

BİR EYLEM ARAŞTIRMASI: KONUŞMA DERSLERİNDE AKTİF ÖĞRENME STRATEJİ VE AKTİVİTE KULLANIMININ FAYDALARI

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ÖZ

Bu eylem araştırması bir vakıf üniversitesi hazırlık okulu konuşma dersinde ortak çalışmaya dayalı iletişimsel dil öğrenme aktivitelerinin kullanımı yoluyla öğrencilerin derse katılım seviyelerini yükseltmek amacıyla yürütülmüştür. Sekiz hafta süren bu eylem araştırması 25 öğrencinin katılımıyla dinleme/konuşma derslerinde sürdürülmüştür. Çalışma süresince çeşitli iletişimsel aktiviteler kullanılmış ve hangi aktivitelerin öğrenci motivasyonunu ve derse katılım seviyelerini yükselttiği tanımlanmaya çalışılmıştır. Çalışma süresince ikili ve büyük grup tartışmaları, film izleme ve tartışma tekniği, öğrenci sunumları gibi iletişimsel aktiviteler kullanılmıştır. Çalışmanın verileri öğrenci günlükleri, araştırmacı tarafından tutulan alan notları, açık uçlu öğrenci mülakatları ve anket yolu ile toplanmıştır. Çalışma sonuçları iletişime dayalı dil öğretim tekniğinin öğrencilerin derse katılımını arttıran bir öğrenme atmosferi yarattığını; öğrencilerin grup çalışmalarında iyi bir performans gösterdiklerini; grup çalışmalarının öğrencilerin kendilerine olan güven seviyelerini arttırdığını ve bunun da öğrencilerin konuşma aktivitelerine katılımını arttırdığını ortaya koymuştur. Bu eylem araştırması araştırmacının da iletişimsel dil öğrenme aktivitelerinin nasıl adapte edilip kullanılması gerektiği konusundaki öz güvenini de arttırmıştır.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Konuşma öğretimi, iletişimsel aktiviteler.*

AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY: BENEFITS OF USING ACTIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES IN SPEAKING CLASSES

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the findings of an action research study which aimed to find ways of increasing the students' level of participation in speaking lessons. An eight-week action research study was conducted with 25 students during the speaking/listening sessions at the preparatory school of a foundation university to find an answer to our puzzle. The instructional intervention in our action research cycle involved the use of active and animated speaking activities such as group-chatting, pair or group work, practicing listening to native speakers in movies, group and whole class discussions based on movies, preparing and making presentations in the class. The data of the study were collected through student diaries, teacher-researcher field note, semi-structured interviews and an open-ended questionnaire. The findings of the study indicated that the students work well together as a group and that working in groups increase the students' confidence in speaking and an increase in self-confidence results in an increase in classroom participation in speaking lessons. Involvement in an action research study has also increased the researcher's confidence to adopt and apply speaking activities to increase the participation of the students in English lessons in the future.

Keywords: *Teaching speaking, active learning activities, communicative activities.*

INTRODUCTION

Among all the four language skills in language learning, speaking has been considered as the most important skill, through which the learners' communication occurs and they can express their opinions and intentions to an audience. In addition, 'speakers' of the target language are the people who have the knowledge and ability to communicate with that certain language. As Rivers (1981) claim, in communication, speaking is twice useful in comparison to the other skills. Writing is one of the skills that has been compared to speaking, as these two skills have been considered as being "productive skills." Meanwhile, speaking is also related to listening; as these two skills need to work together to accomplish the whole communication process. One of the most important skills in communication through language could be speaking (Richards, 2009). In a legitimately short time-period English has been displaced all the other languages and developed into the leading means of communication worldwide. The modern world of Internet, media and communication demand good knowledge of English, specifically spoken English.

According to our experience, class participation is a huge issue for many students. Generally, many teachers complain about the students' passiveness in speaking tasks. Unfortunately, not many research has been conducted to find ways of fostering classroom participation in speaking classes. Mostly low level of confidence and anxiety has been considered as the causes for the students' lack of participation in classrooms (Thomson, 2001). Bonwell and Eison (1991) note that active learning is a kind of instructional method that could engage the students in the whole process of learning. In addition, the learner is more likely to learn when he/she is with others rather than working in isolation. Meanwhile working in a team helps to solve an issue or collaborating in a project. Collaborative learning empowers and enables the students learn how to view their peers as a resource, how to test their own knowledge and learn from other students' mistakes.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was designed as an action research study. Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) state an action research is a collaborative process that occurs through the cycles of observation, planning, reflection and action. This reflective cycle is believed to lead improvement as its reflective cycles help to understand an identified problem and in turn help the researchers to take action steps to improve the issue (Hensen,

1996; McTaggart, 1997 and Johnson, 2012). Qualitative research methods were used in the collection and the analysis of the data. Qualitative research primarily has been recognized as understanding human beings' personal experiences in a humanistic and interpretive approach. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), qualitative research involves the natural interpretation of our world. Descriptive analysis was used in order to analyze the data collected from the students' diaries, teacher-researcher's field notes, the open-ended questionnaire and the interviews.

