The Role of Information Gap Activities in Teaching Speaking in Esl Classes

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ABSTRACT

Speaking is one of the most important skills in English language learning. Students learn English in order to be able to speak, to use the language for communicating either with their peers or with other English language speakers and the goal of teaching speaking skills is communicative efficiency. Learners should be able to make themselves understood, using their current proficiency to the fullest. They should try to avoid confusion in the message due to faulty pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary, and to observe the social and cultural rules that are applied in each communication situation and this article highlights the importance and benefits of using information gap activities in teaching speaking and developing language learners' communicative skills in ESL classes, as well as they give motivation to learn and use language in real situations and help to develop pair work skills.

INTRODUCTION.

Speaking in the English language has been considered the most challenging of the four skills, as this process requires speakers to make decisions about why, how and when to communicate depending on the cultural and social context, in addition, speaking is recognized as an interactive, social and contextualized process that serves a number of functions, based on real-life situations that demands communication. Therefore, at the lessons of foreign languages in order to teach speaking and encourage children to use the target language in their life, as well as, to develop their communicative skills, competency and culture, teachers should know how to use some speaking strategies, which help to enhance language learners' communicative skills, how to form their interest and motivation to study the language and how to create an English classroom environment where learners have real-life communication, authentic activities and meaningful tasks that promote oral language.

According to methodologists Burns and Joyce, *speaking is an active process of negotiating meaning and of using social knowledge of the situation, the topic and the other speakers*. Further, Nunan has defined *speaking as an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving, and processing information received orally* and Penny Ur states that *the classroom activities that develop the ability of learners to express their ideas through speech should be considered an important component of a language course*. Taking into account these studies the main

goal of teaching foreign languages has become to improve language learners' speaking skills and communicative competency using different effective innovative, interactive methods and techniques in order to have language learners speak proficiently and independently in various situations. And, studies have shown that one of the most effective interactive methods that promotes language learners' communication competences and enhances speaking skills, is *Information Gap activities*, which help to increase learners' motivation to learn English and use the language in real life situations.

The Information Gap activity is a useful activity in a speaking class, where one person has certain information that must be shared with others in order to solve a problem, gather information or make a decision. These types of activities are extremely effective in an L2 classroom. They give every student the opportunity to speak in the target language for an extended period of time and students naturally produce more speech than they would normally do. So, the aim of this activity is exchange information and share ideas between two students, because this activity is mostly done in pairs, with each student having a part of the information. The two students will be asking each other questions to which they don't know the answer. Moreover, while talking in pairs learners will not be embarrassed and share their ideas easily, and they will talk more willingly to solve a problem of the task, or give the needed information to the classmates.

MATERIALS AND METHODS.

Information gap, as one of the aspects of communication in the classroom, refers to structured output activities and they are very important in teaching speaking in foreign languages since they are close to real-life situations. According to Prabhu *"Information gap activities involve a transfer of given information from one person to another or from one form to another or from one place to another generally calling for the decoding or encoding of information from or into language"*, while Harmer states that this type of activity is labeled as *a meaning-focused activity* as well as *"reasoning gap"* and *"opinion gap"*. The gap is the incomplete information two speakers have about a conversation topic.

➢ *Reasoning gap activity* involves comprehending and conveying information, and language learners do filling the gaps in a schedule or timetable and completing the picture;

➢ *Opinion gap activity* involves identifying and articulating a personal preference, feeling or attitude in response to a given situation. Learners do story-completion tasks and take part in the discussions of a social issue.

Moreover, Willis points out that this type of technique is also implemented to focus on meaning to *gain fluency at the expense of accuracy*. As stated above, information gap activities are part of the communicative approach and, they are useful to promote fluency and motivate learners to interact, as well as these activities help learners how to communicate more fluently through conversations and how to learn new words and improve pronunciation.

Brown states that information gap activities have two characteristics:

➢ the first one is that ***information gap focuses on the information and not to language forms***;

➢ the second, ***information gap prioritize the communicative interaction in order to reach the objective.***

So, information gap activities practice real communication and the goal of these activities is to discover certain information, whether about the other person or related to a specific activity. While using these activities, pupils have to exchange information by asking and answering, and only by communicating successfully, they can get the information to complete the task. To fulfill the task, learners have to interact, to create questions and share information.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS.

Information gap activity is really helpful activity to improve learning skills of the students, as well as

it is beneficial for the students who lack confidence and vocabulary to share their ideas or shy when they are asked to answer in front of the class, these activities give opportunities for them to practice speaking. Moreover, these activities can make the teaching learning situation more interesting, as they are hold between students, not a teacher and students. It means, the teacher is only facilitator, not controller and teacher can show how to do the activity as a modeling, so that learners can follow the instruction and do the task. The students are not just sitting and listening to the teacher's explanation, but they can interact with their friends, enhance their confidence.

In Information gap activity teacher just explains the task, gives necessary vocabulary and instruction. Then, students are asked to fulfill the task by themselves. Each learner should take part in the process, because the task cannot be accomplished without everyone's participation. Many information gap activities are highly motivational because of the nature of the various tasks. The most effective task is problem solving. Teacher should know the level of the students in order to choose suitable level of difficulty task. If the task is given beforehand, then any level can be acceptable. Information gap activities allow students to use linguistic forms and functions in practice. Students will have to remember all grammar materials and learnt vocabulary to communicate with their classmates during the lesson. The best part is that they're very flexible and can be adapted for virtually any topic or lesson, just like the majority of ESL activities. For example, you can easily use an information gap activity as a way to review and practice new vocabulary, parts of speech and topic-based dialogues.

There are several ways of implementing information gap activities in teaching languages and can be used with language learners in order to improve their speaking skills:

➢ *Spot the difference activity -* Learners work in pairs. Each of them is given a set of two very similar pictures (Picture A and B) with only a few differences. They cannot see each other´s picture, thus they take turns in describing their pictures and asking questions and together they try to find all differences.

➢ *Guess the card -* Learners work with partners. One pupil holds a card so that their partner cannot see. The partner must ask "yes/no questions" to determine what is on the card. Often teachers structure this activity to fit with the theme of a particular unit.

➢ *Fill in the chart -* Learners work with their partners. Both learners are given tables with information missing. What is missing in one partner's table is there on the other partner's table and vice versa. Pupils must ask each other questions to discover what is missing in each of their tables.

So, information gap activities can be used in any level to promote speaking tasks as they provide optimization of time for learners to speak in class.

CONCLUSION

Overall, it can be said that implementation of information gap activities in teaching English helps move the learners from working in a more structured environment into a more communicative environment, as they are hopefully using lots of the target language, and in the process discovering where they have gaps, in addition, as an essential part of the learning process they:

✓ *enable them to practice the target language in meaningful context;*

✓ *improve their different skills needed for the language acquisition process;*

✓ *offer a variety of experiences and improves four main language skills;*

✓ *promote a learner-centered classroom;*

✓ *increase intrinsic motivation;*

✓ *enhance peer-to-peer collaboration;*

✓ *help to consolidate the vocabulary and grammar rules of the previous lessons, as well.*

In conclusion, from our teaching experience, we can say that whatever the children's age, it is important to provide frameworks for speaking activities, which encourage them to use English for real purposes, and we can confirm that implementation of information gap activities are beneficial, if only while designing information gap activities, language learners' needs, age and level of social, cognitive and emotional development need to be taken into account by the teachers.

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