

Using Discussion Activities To Improve The Efl Students' Speaking Skills At Dong Nai Technology University

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Abstract – The study was written based on the research done by the writer as a teacher at Dong Nai Technology University. The study was carried out by using discussion activities with two aims. They are: (1) to investigate the EFL students' attitudes towards discussion activities in their speaking classes and (2) to evaluate the effectiveness of discussion activities applied to English speaking skill teaching and learning.

The results of the study show that discussion activities helped increase most of the students' motivation in speaking lessons. In addition, the findings of the study also reveal that after using discussion activities in speaking lessons, some of the students could improve their scores in the post-test. Although there was not too much change, it was proved that discussion activities played a certain role in improving the students' speaking proficiency.

Keywords – *Discussion Activities, Speaking Class, Dong Nai Technology University*

I. INTRODUCTION

As a teacher at Dong Nai Technology University, I found that speaking is so hard for non-native English Foreign Language students. The teacher also noticed that they did not know how speak English well and they were embarrassed to practice. And they are always afraid of making mistakes in speaking English and keep silence during the lessons. So, how to stimulate them to be active in the speaking classes is a difficult question to answer. To find the answer to this question, it is necessary to investigate what motivates and de-motivates students in English learning in general and in speaking in particular.

Research Questions

- How do discussion activities promote the students' motivation at DNTU?
- To what extent, do discussion activities increase the students' speaking proficiency at DNTU?

Scope of the Study

This study only attempts to do research on random samples of 25 students at DNTU in Dong Nai. The students are non-English majored students.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Speaking skill

According to Chaney (1988, p.13), speaking is the process of building and sharing meaning through the use verbal and non-verbal symbols in a variety of contexts.

Scott (1978, p.18) states that “speaking can be typified as an activity involving two or more people in which the participants are both hearers and speakers having to react to what they hear and make their contribution.” The hearers and listeners are required to reflex the information that they have heard and contribute their ideals.

In 1976, Byrne (p.8) claimed that speaking is a two-way process between the speaker(s) and the listener(s) involving the productive skill of speaking and the receptive skill of understanding. In the two-way process, speaking requires speaker(s) having productive skill to encode the message and listener(s) having receptive skill to decode the message.

Brown (1983) also noted that speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving and processing information.

Speaking skill is defined as “the range of exercise types and activities with a communication approach is unlimited, provided that such exercises and activities enable learners to attain the communicative objectives of the curriculum, engage learners in communication and require the use of such communicative processes as information sharing, negotiation of meaning, and interaction”. (Richard and Rodgers, 1986: 165).

To summarize, different researchers have different definitions of the word “speaking”, however, they all agree with one very important feature of speaking. Speaking is one of the most important skills of all the four language skills because individuals who learn a language are referred to as the speakers of that language (Ur, 1996).

Discussion

According to Byrne D. (1980) defines discussion as “any exchange of ideas and opinions either on a class basic, with the teacher as mediator, or within the context of the group, with the students talking among themselves”.

Gulley (1960, p. 4) states that discussion occurs when a group with group orientation purposefully interacts orally for enlightenment or policy-determination. If the aim is enlightenment, members systematically define, analyze, and exchange information. When the end is problem solving, members systematically define, analyze, evaluate possible solutions, and attempt to agree upon a high quality decision to which all or the majority will be committed.

Regarding to the language teaching, Brown (2001) claimed that discussion is one of the techniques used in language teaching. Furthermore, in teaching speaking or teaching oral communication, discussion belongs to one of the activities to promote teaching speaking in the classroom (Kayi, 2006).

In short, discussion is one kind of speaking activities which students have a chance to express their ideas in front of their partners.

III. METHODOLOGY

Participants

In order to collect the data for the study, 25 students were randomly chosen to participate in the study. Most of the students are fresh-man and just some of them are the second - year students who just finishes Level A1 at English. This module lasts 10 weeks with 45 periods, 4 periods each week, 40 minutes each period.

