



International Journal of Educational Methodology

Volume 7, Issue 1, 33 - 51.

ISSN: 2469-9632

<https://www.ijem.com/>

Evaluation of the “Speaking” Component of a Curriculum Applied in a School of Foreign Languages: An Action Research in a State University in Turkey

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Received: June 1, 2020 • Revised: November 10, 2020 • Accepted: January 21, 2021

Abstract: Speaking is considered as a challenging skill to improve as it is a productive one which requires the learners to be unique and creative in the way they express themselves. Therefore, teaching speaking takes the attention of the researchers in the field of English language teaching. Therefore, the way “speaking” was integrated into the curriculum of a School of Foreign Languages in one of the state universities in Istanbul was investigated by the researcher to find out whether the speaking component of the program helped students improve their oral language proficiency and to learn both efficiency and sufficiency of it from the perspectives of the students as well as the instructors in that institution. For this purpose, eight students within the program were taken into five different speaking tests in five different weeks sequentially and were interviewed by the researcher afterwards. Additionally, six students who had taken this program of the school previously and were taking their departmental courses at the time of the study were also interviewed to give them the chance to reflect back on their past experiences as learners who applied the knowledge they had acquired from this school. Six different instructors working in this institution were also interviewed. One of them was also observed in her real class environment. Results showed that the program was found “efficient” in some aspects such as the importance given to “speaking” but there were some points that needed consolidation just like the materials.

Keywords: *Speaking, program evaluation, school of foreign languages, English language teaching.*

To cite this article: Tomak, B. (2021). Evaluation of the “speaking” component of a curriculum applied in a school of foreign languages: An action research in a state university in Turkey. *International Journal of Educational Methodology*, 7(1), 33-51. <https://doi.org/10.12973/ijem.7.1.33>

Introduction

English is a language which is spoken by several countries either as their native tongue or as an official language. Along with this, it is used as a lingua franca by almost all of the countries in the world as a language that maintains the bonds and connections between different nation states because it has become an international/global language (Crystal, 2001; Pennycook, 1995; Phillipson, 1992; Widdowson, 1997). This fact stands out the significance of speaking when two people who are from different nation states come together and need to talk to each other when they have to have perfect speaking skills so as to keep in contact with people from other communities in a global world (Gömleksiz & Özkaya, 2012).

Speaking is one the four skills that is taught in language classes. It is the productive skill along with writing whereas reading and listening are the receptive skills. Byrne (1991) emphasizes the importance of speaking by saying that listening and speaking are the two important skills that are part of our real-life communication. Doğan (2009) confirms that people need to speak properly so as to express themselves, to have a place in the society, to give some information about a specific topic and to share ideas and emotions with others that are part of the community. This shows the importance of speaking a language accurately and fluently whether it is a foreign language or your mother tongue so as to be a human being.

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The Importance of Speaking in English Language Teaching (ELT)

The importance of English has increased a lot as it has become the lingua franca of the world that facilitates communication among different nations which do not use English as their official language. However, when English started to be taught, speaking skill was highly ignored because people gave more importance to the grammatical structure of the language. This was the case everywhere just like the one in Turkish context, as well. Therefore, it was noticed that people taught with the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) were not able to speak but they could read and write. Thus, Hymes (1972) came up with a new term called “communicative competence”, which means the learners need to know the grammatical structure of the language as well as the social knowledge that requires a person to know how and what to say in an appropriate situation. Gumpers (1972) elaborates that a learner must “select, from the totality of grammatically correct expressions available and forms which appropriately reflect the social norms governing behavior in specific encounters” (p. 205). Saville-Troike (1996) explains communicative competence:

Communicative competence extends to both knowledge and expectation of who may or may not speak in certain settings, when to speak and when to remain silent, whom one may speak to, how one may talk to persons of different statuses and roles, what non-verbal behaviors are appropriate in various contexts, what the routines for turn-taking are in conversation, how to ask for and give information, how to request, how to offer or decline assistance or cooperation, how to give commands, how to enforce disciplines, and the like - in short, everything involving the use of language and other communicative dimensions in particular social settings (p. 363).