The participants of this study were a total of 25 young adults, who were enrolled in the preparatory school of Istanbul Aydin University. beginner (A1) proficiency level students. At this level, the students have 22 hours of English classes 5 days a week including, 4 hours of listening/speaking, 3 hours of reading, 2 hours of laboratory, 3 hours of writing and also 10 hours of main course per week. The research was conducted during the speaking/listening sessions. The speaking sessions were 2 hours per week. Researchers who are interested in collecting qualitative data have been interested in conducting diary studies (Bailey, 1983; Krishnan and Lee, 2002). One of the main data collection instruments used in this study was the diaries kept by the students. The students were asked to write in their diaries after each activity was over which was a 2-week process for each activity. The second data collection instrument used in this study was the use of field note by the teacher-researcher. The researcher kept the field note to find out the effect of each session and the activities used regarding the level of student participation and improvement of interest in speaking lessons. The researcher filled in the field note after each activity was completed. The third data collection instrument used in the study was an open-ended questionnaire developed by the researcher. The questionnaire involved 5 questions. The questions were designed after the analysis of teacher reflections recorded in the field note and the student reflections in the diaries were completed. The aim of using the questionnaire was to triangulate the data gathered from the above-mentioned data collection instruments. In addition, we wanted to make sure that we provided the students a space to express their ideas. The final data collection instrument was the semi-structured interviews. Dornyei (2007) and Kendall (2008) note that interviews are one of the most commonly used data collection tools in qualitative research as the data gathered reveals in-depth/detailed insights on interviewees' thoughts, attitudes, and actions. Descriptive analysis was used in order to analyse the data collected from the teacher's field notes, the students' diaries, interviews and the questionnaire.

INSTRUCTIONAL INTERVENTION

The instructional intervention in our action research cycle involved the use of active learning strategies and speaking activities such as group-chatting, pair or group work, practicing listening to native speakers in movies, group and whole class discussions based on movies, preparing and making presentations in the class.

The learning objective of the lessons in the first two weeks was to talk about facts and express daily routines. Reflecting on the possible activities to be chosen to achieve the stated objective, we decided to use Speaking Marathon Activity. The speaking strategy chosen for the first two weeks was collaborative learning to encourage higher level thinking. Related literature suggests effective collaborative learning could involve establishment of group goals, as well as individual goals, which helps to keep the group on the task and establishes an unambiguous purpose. In the present study, Speaking Marathon activity focused on greetings and free discussion. The language structure to be practiced in week 3 and 4 was present progressive. The speaking strategies chosen for the third and the fourth weeks of the study were listening, brainstorming and notetaking. We also aimed to foster critical thinking through in and out of class activities in addition to establishing a native like situation in class so that the students could learn the language implicitly. To achieve the aims stated above, the students were assigned to watch the first and the second episodes of an American series, "*Baby Daddy*" in the class, after they had completed studying present progressive with their main course teacher and the note taking strategy in their listening lesson. When watching

the movie, the students were asked to take notes about the characters and the daily life routines of the people in the target culture so that they would talk about and discuss the theme of the movie. The students watched the part of a movie and they were asked to comment on the characters trying to put themselves in the characters' shoes and find better solutions for the discussed issues. The objective of the lessons in weeks 5 and 6 was to revise the use of simple present and progressive present tenses. The activity used was listening to the favourite songs and performing karaoke songs on stage. The aim of choosing this activity was using students' interest in music and their favourite singers to encourage them to participate more in the speaking lessons. In order to achieve the above-mentioned aim, the students were asked to choose their favourite songs and copy out the lyrics for the whole class. In addition, each student was assigned to add the meaning of the complicated vocabularies at the end of the paper and prepare for a solo (if they wanted to) or a group *Karaoke* presentation. The students were encouraged to have control over their learning materials as they were asked to bring their own favourite songs. The students were also free as to whether they would work on their own or in small groups. A few of the students suggested to have the presentations in group of two or three which the teacher considered to help their confidence. This approach also helped those shy students to perform well. Finally, the rest of the class commented on the song and also on the presentation; they asked questions about the song. The activity ended with singing the best performed song. The speaking strategies chosen for weeks 7 and 8 was brainstorming and journaling in addition to collaborative strategies. Journaling and brainstorming helped the students to think on their own and the collaborative strategy helped them to attain high level of thinking. An effective collaborative learning is believed to help the students set up group goals as well as individual goals. This also helped to make the students feel part of a group. The students' critical thinking skill was activated by asking them to comment on each other's experiences. The topic of the activity used was writing in a diary. The teacher expected the students to write in their diary about a special event as an assignment and later give a presentation to their classmates on voluntary basis. The aim of this activity was to help the students take control of what they were going to talk about in the session and getting to know their classmates better by commenting on their presentations. The language structure to be practiced was simple past tense. During the presentations, the listeners were expected to take notes so that they could comment on what they had listened to after the presentation is over. When it was the time to present in front of the others, they took turns to present their diaries. The second stage was commenting on the presentations and sharing suggestions.

