Teaching Oral Communication Skills: A Task-based Approach

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Abstract

Oral communication fulfills a number of general and discipline-specific pedagogical functions. Learning to speak is an important goal in itself, for it equips students with a set of skills they can use for the rest of their lives. Speaking is the mode of communication most often used to express opinions, make arguments, offer explanations, transmit information, and make impressions upon others. Students need to speak well in their personal lives, future workplaces, social interactions, and political endeavors. They will have meetings to attend, presentations to make, discussions and arguments to participate in, and groups to work with. If basic instruction and opportunities to practice speaking are available, students position themselves to accomplish a wide range of goals and be useful members of their communities.

(http://www.com.uri.edu/comfund/cxc.shtml)

This paper describes the applications of the task-based approach to teach oral communication skills in an academic setting. A course 'Oral Communication Skills' is taught to the students of Engineering and Technology at Indian School of Mines, Dhanbad to make them proficient in oral skills. The present study tries to explore the possibility and feasibility of task-based approach to apply for the teaching of oral communication.

Key Words: Oral Communication, Task-based approach, dimensions of oral communication, academic setting.

Introduction

The present study is based on the author's four years classroom experience at Indian School of Mines. The author has been teaching Oral Communication Courses since 2005. At ISM students come from all over India through Joint Entrance Examination conducted by Indian Institute of Technology. Their schooling is with different medium of instruction. They take a course 'English for Science and Technology' in first year. The course 'Oral Communication Skills' is taken by those students who are less proficient in oral communication.

With the globalisation, calls have been made for graduates to be proficient in oral communication skills so that they can function effectively in the academic and Professional setting. Consequently, oral communication skills course is included in undergraduate classes. Despite the need, and the varied ways of including oral communication skills in curriculum, there appears to be little research available that provides a more precise understanding of the methods and approaches of teaching oral communication for undergraduate students. Oral communication covers a wide area, ranging from formal presentations to participation in teams and meetings.

This paper tries to seek the possibilities to apply task-based approach in teaching oral communication skills. This study reports on an investigation into the teaching of oral communication to the students of Engineering and Technology at Indian School of Mines. The paper first describes the dimensions of 'oral communication skills' and task-based approach'. It then introduces the institutional contexts in which the oral communication skills course is offered, and the goals of this particular course. The paper concludes with some remarks on the strengths and the limitations of applying task-based approach in teaching oral communication skills.

Oral Communication Skills

For successful communication, students require more than the formal ability to present well and a range of formulaic expressions. Successful communication is context-dependent and therefore embedded in its particular discourse community (Bizzell, 1989).

Oral communication reflects the persistent and powerful role of language and communication in human society. As Halliday (1978, p. 169 explains, communication is more than merely an exchange of words between parties; it is a "…sociological encounter" (Halliday, p. 139) and through exchange of meanings in the communication process, social reality is "created, maintained and modified" (Halliday, p. 169). Such a capacity of language is also evident in Austin's (1962) earlier work on speech act theory where, as cited by Clyne (1994, p. 2), language and thus communication is an "…instrument of action". Speech act theory, concerned with the communicative effect, that is, the function and effect of utterances, dissects an utterance into three components: the actual utterance (the locution); the act performed by the utterance (the illocution); and the effect the act has on the hearer (the perlocution). Searle's (1969) work further defined speech acts as directives, imperatives, requests, and so on.

Communication is a dynamic interactive process that involves the effective transmission of facts, ideas, thoughts, feelings and values. It is not passive and does not just happen; we actively and consciously engage in communication in order to develop information and understanding required for effective group functioning. It is dynamic because it involves a variety of forces and activities interacting over time. The word process *s*uggests that communication exists as a flow through a sequence or series of steps. The term process also indicates a condition of flux and change. The relationships of people engaged in communication continuously grow and develop.

Communication is an exchange of meaning and understanding. Meaning is central to communication. Communication is symbolic because it involves not only words but also symbols and gestures that accompany the spoken words because symbolic action is not limited to verbal communication. Communication is an interactive process. The two communication agents involved in the communication process are sender (S) and receiver (R). Both the communication agents exert a reciprocal influence on each other through interstimulation and response.

At its most basic level, oral communication is the spoken interaction between two or more people. The interaction is far more complex than it seems. Oral communication is composed of multiple elements which, when taken as a whole, result in the success or failure of the interaction. Not everyone is an effective communicator.

