

**Teaching speaking to beginner level learners in Bangladesh**

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## **1. Introduction:**

Language is the medium of expressing our thoughts, views and ideas. In other words language is a medium of communication with the whole world. English is an international language and a medium of communication in this age of globalization. In Bangladesh, English is considered as a foreign language and is an important subject in our curriculum system. We want our students to be communicatively competent in English and for this, out of the four skills- reading, writing, listening and speaking, speaking skill is of utmost importance. In many situations a person's competence in a language is judged on the basis of that person's ability to speak in the language in question. From a very early age, our learners should be taught English language. Lenneberg (1967) argues that there is a language acquisition device that works successfully only when it is stimulated at the right time (before puberty). It is said that language is best acquired in the initial years of life. In that case, beginner level learners in our country should be taught this language effectively. However, it is mostly seen that learners in Bangladesh cannot speak English fluently even after being taught the language till the higher secondary level. In our education system, the students do not get enough exposure to the target language in real life contexts and as a result it becomes very tough for them to develop their speaking ability. Many educational institutions pay more attention to teach grammar and rules of English without emphasizing the spontaneous use of this language. Most of the times, it happens that learners learn the grammatical rules very well but they fail to speak fluently. To develop their speaking skill, the learning and teaching should be more effective and it

is important for the teachers to design the lessons according to the learners' age group and competency level and also in a way that will make the learners motivated to learn and speak. The teacher should give attention to learners' interest, motivation, level of proficiency and learning preferences and design the tasks accordingly. It is very difficult to hold the attention and interest of the beginner level learners and to do so the teacher has to follow some methods of teaching which will facilitate them for a better and effective learning.

For educational purpose, I started my internship in Scholars School and college. It is an English medium school that follows the Board curriculum syllabus. I worked there as a teacher for 12 weeks and was appointed as conversation/spoken English teacher of class 3. The objective of that course was to develop the speaking skill of the students. I got an excellent opportunity to deal with the beginner level learners as it is more challenging to teach and motivate them. In terms of proficiency level, the students were at the beginner level and they were very young as well. According to some theories, learning an L2 is more effective before puberty, so I felt that it would be very helpful for the young learners if they were taught the language through more effective methods. My attempt was to apply the ELT knowledge that I have learned in my undergrad courses and try to develop their speaking skill as much as I can in interesting and motivating ways.

In this paper, I will first talk about the theories of teaching speaking and also the views of different scholars and theorists in this regard. I will then look at various methods of teaching spoken English and will try to relate those to my own teaching experiences. Finally I want to offer few suggestions about how a teacher can help the young learners, who are at the beginner level, to develop their speaking skill effectively

## 2. Literature review

Ur (1991) says that “speaking is the productive aural/oral skill. It consists of producing systematic verbal utterances to convey meaning.” (pg, 48) Ur has made a distinction between second language and foreign language learning contexts. According to him “A foreign language context is one where the target language is not the language of communication in the society. And second language context is the one where the target language is the language of communication in the society” (pg. 54). According to this view, in Bangladesh, English can be regarded as a foreign language because the EFL learners here in Bangladesh have very few opportunities to use the target language outside the classroom. Thus acquiring fluency in speaking in English becomes very challenging for the learners of Bangladesh. As a result, we find them using their L1 (Bengali) in EFL classroom. According to Eldridge (1996), “Code switching between L1 and L2 is naturally developmental.” (pg, 310). Learners are found to be using L1 in pedagogical tasks where one student explains something to another. This is a habit, “that in, most cases will occur without encouragement from the teacher” (Harbord 1992: 354). However it can be considered useful to code switch for the beginner level learners and would be helpful for both teachers and learners “in an explanation or discussion of methodology, or the giving of announcements which would be impossibly difficult in English” (Harmer 1988: pg, 132).