RESEARCHER AND STUDENT REFLECTIONS ON THE INTERVENTION

At the outset of the study, I tried to change the classroom atmosphere from a passive learning environment to a more active one. I tried to achieve this change by engaging the students in tasks related to daily life topics such as greetings, daily routines, etc. I aimed to motivate the learners to try to speak and to interact with one another without being afraid of making mistakes. In their daily lives, my students do not use English as a medium of communication, but they use English for taking an examination and/or to conduct higher level academic studies. In addition, I tried to change my role as a teacher from a knowledge giver and the controller to a facilitator to promote a better rapport between me and my students. Following this line of intention, in the first two weeks of the study, I used the *Speaking Marathon* activity in which the students work in groups of four/five. The aim of using this activity was to build confidence in the students so that they express their ideas and opinions easily having collaborated with their peers. Moreover, I adjusted the speaking tasks in my speaking classes to promote student confidence and motivation by employing active and animated speaking activities. More specifically, the activity chosen for the third and the fourth weeks of the study was watching part of a movie and taking notes about the characters and the daily life routines of the people in the target culture so that they would talk about and discuss the theme of the movie in addition to finding solutions to the problems raised in the movie. The main strategies emphasized in these two weeks were listening, notetaking, brainstorming and

collaboration. The observations recorded in the field note showed that almost all of the students joined the first part of the activity attentively. Everyone took part as much as they could and when one could not continue the other peer took part in and helped the other one. In the second part of the activity the students were expected to discuss and find solutions to the problems the characters faced. The topic of discussion was based on different cultural values and norms so the students had very different points of view to express. However, there were some students who did not want to participate in the discussion. On reflection, I realized this might be due to some cultural boundaries, beliefs and shyness. The rest of the class members, however, got into strong discussions especially when they were comparing girls' and boys' situations. The topic of the activity in the fifth and sixth weeks was listening to the favorite songs and performing karaoke songs on stage. The speaking strategy chosen was active learning strategy with a specific emphasis on listening and speaking skills. The analysis of the data showed that most of the students improved their confidence in speaking English even some of those students could perform better speaking after getting more opportunities to practice. Moreover, I noticed that my students were motivated and also more active in the class while singing together or performing Karaoke songs. Most importantly, even though a few of the students did not want to have a Karaoke song performance in front of the class, all of the students collaborated well as a group. In the last two weeks of the study, the topic of the activity was writing in a diary about a personal event and later giving a presentation on the same topic to the classmates. The strategies reinforced were brainstorming and journaling in addition to collaborative strategies. Journaling and brainstorming helped the students to think about the topic on their own and the collaborative strategy helped them to attain a high level of thinking through group discussion. I tried to challenge the students with this activity to write their own experiences of life and also to rehearse speaking for the presentation in front of their classmates and the teacher. On observing the students while they were on task, I realized that it was not an easy task for my students, but still it was satisfying to see that many of them tried to do their best to fulfill each task. When giving their presentations, they showed less fear of making mistakes in their speech. There were some students who could not talk more than two minutes which I believe might have stemmed from the nature of the activity. On reflection, I thought I could have asked them to find a story or a movie of their own interest instead of asking them to prepare their presentations about a personally important event. I also noticed that while a few of the students were tardy to step out some others were more active and willing to show their efforts. A few others were not well prepared or a little unsteady. The atmosphere in the classroom was not as lively as it was in previous weeks. I observed that not everyone wanted to participate, they either did not have the courage or did not have knowledge to take part in the conversation. Meanwhile the students with high language proficiency levels were participating utterly more than what I expected. Based on my observations, I can state that some students did not have a fulfilling note as they told me that their lives are so routine that they could not think of something special. In addition, even though the activity was based on the brainstorming strategy and personalizing the learning process, it did not fulfill my expectations as a final activity.