The term “communicative competence” stresses that learners need more than the grammatical structure of the language if they want to speak the language properly. It is also mentioned by Miller (1999) that a communicatively competent language speaker has to deal with higher-level changes of ideas, meanings, intent in a flexible or adaptive way considering the changing circumstances in the context of speech. This shows that teaching speaking is not as easy as one has ever thought about because teaching the grammatical structure of the language does not guarantee a perfect and fluent speech. Therefore, Lightbown and Spada (2006) suggest “speaking in the target language requires more than one mental task at one time like choosing words, pronouncing them, and stringing them together with the appropriate grammatical markers” (p. 39). Therefore, speaking skill is the most difficult one to teach and evaluate at the same time (Altıncı, 2010; Ertürk, 2006; Knight, 1992) and this might be due to the fact that a perfect speaking skill requires a person to be competent at pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and sociolinguistics (Cunningham-Florez, 1999).

Sociolinguistics aspects of the language that is taught should be paid attention while a foreign language is taught. Hedge (2008) warns that learners need to know the appropriate social conventions in order for communication to be flawless. This means that learners should be familiar with the cultural aspects of the language that they want to speak because culture is part of the language and language represents culture so culture is also one of the sociolinguistics aspects of language teaching. Unless learners know anything about the culture of the language, they might be misunderstood while speaking. In this respect, Taylor (1986) and Taylor and Clarke (1994) proposed a cultural framework displaying the impact of culture on communication disorders in terms of four central topics associated with the nature, causes, assessment and treatment of communication disorders. These topics include developmental issues (such as adult-child interaction within culture, and indigenous cognitive acquisition), precursors of communication pathology (such as cultural definitions of normal and pathological interaction), assessment (i.e. culturally valid assessment and diagnosis of communication), and diagnosis and treatment (i.e. application of culturally valid treatment procedures).

These trends in the field of ELT have brought changes in the teaching methodology that teachers apply in the class because the old-fashioned methods such as GTM started not to meet the needs of the learners in term of speaking. Thus, with the advent of term “communicative competence” by Hymes (1972), people have become more conscious of the other elements of the language that is to be learned so as to be competent speakers of the language. Consequently, an approach that gives more importance to speaking skills has come out: The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). This approach is based on communicative competence described as the knowledge needed to be able to communicate effectively and efficiently (Thornbury, 2006). CLT’s main objective is to apply the theoretical perspective of Communicative Approach (CA) by making communicative competence as the goal of language teaching and by acknowledging the interdependence of language and communication (Larsen-Freeman, 2008). This has resulted in more speaking activities in the language classes.

With the advent of the CLT, speaking has been given more importance. Hence, language teaching methodologies and teachers have started to be more responsible for the process because they are expected to deal with class activities more by engaging the students with more practice and by providing them more autonomy. Jones (2004) states that “the instructor should be the facilitator in the classroom to create an unthreatening environment” (p.34) because students need such a relaxing atmosphere in the class to have the courage to speak a foreign language. Teachers have a lot more responsibilities while teaching speaking in the class. Hence, Wilson (1997) articulates that teachers should be good role models in terms of speaking in the class and they can ask questions that make them think first and then speak on that issue and they should guide their students in an appropriate way while they are speaking.

As Turkey is an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context, which means students do not have the chance to be exposed to English when they are out of the class, teachers should always make their students engaged with speaking

activities so as for them to improve their skill even if they are all alone at home because it is known that speaking is a productive skill and it might not improve without practice and practice makes it perfect. Davies and Pearse (2000) emphasize that “real success in English teaching and learning is when the learners can actually communicate in English inside and outside the classroom” (p. 99). Thus, teachers should make sure that their students are doing their best while they are out of the teaching context and this is actually possible with the help of technology. Thus, technology is a great asset to the improvement of speaking skill in this concept. However, the willingness of the students to cooperate with their teachers to use technology to improve their speaking skills. Students must have the awareness and enthusiasm to use the technology and the Internet, both of which are highly used in this global world by people who want to keep in contact with each other even though they are in long distances. Khan and Ali (2010) explain the importance of willingness of students in language teaching process by saying:

The students’ perspective is very much important because the modern age is the age of media, propaganda and mass communication. Every person desirous to reap the full benefits of modern education, library use, research knowledge, science, commerce and trade etc. know how should have a sound knowledge of English language and good communication skills. The person who has not good communication skills will suffer badly in this era of competition in comparison to the person who has good communication skills and can soon catch the eyes of an authority to award him a higher position or responsibility in order to increase his self-esteem and reputation (p.3576).

