# CHALLENGE-BASED LEARNING TO IMPROVE SECOND LANGUAGE SPEAKING SKILLS

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## ABSTRACT

Second language learners often find it challenging to master speaking as it is an interactive skill that requires speakers to be able to apply their knowledge of vocabulary, grammatical rules, appropriateness of language and other metalinguistic features such as tone and intonation in real-life conversations. Learners often lack exposure to authentic language production and enough practice of speaking skills. Further, they may not even see a clear purpose for practicing speaking skills in a monolingual classroom where communication in their first language can be more successful. This paper discusses some of the problems related to speaking skills in terms of English second language learners and explores the possibilities of integrating Challenge-Based Learning into language classroom to provide exposure to authentic language, a sense of purpose for practicing speaking tasks and opportunities to practice speaking in authentic real-life situations.

**KEYWORDS:** Communication, Challenge-Based Learning, Speaking, Second Language Learning, Authentic Learning & Interactive Skill

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Speaking is an important language skill that most of the second language students want to master. It is considered to be a cognitively and linguistically complex skill. Penny Ur (1996) says that speaking is one of the most critical skills of all the four language skills. Davies and Pearse (2000) state that the main objective of teaching English as a second language is to make the learners to communicate effectively and correctly in English. The ability to speak English well is often used as a measure for the success of an English learning program (Richards, 1990). Nunan (1995) also said that learning the speaking skill is the most important aspect of learning a second or foreign language, and success is measured based on the ability to perform a conversation in the language.

Today, a lot of our communication is verbal or in digital text mode through various online platforms. Oral communication skills are fundamental as it enables the speaker to take decisions regarding what to say, when, and how (Bygate1987:6). Speaking also helps learners to integrate other language skills such as listening, reading, writing, and to develop their vocabulary and grammar skills. Language skills help students in the real world as it improves their chances of better education and employment opportunities (Baker and Westrup 2003).

However, many second language learners are not able to communicate fluently in English because they do not have enough knowledge in this field. Despite its importance, speaking is not taught like reading, writing, or grammar in most schools. Speaking tests are not as common as it takes much time to carry out speaking tests (Clifford, 1987). To give the importance of speaking skills in real-life situations, second language teachers need to ensure that students are giving

time, opportunity and relevant activities to practice speaking skills in the classroom as well as in authentic real-life speaking situations.

## 2. PROBLEMS WITH ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS

Speaking is an interactive skill where a person is required to use words and phrases in real time without much conscious thinking. This feature can make speaking in English difficult for second language learners. Oral communication requires the ability to use language effectively in social interactions and speaking lessons may not provide this opportunity to the learners. The major problems with speaking skills are due to lack of attention to the teaching of speaking, lack of exposure to authentic language, and lack of opportunity to practice the skill.

### 2.1 Lack of Attention to Speaking

Second language learners need explicit instructions, just like in mastering any other skills, to improve speaking skills. However, there is either a lack of time or sufficient tasks allocated to practice and improvement of speaking and oral communication skills. While students learn grammar, vocabulary, reading, and writing, and practice tasks in course books and workbooks, speaking skill hardly gets noticed. Students are rarely exposed to real life, everyday language use, and even if they are given simulated role-play tasks, these are not taken seriously because students cannot relate to these tasks.

Richard (2008) asserts that in second language teaching and learning, not enough attention is given to the factors that influence speaking skills. It is often believed that learners will develop speaking skills by assigning them general topics for discussion.

### 2.2 Lack of Exposure to Authentic Language

Alison d'Anglejan (1978) views that cognitively mature learners want to comprehend and express ideas, which need a wide range of syntactic structures, verb tenses, or vocabulary. Their communicative requirements require much more than a programmed presentation given by the instructional materials or syllabus. Learning to speak a foreign language requires more than the knowledge of grammatical rules and vocabulary.

A variety of demands are placed on the speakers as soon as the speaking process begins. Speakers are required to monitor and understand other speakers, think about one's response or contribution and producing the right kind of response or effect, and so on (Lazaraton, 2001). As Nunan (1992) says, the most verbal interaction can either be predictable or unpredictable. Therefore, learners need to be engaged in independent decision-making concerning word choice, choice of fillers, and other communication strategies. Richard and Rogers (1986) also say that oral communication is much more than transmitting a message from the speaker to the listener. The goal involves understanding as well as giving a meaningful reply in the target language. Curtin and Dalberg (2001) assert that the meaning is much more important than the form from a communicative perspective.

As d'Anglejan (1978) states, the words and structures learned in the classroom may be sometimes unrecognizable when they occur in the normal discourse of native speakers. This lack of transferability of classroom learning to the unstructured authentic speaking situation is one of the prime criticisms of the methods used to teach speaking skill.

