AN ANALYSIS OF PERCEPTIONS OF SPEAKING FLUENCY ACTIVITIES: CLASSROOM APPLICATION

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions that a group of EFL teachers have regarding speaking fluency and to obtain insight as to whether or not these views were reflected in their classroom practices. This topic was considered appropriate to undertake due to the importance and emphasis placed on students’ ability to communicate orally in English. The institution where the study was done has as one of its learning outcomes for students to be able to communicate orally in English upon graduation. In fact, one of the major observations that multi-national corporations have made when hiring graduates from this institution is that they are unable to communicate verbally in English. The concern with the development of speaking fluency is not an isolated one as similar studies have been carried out in Iran and Japan.

This qualitative study was conducted at one of the top-ranked public universities in Ecuador. There were a total of 17 participants of whom 10 were male and 7 were female. The participants ranged in age from 25 to 50 years of age. All of them are full-time teachers in the institution and all teach Advanced levels equivalent to the CEFR B1+ or Intermediate level. The study focused on three research questions: What do teachers define as speaking fluency? Are there any differences between those definitions and what the teachers do in class? To what extent are speaking fluency activities developed in class? In order to obtain the necessary data, semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions were used, classroom observations were also done and lesson plans were requested in order to triangulate the data. The classes were specifically requested to be one hour and be dedicated to developing speaking fluency. The study found that for the most part the teachers’ perceptions matched their classroom practices. However, it is the view of the teachers that was a cause for concern. A fluent speaker is able to communicate and receive messages naturally with few errors (1). Speaking fluency is also defined as one of the goals of speaking activities in the classroom, which depends largely on having access and control of lexical and syntactic instruments that allow learners to decide how to use them efficiently [2].

While there was a certain degree of understanding by the teachers about speaking fluency, these views and their classroom practices showed that some major concepts related to speaking fluency were absent or completely misunderstood. Certain principles needed to develop speaking fluency such as time pressure, practice drills, preparation time and the use of familiar and motivating topics were non-existent or only partially done in the classes [3]. It is suggested that further training on the concept of speaking fluency be given to these teachers. In addition the researchers recommend the use of some specific activities in class that match the principles mentioned above such as the 4/3/2 activity attributed to Paul Nation, the use of “find someone who” activities as well as the need to teach students chunks of language, formulaic sequences and collocations [3].

Keywords: CEFR Common European Framework of Reference.

1 INTRODUCTION

A well-balanced language course should be planned in such a way that it includes meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language focused learning and fluency development, which means that students will have contact with language features, and language items and have the opportunity to convey ideas and messages to another person [2]. These authors state that teachers tend to neglect one of two areas during their classroom sessions and that this in turn affects the achievement of the learning goals that have been set forth for a course. It could happen that teachers focus on formal features of the language without giving learners enough opportunities to use what they have learned in class, or there are courses in which teachers try to balance the input and output processes but do not provide opportunities to develop fluency so that learners can express what they know [2].

A person that shows fluency in a language is able to speak easily, fairly quickly and without too many pauses. A fluent speaker is able to communicate and receive messages naturally with few errors [1].
In addition, oral fluency is also defined as transitory aspects of speech that incorporate speech rate, pauses and length of speech between pauses [3]. A recommended source for fluency speaking activities is the vocabulary and grammar structures that students have already learned in the past but they have not had the possibility to use either in class or outside [3]. However, fluency is also letting speech flow, without focusing on the other aspects of speaking such as pronunciation, intonation, accuracy, the use of facial expressions and interactive strategies [4]. Fluency can be defined as one of the goals of speaking activities in the classroom, which depends largely on having access and control of lexical and syntactic instruments that allow learners to decide how to use them efficiently [2].

This study seeks to understand teachers’ perceptions of speaking fluency activities and to comprehend the differentiation between their perceptions, what they have planned and the fluency tasks they actually implement in the classroom. It is hoped that through this understanding, both authorities and teachers may gain some insight into the current situation in the classroom. This understanding is pertinent to the effectiveness of the current curriculum of the English language department and to the objectives of this Ecuadorian public university as the major learning outcome pursued nationwide is that university students can communicate effectively in English and reach a B2 level of proficiency as defined by the CEFR.

