

Promoting Speaking Accuracy and Fluency in Foreign Language Classroom: A Closer Look at English Speaking Classrooms*

Yabancı Dil Sınıflarında Konuşma Doğruluğunu ve Akıcılığını Arttırma: İngilizce Konuşma Sınıflarına Yakın Bir Bakış*

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the literature about teaching and learning English speaking in depth and draw main guidelines about how to increase speaking accuracy and fluency in language classrooms for both English language learners and teachers. The first section of the paper is about the general features of speaking skills. The second section mentions the relevant studies related to speaking classrooms. The third section contains teaching speaking approaches by focusing on generally accuracy and fluency. The fourth section gives readers practical suggestions about what to do in order to enhance speaking accuracy and fluency both from psychological and instructional perspectives. Lastly, the fifth section presents a conclusion summarizing the study and combining all suggestions made by the researchers in this area.

Keywords: Autonomy-supportive climate, English speaking, motivation, accuracy, fluency.

Özet

Bu çalışma, İngilizce konuşma öğretimi ve öğrenimi ile ilgili literatürü derinlemesine analiz etmeyi ve yabancı dil sınıflarında İngilizce konuşma doğruluğunun ve akıcılığının nasıl artırılması konusunda hem İngilizce öğretmenleri hem de İngilizce öğrencileri için temel esasların verilmesini hedeflemektedir. Çalışmanın ilk bölümü konuşma becerisinin genel özellikleri hakkındadır. İkinci bölüm konuşma sınıflarıyla ilgili alandaki çalışmalardan bahsetmektedir. Üçüncü bölüm doğruluk ve akıcılık yaklaşımlarına odaklanarak konuşma öğretimi yaklaşımlarını içermektedir. Dördüncü bölüm okuyuculara, hem psikolojik hem de metodolojik açıdan konuşma doğruluğunu ve akıcılığını artırmak için neler yapılmasına gerektiğine dönük öneriler vermektedir. Son olarak beşinci bölüm, çalışmayı özetleyen ve bu alandaki araştırmacıların önerilerini birleştiren bir sonuç sunmaktadır.

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Anahtar kelimeler: özerklik-destekleyici ortam, İngilizce konuşma, motivasyon, doğruluk, akıcılık.

Introduction

In spite of its importance in communication and the perception that knowing a language equals to effective communication in foreign language, language classrooms, especially those which do not focus on the use of spoken language, are full of reticent learners who do not participate in any language learning activity and have foreign language learning fear. Then, a new concept for English learners, “mute English learners” who learn a dead language, “mute English” (Wolff, 2010) is formed to describe the learners in outer-circle countries (see Mckay, 2002). Mute learners can write and read English effectively but cannot communicate orally effectively with foreigners. This is because; writing and reading skills can be reinforced individually, but not speaking and listening. In addition, the popularity of traditional approaches and a number of both methodological and psychological factors closely related to language learning and teaching negatively reinforces learners’ oral language skills, especially their speaking development.

Drawing on these considerations, this paper aims to review a number of studies on how to promote speaking accuracy and fluency in language learning. For this aim, the paper will focus on speaking language classrooms in depth from psychological perspectives to create effective English speakers and to wipe the concept “mute learner” out in outer-circle countries such as Turkey, China, Russia, etc. Therefore, it will respectively mention features of speaking skill, studies related to speaking classrooms, accuracy and fluency orientated approaches in speaking, psychological and instructional perspectives in classrooms and lastly a conclusion.

The Skill of Speaking

Speaking in a foreign language has been considered the most challenging and complex of the four language skills (Martinez-Flor, Uso-Juan, & Soler, 2006; Nunan, 2003; Zhang, 2009). That is because the speaking process occurs in real time, dynamic interrelation between speaker and hearer should arise under time constraints. Then

in this process, the speaker has to make decisions about why, how and when to communicate in accordance with the hearer's cultural and social context (Martinez-Flor, Uso-Juan, & Soler, 2006). Additionally, the speaker should master in both micro skills concerning speech elements such as the pronunciation of phonemes, correct placement of stress and intonation, use of formal and informal expressions (Zhang, 2009) and non-linguistic elements such as gestures and body language, facial expression and their tremendous variation of interpretations cross culturally (Shumin, 1997). However, the speaker should be prepared to speak affectively, especially in public and with native speakers. This is because speaking is often an anxiety-provoking issue.

