Theories in Developing Oral Communication for Specific Learner Group

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Abstract

The current article presents some key theories most relevant to the development of oral communication skills in an Indonesian senior high school. Critical analysis on the learners' background is employed to figure out their strengths and weaknesses. The brief overview of the learning context and learners' characteristic are used to identify which particular theories and issues of L2 teaching would best suit the need of developing their oral communication skills.

Key words: Oral Communication, Development, Theories, Specific Learner Group

Teaching context and the Learners characteristics

The target learners discussed in this article are students in multilingual school in Indonesia, where the learners have to learn two foreign languages, Arabic and English as well as the national language, Bahasa Indonesia. This means that a lot of burden is placed on students' brain to learn the languages. Reward and punishment are employed at this school because it is believed to be effective to ensure the mastery of both foreign languages. The reason for this is because the students have to communicate in both languages in the school area such as in the classroom, outside the classroom and in the dormitory. Nevertheless, one positive side of this regulation is that it provides learner with opportunities to immediately use the languages.

This regulation could be one of extrinsic motivations. Having an extrinsic motivation to learn a foreign language could mean better job prospects, greater economic rewards, survival as a refugee, social prestige or fulfillment of the requirements of a program of study (i.e., exam) (O'Neil et al, 2008). Besides having to communicate in English, learners are also directed to learn English to pass the national exam. This also a common feature of English language

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learning in other countries such as Japan where English becomes one of of the major components of entrance examinations for high schools and universities (Seki, 2004:p.8)

There are approximately 25 students in this class consisting of more or less 10 male and 15 female students. However, their current level of English is varied, from lower intermediate to intermediate. Most of them are highly motivated to speak in English and prefer to study oral communication than to improve their written English because they are pushed to gain such skill in their first year of study. These learners seem to have high motivation to learn and to take risks in using English. Therefore, selecting proper theories and issues to develop theirs oral communication skills is necessary.

Pressure to speak in English to the learners, both at school and in the dormitory has demanded language instructor to take into account the best methods fitting the learners' needs and the school' expectation. As a result, language instructors have designed an oral speaking class separated from literacy development which means the students have to attend two English classes. The first is a speaking class focusing on speaking and listening and language features (pronunciation) and a literacy class focusing on developing reading and writing skills and on language features such as grammar and vocabulary. This context puts teacher in more flexible way in managing his class. Also, in developing the learners' oral communication skills, teacher plays an important role in structuring students' learning experiences so as to support their speaking development in and outside the classroom, that is by designing interesting and appropriate materials (Goh and Burns, 2012). Furthermore, the teacher can develop assessments fitting the learning goals and objectives. Overall, the language course in this particular school could be a perfect example of the integration and balancing the four strands as suggested by Nation and Newton (2009, p.1-10) in order to achieve the ultimate goals of L2 learning.

Despite this, there are a few things that require improvement by employing a variety of theories of L2 teaching and learning. For instance, although the learners have many opportunities to use the language, they have not made significant progress in oral communication skills. The students still have problems related to limited vocabularies, collocation, structure, and pronunciation and of course fluency. Although learners are capable to communicate with their peers, they still use limited vocabularies and quite often produce inaccurate sentences structures. They also find

pronunciation and stress challenging. Furthermore, they sometimes get bored with their activities in the classroom.

Relevant theories to develop oral communication

Learning contexts are related to various individual difference variables influential in determining what teaching and learning students would choose (Rao, 2006). Similar to that, Goh and Burns (2012, p.172) also suggest that an effective way to plan an effective speaking program is by identifying the learners needs Therefore, having sufficient understanding about the learning context and characteristics of the learners will certainly beneficial to identify what language learning theories or techniques would be most relevant to the development of their oral communication skills. Therefore, this article will address some of key concept to implement in this context. These include: interaction and correction, varying learning activities inside or outside the classroom for fluency development, a combination of multiple structural frameworks, using emerging technologies, and assessment and evaluation.