2 METHODOLOGY

Due to the nature, the objective and the perspective with which this study was done, the methodology best suited to undertake it was a qualitative one. Qualitative research has a number of characteristics which matched with this study [5]. The first of these features being that this examination proposed to investigate a number of individuals in their natural setting. This natural setting was the classroom and the participants were requested to create a one-hour speaking lesson where speaking fluency activities were included. One of the fundamental aspects of this study is that it is based on interpretivist view as the desired path was to investigate and explore the teacher’s perspectives in order to better understand their reality and to observe how their views corresponded to their actions in the classroom and not to intervene or change them in any way. The intent of interpretivists is “to retain the integrity of the phenomena investigated, efforts are made to get inside the person and to understand from within.” [6]. This study is an ethnographic one however, on a very small scale as it was conducted for a brief period of time. Such a study is done “when the study of a group provides understanding of a larger issue.” [7]. The larger issue in this case is that of obtaining information about the group of participants and not of each individual participant. Moreover, it was the hope of the researchers to build a distinct variety of the reality of this given context through this study and to achieve this goal a constructivist view was also adopted. With a constructivist approach “the researcher always presents a specific version of social reality, rather than one that can be regarded as definitive. Knowledge is viewed as indeterminate” [8]. Taking into consideration the paradigm of the study and thus the qualitative approach used, the following methods were employed: interviews, observations and documents which were all analysed. The analysis of those three methods was also a primary factor as triangulation was a major concern for the researchers in the design of this study.

The interviews done were semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions. Owing to the uniqueness of the study and given the desired objectives of the research questions, a group of six interview questions was created and piloted by 9 non-participant teachers. In the light of their feedback, one question was revised and another eliminated. By piloting these questions, receiving feedback and making certain modifications, these questions were validated preceding the interviews. The final total number of questions used in the interviews was five.

The use of a semi-structured interview using open-ended questions was chosen. In this type of interview [5] the researcher uses a list of questions as a guide and because it is it is a guide it still permits the interviewer the freedom to digress and to continue to probe for more information. In addition to this, all interviews were tape recorded and transcribed so as to add to the validity and reliability of them. After the interviews were conducted, classroom observations followed.

The interviews were done by the researchers, and were unstructured, overt, direct and non-participant. The researchers asked the participants for the one-hour class to be a speaking fluency class. By following these procedures the researchers assured internal reliability that occurs when there is more than one observer and the members of the research team agree with what they saw and heard [8]. As indicated earlier, triangulation was also subscribed to by the researchers as a means of safeguarding validity. All observations were video recorded using a video recorder or an IPhone. For these observations, an observation sheet was created. The foundation for the observation list was the
CEFR (Common European Framework) and the descriptions of speaking abilities for intermediate level learners as well as some aspects of speaking fluency [9]. There were four categories and twenty-two items in the observation sheet. As with the interview questions, the observation sheet was piloted by 8 non-participants. They were asked to use the sheet while scrutinizing a speaking fluency class of another non-participant. Once these observations were done and the feedback collected, minor modifications to this instrument were made. It is fitting to mention the fact that both instruments had to be created by the researchers because no one existing instrument was considered to be useful for the type of data collection that was needed for this specific sort of research. Again this was done to enhance both the reliability and the validity of the instrument.

Finally a document analysis was done. The documents were the lesson plans from the participants. No set format for the lesson plans was established or given to the teachers in this study. This was done purposefully so that the teachers would be able to express their plans as they had visualized them without having any preconceived ideas and without being influenced by the vision of the investigators who would have created it. By freeing the participants to create their own lesson plans, the investigators objective was to draw further information about the teacher’s perceptions of speaking fluency tasks by analysing the lesson plans with the interviews, and the classroom activities that were actually done. All of these instruments were employed in order to assure triangulation which means using a number of independent methods of obtaining data in a single investigation so as to arrive at the same research findings [5]. Furthermore, triangulation promotes the validity, reliability and accuracy of the information [5].