Studies about Teaching Speaking Skills

English speaking classrooms in many countries have many problems which lessen the chance of promoting speaking accuracy and fluency such as limited time, crowded classrooms, lacking the opportunity to practice outside the class and inefficient multimedia systems in classes, etc. Therefore, many researchers (Boonkit, 2010; Chelle de Porto, 1997; Dinçer, 2011; Dinçer, Yeşilyurt, & Göksu, 2010; Khan & Ali, 2010; Klancar, 2006; Shumin, 1997; Songsiri, 2007; Xia- Hua, 1985; Xian-Long, 2009; Zehr, 2010; Zhang & Head, 2009) conducted their researches to turn language classrooms into real speaking classes, not listening ones.

One of the researchers above, Songsiri (2007) asked the question "Which skill do you want to improve most?" to university students enrolling to courses related to English at their universities. Nearly half of the students participating in the study (N: 308, 50.29%) expressed the view that their highest requirement was speaking ability, and they wanted to improve their speaking skill a lot. Another researcher, Xian-Long (2009) sought answers to the question "What do you think is the weakest among your language skills?", and 76% of the participants stated that their weakest skill was speaking. Dinçer (2011) interviewed university level English speaking course takers and asked participants of the study "Do you believe that you are competent in English speaking ability or not?". All of the students

(100%) said that they were inadequate in English speaking ability and they had problems in their speaking skills.

As stated above, students generally believe that they are incompetent in English speaking and they want to improve this the most. In spite of the years which are spent in English education, speaking education is not at the desired level and even language teaching departments do not provide enough opportunity to pre-service teachers for speaking because of limited time, overcrowded classrooms, etc.

Speaking Accuracy and Fluency

Teaching speaking methodology has undergone prominent changes since the late 1950s from traditional teacher centred methods (e.g. the Audio-Lingual Method) to more student-centred ones (e.g. Communicative Language Learning) (see Larsen-Freeman, 2000). In this concept, there are two different teaching approaches in speaking which are related to teaching methods.

The former one is the accuracy-oriented approach which accepts that grammatical errors cannot be neglected, that is because they can result in fossilization. Instant error-correction is strictly needed to avoid fossilization. This approach focuses on repetition of newly introduced forms and grammatical structures in speaking (Willerman, 2011).

The latter is the fluency-oriented approach which believes that grammatical or pronunciation errors are insignificant, especially in the early stages. Correction can hinder learners' development in speaking. This approach stems from the Natural approach and regards errors as tolerable and probable and they are signs of natural language development.

All approaches are not adequate separately in education and being eclectic and combining approaches is more feasible than being strictly bound to one approach. Then, the necessity of combining these two approaches in English speaking classes and using them separately or together according to students' needs, English levels, activity types, lessons' purpose, etc. will be a more plausible answer to how to foster English speaking skills and to gain authenticity in oral communication. Lastly, it should not be forgotten that accuracy and

fluency are not contradictory, because they affect each other. Accuracy brings fluency and fluency brings further accuracy (Willerman, 2011).

What Teachers and Students are to Do to Foster Speaking

“The affective side of the learner is probably one of the most important influences on language learning success or failure” (Oxford, 1990, p.140). Then, learner and teacher should care about both positive and negative affective factors a lot in the language learning process. Positive affective factors are more related to positive emotions and feelings towards language learning, and they improve the language learning (Meng & Wang, 2006). Negative factors are called affective filters and they impede language acquisition.

When teachers reduce negative factors such as high affective filters, high level of classroom anxiety, inhibition, lack of motivation, reticence, shyness, lack of confidence, self-consciousness, inadequate perceived competence and so forth, they can develop students’ language proficiency levels, and make them develop positive emotions, feelings and attitudes towards language learning. For this reason, teachers and students work in harmony and affect each other positively. At this point, teachers are much more responsible than students and they have important roles and tasks which enable their students to succeed in oral English proficiency. That is because students’ learning reasons and affective filters are mostly affected by the teachers in the language environment.