Research design

The research was carried out

According to Kemmis and McTaggart (2000, p. 564), the following figure illustrated an action research's cycles which the author used in the study.

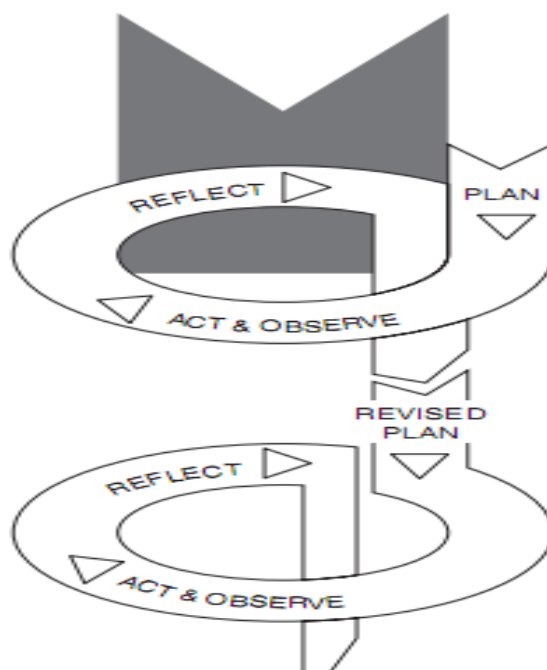


Figure 3.1. Kemmis and McTaggart's action research spiral

According to these authors, each action research cycle should involve:

- planning a change
- acting and observing the process and consequences of the change
- reflecting on these processes and consequences and then replanning for the next cycle.

Particularly, this study underwent the following steps:

- Conducting preliminary investigation
- Planning the action
- Implementing the action
- Observing the action
- Reflecting the action

Data Collection Instruments

In order to collect information about the students' motivation during speaking lessons and their speaking proficiency, the researcher used two survey questionnaires, classroom observation, and three tests (pre-test and 2 post-tests).

Data Analysis

To carry out this study, the researcher used both qualitative and quantitative data. Quantitative data were gathered from the two tests and the two survey questionnaires, while the qualitative data was obtained from the classroom observation. For the results of the tests and the survey questionnaires, percentage count was calculated. For the class observation, the researcher noted down the information carefully, and evaluated the level of the students' motivation in the observation sheet in each speaking lesson.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Survey questionnaire 1: Student's motivation in learning English speaking lessons

4.1.1 Students' levels of interest in English speaking lessons and discussion activities

In order to investigate the levels of the students' motivation in learning speaking skill as well as their difficulties in speaking class, survey questionnaire 1 was used before the action. The following bar chart shows the motivation of the students.