It can be understood from this quote that the importance of being a competent speaker must be noticed by the learners who must comply with the changing trends of both society and era in which they live.

The purpose of the study

The importance of speaking is both mentioned and emphasized by the documents and laws related to the Ministry of Education (MoE) in Turkish context. According to MoE (2006) documents, students are expected to speak a foreign language fluently and they will be able to have a communication effectively with foreign people by using the structure and the vocabulary of the language appropriately. It is also stated in this document that the MoE is responsible for the monitoring of foreign language education in primary, secondary and high schools whereas the Higher Education Council (HEC) is responsible for the foreign language teaching in the universities which have the freedom to create and apply their own curriculums so there is not a certain standardization in all institutions in higher education. Therefore, their efficiency must be monitored and checked with such academic studies. This situation made it necessary for the researcher to do an action research in the institution where he was working as one of the academics applying the curriculum. What is more, most of the studies in the field tries to evaluate the way speaking skill is taught with a certain methodology just like the one conducted recently by Darmuki et al. (2018) who confirmed the efficiency of the “cooperative” approach to teach speaking. Similarly, the study conducted in higher education level in Indonesia emphasized the importance of several components that should be kept in mind in terms of evaluation of the speaking skill taking the significance of peer-evaluation (Usman et al., 2018). However, there are no such studies that look for the efficiency of a curriculum applied in a language school in terms of the “speaking”. Thus, what made this study different from others was that it investigated the “speaking” component of a curriculum applied in a language school in tertiary level in Turkey, which is an EFL context. Here are the research questions of this study:

- a) To what extent does speaking component of the curriculum help students improve their oral language proficiency?
- b) What are the perceptions of the instructors and students in terms of “speaking” component of the curriculum?
- c) What are the objectives of the speaking component of the curriculum applied in this school? Do they match with the expectations and needs of the students?
- d) Do the materials meet the needs of the students in terms of speaking?
- e) Does the school apply the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) standards in terms of “speaking”?

Description of the Program and the Parameters (CEFR)

The research questions and the aim of the study will make sense when the contextual clues and the parameters used are explained in detail. The study was carried out in the School of Foreign Languages in one of most prestigious state universities in Istanbul in Turkey. The reason why this institution had been chosen for this study was that it had been applying a new curriculum for the last five years. Beforehand, they used to have grammar-based teaching methods because the students were evaluated on their grammar knowledge and students were expected to solve reading questions on a multiple-choice final exam. This part of the final constituted 50 % of the exam and 30 % of the final exam was allocated for writing while 20 % of it was given to test listening skills of the students. Thus, it can be understood from the ratios that the school used to implement a traditional way of teaching with no emphasis on speaking skill in the past. However, five years ago, they abandoned testing grammar all together and they started to teach four skills of the language in an integrated way in the institution. Accordingly, students started to be tested on four skills (reading,

writing, listening and speaking) and the ratio of each skill in the exam was equal (25%), which showed that the school started to pay attention to productive skills (writing & speaking) and receptive skills (reading & listening) equally. This gave a rise in the importance of speaking which started to be both tested and taught in the curriculum.

With the advent of this new implementation in the curriculum of the school, it applied for accreditation and it was accredited by Pearson two years ago with the help of the changing trends in education. Therefore, the school had started to apply the CEFR to standardize the education and the assessment and to make the quality much better.

Council of Europe (2001) has brought language teaching standardization. This framework has identified the different language learner profiles with different levels starting from A1 till the C2 level. These categories show the language proficiencies of the learners and they may also determine the objectives and the expectations from the learners from different learner types. These objectives are also categorized and written for four different skills. Thus, this school had organized workshops that introduced “CEFR” to its instructors. Table 1 underneath shows the categorization of learners in terms of their language proficiency in general.

Table 1. Global scale descriptors for CEFR levels (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 24)

Proficient User	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarize information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognize implicit meaning. Can express him/ herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organizational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
Independent User	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialization. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics, which are familiar, or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
Basic User	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/ herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/ she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

Table 1 shows the categorization of CEFR in terms language proficiency of the learners in general but as this study aimed at the evaluation of the speaking component of the curriculum applied in this school, the criteria of CEFR for speaking skill in particular was required. Thus, Table 2 demonstrates the speaking part of this scale.