## 2.3 Lack of Motivation and Opportunity

Ur. P (2001) states that in most classroom situations speaking sessions are taken over by dominant students, and many do not get the opportunity to speak. Students are not motivated to take part in speaking activities as they do not see a real purpose in speaking. Scrivener (2005) states that without practice and experience students may be nervous, may be worried about completing tasks and suffer from fear of 'losing face' in front of their peers while engaging in speaking activities.

## 2.4 The Fear of Speaking

Cambridge dictionary (2008) describes inhibition as a feeling of worry that stops people from telling or performing what they want. Due to the worry of making mistakes and being laughed at, learners prefer to be silent rather than being criticized in front of a large number of people (Brown, 2000).Ur (2005) describes inhibition as a major issue in speaking skills. Students often complain that they have 'nothing' to say or use their mother tongue instead of the target language during the speaking activities in monolingual classrooms. Bashir, Azeem, & Dogar (2011) study concluded that extreme anxiety might sometimes lead to a sense of failure in learners. Woodrow (2011) says that anxiety can negatively impact the oral communication abilities of second language speakers. Classroom conditions where the dominant peer takes the lead and leads to the emergence of a strong and weak group may also cause speaking anxiety. Learners who are low risk-takers and who have inhibitions due to fear of being criticized prefer to be silent and do not participate in speaking activities (Brown, 2000; Mahripah, 2014).

## 2.5 Monolingual Classrooms

Students in a monolingual class often slip into a conversation in the mother tongue as it is effortless for them to send across the message and reach the communicative goal through a common well-known language (Tuan & Mai, 2015). Harmer (1991) observed that students use their first language when they are asked to talk about a topic in which they do not have much knowledge. Harmer also says that the application of mother-tongue is very natural for learners to use. Therefore, learners will automatically use their first language to explain something to their classmates unless they are urged by the teacher to speak only in English.

## 2.6 Lack of Information about a Topic

Rivers (1968) states that learners often struggle with speaking because they have nothing to say. One of the reasons for this could be the selected topics not appropriate for them or they do have enough information about it. Baker and Westrup (2003) also assert that it is challenging for learners to speak about a topic which is not relevant to them or about which they have limited information. Second language learners, therefore, find it difficult to decide which vocabulary to apply, or how to use grammar accurately.

## 3. AUTHENTIC LEARNING EXPERIENCES FOR TEACHING OF SPEAKING SKILLS

Peck (1978) cited in Celce Murcia (2001) states that speaking activities need to be student-centered, and communication should be authentic. It is essential that the learning tasks are of interest to the students, for their own reasons and not because the teacher has asked them. Brown (1998) states that students should be given opportunities to practice the target language in authentic situations in order to improve their speaking and listening skills.

Krashen and Terrel cited in Lightbown and Spada (1999) state that communication can provide the opportunities to use the language rather than focusing on the structure and form. Therefore, it is crucial to provide students with ample

opportunities for engaging in authentic real-life situations to practice their speaking skills. In this context, language teachers may consider student-centered learning approached as a vehicle to introduce practice activities that are similar to real-life speaking situations.

## 4. CHALLENGE-BASED LEARNING

The Challenge-Based Learning (CBL) methodology proposed by Apple Inc. is a student-centered approach that employs a multidisciplinary method in encouraging students to use the knowledge around them and solve real-world problems. CBL is a call to action that requires students to develop solutions and implement them in authentic environments (Johnson et al., 2009).

Apple Inc. (2012) defines CBL as an active, student-directed instructional strategy which encourages learners to gain skills while finding solutions to real-world problems. As an active model of learning, CBL engages students in planning their learning.

CBL stems out of Apples Collaborative project called Apple Classrooms of Tomorrow ACoT that started in 1985. In the first phase, it was observed that cooperative and task-related interactions between students increased during the study and students had significantly higher scores on achievements tests, especially in vocabulary, reading comprehension and language mechanics (Dwyer, 1994).

In the second stage of the study called ACOT2 or Apple Classrooms of Tomorrow Today, it was noticed that students were regularly engaged in activities that required higher order thinking and problem-solving skills. Students believed that their communication skills, among many other 21st century skills, improved during the study. Students also noticed that learning activities were engaging and exciting, which helped to boost their confidence (Johsnon et al. 2009).

Through CBL, students engage in deep, meaningful, and purposeful learning activities and make a difference to the world around them.

### 4.1 CBL and Speaking Skills

As an active learning approach, there are many aspects of CBL that can help language teachers integrate authentic speaking practices within the CBL framework. Some of the core constructive values described by Lebow (1993) "the seven primary constructivist values of collaboration, personal autonomy, generatively, reflectivity, active engagement, personal relevance, and pluralism" are an essential part of the CBL approach.

As CBL focuses on real-world problems connected to the students' learning environment, the learners will see a purpose in engaging in these activities. Furthermore, CBL focuses on collaborative problem solving through teamwork. This aspect of CBL can be utilized to create opportunities for students to communicate in the target language for specific problem-solving goals.