Regarding the participants, there were a total of 17 participants for this study. There were 10 males and 7 females. The participants ranged in age from 25 to 50 years of age. All of them are full time teachers in the institution and all of them teach Advanced levels which according to the CEFR are actually a B1+ or Intermediate level. The majority of the participants are Ecuadorian and were born in one of the largest and most cosmopolitan cities, Guayaquil, with the exception of 4 of the teachers in this study who are native speakers having been born in the United States and the United Kingdom.

3 RESULTS

The analysis and interpretation of data are based on the results of the interviews, class observations and lesson plans used by the teachers.

3.1 Interviews

3.1.1 What do teachers define as speaking fluency?

Fluency is a widely used term in a communicative language teaching that contrast with accuracy [10], and is used as a synonym of oral proficiency. In addition, fluency is also considered as the ability to speak quickly and easily without making unnecessary pauses [1]. The participant’s definitions varied, however the most notable ones were that being fluent means speaking freely, without making unnecessary pauses as stated by fourteen of the seventeen participants. Fluency was also defined as the ability to express ideas that are understood by the listener. Of the seventeen participants eight of them expressed this idea in some way. Furthermore, fluency was also defined as the ability to use the appropriate words and structures when speaking. For instance, one participant said “Well from my point of view that means that uh you can communicate accurately and precisely…. Finally, the last notion that was derived from the interviews was that of talking without preparing the answer in advance “Ahh fluent means about you don’t have to think about what you are gonna say. Someone asks you a question and you just have to answer……”. However, a balance between fluency and accuracy can help students use the acquired language properly [11].

3.1.2 What is an intermediate learner expected to do in speaking?

The second question was related to what an intermediate learner is expected to do regarding speaking fluently. The ability to speak English well can determine the level of English a student has. An intermediate student is able to talk about a wide number of topics, with a certain lack of vocabulary and some structural mistakes [12]. Of the seventeen participants eleven mentioned that intermediate students are able to talk about familiar topics. Yet another stated the following “…talk about topics that are related to their context like habits or routines they have, or they can talk about their holidays ….”. Another important detail that was mentioned by four participants is that intermediate learners are not ready to handle academic language, or to deal with abstract topics. Teachers said things like “...
but they can’t use like academic level or more formal English but more casual. In addition three participants stated that intermediate students need to learn more vocabulary to be fluent in English. “Well obviously one of the limitations is vocabulary. The intermediate level learner does not have a wide vocabulary and probably can’t talk very fluently about abstract topics.” According to the Common European Framework of Reference for languages, an intermediate student has enough vocabulary and structures to convey their ideas, even when they are not about predictable situations. It points out that students of this level get by better when the topics are familiar to them, this is, hobbies, family, friends, work, travel and others [13]

3.1.3 What techniques and/or strategies do you implement to help learners enhance their speaking skills?

Even though intermediate level students usually have a good range of grammar and vocabulary, they do not feel confident enough at the moment of using their knowledge in productive skills [14], so it is recommended to focus exclusively on fluency during classes so that students can gain build up confidence to convey ideas. This author also recommends the use of two techniques: the use of pause fillers and lexical phrases. It is important to state that when asked this question only two or three of the participants consciously mentioned techniques and the others gave activities. There is a marked difference between the two as the former enables the learner to achieve or complete the activity [15]. The most prominent activities as noted by nine out of the seventeen participants are debates and open discussions. However, only two out of the seventeen participants interviewed mentioned a technique and that technique is presenting students with certain expressions to use otherwise known as chunking. Regarding this topic, it is also argued that there is a need to use speaking strategies such as asking for clarification or repetition, using fillers and verbal and non-verbal expressions that learners can adhere to during the speaking activity [4].

3.1.4 What characteristics do these activities have in common?

Of the seventeen participants five of them indicated that what these activities have in common is that the students can express themselves freely. In other words “…..that they express their ideas, they express the way they think ohhh or they give their opinions so they’re expressing themselves…” Four of the seventeen participants said that interaction is a common characteristic and that this interaction is normally between students and not student to teacher.