Among the four skills speaking is one of the most important productive skills. Brown and Yule (1983) have made a distinction between the two functions of language which are, 'transactional language and interactional language'. Transactional language deals with factual and propositional information and deals with the transfer of that information, while interactional language is used to establish and maintain social relationships. According to Brown and Yule (1983), spoken language can be both interactional and transactional whereas interactional language is 'listener oriented' and transactional language is 'message oriented'. Nunan (1991) states that, most spoken interactions "can be placed on a continuum from relatively predictable to relatively unpredictable" (pg, 42). He also states that, "transactional encounters of a fairly restricted kind will usually contain highly predictable patterns." (pg, 42). Examples of transactional language could be a conversation between shopkeeper and the customer or between a doctor and a patient, which are quite predictable dialogues or language. Teaching transactional language could be easier for the beginner level learners as the forms of language used are of quite predictable patterns.

Initially, practice in spoken English was conducted by having students repeating some sentences and then memorizing those sentences or dialogues. This method of teaching and learning is called audio-lingual method where students learn to speak by practicing grammatical structures, by repeating drills and then using them into conversations. In this method, accuracy in speaking is emphasized over fluency. The theoretical basis of this method is 'behaviorism' which believes that language is learnt through habit formation



where errors cannot be overlooked. During nineteenth century, language acquisition researchers concluded that infants learn their first language and people acquire their foreign language in fragments by interacting with one another. Through constant studies by researchers of diverse fields in the mid twentieth century, a method called 'Communicative Language Teaching' came into being; in this method, what is emphasized is enabling learners to communicate meaningfully in the target language and teachers often downplay accuracy and set the tasks where the students get the opportunity to speak and thus enhance their fluency in the target language. However, "in order to communicate well in another language we must make ourselves understood by the people we are speaking with. And this is not an easy task- especially in the beginning and intermediate levels" (Penny Ur, pg, 50). This statement of Ur's is quite right as it is quite difficult for the beginner level learners to make themselves understood or communicate successfully in the foreign language.

According to Nunan, to be successful in acquiring the speaking skill in the target language, the following sub skills should be developed:

- “1. The ability to articulate phonological feature of the language comprehensibly;
2. Mastery of stress, rhythm, intonation patterns,
3. An acceptable degree of fluency,
4. Transactional and interpersonal skills,
5. Skills in taking short and long speaking turns,
6. Skills in the management of interaction,
7. Using appropriate formulae and fillers” (Nunan, 1989, pg,32)

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There are two approaches of teaching speaking which are 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' approaches (Harmer, 1988). Top-down approach suggests that learners start working from the larger elements and gradually goes to the smaller ones. In this case learners begin with greater chunks of language, which are embedded in meaningful social contexts and use their background knowledge to grasp and to use the smaller components of language. The bottom-up view suggests that learners move from the mastery of the discrete elements of the language to the mastery of the larger components (Harmer, 1989), that is, it starts from the mastery of phonemes, syllables, morphemes, words etc.

Ur (1991) believes that learners should be given opportunities to talk by using group work or pair work, and limiting teacher talk; because in pair work and group work, there would be wider opportunities for learners to interact and communicate meaningfully with others. Several activities can be conducted in groups or pairs like role play, debate, jigsaw tasks etc

The American applied linguist, Stephen Krashen (1985) made a distinction between acquisition process and learning process. He claimed, "Language which we acquire subconsciously is language we can easily use in spontaneous conversation because it is instantly available when we need it. Language that is learnt on the other hand, taught and studied as grammar and vocabulary is not available for spontaneous use" (cited, Harmer,

1988: pg, 71). Penny Ur has also made a distinction between 'accuracy' and 'fluency'. According to him, "'accuracy' is the extent which students' speech matches what people actually say when they use the target language" (pg, 55) and 'fluency' refers to the ability of speakers to "use the language quickly and confidently, with few hesitations or unnatural pauses, false starts, word searches etc." (pg.55). According to Harmer (1988), "Children subconsciously acquire languages with considerable ease. Yet adults find things more difficult, especially when they are learning in classrooms away from target-language communities;" (pg, 72)