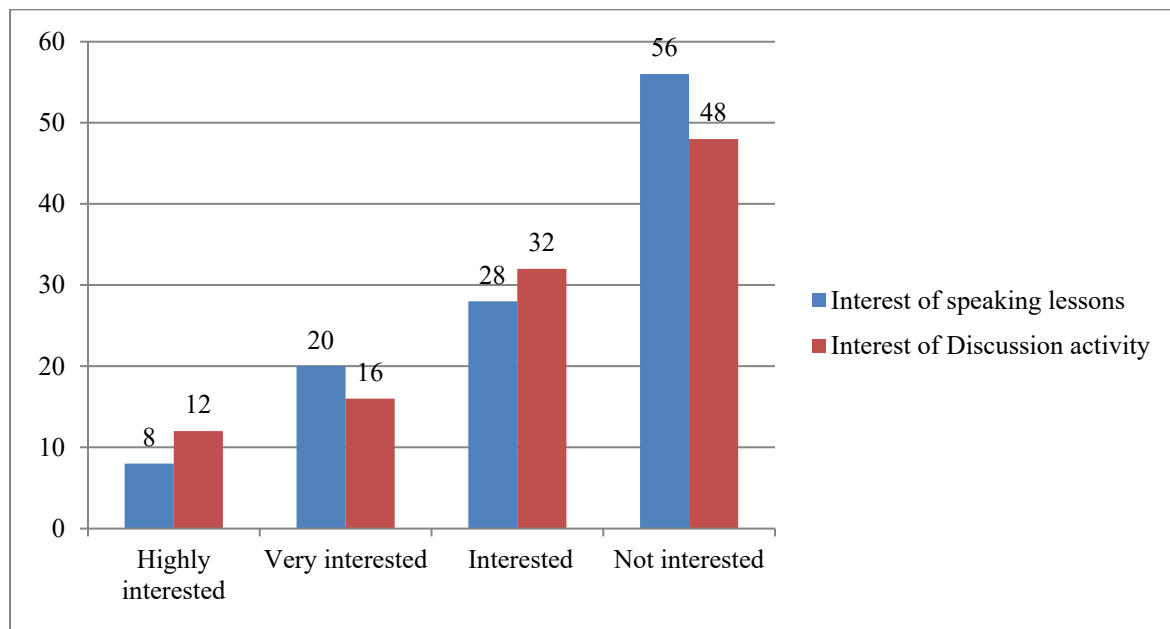


Figure 4.1. Students' levels of interest in English speaking lessons and discussion activities

4.1.2 Students' speaking opportunities

The following table shows the information about students' speaking opportunities.

Table 4.1. Students' speaking opportunities during speaking lessons

Speaking English when...	Number of students	Percentage %
You talk with your friends	0	0
Your teacher ask you	23	92
You think it's useful	3	12
You are interested in speaking activities	3	12

4.1.3 Students' difficulties in learning speaking English

The collected data in the next figure revealed certain difficulties faced by the students during the process of learning speaking English.

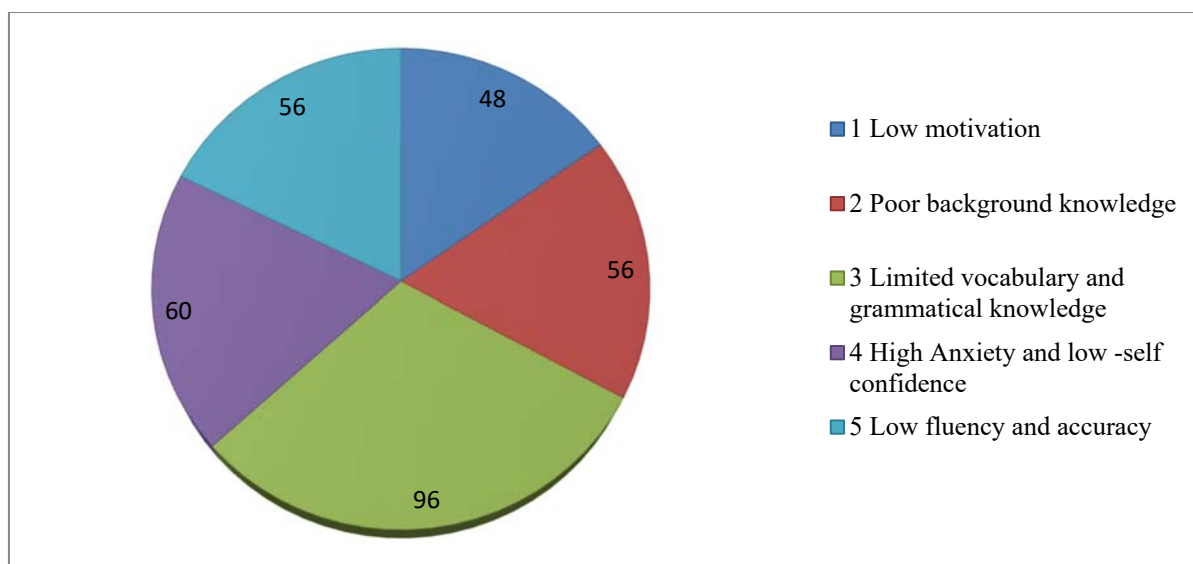


Figure 4.2. Students' difficulties in learning speaking English

4.1.4. Students' preferences for types of discussion activities

The next figure shows a list of some certain discussion activities that had ever been given to the students by their teachers and their preferences for the activities.