Table 2. Qualitative aspects of spoken language use

	RANGE	ACCURACY	FLUENCY	INTERACTION	COHERENCE
C2	Shows great flexibility reformulating ideas in differing linguistic forms to convey finer shades of meaning precisely, to give emphasis, to differentiate and to eliminate ambiguity. Also has a good command of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms.	Maintains consistent grammatical control of complex language, even while attention is otherwise engaged (e.g. in forward planning, in monitoring others' reactions).	Can express him/herself spontaneously at length with a natural colloquial flow, avoiding or backtracking around any difficulty so smoothly that the interlocutor is hardly aware of it.	Can interact with ease and skill, picking up and using non-verbal and international cues apparently effortlessly. Can interweave his/her contribution into the joint discourse with fully natural turn taking, referencing, allusion making etc.	Can create coherent and cohesive discourse making full and appropriate use of a variety of organizational patterns and a wide range of connectors and other cohesive devices.
C1	Has a good command of a broad range of language allowing him/her to select a formulation to express him/herself clearly in an appropriate style on a wide range of general, academic, professional or leisure topics without having to restrict what he/she wants to say.	Consistently maintains a high degree of grammatical accuracy; errors are rare, difficult to spot and generally corrected when they do occur.	Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously, almost effortlessly. Only a conceptually difficult subject can hinder a natural, smooth flow of language.	Can select a suitable phrase from a readily available range of discourse functions to preface his remarks in order to get or to keep the floor and to relate his/her own contributions skillfully to those of other speakers.	Can produce clear, smoothly flowing, well-structured speech, showing controlled use of organizational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
B2	Has a sufficient range of language to be able to give clear descriptions, express viewpoints on most general topics, without much conspicuous searching for words, using some complex sentence forms to do so.	Shows a relatively high degree of grammatical control. Does not make errors which cause misunderstanding, and can correct most of his/her mistakes.	Can produce stretches of language with a fairly even tempo; although he/she can be hesitant as he or she searches for patterns and expressions, there are few noticeably long pauses.	Can initiate discourse, take his/her turn when appropriate and end conversation when he/she needs to, though he/she may not always do this elegantly. Can help the discussion along on familiar ground confirming comprehension, inviting others in, etc.	Can use a limited number of cohesive devices to link his/her utterances into clear, coherent discourse, though there may be some "jumpiness" in a long contribution.
B1	Has enough language to get by, with sufficient vocabulary to express him/herself with some hesitation and circumlocutions on topics such as family, hobbies and interests, work, travel, and current events.	Uses reasonably accurately a repertoire of frequently used "routines" and patterns associated with more predictable situations.	Can keep going comprehensibly, even though pausing for grammatical and lexical planning and repair is very evident, especially in longer stretches of free production.	Can initiate, maintain and close simple face-to-face conversation on topics that are familiar or of personal interest. Can repeat back part of what someone has said to confirm mutual understanding.	Can link a series of shorter, discrete simple elements into a connected, linear sequence of points.
A2	Uses basic sentence patterns with memorized phrases, groups of a few words and formulae in order to communicate limited information in simple everyday situations.	Uses some simple structures correctly, but still systematically makes basic mistakes.	Can make him/herself understood in very short utterances, even though pauses, false starts and reformulation are very evident.	Can answer questions and respond to simple statements. Can indicate when he/she is following but is rarely able to understand enough to keep conversation going of his/her own accord.	Can link groups of words with simple connectors like "and", "but" and "because".
A1	Has a very basic repertoire of words and simple phrases related to personal details and particular concrete situations.	Shows only limited control of a few simple grammatical structures and sentence patterns in a memorized repertoire.	Can manage very short, isolated, mainly pre-packaged utterances, with much pausing to search for expressions, to articulate less familiar words, and to repair communication.	Can ask and answer questions about personal details. Can interact in a simple way but communication is totally dependent on repetition, rephrasing and repair.	Can link words or groups of words with very basic linear connectors like "and" or "then".