According to Mc Donough and Shaw (1993), "As a skill which enables us to produce utterances, when genuinely communicatively, speaking is desire and purpose driven, in other words we genuinely want to communicate something to achieve a particular end" (pg, 152). Learner's age is a very important determinant in an individuals approach to foreign language learning. It is best if learning the foreign language is initiated at the very early age. Lenneberg (1967) argues that, "the language acquisition device (LAD), like other biological functions, works successfully when it is stimulated at the right time- a time called the 'critical period'." This critical period ends after adolescence and according to this argument, adult learners will hardly achieve native like proficiency if they start learning the foreign language after their adolescence. Krashen, Long, and Scacella (1982) say that, if acquirers begin to learn a second language early in childhood through natural exposure, they will be able to achieve higher level of proficiency than those beginning as adults. Many researchers have researched to see if age really makes a difference in

learning a foreign language. The main question of Patkowski (1980) before his research was “Will there be a difference between learners who began to learn English before puberty and those who began learning English later?” and by his research this question was answered with a very resounding “yes”. This study further supports the critical period hypothesis that there is a critical period during which one can achieve native like mastery in foreign language.

As noted by Peter Skehan (1989), “the question is, are learners more highly motivated because they are successful, or are they more highly successful because they are highly motivated”. In teaching a foreign language to the beginner level learners, motivation is very essential factor to help the learners attain success. Robert Gardner and Wallace Lambert (1972) (cited: Patsy M. Lightbown and Nina Spada, 1999, pg, 56) talked about two types of motivation which are ‘integrative motivation’ and ‘instrumental motivation’. Integrative motivation refers to language learning for personal growth and cultural enrichment and instrumental motivation refers to language learning for more immediate and practical purposes and goals. However, in many cases, learning a second language can be both a fact of enrichment or of resentment. “If the speaker’s only reason for learning the second language is external pressure, internal motivation may be minimal and general attitudes towards learning may be negative.” (Patsy M. Lightbown and Nina Spada, 1999, p 56).

Thus we can see that it is very challenging to teach a foreign language to the beginner level learners. In Bangladesh, in most of the cases, the students have hardly any exposure to the spoken English outside the classroom and thus it becomes very difficult for them to acquire this skill. The teachers should create such an atmosphere in the classroom which will create an opportunity for the learners to learn and acquire the foreign language. As Lenneberg claims that it is best if a foreign language is learnt at an early age, it will be beneficial if the beginner level learners are taught the foreign language in their early ages.

### **3. Implementation of theories into practice:**

For educational purpose, I started my internship in Scholars School and college. It is an English medium school that follows the Board curriculum syllabus. I was assigned to class 3 as their conversation/spoken English teacher. The aim of that course was to make them speak or converse in English. Their average age level was 8-10 years and they were the beginner level learners of English language. The purpose of this internship is to implement the ELT knowledge that I gained as a linguistic student, in a real classroom setting and to see how it really works. In this section I will focus on my teaching experience where I tried to implement some of the theories and techniques that I learned about in my undergrad courses.

#### **3.1 Class observation and preparation of lesson plans before teaching:**

On my first visit in every section of class 3, I asked them how they were taught this course previously. I found that they were taught in audio-lingual method. They were given a set of dialogues that they had to memorize and act with their partner. I decided I would not follow this method; rather I would try to implement some techniques of communicative approach and to be able to speak spontaneously, they have to have communicative competence. I decided to focus on the real life language use rather than making the students just to master the language forms. I wanted to be just a facilitator and

less dominant so that the students can be communicators who will be more responsible managers of their own learning.

On my first day in every section I tried to motivate them by letting them know and understand the importance of knowing and speaking English. I tried to elicit from them what really motivates them to learn English language and how much important it is to learn an international language like English. Different students have different sorts of motivation. Some of them have integrative motivation (termed by Robert Gardner and Wallace Lambert, 1972), because they feel that in our culture, those children who speak good English are considered as smart kids. So from the need of cultural enrichment and their interest to be smarter, they get motivated to learn English. Some of them have instrumental motivation (termed by Robert Gardner and Wallace Lambert, 1972) because they said that as they were studying in an English medium school and all the courses were taught in English so it was necessary for them to learn English to get good marks. Most of them said that they needed to learn it because they had external pressure from their parents and teachers who wanted them to be fluent in spoken English. I guess this sort of external pressure minimizes the inner motivation and the students' affective filter becomes high.