3.1.5 How often should these activities be implemented and what portion of the class time do you dedicate to speaking fluency activities?

Ten out of seventeen participants argue that speaking fluency activities should be implemented every day. One participant said “Well, you are gonna have speaking fluency activities every class, at the beginning of class, in the middle of class, at the end of class, you constantly get students to talk because that’s the aim of the….”. Regarding this topic, The TESOL International association recommends doing fluency speaking activities every day, maintaining the balance between accuracy and fluency itself [16].

Only one out of seventeen participants stated that he or she dedicated 10 minutes a day to developing speaking fluency. The majority of the participants indicated they set aside anywhere between 15-20mins (six participants), another five teachers stated that they devoted about 20-25 mins to speaking, 2 from 25-30 mins and lastly 2 from 40-45 mins. When it comes to the time, it is recommendable to distribute the time into preparation time and the speaking task. During the preparation time, they can make notes, but these notes should not be read during the exercise to get effective results. In addition, this site recommends shuffling partners, so that students can repeat and get more practice in fluency [16].

3.1.6 Observations

Following the interviews, classrooms observations were immediately done in order to explore if the responses from the interviews were comparable with the teachers actions in the classroom. An observation checklist was created and divided into three sections: Pre-task, during the task and post-task. The summary of these observations was based on certain aspects of each of those three sections that were directly related to the interview questions. The results of these observations are seen as follows.
3.1.7 What does it mean to be orally fluent?

There are two notable aspects from the classroom observations and they are the element of pressure and the use of conversation strategies. The fact that none of the participants reminded the students of the different conversation strategies available to them is noteworthy in the sense that it might be indicative of the lack of use of said strategies in the classroom perhaps due to a lack of knowledge of them on the part of the teachers, or perhaps as an oversight on their part due to the type of activities that were implemented in the class which may not have not warranted such techniques from the teachers’ viewpoint. There is concern for accuracy as the majority of the participants gave preparation time to their students but there were also 9 participants that did not provide time for their students to prepare which would indicate a contradiction between their perceptions and actions.

For the most part the perceptions are reflected in what is being done in the classroom. Only 7 of the 17 classroom activities gave way to the possibility of the students using spontaneous speech: This would confirm the view of the majority that their students are unable to use abstract language or to talk about topics that are unknown. In other words, the teachers feel that the students are not capable of handling any kind of speech that has not been planned for the activity. The participants’ views as to the most common activities they use for speaking fluency matches what they did in their classes.

3.1.8 Techniques and/or strategies Implemented during the Class Observations

According to our review of the classroom practices videos, two of the 4 participants that mentioned the technique of writing the target language on the white board did so in class; however the other two that mentioned chunks and flashcards did not use these techniques in their classes. Group and pair work while not mentioned directly to the relevant question, were nevertheless mentioned by all the participants in some form during the course of the interviews. In viewing the activities done in the classes, all of the activities required some form of interaction except for the presentations where in reality a group of students spoke while the others listened. The only type of interaction that was observable during these presentations was the question and answer portion, which was done in only one of the instances but not the other. In 50% of the classes the main activity was a discussion, which would also lead to the idea that this task type was chosen because from the teachers’ perspective discussions are synonymous with speaking freely.

3.1.9 What portion of the class do you dedicate to speaking fluency activities?

While more than 50% of the participants stated in the interviews that they used between 15-25 mins of the class for practicing speaking, the classroom observations indicated otherwise. There were two interesting things seen during the classes. The first observation to be made is that the time spent speaking was quite high and this is probably due to the fact that 9/17 participants did not provide their students with preparation time. In two of the instances the preparation time had been given to the students outside of the class time or in the previous class. In the majority of the cases, the students went from one activity to the next with no preparation. In the case of Teacher 1 the students spent only 8 minutes speaking and were given no preparation time. 52 minutes of the 60 minutes that were observed were spent on input.