In order to function successfully academically and professionally, one needs to learn effective oral communication skills. For many, conversational speech comes naturally. However, in more formal speech, effective communication skills are essential. A poorly conducted interview, sales presentation, or legal argument could have ramifications that affect many more people than the speaker. By becoming an effective communicator one will be able to conduct himself in a variety of personal, professional, and academic environments with confidence.

Oral communication is a unique and learned rhetorical skill that requires understanding what to say and how to say it. Unlike conversational speech, speech in more formal environments does not come naturally. What should be learnt is how to critically think about how to present oneself as a speaker in all occasions and then how to function in a variety of speaking environments?

Oral communication can take many forms, ranging from informal conversation that occurs spontaneously and, in most cases, for which the content cannot be planned, to participation in meetings, which occurs in a structured environment, usually with a set agenda.

As a speaker there are several elements of oral communication of which one needs to be aware in order to learn how to use them to his advantage. Apart from the language used for communication, there are several others elements which the speaker should learn to communicate effectively. The Skills are eye contact, body language, style, understanding the audience, adapting to the audience, active and reflexive listening, politeness, precision, conciseness, etc. At tertiary level it is assumed that the learners know the basics of the language. At this level teaching speaking skills is irrelevant. What the teacher has to teach is the communication skills. For this he has to know the individual needs of the students. And this can be known in a better way when the learners perform a task in the class. Task-based approach seems to be suitable for teaching and learning these skills.

Task-based Approach

Task-based syllabus design has interested some researchers and curriculum developers in second/foreign language teaching for last two decades (Long 1985; Breen 1987; Prabhu 1987; Nunan 1989), as a result of widespread interest in the functional views of language and communicative language teaching. However, under the rubric of task-based instruction, a variety of approaches can be found, e.g., "procedural syllabuses," "process syllabuses," and "task-based language teaching" (Long and Crookes 1993). At a more fundamental level, the term 'task' itself has been a complex concept, defined and analyzed from various, sometimes critical, theoretical and pedagogical perspectives (Crookes 1986; Duff 1986; Foley 1991; Crookes and Gass 1993a,b; Sheen 1994; Lantolf and Appel 1994; Skehan 1996).

Since mid-1980s, there has been a tremendous growth in task-based language learning and teaching (Skehan, 1998a; Willis, 1996; and Bygate, Skehan and Swain, 2000a). This interest has been motivated to a considerable extent by the fact that 'task' is seen as a construct of equal importance to second language acquisition (SLA) researchers and to language teachers (Pica, 1997). 'Task' is both a means of clinically eliciting samples of learner language for purposes of research (Corder, 1981) and a device for organizing the content and methodology of language teaching (Prabhu, 1987). However, as Bygate, Skehan and Swain (2000b) point out, 'task' is viewed differently depending on whether the perspective is that of research or pedagogy.

As Bygate, Skehan and Swain (2000b) point out, definitions of tasks are generally 'context-free'. However, the term 'task' has somewhat different meanings in different contexts of use. A task is a 'workplan'; that is, it takes the form of materials for researching or teaching language. A workplan typically involves the following: (1) some input (i.e. information that learners are required to process and use); and (2) some instructions relating to what outcome the learners are supposed to achieve. As Breen (1989) has pointed out, the task-as-workplan is to be distinguished from the task-as-process (i.e. the activity that transpires when particular learners in a particular setting perform the task). The activity predicted by the task-as-workplan may or may not accord with the activity that arises from the task-as-process. Definitions of 'task' typically relate to task-as-workplan. Skehan (1998a), reflecting a broad consensus among researchers and educators, suggests four defining criteria:

1. meaning is primary;
2. there is a goal which needs to be worked towards;
3. the activity is outcome-evaluated;
4. there is a real-world relationship (p. 268).

Widdowson (1998a) is critical of such a definition of 'task', arguing that the 'criteria do not in themselves distinguish the linguistic exercise and the communicative task' (p. 328). Widdowson argues that 'exercise' and 'task' differ with regard to the *kind* of meaning, goal, and outcome they are directed towards. An exercise is premised on the need to develop linguistic skills as a prerequisite for the learning of communicative abilities, while a task is based on the assumption that linguistic abilities are developed through communicative activity. Widdowson suggests that what constitutes the primary

focus of attention, the goal, the way in which the outcome is evaluated and the relationship to the real-world are all interpreted differently in accordance with this basic difference in orientation.

