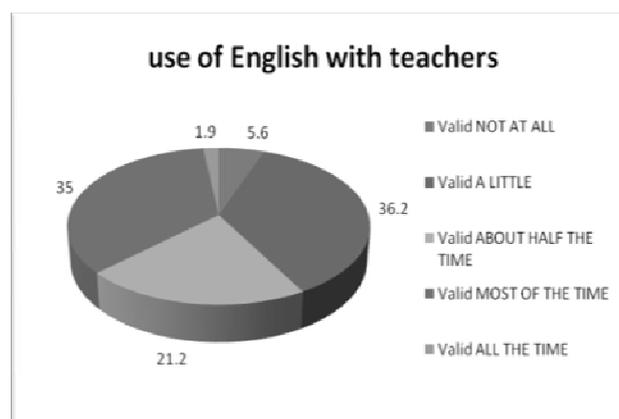


Fig 1(g): Use of English with Teachers

On asking about use of English with their teachers, the finding of the research work shows that only 1.9% of respondents use English all the time with the teachers, 35% of respondents use it most of the time, 21.2% of respondents use it half of the time and 5.6% of respondents never used English with their teachers. So the overall percentage of usage of English with teachers is fairly good.

Use of English with Friends

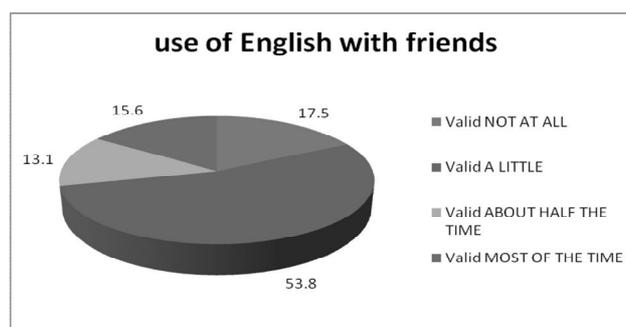


Fig 1(h): Use of English with Friends

Similarly, when the respondents were asked about the use of English with their friends, 15.6% of respondents claimed that they use English most of the time with their friends, 13.1% claimed to use it about half of the time and 53.8% use little English with their friends. 17.5% of respondents are those who have never used English with their friends.

Use of English with Family Members

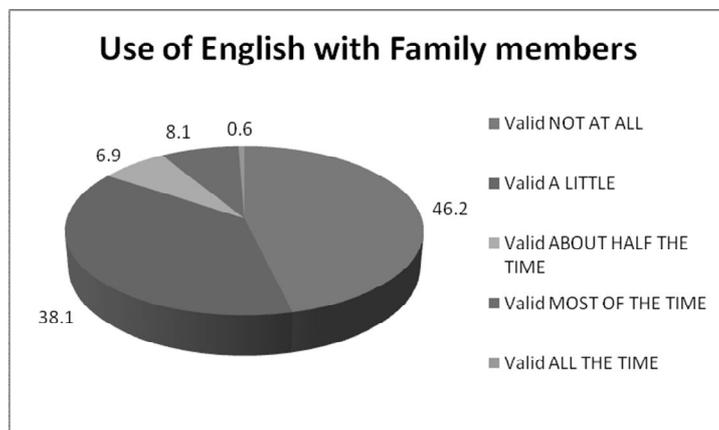


Fig 1(i): Use of English with Family Members

The respondents were asked about the use of English with their family members. As is evident from the figure, 46.2% of respondents never used English with their family members, 38.1% use little English with them and mere 0.6% use English all the time with their family members. Only 8.1% respondents have claimed to use English most of the time with their family members.

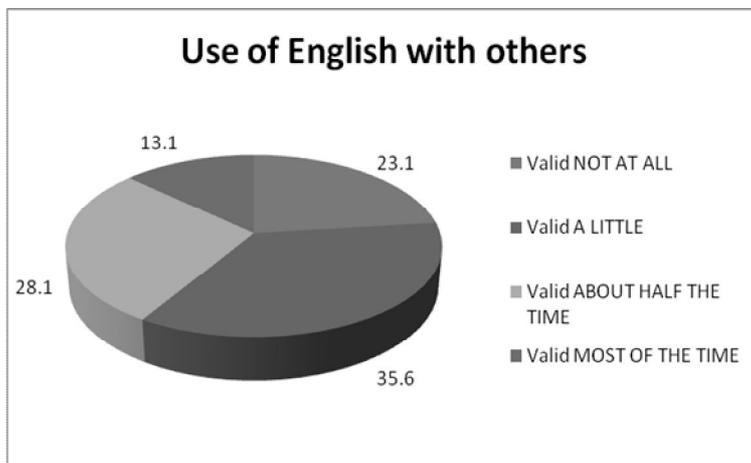


Fig1 (j): Use of English with Others

Use of English with Other

The respondents were asked about use of English with others (neighbours, in the market). 13.1% of respondents claim that they use English most of the time with others, 28.1% use it about half of the time. 23.1% have never used English with others and 35.6% used little English with others.

