

Teaching Communication Strategies to Students with Communication Disabilities

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Abstract: Many communication scholars and researchers agree that students with oral communication disabilities should be trained to be effective communicators and that effective communication strategies need to be taught to those students to improve their communication skills. They further agree that if students are not taught effective communication strategies, they will rely on the policies that do not work well, such as borrowing from language and avoidance strategies. Therefore, the author developed a way of teaching communication strategies to students with oral communication disabilities. This way is based on the concept of scaffolding, interaction hypothesis, and the social cognitive theory.

Keywords: Teaching, communication, strategies, students, communication disabilities.

INTRODUCTION

Many researchers studied communication strategies and their effect on students' oral communicative ability. However, the author found that only one of these studies was conducted with students with learning disabilities. In this study, we examined teacher-student verbal interaction in classrooms of high school students with specific learning difficulties (SpLDs) learning speaking. The aims of the study were two-fold:

- (a) To examine teachers' interactional strategies when teaching communication to those students and
- (b) to search for strategies which appeared to support and activate students' participation in speaking learning activities. The study was conducted in classrooms of low ability groups of high-school students over four months [1].

The classes were composed of students with SpLDs which affected their ability to acquire proper literacy skills in speaking and whose literacy and communication skills were therefore limited. The primary sources of data were transcripts of observation notes and videotaped classroom interactions. The conceptual framework for analysis and interpretation of the data included a socio-cultural model of teacher-student interaction and examination of deviations from the traditional, restricted Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) classroom sequence. The results suggest that instructional strategies and the quality of teacher verbal interaction have the potential to open up and increase

learning opportunities for SpLD students despite their limited literacy and communication skills [2].

That is, the gradual release of responsibility from the teacher to the student lies at the heart of this model. To make this happen, the model proceeds through these four steps: (1) direct instruction of communication strategies, (2) application of communication strategies in teacher-student interaction, (3) application of communication strategies in student-student interaction and (4) self-assessment. These four steps are discussed in detail in the next sections [3].

In this step, the teacher raises students' awareness of one or more of the communication strategies at a time over a semester, school year, or course. She makes them aware of how, when, and why these strategies are used to facilitate oral communication. She also provides students with the necessary words and expressions of this strategy. Finally, she involves students in observing a video of conversation and gets them to identify, categorise, and evaluate the policy explained to them before and used by interlocutors in this conversation. In support of this step, we state that research shows that strategy training which fully informs the learner (by indicating why the strategy is useful, how it can transfer to different tasks, and how learners can evaluate the success of this strategy) is more successful than training that does not.

Teacher-student interaction is a two-way process in which the teacher and the students participate in oral exchanges. It involves, not only exchanges but also every verbal exchange that occurs in the classroom, including those that arise in the course of formal drilling. This type of interaction base on the concept of

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scaffolding, within the student's zone of proximal development. In this type of interaction, the teacher interacts with students by using interactional patterns that elicit students' use of the communication strategies explained to them in step one. In other words, she supports students to develop their strategic competence through the questions s/he asks, the speech modifications s/he makes, and the way she reacts to student responses and mistakes. S/he also provides needed language to help them pre-empt communication breakdowns and offers communication strategies to help them maintain and extend their turns. This, in turn, can make communication strategies meaningful and utilisable to the students [4].

Moreover, teacher-student interaction can indirectly contribute to the development of communication strategies because students can absorb these strategies through observation of the teacher's verbal behaviour. During this type of interaction, students notice the gap between the strategies they use and the strategies used by the teacher. When they see the discrepancy and realise that their message is not understood as intended, or that the teacher is using a different strategy, they can modify their message and/or policy accordingly. This, in turn, leads to the development of both the processes and outcomes of their interactions [5].

More importantly, teacher-student interaction allows the teacher to continually and informally assess what students comprehend and express as well as the strategies they employ in expressing their thoughts. This, in turn, allows the teacher to determine where scaffolding is needed to help students perfect their use of communication strategies. It also will enable teachers to give feedback to the students to help them maintain interaction and expand their use of these strategies.

Furthermore, teacher-student interaction is significant for a positive relationship between students and teachers, which can, in turn, lead to better learning in general. In support of this benefit, many researchers; praise, self-disclosure) and non-verbal (e.g., eye contact, facial expressions) immediacy behaviours could lessen the psychological distance between themselves and their students, leading to higher learning. This positive relationship may even have a mediating effect on students with developmental vulnerabilities and insecure maternal attachments. In some cases, high-quality teacher-student interactions provided a "protective effect" for at-risk students in

comparison to similar students who lacked these interactions. Also, we found that students retained new information better when they interacted with the instructor by questioning the latest news. He further saw that when questions elicited higher cognitive processes students could maintain 80% to 85% of new materials [6].