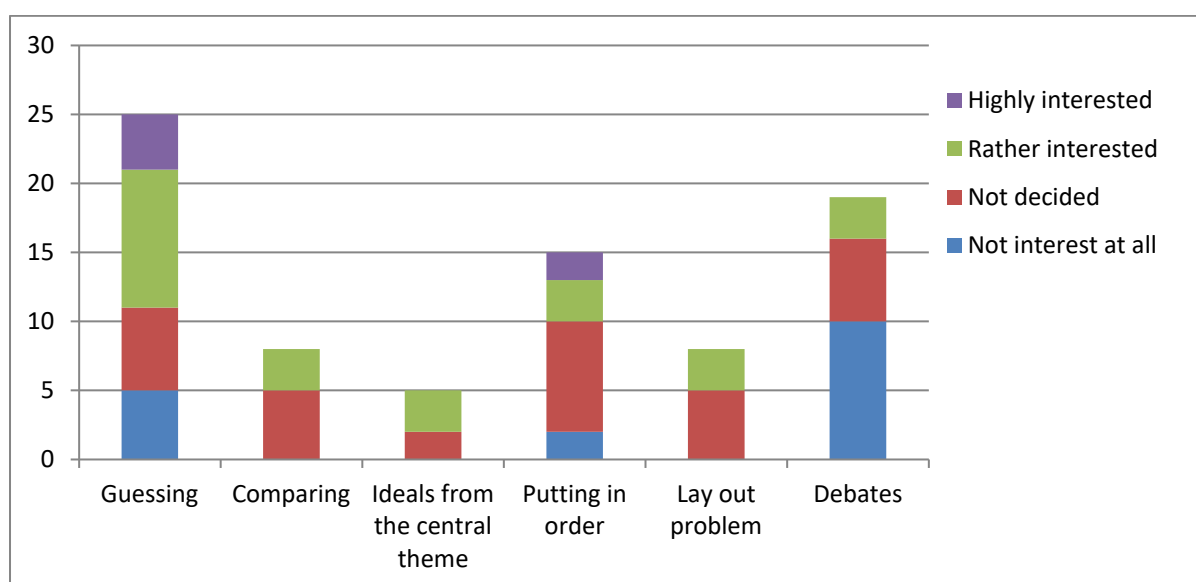


Figure 4.3. Students' preferences for types of discussion activities

1. 4.2. Survey questionnaire 2: Student's attitude toward discussion activities after implementation the action

4.2.1 Level of interest in learning speaking lessons

In the table below, the students' levels of motivation was clearly indicated.

Table 4.2. Students' level of interest in learning speaking lessons

Level of interest in learning speaking lessons	Preliminary	Cycle 1	Cycle 2

	Number of students		
Highly interested	2 (8%)	2 (8%)	3 (12%)
Very interested	2 (8%)	5 (20%)	6 (24%)
Interested	7 (28%)	10 (40%)	14 (56%)
Uninterested	14 (56%)	8 (32%)	2 (8%)

4.2.2. Students' attitude in speaking lessons

Table 4.3. Students' attitude in speaking lessons

Level of students' interest in discussion activities	Preliminary	Cycle 1	Cycle 2
	Number of students		
Highly interested	3(12%)	2 (8%)	2 (8%)
Very interested	4 (16%)	2 (8%)	4 (16%)
Interested	8 (32%)	20 (80%)	19 (76%)
Uninterested	12 (48%)	1 (4%)	0

Moreover, in order to know the students' feelings after participating in discussion activities, the following table shows students' comments on some of the opinions about discussion activities.