In this context, teachers’ behaviour gains crucial importance. Their behaviours can be divided into autonomy-supportive behaviours vs. autonomy suppressive behaviours. Autonomy-supportive behaviours are mostly connected with positive psychology of the language learner and aim to facilitate learning by increasing the intrinsic motivation of learners. Autonomy suppressive behaviours or controlled behaviours are closely related to traditional approaches and they have detrimental effects on learners’ psychology and language learning. Therefore, teachers try to create autonomy-supportive climates (Black & Deci, 2000) within which students can motivate each other in class. Autonomy supportive climates are mostly connected with motivation, especially intrinsic motivation which

refers to personal interests and enjoyment, and the highest level of self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2002).

On these issues, Wang (2005) gives practical suggestions for teachers who want to promote English speaking motivation in their classrooms, and aim to create autonomy-supportive climates. He introduces five teaching strategies as follow:

1-Build up an open and pleasant learning climate. Such an environment consists of cooperative and competitive oral activities, jokes, games, etc. This environment can be the first step in motivating students to speak in English.

2-Become a friendly, creative and enthusiastic teacher. By paying attention to the equal relationship between teacher and student, creating new oral activities such as speeches, discussions, role plays, debates, etc., by boosting their own motivation a highly-motivated teacher, teachers can improve learners' willingness to communicate in class, and raise their interest and enthusiasm towards language itself.

3-Present a variety of meaningful and intercultural materials. The importance of teaching material is very important for increasing the interest of learners. In order to energize students in oral tasks, the teacher should present many meaningful intercultural materials.

4-Enlarge learners' autonomy. By increasing learner autonomy, providing informative feedback, giving more chance for learners to set their own goals, choose topics, regulate their behaviours in their learning, etc., the teacher can support students' sense of self determination and enjoyment.

5-Provide individualized self-assessment. Exam-oriented assessments both decrease the learners' intrinsic motivation and make them addicted to external rewards to avoid punishment. Therefore to avoid such situations, the teacher can give opportunities to the learners to self-asses their own oral language abilities by creating self-assessment forms based on the learners' own abilities and feelings.

In addition to these suggestions, the other suggestions retrieved from different studies (Dinçer, 2011; Dinçer, Yeşilyurt, & Göksu, 2010; Kayı, 2006; Reeve, 2006; Reeve & Jang, 2006) are as below:

- Try to affect students' self perceptions such as their competence, self-determination levels, their perceived autonomy related to English speaking positively by creating autonomy-supportive climates.
- Give opportunities for students to choose topics and activities about English speaking.
- Increase intrinsic motivation by caring about students' interest and needs regarding speaking topics.
- Use informational language and avoid controlling language in English speaking activities.
- Give informational feedback related to speaking performances in class.
- Acknowledge and accept students' expressions of negative affect in the class.
- Listen to them carefully and empathise when they have a problem.
- Offer progress-enabling hints when students seem stuck.
- Correct students' pronunciation mistakes less while they are speaking.

Language teaching is not only the work of teachers; students are also responsible for their own development in this process. To reach accuracy and fluency in the target language, students should reinforce themselves by participating in extra in- and out of class activities whenever they are convenient. Huang's study (2010) gives six important pieces of advice to EFL learners who want to practice and develop their oral English skills. This advice is as follows:

- Be familiar with the close connection between listening and speaking.
- Do not miss any opportunity to practice English and apply what you have learnt.
- Recite English poems, prose, or even short stories, etc. containing a lot of new vocabulary and useful expressions.
- Train with various topics and change the topic after each one ends,

- Create an English environment.
- Think in English.

Of course, these suggestions and advice is inadequate to master fluency and accuracy in English speaking skills, but they are certainly effective in learners' language development and psychology. With careful teacher behaviours which are associated with learners' psychology and motivation, and learners' personal effort to foster their oral communication skills, they will be helpful in overcoming many problems in English speaking classes.

Conclusion

This study overviewed studies about English speaking skills and gave some classroom suggestions for educators on how to care about students' psychology in language classrooms. Therefore, this paper mentioned speaking skills, studies in this area, teaching speaking methodology, the importance of affective factors on English speaking skills and advice for both teachers and learners. To summarize, in the shadow of above literature, it can be said that English speaking skills are seen mostly as the weakest language skill by many learners. Besides, studies show that many learners think that they are incompetent in English speaking skills, and combining fluency and accuracy approaches in the classroom according to classroom activities is more useful than sole application of one approach. In addition, when teachers create autonomy-supportive climates in their schools, students can motivate themselves and internalize their learning goals, and so they become intrinsically motivated to learn English. As a result, teachers can help learners who are overwhelmed by negative affective filters which affect their English speaking and make them reticent learners. Then, by participating in every English speaking activity both inside and outside the class, students can contribute to their language learning process.