METHODS

Participants

The study was done on a group of a hundred Kazakh undergraduate learners studying in two schools in Almaty city.

Most of the students were juniors (56 %), (44%) were seniors. In terms of gender, the students did not balance with 135 Females (90%), 15 males (10%) and their age ranged from 19 to 21.

In support of the benefits of developing communication strategies instruction for students with learning disabilities, we found that these students scored lower on the measures of communication strategy use than did their non-disabled peers as a result of comparing the learning strategies used by 90 postsecondary students with disabilities to those used by 80 students without disabilities. This intentional teaching can benefit students with learning disabilities in particular because it will help them to grow more aware of their thinking processes, to recognise when meaning breaks down, and to understand what strategies work best for them. It has also been suggested that strategy instruction can help learners with disabilities to overcome certain psycholinguistic and effective constraints in the classroom.

In this step, the teacher involves each student in assessing the quality of his vocal performance concerning the communication strategies she employed during student-student interaction. This step helps each student to draw a profile of her lacks of communication skills and strategies. It also promotes the learner's responsibility and independence, without learner self-assessment "there can be no real autonomy". Specifically, self-assessment can help students to:

- (1) identify their strengths and weaknesses in communication,
- (2) document their progress,

- (3) identify effective learning strategies and materials,
- (4) become aware of the learning contexts that work best for them,
- (5) Establish goals for future independent learning. To make it easy for the student to self-assess her/his communicative performance concerning the communication strategies s/he has already used, the teacher should provide them with an assessment tool such as the one given in Table 1 below.

Table 1 A Self-Assessment Tool of Communication Strategies (Questinnaire)

Date
Name
Topic of Interaction
I used a repertoire of strategies to communicate with other members in my group.
The strategies I used helped me communicate with other members in my group more easily and thoughtfully.
The communication strategies I found most useful were
The communication strategies I found difficult to use were

RESULTS

Two types of instruments were administered in this study (a) a written Quantitative questionnaire, (b) Qualitative classroom observations.

To determine the effect of teaching methods to students with special needs, the learners, took a test at the beginning of the study, the purpose of which was to achieve homogeneity between the two groups. The test is a standardised, reliable and valid test, which is known all over the world. Regarding the scores on the test, most of these selected learners could be assumed to be elementary. This pre-test contained the written section of the test and it included 50 items. But the scores were calculated out of 100. Results of the pre-test were also used to homogenising the groups. After the treatment, again a version of the test was administered to check the effectiveness of the two teaching methodologies on the learning learners with special needs. The researcher used the SPSS program to process the gathered data by pre-test and post-test.

In the third category, the statements in the test address the issues related to the nature of learning. The responses of the test items in this category are presented in Table 2 below. Items 7, 9, 17 and 28 concern the roles of vocabulary learning and grammar instruction. Item 24 and 30 concern the importance of cultural knowledge and learning strategy. Item 25 concerns the perception of the learning process related to that of other subject areas.

In the area of the nature of learning (Table 2), in both groups, nearly all students 95% from GROUP 1 and 92% from GROUP 2 believed that it is best to learn to speak in a small group.

Table 2: BALLI Survey: The Nature of Learning

Item	Source	AG	DA	M	SD
7.learning speaking is mostly a matter of self-working.	Group 1	48%	26%	2.74	0.76
	Group 2	47%	24%	2.69	1.03
9.learning speaking is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary words.	Group 1	93%	6%	1.76	0.75
	Group 2	85%	7%	1.89	0.92
17.learning speaking is mostly a matter of learning of grammar rules.	Group 1	46%	26%	2.74	0.98
	Group 2	56%	20%	2.46	1.1
24.it is necessary to know the oral culture to speak better.	Group 1	69%	23%	2.39	1.1
	Group 2	77%	15%	2.16	1.1
25.learning speaking is different from learning other school subjects.	Group 1	66%	13%	2.37	0.85
	Group 2	57%	26%	2.56	1.11
28.the most critical part of learning speaking is learning how to express thoughts.	Group 1	50%	24%	2.65	0.96
	Group 2	56%	26%	2.65	0.95
30.it is better to learn speaking more better in the small groups.	Group 1	95%	--	1.41	0.6
	Group 2	92%	3%	1.64	0.77

Note: AG=agree, DA=disagree. The percentages (%) have been rounded to the nearest tenth.

The majority of many GROUP 1 students (93%) and 85 per cent GROUP 2 students strongly agree and agree the idea of learning speaking is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary words.

Nearly three-quarter students from both universities (69% GROUP 1, 77% GROUP 2) thought it is necessary to know the speech culture to speak the better. However, 66 per cent of students from GROUP 1, and 57 per cent of students from GROUP 2 felt that learning speaking is different from other subjects.