### 4.1.1 Practicing Speaking in an Experiential Learning Environment

Experiential learning engages students in the process of inquiry and discovery while giving opportunities to apply the content t-Learning takes place in problem-solving situations where the learner draws on his or her own experience, existing individual as well as the collective knowledge of the group to discover facts and inferences. This knowledge is then applied

to new situations (Alfieri et al., 2010). Students continually assimilate and accommodate new learning throughout this process in experiential learning.

Porter and Grant (1992) say that adopting an experimental approach to learning can encourage learner involvement and interaction. Students learn communication skills through extensive practice, and CBL, as an experiential learning approach can provide students the opportunity to practice the language in a real-life problem-solving situation. Students should be engaged in practicing speaking skills rather than just talking and hearing about grammar rules and communication strategies.

### 4.1.2 Encouraging Speaking with Collaborative Activities

Speaking is a complex skill that the learners can learn in groups, and speaking activities in groups can help to improve speaking skills significantly (Celce-Murcia, 2001). CBL provides a collaborative learning experience in which the students work together to learn about compelling issues; they collectively discuss and design solutions, implement the solution, and reflect on the success of the solutions. Within the framework on CBL, collaboration, personal autonomy, and reflection are considered essential for the learning process (Apple, 2010).

Cambridge University Press (1996) states that the following as the features of a successful speaking activity;

Learners talk a lot,

Participation is even,

Motivation is high,

Language is at an acceptable level.

All these features can be easily integrated into CBL as it provides learners the opportunity to participate in collaborative, hands-on learning activities that require students to work with each other. Students are also expected to work with the teacher and other experts in the community (CBL Guide, 2010).

Deep learning does not happen by mere repetition, but by active participation in the learning process (Kroll, 1996). CBL provides opportunity to participate and engage actively in the learning activity to develop a deep understanding of the content. Report from Memphis Public School (1987), a participant school in the CBL study stated that children interacted frequently mastered the skills of organizing work, working collaboratively with others, locate, evaluate and use information during the CBL project t.

### 4.1.3 Sense of Purpose

Thornbury (2005) says that speaking should be taught in a way where learners can see a purpose for the activity. He further describes 'speaking-as-skill' activities where learners are given tasks to complete. The only way to complete these tasks is to communicate. Students generally have seen using any language available to them to achieve the task. Harmer J (2007) says that speaking activities should be 'extremely engaging' for the students in order to help them acquire the skill. According to Thornbury(2005), it is essential to regularly activate speaking and have a culture of speaking in the classroom to motivate and engage students in speaking.

Borrowing from Vygotsky's ideas that social interaction is the key to learning, and that language and cognition are interdependent processes, van Lier posits three essential learning principles:

awareness (learner must first notice to learn (p. 11)),

autonomy (learner must be ready to learn and must be able to decide what he learns,how, and when (pp. 12–13)),

and authenticity (each learning act must be intrinsically motivated (p. 13)).

Creating an environment that promotes work that is "challenging" but also "attainable" (van Lier, 1996, p. 94) can be a significant challenge for language instructors. This is especially true in the case speakers where opportunities may be scarce to engage in extended, meaningful discourse to provide the necessary scaffolding for learning, either because learners do not have the opportunities to interact in the foreign language outside of class, they are not encouraged sufficiently, or they just do not find the time. Zhang (2009) observed a similar situation with Chinese English learners, who failed to speak English fluently because they had no real need or desire to interact in English.

The Challenge Based approach addresses this problem as at the center of CBL is a call to action, which becomes the real purpose for engaging in conversations, that requires students to develop solutions and implement them in authentic environments (Johnson et al., 2009). The flexible framework of CBL allows for including more student contributions and a newer idea.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

CBL is a relatively new concept, with few (if any) comparative studies done so far. Many aspects require further investigation, including to understand how to design such learning experiences and their effects on student learning, design appropriate learning spaces, develop needed faculty competence, cost-effectiveness, and scalability (Malmqvist et al., 2015).

Studies do refer to a general improvement in overall interaction, communication, and thinking skills. Research has proven that second language learning is influenced by the factors such as learning environment, instructional techniques, motivation, and readiness of the learners (Paiva, 2009). CBL has a significant impact on the above-listed factors; this approach can also be considered to improve second language skills.

CBL is also very closely linked to the principles of the constructivist approach that says learning is;

- about constructing knowledge, not receiving it

- about thinking and analyzing, not accumulating memorizing

- about understanding and applying, not repeating back

- being active, not passive. (Marlowe & Page, 2005)

As previously stated, CBL puts learners at the center of the learning process. It encourages constructive and reflective thinking that intentionally creates collaboration and a conversational atmosphere (Brooks & Brooks, 2001). Language teachers, should, therefore, explore the possibilities of employing the unique characteristics of CBL such as, a starting point in a massive open-ended problem, an approach that is driven by values such as decision-making, self-awareness, self-direction, and self-leadership in combination with teamwork to improve second language speaking skills.

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