Table 2 explicitly displays the expectations from the learners of English in terms of their speaking skill according to their language proficiency. However, as this study was conducted with learners of English who started the program two months ago with A1 level, the expectations from them as for their speaking skill was different. Table 3 underneath shows the speaking criteria applied in this institution in the oral exams for this learner profile.

Table 3. Basic user speaking exam rubric

	TASK ACHIEVEMENT (INTERACTION)	GRAMMATICAL RANGE&ACCURACY	LEXICAL RANGE&ACCURACY	FLUENCY& INTELLIGIBILITY	COHERENCE
5	Fully understands and responds to the task / question Can ask and answer questions and respond to simple statements effectively	A wide variety of structures suitable to the task and level* are used Almost all basic structures are correct Few errors occur	Good range of vocabulary is used (suitable to the task and level*) Most vocabulary items are used in the right form and context	Most utterances are easily understandable There is a flow of speech with few unnatural pauses Utterances are rarely left unfinished or entirely abandoned	Can link groups of words with simple connectors like 'and', 'but', 'because' and 'then' effectively
4	Understands and responds to the task / question almost fully Can ask and answer questions and respond to simple statements with ease	A variety of structures suitable to the task and level* are used Most basic structures are correct Some errors occur	Reasonable range of vocabulary is used (suitable to the task and level*) Vocabulary items are often used in the right form and context	Most utterances are understandable There is a flow of speech with some unnatural pauses Utterances are rarely left unfinished or entirely abandoned	Can link groups of words with simple connectors like 'and', 'but', and 'then' effectively
3	Is able to understand and respond to the task / question Sometimes needs repetition or paraphrasing Can ask and answer questions and respond to simple statements	A fairly limited variety of structures suitable to the task and level* are used Some basic structures are incorrect Errors occur systematically	Slightly limited range of vocabulary is used (suitable to the task and level*) Vocabulary items are sometimes used in the wrong form and context	Some utterances are understandable There is a flow of speech with frequent unnatural pauses Utterances are sometimes left unfinished or entirely abandoned	Can link groups of words with simple connectors like 'and' and 'then' effectively
2	Partly understands the task / question Frequently needs repetition or paraphrasing Cannot ask and answer questions and respond to simple statements with ease	A limited variety of structures suitable to the task and level* are used There are frequent inaccuracies in basic structures Errors occur frequently	Limited range of vocabulary is used (suitable to the task and level*) Vocabulary items are frequently used in the wrong form and context	Few utterances are understandable There is a flow of speech with too long unnatural pauses Utterances are often left unfinished or entirely abandoned	Can link groups of words with only 'and' effectively
1	Does not understand the task / question Cannot respond to the task/question even after repetition and/or paraphrasing Cannot ask and answer questions and respond to simple statements at all	A very limited variety of structures suitable to the task and level* are used There are many inaccuracies in basic structures Errors hinder communication	Extremely limited range of vocabulary is used (suitable to the task and level*) Most vocabulary items are used in the wrong form and context	Utterances are often not understandable There is no flow of speech as there are long silences Utterances are most always left unfinished and abandoned	Cannot use any simple connectors effectively

NOT ENOUGH TO EVALUATE 1-4 points /The student draws a blank even after repetition or paraphrasing/ Not even one word answers

This was the rubric used as an assessment tool as for the learners' speaking performance in the mid-term exams of this school in the fall semester. These parameters were significant to better understand the study group and the design of this research.

Methodology

Research Design

This study was an action research because the researcher was the one who designed this research in his own teaching context as Burns (2010) defines "action research" as "a self-reflective, critical, and systematic approach to exploring your own teaching contexts" (p. 2). This means that "a teacher becomes an 'investigator' or 'explorer' of his or her

personal teaching context, while at the same time being one of the participants in it" (p.2). Therefore, the researcher acted as an "on-site" observer in the research context in which he worked as one of the academics who was totally familiar with the certain dynamics of the institution. Kemmis and McTaggart (1992) also justify that an action research must be "participatory". This is because the problems of a certain context can be better known by someone who is part of the educational institution. Thus, considering all the elements that should be taken into account, Zuber-Skerritt (1996b) defines an "action research" as:

critical (and self-critical) collaborative inquiry by reflective practitioners being accountable and making results of their enquiry public self-evaluating their practice and engaged in participatory problem-solving and continuing professional development (p.85).