All of the students expressed their satisfaction with the learning atmosphere created and mentioned that the atmosphere in the lessons had a positive effect on their speaking performance. The students claimed that the movies, the games, the songs as animated speaking activities made the speaking atmosphere enjoyable and interesting. The students also pointed out that hearing target language related to real life situations and being involved in different types of activities increased their sense of motivation. The students also stated that involvement in note-taking, brainstorming strategies and working in a relaxed and native-like environment raised their confidence in using the target language. Moreover, the students pointed out that working with their peers either in pair work and/or group work activities reduced their anxiety levels. Most of the students pointed out that they found the atmosphere of the classroom lively and amusing in the Karaoke activity except for one or two who believed that their voice is not good enough to sing in the classroom. In addition, more than half of the students pointed out that they had more confidence to speak

than what it was at the beginning of this cycle. Those students rationalized this situation by stating that they did not experience anything interesting to share with their classmates or they thought that it was too personal to be shared in the classroom.

CONCLUSIONS

At the end of action research cycle, we might conclude that using learner-centered classroom activities such as group and pair work, making presentations, and performing karaoke songs increase level of student participation in speaking lessons. In this study, we observed the positive effect of group activities on student participation in speaking lessons especially in *Speaking Marathon*, *Movie Discussion* and *Performing a Karaoke song*, respectively. While this conclusion is line with the arguments raised by Gathumbi and Masembe (2005) and Okech (2005), it contradicts with Brown (2000) who states that only the extroverted students tend to actively participate in group activities while the other group of the students who are introverted tend to be passive. In the present action research study, especially the group activities such as *Speaking Marathon*, *Movie Discussion* or *Performing a Karaoke Song* increased the students' confidence and eventually their level of participation during speaking classes through establishing in the students a feeling of security and disappearance of the shyness. After each group work activity, the learners seemed to be more confident to step up in the class and actively participate in the classroom discussions. For example, the Movie activity, which was based on a brain storming strategy, was definitely effective in increasing the students' level of participation in classroom. During the movie discussion activity, the students worked in groups and so they had the chance to express and support their own ideas about some social daily-life situations, the characters and the events in the movie. In these discussions, most of the introverted students seemed to engage in the tasks. It might be appropriate to argue that, the activity also encouraged out-of-class learning as most of the students stated they continued watching the same series at home. Songsiri (2007) states activities as such are engaging as they are related to daily life situations. Our conclusions regarding pair-work activities are similar to our conclusions about group work activities even though Kuramoto (2002) argues in peer work the concern of peer pressure can result in less motivation among the students. In the present action research study, we observed that the students work better together and the feeling of shyness in some students reduces as a result of involvement in pair work activities.

Group and pair work activities also helped the learners to establish a sense of collaboration, which is an important characteristic, "...the world is requiring ... absolute collaboration, life-long learners and critical thinkers, creative active learners (Prensky, 2005; Tapscott, 1998; Robinson, 2009). They collaborated well in almost all of the speaking activities despite their restricted general English language knowledge.

We may argue that, most of the learners showed some improvements specifically in their confidence and even some students could perform better speaking after getting more opportunities to speak. Moreover, I noticed that my students were happier and also more active in the class while presenting their songs and singing together or solo. (Gugliemino, 1986) claimed that it can be very valuable if the teacher uses a song in combination with the lesson. Meanwhile, Lo and Li (1998) argued that applying songs in the lessons might distract the classroom routine; however, according to my observations the students' motivation to participate increased considerably.

Nunan (2003) claims that while the teacher is planning a lesson, it is the basic fact to promote the real use of language which needs to relate the activity with the participants' common interest so we would be able to increase the motivation and confidence in our classroom. Moreover, the use of cooperation in the activities and involving the students in the materials and generally the whole activity conducted by letting them to choose their own favorite songs and present them in front of

the class was absolutely motivating and also strengthen of their confidence which ended in more participation during the following speaking activities.

Even though according to English language scholars, the learner-centered activities such as speeches or storytelling etc. could remove or decrease the low level of oral skills (Gathumbi and Masembe, 2005; Okech, 2005), while I was conducting the last activity (*Diary*) the result was not much satisfying as many student were not ready or confident to provide a suitable material to present and discuss in the class and it was a little confusing for some others that made me realize the students need to have more hints and more specified material to be able to take part and cooperate in the class activities although, there were very few number of the students who provide the class with interactive ideas in their diaries to be discussed in the classroom by their classmates. The students' individual presentations were promoted partially successful during *Diary* activity. Apart from students practicing interaction with one another related to the songs, I tried to challenge them with the *Diary* to make their own sentences and also to rehearse speaking for presentation in front of their classmates and teacher. Meanwhile I realized that It was not easy for my students, but still it was satisfying to see that many of them tried their best to fulfill each task. However, I did not stop to provide help some students in need.

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