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Development of Speaking Skills through Activity Based Learning at the Elementary Level

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ARTICLEINFO	ABSTRACT
	Purpose: This paper discusses an effective instructional method called 'activity based learning' that can be used to develop the speaking skills of students in the elementary school level. The present study was conducted to determine the effect of activity based learning on the development of the speaking skills of low and high achievers in a 6th grade class at the elementary school level. **Research Methods:** The research was based on pre-test post-test equivalent group design. A total of 50 male students served as participants in this research.

The participants were selected randomly from two sections and then a pre-test was administered. Based on pre-test scores, the participants were divided equally into experimental and control groups. High and low score achievers in each group were also identified. The experimental group received instruction based on the activity based learning method, and the control group was instructed through the traditional language teaching method. At the end of the experiment, a post-test was administered to measure the development of speaking skills in students. The independent sample t-test was used to test the significance of difference between the mean scores of groups at the 0.05 level. **Implications for Research and Practice**: The findings of the study suggested that activity based learning was an effective way to enhance students' speaking skills since the experimental group post test score was significantly different from the control group post test score. Based on the result of the study, it is recommended that the activity based learning method be used in class to develop and enhance the speaking skills of students. It is also recommended that teachers be provided training to implement the activity based method in language lessons.

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Introduction

Activity Based Learning (henceforth, ABL) is generally defined as 'any instructional method that engages students in the learning process' in the classroom (Prince, 2004, 223). Harfield et al. (2007) indicates that during ABL students are not passive recipients of knowledge; rather, they actively participate in learning experiences. This is so, since ABL is based on the constructivist theory of learning that indicates that 'humans cannot be given information, which they immediately understand and use; instead, humans must construct their own knowledge' based on their previous experiences and usually in collaboration with others (Powell & Kalina 2009, 242).

Research shows that activity based teaching facilitates learning. For instance, Harfield et al.'s (2007) study indicates that activity based teaching results in marked improvement in student engagement in the classroom and in grades in relation to those from the previous class. Besides that, Churchill's (2003) study indicates that ABL could also facilitate development of higher order thinking skills in students.

Some researchers, such as Kolb (1984), point out that demonstrative activity based teaching as compared to conventional ways of teaching, is more suitable for facilitating learning. Domin (2007) also states that teachers could provide successful learning experiences to learners through engaging them in activities.

The study of Zahoor-ul-Haq et al., (2015) explored that students actively participated in the language classroom who were taught through activity based learning method (ABL) because activity based instruction provided students many opportunities to develop their listening skill. Students taught through activity based teaching method outscored students who were taught through traditional language teaching methods in the listening skill on post-test. The low achievers of experimental group showed a significant jump over the low achievers of control group on post-test in listening. The results also proved that high achievers who were taught through activity based teaching method showed better performance in listening than those high achievers who were instructed through conventional/traditional way of language teaching.

Speaking

Speaking is the 'ability to carry out a conversation in the language' (Numan, 1991, 12). Speaking is regarded as a vital language skill (Grainger 2000), since the most important function of a language is 'facilitating communication with others' (Littlewood, 1992, 9). Indeed, the art of speaking is considered 'the single most important' (Numan, 1991, 39) and 'most rewarding' (Haley & Austin, 2004, 20) aspect of language learning.

Learning to speak, whether in a first or other language, necessitates that students develop linguistic and sociolinguistic aptitudes (Mahbub-ul-Alam & Khan, 2014). To elaborate, learning to speak a language requires learners to use accurate grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Moreover, it involves developing knowledge about when and how to communicate (Burns & Seidlhofer, 2002). Since learning to speak is

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challenging, teachers need to carefully select a task to give students speaking practice and should guide the students when and how to perform the task (Mercer, 1998). Moreover, the teacher should not only be encouraging, but also keep in mind that learners learn while making mistakes during an assigned task (Baker & Westrup, 2000).

Speaking activities used during the study:

In this study, a few warm up activities suggested by Holmes (2003) were used with the experimental group to develop and enhance students' speaking skills. Warm up activities help the students get to know each other in a comfortable atmosphere. Warm up activities can be divided into two types (Holmes, 2003). The first type gives students an opportunity to interview each student, without too much teacher supervision. Conducted in pairs, students often find these activities non-threatening since they have only one listener (Klippel, 1984). During the second type of speaking activity the students play games that are fun and rather interesting.