It is believed that if a learner uses English language in their communication, his /her chances of increase in proficiency of English language will be greater. It can be inferred from the figure (2) that a good percentage of students use English with their teachers. A very little percentage of students use English with their friends and few use English with their family members while as a fair amount of students use English in their communication with others.

Section 2nd

In this particular analysis, the statistical significance level was accepted to be $p < .05$ for all the paired sample findings. If the p-value (2-tailed significance value) is greater than .05, then there is no significant difference, and if the value comes out less than .05 or equal to .05 then there is significant difference.

Mean Scores Scored by the Respondents at their Initial and Final levels in Speaking Skill.*Table 2: Overall Mean Scored by the Respondents in their speaking skill*

Variable	Mean	Total respondents
SPEAKING SKILL	2.5344	160

The overall score of speaking skill is 2.5344 on a scale of 5. Though they are exposed to English language from kindergarten.

Paired Samples Statistics**T-Test***Table 3: Mean Scored by the Respondents at their Initial and Final levels*

		Mean	Total respondents
Pair 1	INITIAL LEVEL OF SPEAKING SKILL	2.5188	160
	FINAL LEVEL OF SPEAKING SKILL	2.5500	160

After analyzing the data it was observed that the mean score remains almost same, i.e., from 2.51 to 2.55 from their initial to final level.

*Table 4: Significant difference between initial and final level in general***Paired Samples Test**

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	INITIAL LEVEL OF SPEAKING SKILL - FINAL LEVEL OF SPEAKING SKILL	-.03125	.56548	.04471	-.11954	.05704	-.699	159	.486

After applying t-test, it was observed that there is no significant difference in speaking from initial to final level. This may be because of the fact that less focus is given to speaking activities and students gets less exposure to speaking skills.

*Table 5: Mean Scored by the Respondents at their Initial and Final levels in 12th Class***Paired Samples Statistics****T-Test**

Pair 4	INITIAL LEVEL OF SPEAKING SKILL	2.3600	80
	FINAL LEVEL OF SPEAKING SKILL	2.3875	80

While talking about 12th class respondents the mean score of speaking remains almost constant.

Table 6: Significant difference between initial and final level in 12th class respondents

Paired Samples Test(a)

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 4	INITIAL LEVEL OF SPEAKING SKILL - FINAL LEVEL OF SPEAKING SKILL	.11250	.52756	.05898	-.00490	.22990	1.907	79	.460

In case of 12th English students, there is no significant difference in speaking skill. It means speaking skill do not get much focus in English class and the syllabi of English language at various levels lay least emphasis on speaking skill.

Table 7: Mean Scored by the Respondents at their Initial and Final levels in 11th Class

Paired Samples Statistics

T-Test

Pair 4	INITIAL LEVEL OF SPEAKING SKILL	2.3500	80
	FINAL LEVEL OF SPEAKING SKILL	2.3900	80

After analyzing the data of only 11th class respondents, it was observed that the mean score speaking remains almost same, i.e., from 2.35 to 2.39.

Table 8: Significant difference between initial and final level in 11th class respondents

Paired Samples tests (a)

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
INITIAL LEVEL OF SPEAKING SKILL - FINAL LEVEL OF SPEAKING SKILL	-.17500	.71208	.11259	-.40273	.05273	-1.554	39	.128

Here we can depict from the above table that in case of speaking skill there is no significant difference. In other words the student does not show any progress in speaking skill. The obvious reason for the present finding could be that in 11th class, student’s speaking skill is less focused.

The above charts clearly show that there is no significant difference from their initial to final levels. This is because of the fact that the speaking skill is not adequately covered in the teaching of English. Yet another reason may be that respondents become conscious while speaking and make mistakes which in turn effect their scoring in this skill. A further reason for these findings could be the large classes that teachers have to cope with. Because the classes are large in terms of student strength, the teachers cannot give individual attention to all the students. Another reason for the present findings could be the defective educational system in Kashmir, especially the lack of adequate number of trained teachers. It is a fact that majority of the teachers are not well equipped and pedagogically well trained as far as the teaching of English language is concerned. Due to this

reason as well, teachers are unable to effectively mould their teaching according to the prescribed curriculum objectives.

Section 3rd

Observation part

Vocabulary

Liu and Jackson (2008) observed that lack of vocabulary was regarded as a main hindrance for spoken communication by English learners. In the present study, inadequate vocabulary was also reported as a prevalent concern among the students although they are exposed to range of words and phrases at this stage. But when it comes to speaking, these words and phrases never come to their mind, so the expression they deliver intended meaning precisely. This also contributed directly to a lack of fluency in their speech.

Interference of mother tongue or Urdu language

The problem noticed was that the students tend to translate a word directly from Kashmiri/Urdu to English. Because learners find it easier or more natural to express themselves in their native language.