However as their teacher, my effort was to motivate them by increasing their interest towards this language by applying different activities where the contents would be relevant to their age level and ability and to make the atmosphere more co-operative than competitive.

I introduced to them some communicative activities such as, role play, instant speech, story reading and discussion, debate, describing a picture etc. These activities were quite novel to them as they had never done such things before. They seemed to be very enthusiastic and really enjoyed taking part in those activities.

### **3.2 Techniques applied while teaching speaking:**

At first I started with the topic “Your best friend” where I first asked them about the qualities they liked and disliked about their best friend. I wrote down the qualities on the board that they came up with and then introduced some vocabularies which were adjectives and then asked them to prepare a speech on their best friend using those adjectives. They were very enthusiastic and did the task successfully. I also tried to implement role-play activity in pairs, but the result was not successful as I found they were doing more acting and using gestures and props rather than speaking. They spoke in such a low tone that only their respective partners could hear them. It was difficult for me and for the whole class to listen to them. As a result as other students could not hear what they were saying, they started talking among themselves as each pair failed to grab the attention of others. It was also difficult for me to assess the pairs as I could not hear them at all. I realized that as these students are at the beginner level of learning their second language, ‘role play’ is not a suitable activity for them. I decided not to do this activity with them anymore because, I felt it is more suitable for more advanced or intermediate level students. Then I gave them topics like “My family” where I gave them a sample



model to read titled “Sally’s family” and told them to prepare a speech, in the way Sally has described her family. The result was quite successful as family is something very easy to talk about and they were quite familiar with the topic. Then gradually I started giving them topics based on real life experiences like, telling about a time when you lost something, telling about one of your fondest childhood memories, telling about a time when you had to lie to your teachers. I also gave them topics based on hypothetical situations like, “What would you do if you were late for school?”, “What would you do if you got lost in an unfamiliar city?”, “What would you do if you did not have enough money to pay for the tiffin?” etc.

I found that it is very difficult to design a task for a ‘heterogeneous class’ (Ur 1991) where there are students of different levels of proficiency. If I designed an easy task, the more proficient students did not have to give much effort. And if I designed a harder task, the less proficient ones had to face problems. In this regard, I tried out various techniques in grouping and pairing the learners.

Initially I used to pair them while doing the activities. According to Harmer (1988), pairs can be divided in three ways and I used to pair them by ‘chance’ (Harmer, 1988) where each student had to pair with the one sitting next to himself. To me it was an easier way to divide them into pairs as it needs no such pre-planning and the students have no choice while choosing their partners. But sometimes I found that some topics were very easy for some students and if I designed the topics and tasks a bit harder, then it became difficult

for the others. So I decided not to pair them 'by chance' but to pair them 'by streaming' (Harmer, 1988) which is to pair the weaker students with the stronger ones. In such pairing, the more able students can help the less fluent ones. This type of pairing also helps the stronger students to understand more about the language themselves and the weaker students can be benefitted from the help they get from their stronger partners. I found this type of pairing quite useful as I could see each pair could complete the tasks quite successfully.

While the students used to be busy in their activities, I used to "monitor" (Scrivener, 1994) the activities where I was not really participating with them but was there whenever they needed any help.

The most striking thing I found was that, some students tended to switch to their native language frequently which is one of the limitations of pair work or group work. It was hard for me to monitor the whole class just to see whether they were speaking in English or not. Even when they were asked to come and discuss their activities with the whole class, except very few of them, the majority were very reluctant to come and speak in English in front of the class. Even if they came, they spoke in a very low tone, sometimes switching to their native language.

It was a hard and challenging task for me to make the students keep speaking in the target language. I found many of them as shy and they were hesitant to speak in the target language because they thought they could not speak English correctly and they would make mistakes in front of the whole class. With more practice of communicative tasks like simulations, describing pictures, solving puzzles etc, shyness could be alleviated and gradually I found that some students could really overcome their shyness and hesitations.