Activity 1: Getting to Know You Interview

In this warm up activity, students are grouped in pairs and each receives a guideline to interview each other in English. The two students in each pair then interview each other in order to fill in the blanks on the guideline. Next, each student introduces his/her partner to the class, in no more than two to three minutes, using the guideline as a memory aid. A guideline might include: Name, date of birth, place of birth, hobbies, education, like/dislikes, favorite book, favorite food, prizes/awards, travel experience,

Activity 2: Simon Says…

This fun game is based on carrying out the actions of simple sentences. In this activity students stand in a circle and one of the nominated students gives commands for the other students to follow. Examples of commands include: Simon says, 'Touch your eyes', Simon says, 'Open your mouth', Simon says, 'Show me your hands'. What students must remember during this activity is that if the command begins with 'Simon says', they must follow the order. If a command does not begin with 'Simon says' students must not carry out the order, or else they will get disqualified and drop out of the circle. Although this game is usually played by 10-16 year olds, it can be played with more mature students, making the commands more demanding, such as Simon says, 'Tell us about your father-in-law's profession'.

Activity 3: It's in the Bag

For this activity, a durable plastic bag that has enough capacity to contain about twenty items is bought. In this bag the teacher puts items such as plastic fruit, balls, a cell phone, toffee, a battery cell, an eraser, a pen, or any other item that is not scary or dangerous. Students are asked to put their hand in the bag, blindly select one item, and then try to describe it to other students by feeling it. They can describe the shape, texture, weight, size, and material of what they have in their hand. The student can keep describing the selected item until the other students guess what it is.

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Activity 4: The One-Minute Game

In this game the class is divided into two teams that compete against each another. The game starts when a member of one team is given an impromptu topic to speak on for one full minute. This member is supposed to speak on the given topic without making any grammatical mistakes, stopping or hesitating, mispronouncing the words, or using inappropriate vocabulary. While the speaker speaks, the members of the opposing team listen carefully and disqualify the speaker if he/she makes any of the previously mentioned mistakes. The student of the opposing team who points out the error is then given a topic to speak on for one minute without making any mistakes. Any speaker who fluently and accurately speaks for one minute scores one point for his/her team.

Holmes (2003) suggests that context appropriate topics could be more engaging and fun. A few suitable topics for a Pakistani classroom could be:

How can the electric power shortage crisis in Pakistan be solved?

If you were elected as the prime minister of Pakistan, what would be the first problem you would solve?

How can tourism in Pakistan be enhanced?

Activity 5: Detective

In this very interesting game, three students who claim to have had the same unusual experience stand at the front of the room. Out of these three students, only one student had the real experience while the other two are imposters. Each member of the class acts as a detective and asks one question from the three students about their experience to catch the two imposters. At the end of the questioning, the class votes on which student they think had the unusual experience. Then the student who had the unusual experience steps forward.

Purpose of the Study

This study investigates the effect of activity based learning on the development of speaking skills of low and high achievers in a 6th grade class at the elementary school level. More specifically, the study tests the following null hypotheses:

Ho1: There is no significant difference between the mean scores of experimental and control groups with respect to achievement in speaking.

Ho2: There is no significant difference between mean scores of high achievers and low achievers of experimental and control groups with respect to achievement in speaking skills.

In a Pakistani context, the development of speaking skills through activity based learning is a new initiative since most language teachers in Pakistani public sector elementary schools use conventional teaching methodologies in their classrooms (Khan, 2011).

Method

Research Design

In line with the purpose of the study a quantitative approach was employed and pretest-posttest equivalent group experimental design was used. The experimental research in language learning is usually 'conducted within a language classroom, which can be viewed as a real-life laboratory' and aims to understand aspects of language learners' learning in a controlled environment (Phakiti, 2014, 2).

Research Sample

A sample of 50 male students was selected randomly from the two sections of class 6 of Government High School Tarkha district Nowshera..For this purpose a teacher-made pre-test was served to the sample. On the basis of students achievements in pre-test scores two equal groups i.e. experimental and control groups were formed. Further, low achieving and high achieving students were also identified in both groups. Those students who achieved who were above the mean scores were named as high achieving students and those who were below the mean were named low achieving students in both experimental and control groups.

Research Instrument

An achievement test developed by the researchers was used to measure to what extent the participants developed their speaking skills. This test was administered on the participants twice, as a pre-test and a post-test. The pre-test was administered to distribute the participants into experimental and control groups. The post-test was administered to the participants at the completion of the study.