Grammar

Like vocabulary, grammar is also an obstacle to their spoken English. Sometimes, they have problem in simple sentences like a verb's third-person singular form, although they have the concept of subject-verb agreement in their head. But when they speak fast, they fail to apply this rule. Some students had problems in using past tense they tend to switch unconsciously from past tense to present tense. It was also observed that students would think about the particular grammar item being involved before producing the utterance. But this strategy did not always work, as in: "In terms of speaking, you will not think too much about what you are going to say. Actually you will have no time to think, and you have to improvise.

Pronunciation

It was also observed that most of the students speak carefully in order to focus on pronouncing certain words (especially those less common words). When they speak fast, there are inaccuracies in some sounds," Few students have problems with some particular vowels or consonants, although these errors would not lead to unintelligibility.

Inadequate Opportunities to Speak English

It is difficult to define exposure. One can actually live in a foreign country for sometime but not take advantage of being "with the people." It is believed that the quality and intensity of exposure are more important than mere length of time.

Students have little exposure to English language. The opportunity to speak English in the classroom is very low. Somehow if they get a chance to speak the language, they become nervous which eventually hinders their speaking skill.

The extracurricular media and activities like watching English movies and discussions/debates are less focused in the classroom. If these activities are operated in the classroom, it would have helped students to improve their communicative command of English so that they can use it fluently and confidently.

Students don't have many opportunities to speak English in their daily lives. Since Urdu is the preferred medium of communication in most of the schools, the local community, and in their homes. Although Urdu is not a native language of Kashmiris but they learn Urdu from everywhere, when shopping, when watching TV, even when they are at home. Hence it is not surprising that English is less focused in day to day life.

Large classrooms

A further reason for these findings are large classes that teachers have to cope with. Because the classes are large in terms of student strength, the teachers cannot give individual attention to all the students.

Audio visual aids

Another reason for the present findings is the lack of audio visual aids. It was observed only few schools were equipped with it, and the use of AV material was almost negligible.

It was also observed that teachers were more focused on the completion of syllabus rather than involving students in activities.

Conclusion

This paper focuses on speaking difficulties encountered by learners at higher secondary level in Srinagar city. It has come up with the conclusion that there is no significant difference in speaking skill from their initial level(at the beginning of the course) to final levels(at the end of the course). After testing the oral proficiency of respondents, it was confirmed that the overall performance in speaking skill is very low. The study also showed that second language learners did not have that much exposure to English language use inside and outside the classroom. It is believed that exposure to English language tends to develop better levels of proficiency in the English language. Moreover those who have meaningful exposure to English language are generally more proficient in the use of the language and consequently would do better in the proficiency test that would be administered to them.

The observation part also saw various loopholes in teaching-learning processes. The teachers were always under constant pressure of completing the prescribed syllabus. They didn't pay any heed to interactive activities which would have helped students in mastering the speaking skill. Lack in vocabulary was another serious problem which compromises student's fluency. It is believed that anyone who wishes to speak a second language must learn the grammar and vocabulary of the language, and master its sounds (Fulcher, 2003). Furthermore the students had very less chance to speak in the classroom. There were only few students who would come up and speak in English language, and rest of them would remain quiet during the entire lecture. It was more teacher dominating approach which in turn hindered their progress in speaking.

Few Remedies

Speaking is an act of creativity. Most second language learners learn the target language in their own culture; practice is available only in classroom. So a key factor in development of target language speaking is to design interactive activities, which considers all the skills conjointly as they interact with each other in natural behaviour (Nunan, 1989). These activities should be based on authentic material, enable learners to practice all communicative skills they need in real world. Based on these criteria, Kang Shumin put forward the following activities which help in promoting spoken language production.

Aural: oral activities; the material such as news reports on radio can be used for background or as input for interaction. In practice, students are directed to listen to taped dialogues or monologues. After each student has listened to a segment they will negotiate the meaning and answers questions, which motivates students to speak.

Visual: oral activities; because of the lack of opportunity in foreign language setting to interact with native speakers, the need for exposure to many kinds of scenes, situations, and accents as well as voices is particularly critical. This need can be met by audio visual materials such as appropriate films, video tapes and soap operas. While watching students can pay attention how people use language in real life situations, they will be exposed to different registers, accents, intonations, rhythms and stresses (Carrasquillo, 1994, p.140). Similarly they can notice the non verbal behaviour of the speakers.

Material-aided : oral activities; appropriate reading material with comprehension questions can lead to creative production in speech like telling story from a sequence of pictures , leave an answer phone message or using menus for making purchases in the super market or for ordering in a restaurant. These kind of tasks will help learners to deal with real situations in future.

Culture awareness: oral activities; culture plays an important role in shaping communicative competence in speakers. Brown and Yule(1983,p.40)said, “a great number of cultural assumptions which would be normally presupposed, and not made explicit by native speakers, may need to be drawn explicitly to the attention of speakers from other cultures.” Thus Teachers can present situations in which there are cultural misunderstandings and students can be asked to analyse what went wrong and why, which will force them to think about how people in target culture perceive things, and which will definitely provide a deeper insight of their cultural understanding.

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