Again nearly the same per cent (46%GROUP 1, 56% GROUP 2) students agree the idea of learning speaking is mostly a matter of learning grammar rules.

DISCUSSION

The primary aim of teaching speaking is to develop students' communication skills because these skills are necessary for school and society. In the globalisation era, speaking skills have become one of the most important qualities of communication in the world. As it was mentioned, "In today's world where a high percentage of students need or will need to be able to speak better outside the classroom, there is an absolute necessity to develop communicative competence as an integral part of an effective syllabus". In school, oral communication skills are the bridge to literacy because they form the basis for literacy development at the beginning level. Students cannot write what they cannot say. Oral language is a precursor to written language even if we do not write exactly the way we speak. Moreover, both teacher-student and student-student interactions are important sources for learning in the classroom. Through such interactions, input can be made, and meaning can be made clearer. Most importantly, communication makes teaching more thoughtful, involves students in thinking and turns the classroom into a community of thinkers. Therefore, it can develop students' higher-order thinking skills [7].

Dialogue and questions provoke new thoughts, new ideas, and new forms of speaking which require new vocabularies, and those new vocabularies then make new thoughts and insights possible». Therefore, for learning and thinking to go hand-in-hand, students need to share their ideas with their teacher and other students. In the global society, communication skills have become essential for attaining and performing many high-level jobs. They are amongst the most sought-after skills of many employers. Many if not all

employers rank communication skills among the most critical skills for graduates to possess upon their entry in the workplace. Furthermore, a variety of reports identify oral communication skills as the essential workplace skills for employees, among many others, regarding communication skills as one of the most important courses, business schools can teach their students, to prepare them for management positions, and to increase their occupational success.

Communication skills are also central in developing informed citizens who are capable of participation in the global society and democratic deliberation. Through communication, citizens can share perspectives for the benefit of society as a whole [8].

Moreover, communication is a vital part of all aspects of life. It is life by its very nature is dialogic, and we need to freely engage in open-ended dialogue to fully engage with experience and learning. To live means to participate in conversation: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue, a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his entire body and deeds. A person invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium.

In a nutshell, it is clear that communication skills are vital to student success within and beyond school. These skills have been shown to increase academic, occupational and personal achievement [9].

Even though the importance of communication skills within all facets of life has been well documented, many students with learning disabilities have trouble understanding others and expressing themselves usually in a meaningful way. More specifically, speech researchers and pathologists state that students with learning disabilities avoid speaking in class and experience difficulties with oral communication in the following areas:

- Exchanging information on a wide variety of topics,
- Requesting and clarifying,
- Expressing opinions, ideas, or feelings adequately on everyday issues,
- Telling a story or talking about an incident in sequence;

- Interacting with peers,
- Responding to requests and open-ended questions,
- Requesting and clarifying,
- Repairing breakdowns during the interaction,
- Using turn taking appropriately,
- Keeping a conversation going,
- Using appropriate eye contact,
- Comprehending spoken language,
- Expressing understanding.

In our context, the oral communication difficulties, faced by struggling students particularly those with communication disabilities, are due to two causes. The first cause is that teachers always view students as passive recipients of information. They do not interact with them; nor do they provide them with opportunities to communicate with each other. That is, interaction is wholly neglected in classrooms. The second cause is that students are always fearful of expressing their own opinions because teachers penalise them for their mistakes. Therefore, they prefer to be reticent to avoid humiliation, embarrassment, and criticism. This results in the vicious circle, "the less they speak, the less they improve their speaking skills, and the more they are afraid of speaking" [10].

To help students who struggle with oral communication overcome their difficulties, many educators and researchers recommend using communication strategies as an instructional intervention for them to develop their communication skills.

If we are to help students develop their communicative competence, it is essential that we expose them to and draw their attention to a variety of communicative strategies, give them opportunities to apply the policy in similar contexts and give them structured feedback on their performance.

In light of the above, the rest of this research will address communication strategies from all aspects. It will also detail a four-step model for teaching these strategies and review research on their impact on students with learning disabilities [11].

CONCLUSION

In sum, the teacher-student interaction plays a crucial role in supporting students in attaining a higher level of communication skills and strategies, which could be impossible if students work on their own. It also has a positive effect on students' affective and cognitive outcomes. Moreover, it allows the instructor to easily and quickly assess students' communication skills and strategies. However, for the teacher-student interaction to harvest its own benefits, the teacher should regard the student's grammatical mistakes as of the learning process because students do not want to feel embarrassed in front of their classmates. "Above all, criticism is usually counter-productive" Despite the importance of teacher-student interaction in scaffolding students' communication skills and strategies, the teacher should gradually diminish this scaffolding assistance as students begin to assume full control of the communication strategies. She should move from this step to the next which is student-student interaction, where students interact with each other in pairs or groups to achieve a clear communicative goal.

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