### **3.3 Error correction and feedback:**

The students used to make grammatical errors but I never used to point those out to them directly but I used to recast what they have said, by repeating the correct sentence structure myself. Like, if someone said “I goed to school yesterday”, I instantly said, “Oh, you mean, you went to school yesterday”. Sometimes I tried to help them through “scaffolding” (Scrivener, 1994) where I used to provide the correct word or idea that a student could not come up with instantly. For example once a student could not come up with the word ‘boil’, he kept saying something like “the milk was um...mm..erm..” then I said “boiling”, then he instantly said “the milk was boiling on the stove”. I did not interrupt their flow of speaking but I used to give them feedback afterwards at the end of every class. While giving them feedback, the problem that I had faced was to make them understand their errors that need to be corrected. They were too young to understand that it is important to pay attention to their errors and not to repeat that. I used to give them constructive feedback keeping in mind that they should not get demotivated. I always gave them feedback with positive notes. As I was teaching beginner level learners, I had

to be more sensitive and prudent while dealing with errors. I always encouraged them to speak more and tried to motivate them with rewards. Although it took time to motivate them, but with time, many of them could overcome their silence and participated enthusiastically.

#### **4. Recommendations:**

English is an important language to learn in this world of globalization. In Bangladesh, learners are lagging behind in terms of their speaking abilities in English and this is because they do not have enough opportunities to speak in the target language outside the classroom. For the beginner level learners, their classroom is a place outside their home where they spend most of their time. So it will be beneficial for them if they can be taught the speaking skill effectively and are given such exposure in the classroom where they can get enough opportunities to speak. It is necessary to build up the foundation of speaking skill at the beginning level of learning for a better result in later life. In the context of Bangladesh, when in future, these students will have to apply for a good job or want to go abroad for studies, it is likely that they would face problems for lack of their competency in spoken English. To overcome these problems, some suggestions are given below:

- a) Teachers should introduce a variety of activities at different times that will motivate the young learners and will keep the students involved in the task so that they may not get bored and be motivated and interested in the task at hand.
- b) Classroom environment should be more interactive than competitive that will help to lessen the learners' anxiety.
- c) The tasks should be designed in such a way so that the students can get an exposure to real life spoken English.

- d) The class size should not be large and should be limited to 20-25 students, so that teachers can take care of each student's problems.
- e) Teachers should also pay heed to enhance students' vocabulary and take care of their pronunciation as well.
- f) Group work and pair work should be practiced more and more which would allow learners to speak more without inhibition.
- g) The learners must be motivated to speak in English outside the class as well.
- h) To enable the learners to communicate effectively, they need to be given more fluency based activities. The teacher should be less dominant and the tasks should be more interactive that will help to build up their self-confidence in using English appropriately and correctly.

The infrastructural facilities in the schools of Bangladesh are very limited. Although it might be a bit expensive but it would pay off in future if the teachers can make appropriate use of multimedia and audio recorders in the classrooms. However these facilities are available in some schools in the urban areas.

## **5. Conclusion:**

Speaking is one of the essential medium of communication. To make the classroom teaching more effective the teachers need to give instructions and feedback with adequate language input and design interactive activities that will promote speaking and that will progressively help learners to speak fluently and accurately. While teaching beginner level learners, the teachers need to be more prudent as young learners are very sensitive towards learning. While giving them feedback the teachers need to be sensitive enough so that the students do not get demotivated. Learners' motivation plays a vital role in their learning and while receiving positive feedback, their motivation and self-confidence becomes higher and they can enthusiastically participate in the learning process. In Bangladesh where English is a foreign language, teaching spoken English to the beginner level learners is an aspect that demands severe attention. In Bangladesh the majority of the learners are not fluent in spoken English and there are some underlying problems. It is a matter of great apprehension that speaking skill is not stressed that much at the primary school level in Bangladesh. To solve this problem to some extent, I have suggested some recommendations in this paper. Moreover, the teachers need to be trained for teaching beginner level learners and if the learners are taught effectively and skillfully at the initial stages of their learning, the outcomes would be more effective and fruitful undoubtedly.

**Thank You**

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