A table of specifications was prepared for the purposes of test development. Based on the specifications table, 10 test items related to speaking skills were written for the selected lessons. The qualitative data was converted into quantitative data by giving specific score to the specification table. The draft test was consulted for content validity by an expert panel of academicians who specialized in English language teaching, including the English language and other language experts. Some test items were revised based on their feedback. The reliability of the test was measured by using the split-half (odd-even) technique. For this purpose, the test items were divided into halves, ensuring that each half was matched in terms of item difficulty and content. Each half was marked separately. The reliability was calculated by using the Spearman-Brown formula: Reliability = 2r/1+r, where r = the actual correlation between the halves of the instrument. The alpha reliability coefficient of the test was estimated to be 0.88.

Research Procedure

Two teachers from G.H.S. Tarkha, district Nowshera, who had masters in English from the University of Peshawar, were hired for the study. Both had relatively equal teaching experience and teaching competencies. The teacher who volunteered to teach the experimental group was already trained by the DCTE and KPK in teaching English through activity based learning.

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Lesson plans were prepared in accordance with the activity based learning method for implementation in the experiment group. The four p's(preparation, presentation, practice, and production) lesson plan format was used for designing the lessons. The lesson plans were consulted with the supervisor and other language experts who specialized in activity based learning. Based on their feedback, some of the lesson plans were revised.

To make the lessons relevant and interesting, activities were selected from the British Council's E.T.T.E (English for Teaching, Teaching for English) Project. These activities included Simon Says, Chinese Whispers, Name Revision Ball Game, Action Song (heads, shoulder…), Words, Role Play, and Dialogues. The activities provided in the textbook were also used in the lessons. Since English is taught as a second/foreign language in Pakistan, in the first two lessons are only warm up activities and reconducted to motivate and engage students. Later, other activities are introduced during the lessons. The treatment was done for seven weeks between 1 October 2014 and 20 November 2014. The duration of each lesson was forty minutes.

Students in the control group were taught using the conventional teaching method for seven weeks. For teaching purposes, the teacher used the activities given in the assigned textbook.

The first researcher and other language experts observed the teaching of both the teachers. The views of students on their learning experience were also sought during the lessons.

Data Analysis

Relevant data was analyzed to test the hypothesis. Mean, standard deviation, and difference of means were computed for each group. To measure the significance of the difference between the means of the two groups, a t-test of independent sample was applied. Significance of difference between the mean scores of both the experimental and control groups on the variable of pre-test and post-test scores was tested at a 0.05 level.

Collected data were fed into the ''statistical package for social sciences'' (SPSS) program. Data were analyzed by applying the t-test for independent samples.

Results

The significance of difference between the mean scores of the experimental and control groups were found on the pre-test and post-test by applying the t-test. Obtained results, along with analysis and interpretation, are presented below.

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Table 1

Significance of Difference Between the Mean Scores of the Experimental and Control Groups on Pre-Test with Respect to Achievement in Speaking

Group	N	Mean	SD	t-value Table value	Calculated value
Experimental	25	4.32	3.15	1.68	0.30*
Control	25	4.04	3.45		

*Not Significant   d.f.=48   *Significance level = 0.05*

Table 1 indicates that the calculated result of t was 0.30 and the table value of t was 1.68. Results were tested at 0.05 (level of significance) and the degree of freedom was 48.Hence, the table value of t (1.68) was greater than the t (0.30) obtained value. Thus, Ho1 was accepted because no significant difference between the mean scores was found. In this way, the experimental and control groups were similar with respect to previous knowledge of speaking skills on the pre-test.

Table 2

Significance of Difference Between the Mean Scores of Low Achievers of the Experimental and Control Groups on Pre-Test with Respect to Achievement in Speaking

Group	N	Mean	SD	t-value Table value	Calculated value
Low achievers of the experimental group	14	1.78	0.97	1.703	0.949*
Low achievers of the control group	15	1.5	0.83		

*Not Significant   d.f. = 27 Significance level = 0.05

Table 2 reflects that the obtained result of t was 0.949 and the table value of t was 1.703. Results were tested at 0.05 (level of significance) and degree of freedom was 27. Hence, the table value of t (1.703) was greater than the t (0.949) obtained value. Thus, Ho1 was approved because no significant difference between the mean scores was found. Hence, the low achievers of the experimental and control groups were the same with respect to prior knowledge of speaking skills on the pre-test.