Interaction and correction

The school, as a multilingual school, provides a positive learning environment for language learners. Therefore, within such a supportive environment learners are encouraged to interact with the language optimally (Yi, 2007). Many researchers believe that interaction can promote second language learning in many ways. Mackey' study (1999, cited in Mitchel et al, 2013) suggests that "taking part in interaction can facilitate second language development". Mackey and Goo (2007, cited in Mitchel et al, 2013) also suggested that engagement in L2 interaction impacts positively on L2 learning. The reason for this is due to learners can get feedback from interacting, in the form of negotiation of meaning, with their teachers and peers (Hadi, 2014). Despite these benefits, we need to consider the quality of the interaction in the sense that we need to vary the activities, expose learners more to the target language and to and have clear and specific objectives in every language interaction.

During oral interaction, learners have the opportunities to gain input (listen to the target language) and produce output or use the language productively. When producing the target language, learners may encounter problems leading them to recognize what they do not know or partially know (Bot et al, 2006, p.168). Swain (1993 cited in Bot et al, 2006, 169) suggests one

of the output functions, that is to push the learners to move from the semantic processing to the syntactic processing. Simply put, producing output allows the learners to move their focus from comprehension to the language production.

Furthermore, it is also worth considering the use of negative evidence (correction). Long's (cited in Mitchel et al, 2013) interaction hypothesis reveals that negative evidence to the structure of the target language contributes to L2 learning. Long believes such a correction can promote "noticing" or learner awareness about the mismatch between features of their own interlanguage productions and the target language form, in the course of communicative interaction including meaning negotiation and repair. Therefore, correction to language features will be done either implicitly or explicitly to learners.

Combination of multiple syllabuses

Three types of syllabus: functional-based, theme-based, task based syllabus, will be combined in that they could meet the goals and objectives of this learner group. Within the syllabus, Goh and Burns' (2012, p.183-188) recommendation regarding lesson sequences is worth considering. As they have suggested, deciding unit of work starting from topics, tasks and text is necessary to sequence lessons in order to meet goals of building learning.

Fluency development through varying activities

To develop learners' fluency in speaking and listening, Nation and Newton (2000, p.9) criteria of fluency development strand will be taken into account. These criteria include such things as: all input/output must be familiar, focus on either sending or receiving a message, motivating learners to work faster and providing them with lots of input or output. Varying the learning activities is important to make learning interesting and engaging. Nation and Newton also suggested some activities for fluency development which include: speed reading, skimming and scanning, repeated reading, etc. Furthermore, as communication becomes the main objective the learners, employing task based learning will be necessary as communicative methodology interpretation is found in it (Goh and Burns, 2012, p.142)

Using emerging technologies to make learning interesting

The idea of varying the learning activities place an important role in creating an interesting L2 learning; however, integrating emerging technologies into speaking and listening activities will be needed to engage learners to richer learning experience. Stanley (2013, p.1) highlights a number of benefits of integrating technologies into L2 learning. First, technology allows learners to access information about the language and at the same time exposed to the target language; it is entertaining. Second, it allows the learners to create community and to communicate and interact with other language users. Third, it can be used for assessment and evaluation. Stanley has suggested some activities for listening with technology use including: search the tube, talk radio listening, recorded stories, etc (p. 81-96). While for speaking, the activities can be spoken journals, speaking pictures, world issues (p.147-168). For this learners group, the internet, camera, recorder and computer and computer will be the main technologies to use.

Assessment and evaluation

Goh and Burns (2012: p.192) highlight the importance of assessing the learners progress in planning any speaking program through formative and summative assessment. In this particular learner group, both type of assessments will be use as they serve different purposes. They also suggest the need of evaluating the whole aspects of course in order to determine its effectiveness and to identify further course modification and development (p.195). Similar to assessment, both formative and summative evaluation will be employed.

Conclusion

There are many aspects to consider before deciding which particular theories to employ for specific learner group, particularly in a multilingual school. Having observed the learners, there are a number of aspects in which they differ. These include their current language skills, their strengths and problems and some affective factors. Teachers' awareness in such issues along with adequate understanding about the learning context is of great importance to be able to identify which approaches, methods or techniques or activities are most relevant to develop their oral communication skills. The learner group in this article does have many opportunities to engage with language as they are pushed to communicate with it on regular basis. However, they still encounter problems like limited vocabularies, collocation, structure, pronunciation and of

course fluency. Therefore, there are a number of theories or issues would be most appropriate to help them solve such difficulties. These include interaction and correction, combination of multiple syllabuses, using emerging technologies interesting learning, fluency development through varying activities, and assessment and evaluation. All these concepts should be employed in order to help the learners to gain fluency and accuracy in spoken English.

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