Table 4.4. Students' comments on discussion activities

Opinions	Cycle 1					Cycle 2				
	No. of Students									
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
A. Discussion activities make me feel relaxed and enjoyable.	0	10	13	2	0	2	11	12	0	0
B. Discussion activities help lower my anxiety and develop confidence.	0	10	10	5	0	2	20	3	0	0
C. Discussion activities give me more opportunities to speak English.	2	23	0	0	0	3	22	0	0	0
D. Discussion activities make the speaking lessons more interesting because I can get involved in the tasks, and discuss with my friends.	1	10	14	0	0	2	22	1	0	0
E. Discussion activities help me a lot in improving my speaking motivation.	0	15	10	0	0	1	16	8	0	0

(1: highly agree, 2: agree, 3: neutral; 4: disagree, 5: strongly disagree)

4.3. Class Observation Findings

The researcher and her colleague observed the class during speaking lessons of pilot teaching and learning. There were eight items to remark and assess. Each item was scored on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high). After observing the lessons, observatory gave some comments:

*** Teacher**

Optimistically, discussion activities which was used those lessons were quite high appreciated. The teacher had prepared the lessons with different teaching aids. The invited teacher as an observer assessed that the teacher managed the classroom condition well, very friendly with the students and used time effectively. However, once the students got confuse and they did not understand clearly the task given by teachers, which lead unsuccessful activities.

During two first lessons, the teacher did not know the students' English proficiency and their willingness in speaking in front of the class. Therefore, setting up the groups was not as good as the last 3 lessons. During the last 3 lessons, the teacher mixed the talkative students with silent students to be a group. It is more effective for those students who helped others better in speaking English.

*** Students**

The students' motivation was significantly improved from beginning to the last lesson of the implementation. Most of the students actively took part in discussion activities and paid much attention to those lessons during the process of implementation the action. Some students were so shy at the first stage; however they became more active and confident to speak in front of the class after 3 lessons implementation the action. It did not mean that all of the shy students were more confident to talk in English because there were 3 students who were still too shy and seemed to listen more than talk. The students tended to talk more when speaking in groups, but when they were asked to speak in front of the class, three of them were lack of confidence and reluctant to talk if they did not have much time to prepare before class.

The students had to work in groups not only in speaking class but also at home to search for necessary information and fulfill the tasks before class. Besides working in different groups in speaking class, the students also worked with the same group from the beginning to the end of the implementation, helped each other, and shared knowledge so that they could deal with the given tasks. This means they had to prepare for what they intended to talk with the other groups. From what they had prepared before class and what their teacher provided which was not too much challenging, they gained more knowledge and vocabulary related to the lessons.

In general, most of the students participated in discussion activities showing positive attitude towards learning speaking skills. It seemed that discussion activities successfully involved the students even the laziest ones. The results of overall class observation indicated that discussion activities made sense in raising students' motivation in English speaking lessons.

4.4. Students' Speaking Proficiency

4.4.1. Pre-test Results

Before implementing the action, the pre-test was used to measure students' English proficiency; the students' results were shown in the table below.

Table 4.4. General Results of Pre-test

Marks	0-1	2-3	35-5	5.5-7	7.5-9	10
Number of Students	0	6	12	7	0	0

4.4.2. Results of Post-test 1

In order to see if there was any change in students' speaking proficiency after three weeks implementing the action, a post-test 1 was carried out. The results of the post-test 1 were shown in the following table.

Table 4.5. Overall mark of Post-test 1

Marks	0-1	2-3	3.5-5	5.5-7	7.5-9	10
Number of Students	0	2	14	7	2	0

Table 4.6. Results of students' speaking performance in the post-test 1

Criteria	Level and Number of students				
	Poor (0-0.5)	Average (0.75-1.25)	Good (1.5)	Very good (1.75-2.0)	Excellent (2.5)
Fluency & coherence	4	15	4	2	0
Vocabulary	0	6	11	8	0
Grammar	4	15	6	2	0
Pronunciation	2	13	8	2	0

4.4.3. Results of post - test 2

After conducting the post-test 1 and considering the reflection of the students, the researcher decided to do cycles 2 with the post-test 2. The results of the post-test 2 were shown in the following table.