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Table 3

Significance of Difference Between the Mean Scores of High Achievers of The Experimental and Control Groups on Pre-Test with Respect to Achievement in Speaking

Group	N	Mean	SD	t-value	
				Table value	Calculated value
High achievers of the experimental group	11	7.55	1.44	1.729	-0.5*
High achievers of the control group	10	7.9	1.79		
*Not Significant		d.f. =19		Significance level = 0.05	

Table 3 indicates that the obtained result of t was -0.5 and the table value of t was 1.729. Results were tested at 0.05 (level of significance) and degree of freedom was 19.Hence, the table value of t (1.729) was greater than the t (-0.5) calculated value. This is why Ho1 was approved: because no significant difference between the mean score was found. In this way, the high achievers of the experimental and control groups were identical with respect to achievement in speaking skill on pre-test.

Table 4

Significance of Difference Between the Mean Scores of the Experimental and Control Groups On Post-Test with Respect to Achievement in Speaking

Group	N	Mean	SD	t-value	
				Table value	Calculated value
Experimental	25	21.72	4.05	1.68	8.319*
Control	25	10.48	5.40		
* Significant		d.f.=48		Significance level = 0.05	

Table 4 shows that the obtained result of t was 8.319 and the table value of t was 1.68. Results were tested at 0.05 (level of significance) and the degree of freedom was 48.Hence, the table value of t (1.68) was less than the t (8.319) obtained value. This is why Ho2 was discarded: because a significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental and control groups was found. The group taught through activity based learning showed dominance over the control group in the speaking skills on the post-test.

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Table 5

Significance of Difference Between the Mean Scores of The Low Achievers of the Experimental and Control Groups on Post-Test with Respect to Achievement in Speaking

Group	N	Mean	SD	t-value Table value	Calculated value
Low achievers of the experimental group	14	17.92	5.28	1.703	7.992*
Low achievers of the control group	15	6.66	1.34		

* Significant	d.f. = 27	Significance level = 0.05

Table 5 indicates that the obtained result of t was 7.992 and the table value of t was 1.703. Results were tested at 0.05 (level of significance) and the degree of freedom was 27.Hence, the table value of t (1.703) was less than the t (7.992) obtained value. This is why Ho2 was discarded: because a significant difference was found between the mean scores of the low achievers of the experimental and control groups. In this way, the low achievers who were taught through activity based learning showed superiority over the low achievers of the control group with respect to achievement in speaking skills on the post-test.

Table 6

Significance of Difference Between the Mean Scores of High Achiever of the Experimental and Control Groups on Post-Test with Respect to Achievement in Speaking

Group	N	Mean	SD	t-value Table value	Calculated value
High achievers of the experimental group	11	24.72	3.46	1.729	5.383*
High achievers of the control group	10	16.20	3.79		

*Significant	d.f. = 19	Significance level = 0.05

Table 6 shows that the obtained result of t was 5.383 and the table value of t was 1.729. Results were tested at 0.05 (level of significance), while degree of freedom was 19.Hence, the table value of t (1.729) was less than the t (5.383) obtained value. This is why Ho2 was discarded: because a significant difference between the mean scores of high achievers of the experimental and control groups was found. In this way, the low achievers who were taught through activity based learning outscored the low achievers of the control group with respect to achievement in speaking skills on the post-test.

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Discussion and Conclusion

According to the results of the research, there were no significant differences in the pre-test scores of speaking skills between the experiment and control groups. However, the experimental group performed significantly better than the control group on the post-test with respect to achievement in speaking. The difference between the post-test mean scores of both groups was significant at the (0.05) level. Similarly, low achievers and high achievers of the experimental group outscored the control group with respect to achievement in speaking skills on the post-test. Therefore, the null hypothesis was abandoned. It was concluded that activity based learning significantly increased the level of student achievement in speaking skills. The results supported the findings of Bailey (2005) and Songsiri (2007), who stated that speaking ability and self-belief in speaking might be enhanced if a suitable program of study, teaching methods, adequate activities, and resources could be provided to students. The literature also suggests that teachers should conduct a variety of speaking activities in the classroom to enhance their speaking abilities (Zhang, 2009). This study confirms the views of Zahoor-ul-Haq et al. (2015) who were of the opinion that low achievers who had learned through activity based learning outscored control group in the language skills acquistion.

Recommendations

This study concluded that activity based learning was effective in enhancing student speaking skills. Based on the results of the present study, it is recommended that in order to enhance the speaking skills of students, teachers should use the activity based learning method in the classroom. It is also recommended that teachers should be provided training to implement the activity based learning method in language lessons.

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