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Extended Summary

There is a common saying that “The person who never made a mistake never made anything.” Today, many foreign language learning contexts are full of reticent learners who lack self-esteem, perceived self-competence, and have a high

level of classroom anxiety, inhibition and fear in participating classroom activities. In regard to this reality, there are many studies in the literature dealing with psychological aspects of general language learning contexts and promoting learners' foreign language learning ability. But there are few studies covering the speaking skills specifically in a psychological perspective. Therefore, this study aimed to look at English speaking courses in depth and investigate the importance of English speaking classroom climates in increasing students' engagement. In addition, the study was intended to analyze relevant studies and draw main guidelines about how to increase speaking accuracy and fluency in language classrooms for both English language teachers and English speaking course takers.

The first section of this paper is about the general characteristics of the speaking skill. As the speaking activity occurs in real time and life, dynamic interrelation between speaker and hearer should arise under the time constraints. In this process, the speaker has to make instant decisions about the communication issue and master both micro skills concerning speech elements such as pronunciation, stress, intonation and non-linguistic elements such as gestures and body language, facial expression, etc. Therefore, the skill of speaking is perceived as the most challenging and complex of the four language skills by the language learners.

The second section discusses the studies related to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speaking classrooms. Most of the studies in the relevant literature conclude that EFL learners have competency problems in the skill of speaking and the learners perceive themselves as inadequate in English speaking because of the problems such as limited time, crowded classrooms, lacking the opportunity to practice outside the class which hinder the learners' mastering speaking proficiency.

The third section contains teaching speaking approaches by focusing on generally accuracy- and fluency-oriented approaches, and then concludes with the necessity of combining two approaches in speaking classrooms to promote speaking accuracy and fluency. The accuracy-oriented approach accepts that the learners' grammatical errors should be strictly considered in teaching speaking skill in order to avoid fossilization in learning. This approach focuses on repetition of newly introduced forms and grammatical structures in speaking. The fluency-oriented approach believes that the language teachers should consider the grammatical or pronunciation errors as insignificant, especially in the early stages of teaching speaking. This approach accepts that the errors are tolerable and probable. In promoting both the accuracy and fluency in English speaking proficiency, combining these two approaches and using them separately or together according to students' needs, English levels, activity types, lessons' purpose will be more useful for the language learners.

The fourth section gives readers practical suggestions about what to do in order to enhance speaking accuracy and fluency both from psychological and instructional perspectives. Emphasizing the psychological sides of language learners and the importance of teacher communicative styles, the section mentions about

autonomy-supportive teacher behaviours in language classroom. Considering the literature about motivational strategies in language classrooms, it focuses on how to foster English speaking course takers' speaking performance and how to get intrinsically motivated autonomous language learners, and gives practical motivational and pedagogical suggestions for both language learners and teachers. Some of the suggestions for teachers are as follows: try to affect students' self perceptions such as their competence, self-determination levels, their perceived autonomy related to English speaking positively by creating autonomy-supportive climates, give opportunities for students to choose topics and activities about English speaking, increase intrinsic motivation by caring about students' interest and needs regarding speaking topics, use informational language and avoid controlling language in English speaking activities, etc. Advice for the learners includes being familiar with the close connection between listening and speaking, not missing any opportunity to practice English, reciting English poems, prose, or even short stories, etc.

Lastly, the fifth section presents a conclusion summarizing the whole study and combining all suggestions made by the researchers in this area. In sum, most of the EFL learners live problems extensively in acquiring speaking accuracy and fluency, and teachers' combining fluency and accuracy approaches in the classroom according to classroom activities and students' needs is a more plausible answer to lessen the problems about acquiring accuracy and fluency. In the application of the approaches, teachers should aim to create an autonomy-supportive climate in the class which helps students motivate themselves and internalize their learning goals, and make them intrinsically motivated to speak English both inside and outside the class. By giving some practical suggestions including both methodological and psychological suggestions for the learners and the teachers, the study aims to erase mute English learner phenomena in EFL contexts and helps the learners gain fluency and accuracy in English speaking.

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