3.1.10 Lesson Plans

It is important to note that the lesson plans did not have any specific format. This was done purposefully so as not to restrict the teachers and therefore obtain insight as to their vision of the steps required in developing speaking fluency. There are a number of remarks to be made here. The first being that the language used to convey the main objective of the class was vague. Some of the aims were not related to developing fluency but were related to meaning and focus of grammatical structures. The next relevant aspect observed in the lesson plans is the concern that the teachers have for accuracy and speaking without hesitation. Two of the teachers as noted in their lesson plans had their students prepare what they were going to say by writing it down prior to the class and another prior to the in class activity. Another participant in his or her lesson plan in the column of the aim of the speaking fluency activity wrote: Fluency discussion about reaction to news. Some practice of target language (hopefully). Furthermore, the type of techniques and strategies listed in the lesson plans also confirms these concerns.

Of the seventeen teachers one mentions the technique of drilling, but did not do it. Six others did write in their plans different techniques such as projecting the target language or having the students write their sentences prior to speaking and working in pairs or groups. This find is noteworthy because in
the interviews only two participants mentioned techniques yet six of them actually used a technique. This could mean a number of things. The first being that they may not be consciously aware of the techniques that could be used in the class to foment speaking fluency, and the other is the other is that they might be unfamiliar with these techniques. As far as activities are concerned, all of the participants mentioned some kind of activity in their lesson plans such as presentations, role-play, and for the most part discussions.

In reviewing the lesson plans it was virtually impossible to discern just by reading them how much time the teacher had planned to invest in these activities. The problem stems from the teachers not clearly separating and identifying the stages for the speaking task. The time allocated for input nor input itself was written in the lesson plans, neither was the time nor the activities for the pre-production stage written and ultimately neither was the time established for the speaking task.

4 CONCLUSIONS

This study was done in order to explore the answers to the following research questions:

- To explore the teacher’s perspectives of speaking fluency activities.
- To compare these perspectives to the teachers performance in the class.
- To identify to what extent speaking activities are developed in class.

In looking at the first question, we can determine that the teachers view speaking fluency as a skill that needs to be worked on and promoted in the class. That it also requires some form of interaction, and that the teachers are concerned with accuracy and with trying to eliminate or decrease the number of hesitations and pauses that occur. However, at the same time they have a great desire for the students to be engaged and have freedom of expression; hence, the use of discussion. Nevertheless, for the most part, the participants did not see the need to give students time to prepare before speaking which would have been helpful to decrease the number of hesitations and to improve accuracy. When comparing these views and the classroom performance of the teachers, which is the second question in this investigation, the teachers did what they had expressed in the interviews. In other words, if a participant expressed the idea that he or she used role plays that teacher did exactly that in the class. If a teacher stated that he or she used the technique of using chunks or projecting the target language on the overhead projector, he or she did that in class. Another teacher stated that for him if a student could speak for a good 30 seconds then that person had in some way, developed fluency and this was observed in the teacher’s actions in the class. For the most part, the views expressed by the participants was reflected and corroborated in the observations and in their lesson plans.

It is these views that have been uncovered that raise additional questions and issues. It was evident during this study that the teachers made an effort to tackle speaking tasks and to refine in their students their ability to communicate orally. The issue that was brought to light was that the participants do not seem to have a complete grasp as to what speaking fluency encompasses nor the elements or stages needed in order to obtain a true measure of progress. As noted in the introduction there are unequivocal features for a task to be considered directed at enhancing speaking fluency. Aspects such as repetition, the use of techniques such as the 4/3/2, having an element of time pressure, the use of drills, marking the difference between a conversation and a discussion and the strategies needed for managing a conversation were absent. These characteristics where notably not present in the participants responses in the interviews as well as in their actions in the class and in their minds prior to the class as detected in the lesson plans. These factors hinder the extent to which these activities are being implemented in the classroom.

Having expressed these findings, it is also fair to mention that it would seem to be that the teachers have a good foundation based on their years of teaching experience, level of training and education from which to embark on furthering their knowledge of these concepts.

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