Task-based language teaching has a number of purposes. Willis (1996: 35–6) identifies eight purposes:

1. to give learners confidence in trying out whatever language they know;
2. to give learners experience of spontaneous interaction;
3. to give learners the chance to benefit from noticing how others express similar meanings;
4. to give learners chances for negotiating turns to speak;
5. to engage learners in using language purposefully and cooperatively;
6. to make learners participate in a complete interaction, not just one-off sentences;
7. to give learners chances to try out communication strategies; and
8. to develop learners' confidence that they can achieve communicative goals.

These purposes relate to two general goals: communicative effectiveness and L2 acquisition. Interestingly, seven of Willis's purposes relate primarily to communicative effectiveness; only one, (3), relates specifically to L2 acquisition. This reflects, perhaps, the general perception among language teachers and educators that task-based teaching is mainly directed at improving students' abilities to *use* the target language rather than at enabling them to *acquire* new linguistic skills (Samuda, 2000). It contrasts with the orientation of SLA researchers such as Long, Skehan and Swain, whose primary concern is how tasks can contribute to language acquisition.

The theoretical perspectives suggest that there is a need to distinguish between task-based performance that contributes to effective language use and that which facilitates L2 acquisition, that is, it cannot be assumed that achieving communicative effectiveness in the performance of a task will set up the interactive conditions that promote L2 acquisition. Students may succeed in performing a task successfully without the need to participate in much meaning negotiation or the need to attend to linguistic form. In so doing, they may emphasize fluency over accuracy or complexity by drawing on their lexicalized system, thus failing to stretch their interlanguage systems. The task may not confront them with the need to collaborate in the joint construction of new knowledge. Similarly, tasks that are directed at improving students' communicative abilities by promoting confidence in using language or by providing opportunities for trying out communication strategies may fail to develop their linguistic skills. It follows that teachers and language educators need to give more attention to the properties of tasks that respectively aim to promote communicative efficiency and L2 acquisition. In this respect, Skehan's (1998b) cognitive approach and Yule's (1997) theory of communicative effectiveness appear most promising. Yule's theory provides a basis for evaluating the kinds of tasks that contribute to developing communicative effectiveness, while Skehan's work suggests the kinds of tasks that are needed to promote accuracy/complexity and, thereby, potentially to influence language acquisition.

Implicit in this argument, however, is the assumption that it is possible to predict with some degree of certainty what kind of language performance will result from specific tasks. It is precisely, this claim, however, that research based on socio-cultural theory has challenged. If it is not possible to establish how students will behave when asked to perform particular tasks, then, clearly it is not possible to design a task-based syllabus based on such constructs as meaning negotiation, fluency, accuracy, and complexity or communicative effectiveness. If the position adopted by some socio-cultural researchers is accepted, there is no basis for the selection or grading of tasks other, perhaps, than the very general idea that a task should afford opportunities for students to perform functions collaboratively that they have not yet fully internalized.

There are, however, good reasons for dismissing this argument. First, while acknowledging that task performances are necessarily always constructed rather than determined, recognition can be given to the *propensity* of certain tasks to lead to particular types of language behaviour. Such a position is not, in fact, incompatible with socio-cultural theory. There is sufficient research to demonstrate that such variables as the inherent structure of a task, the availability of planning time and the opportunity to repeat a task have certain probabilistic process outcomes. Second, given the strong theoretical rationale for task-based courses, teachers need to be able to design such courses. Thus, they need to take principled decisions about what kinds of tasks to include in the course, the balance of the different types of task, and the sequencing of the tasks. As Corder (1980) pointed out long ago, teachers cannot wait until researchers have resolved their differences – they must get on with the practical task of teaching. It is reasonable to suggest, therefore, that they should draw on the available research to help them in their planning decisions.

Van Lier (1991; 1996) suggests that planning is one of two dimensions of teaching, the other being 'improvisation' (i.e. the actual behaviours that arise during the process of a lesson which have not been planned for). He sees both as important for a teacher's professionalism. Any lesson needs to achieve a balance between these two dimensions. He writes:

> The term 'balanced' suggests that in most cases a lesson which is so tightly planned (and implemented) that there is no room at all for improvisation, and conversely, a lesson which is not planned at all and therefore entirely improvised, would generally be considered unbalanced and perhaps not entirely effective.

<div align="right">(Van Lier, 1996: 200)</div>

'Balanced' teaching involves teachers moving back and forwards between planned and improvised decision-making in the course of a lesson. Van Lier, of course, is talking about teaching in general but the distinction is of obvious relevance to task-based language pedagogy.