Table 4.7. Overall mark of Post-test 2

Marks	0-1	2-3	3.5-5	5.5-7	7.5-9	10
Number of Students	0	1	9	12	3	0

Table 4.8. Results of students' speaking performance in the post-test 1

Criteria	Level and Number of students				
	Poor (0-0.5)	Average (0.75-1.25)	Good (1.5)	Very good (1.75-2.0)	Excellent (2.5)
Fluency & coherence	3	10	8	4	0
Vocabulary	0	4	7	14	0
Grammar	2	13	6	4	0
Pronunciation	0	10	13	2	0

4.5. Reflection

4.5.1. Reflection after Cycle 1

Broadly speaking, the first cycle is quite successful. The groups of students worked well together and they did show their ideas quite confidently before the class. Although mistakes were still made, the students now show a positive attitude to the activities. There were some outstanding members who were very confident and usually gave valuable ideas and arguments. And there also was some students quite embarrassing to talk before the class and limited in some aspects like grammar or pronunciations which made them did not dare to show their ideal. However, in general most of students changed their attitude to learning speaking English with the discussion activities. The atmosphere of the class was raised up, all of the students of the class could be encouraged to participate in the comparing activity. Almost all of the students found discussion activities enjoyable and useful to get over their difficulties in speaking skill. What the teacher gave them before the given tasks, and what they had prepared before class helped them a lot when speaking in class because they gained more knowledge and useful language as well as enlarged their vocabulary which were relevant to the lessons. These made them more confident and enthusiastic to speak English in class.

Furthermore, it was also more comfortable and easier for the students to ask and discuss with others. It was realized by the teacher that some students are encouraged to speak more than the previous time they had participated.

Basing on the reflection got from Cycle 1, it is concluded by the researcher that the activity of continuing to carry out Cycle 2 is necessary in order to enhance the ability of speaking of students and improve their speaking motivation.

4.5.2. Reflection after Cycle 2

After Cycle 2, it can be seen that the speaking ability of the students were improved in a certain level. Furthermore, it was also more comfortable and easier for the students to ask and discuss with others, because they got experience from the first cycle. It was realized by the teacher that some students are encouraged to speak more than the previous time they had participated.

From the beginning to the last of implementing the action, it can be seen that discussion activities made a great contribution to the improvement of the students' motivation and their English proficiency. The number of students became interested in speaking lessons increased significantly. Before the implementation, most the students just spoke English when they were asked to do so or when they were interested in speaking activities. However, from the beginning to the end of the implementation, almost all of the students became more active and concentrated on the lessons.

Almost all of the students found discussion activities enjoyable and useful to get over their difficulties in speaking skill. What the teacher gave them before the given tasks, and what they had prepared before class helped them a lot when speaking in class because they gained more knowledge and useful language as well as enlarged their vocabulary which were relevant to the lessons. These made them more confident and enthusiastic to speak English in class.

It seemed that English speaking proficiency of the students was a bit improved. Specifically, almost all of the students achieved mark 5.5 to 7 after finishing Cycle 2, this number increased 20% comparing with Cycle 1. Most of students got Average mark level in terms of the criteria: fluency and coherence, vocabulary, and pronunciation. However, there were still two students whose grammar was at Poor level, specifically in terms of fluency and coherence.

4.6. Chapter Summary

To summarize, from the results of the class observations and the tests, it can be concluded that almost all of the students whose motivation in speaking lessons was improved made progress in their speaking proficiency. Though there was not too much change, it was a good signal showing that the use of discussion activities could contribute to the improvement in the students' speaking proficiency. For the students who could not improve their speaking proficiency and their motivation in this cycle, it is hoped that in the next cycle or cycles they will be more interested in speaking lessons and make progress with the help of their teacher and their friends. Hence, it is expected that if the study will be carried out in the next cycle, the researcher can give better results.

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