The Oral Communication Skills Course

The course under discussion is being offered as an elective course in the third semester B. Tech. (Mining Engineering, Mineral Engineering, Petroleum Engineering, Computer Science Engineering, and Electronics Engineering) at the Indian School of Mines University (ISMU), Dhanbad (India). The course content is as follows:

Oral Communication Skills

1. The nature, purpose and characteristics of good conversation
2. Phonological forms to use in speech
3. Developing conversation skills with a sense of stress, intonation and meaning
4. Use of question tags
5. Starting, maintaining and finishing conversations
6. Standard conversational exchange
7. Spoken language idioms
8. Effective listening and attention to others
9. Gestures and body language
10. Do's and Don'ts in conversation
11. Telephonic conversation
12. Functions of English in conversation: introductions, greetings, clarifications, explanations, interruptions, opinions,
13. Agreement and disagreement, complaints, apologies
14. Participating in informal discussions and situations
15. Using information to make some decision, i.e., making social arrangements with friends
16. Reproducing information in some form (question/answer, summarizing, oral reporting, etc.)

The Oral Communication Skills Course is offered as an advance level preparatory program. In other words, it is offered to prepare the students to take more advance level course in next semesters and it also prepares the students to use the language in the real-life situations whether it is academic, social or professional situations. This course aims at developing learners' communication skills for specific academic and professional needs such as leadership, organizational, and interpersonal communication skills. The students meet two times in a week for the class.

Activities at the beginning of the course

It is important that the students become clear about the goals of the course and their relevance to the program goals and the institutional contexts. It is also important to assess students' speaking skills based on their prior knowledge and experience and in direct relation to course activities. Keeping in mind these things, the first class begins with a course syllabus discussion activity. Students are given a copy of the syllabus.

After the initial syllabus discussion, the students are asked to interact with different people such as their classmate, seniors, teacher, and a person from management, a stranger and submit a report on each conversation. They are also asked to point out their strengths and weaknesses.

The first few classes are devoted to activities like individual oral presentations and practice in class participation and discussion skills.

The individual oral presentations are designed to serve as pre-tests. Students are instructed to make a five-minute presentation on a topic of their choice. They are given minimum instructions. The participation skills session begins with practice in getting more information. The final activity is an informal discussion, usually on the topic of their choice. These activities give a clear picture of the strengths and weaknesses of the students.

After finishing the initial activities, the teacher devotes some classes to explain the rubrics of the oral communication skills.

Core activities

Discussion/debate: This core activity runs every week. The students are engaged in a formal/informal discussion/debate activity on an assigned topic. This activity is completely student-led, i.e., students play all the roles (conductor, observer, group presenter, and participating members). It is more appropriate to call this activity a "discussion/debate" activity because it includes both group discussions and debates, including a little bit of oral presentation.

After the performance, students are given feed back individually. They are also informed about the errors they committed. And they take care of the errors committed in the next performance. In this way they improve a lot gradually.

Oral presentations: In between the discussion/debate activity, the students are asked to prepare a topic assigned to them and present in the class. This activity is less emphasized because we have a full-fledged course in Oral Presentation Skills.

Students make formal oral presentations. Each presentation is followed by a question/answer period, and concluded by the teacher's comment.

Role-play: For this activity, the students are asked to make group of three to five students. In the beginning, they are given the situation and are asked to come to the after preparation. They prepare their role and perform in the class.

After this initial activity, they are assigned situations on the spot and they have to perform at the very same time.

The teacher listens the performances of the students and comments on the individual performances. He points out the errors of the individual students.

At the end of the semester, students are assessed using these tasks.

Conclusion

The tasks described in this paper were well received by the majority of the learners. They found the experience to be rewarding, intrinsically interesting, and educationally beneficial. They got involved in the task, because the tasks were giving the feeling of real life situation. Their final performances were impressively polished and much improved, that is, the final product was of high level. 70 percent students scored grade 'A'. But, at the initial stage there were some problems in carrying out these tasks. Sometimes it went out of control from the hand of students and even from the hand of the teacher.

To conclude, the task-based approach to teach oral communication has much potential, but it has a long way to go before it can claim empirical success in the field of second language instruction. More data is needed, using different quantitative and qualitative research methods. Case studies provide useful empirical data in this context. The study presented in this paper is a classroom experience, and it is a descriptive account at this point, contributes to the growing number of case studies in applying the task-based approach to ESL teaching.

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