Though this process was planned by the researcher alone, he cooperated with his colleagues and students as well as the previous students of the institution to offer different perspectives to the evaluation.

The research design was organized according to the principles of an action research design put forward by Zuber-Skerritt (1996a):

1. strategic planning;
2. action, i.e. implementing the plan;
3. observation, evaluation and self-evaluation;
4. critical and self-critical reflection on the results of points 1-3 and making decisions for the next cycle of action research (p.3).

First of all, the researcher made a plan for his action research because he thought that the speaking part of the curriculum had to be evaluated. After this "*strategic planning*", he started to take an "*action*". In this phase of the research, he started to collect the data. After the "*implementation of the plan*" which was the second stage of the research, it was time for "*observation, evaluation and self-evaluation*", all of which were also achieved by the on-site researcher by the analysis of the data. The final stage of the research was "*reflection*", which was conducted by the researcher with the participants via post-interviews.

Study Group

This study was conducted in the School of a Foreign Languages in one of the most prestigious state universities in Istanbul in Turkey. The purpose of the school was to prepare the students for their academic studies in their faculties with English-medium-instruction. Therefore, the learners had to improve their academic skills in terms of writing, speaking, listening, and reading. If the students pass the final proficiency test, they will have the eligibility to start taking their departmental courses. Speaking was one of the skills that they needed to improve as they would be tested on it.

This study was conducted with three different groups of participants. Firstly, the on-site researcher determined the participant students in his class with their speaking performances in their mid-term exam. The ones who got between 10 and 18 out of 25 from the oral exam in the mid-term were chosen as the potential participants of the study. 8 students showed enthusiasm to take part in the study and they were categorized as "current students". Additionally, 6 different students in the Engineering Faculty in which English-medium-instruction was provided were selected as they had been taught in the program of this School of Foreign Languages in the previous year so that they could reflect on their past experiences with the speaking component of the curriculum besides their current status as a freshman who would academically need to speak in the courses that they took in their faculties. They were categorized as "last year students". Here is the table that shows the profile of the student participants.

Table 4. Demographic information of student participants

Codes	Category	Department	Age	Language Proficiency	High School Graduation
CS1	Prep student	Public Relations	18	A2	Anatolian High School
CS2	Prep student	Theology	18	A2	Vocational High School
CS3	Prep student	Tourism and Hotel Management	18	A2	Vocational High School
CS4	Prep Student	Mechanical Engineer	20	A2	Vocational High School
CS5	Prep Student	Environmental Engineer	18	A2	Anatolian High School
CS6	Prep Student	Computer Engineer	21	A2	Vocational High School
CS7	Prep Student	Economics	19	A2	Anatolian High School
CS8	Prep Student	Chemistry	19	A2	Anatolian High School
LYS1	Freshman	Metallurgy and Material Engineering	19	B2	Anatolian High School
LYS2	Freshman	Electric and Electronic Engineering	20	B2	Science High School
LYS3	Freshman	Bioengineering	20	B2	Anatolian High School
LYS4	Freshman	Metallurgy and Material Engineering	21	B2	Anatolian High School
LYS5	Freshman	Chemistry Engineering	20	B2	Anatolian High School
LYS6	Freshman	Metallurgy and Material Engineering	20	C1	Anatolian High School

It can be understood from Table 4 that all students attending the prep school at the time of study were called as “current students” as they were taught by the researcher whereas the freshmen were coded as “last year students” as they had been taught one year before the study was conducted. Also, the departments of the “current students” showed a variety while all the last year students were enrolled in the Engineering Faculty. High school graduations of the current students were also versatile as they were the graduates of different high school types whereas the last year students graduated from Anatolian High Schools except from LYS2 who was a graduate of a Science High School. All the current students had an A2 level of language proficiency as it took two months to reach them to A2 level after they had started the program with A1 level. Therefore, the rubric shown in Table 3 was used to test their performance in accordance with CEFR standards. However, the language proficiency of the last year students was B2 apart from LYS6 whose English level was a bit higher than her peers. Otherwise, they would not pass the final proficiency test of the school and start taking their departmental courses because what was required from the prep school students was to reach to B2 level at the end of the academic year to start taking their departmental courses.

Along with the student participants, instructors working in the institution where this study was conducted were also interviewed as they were the ones who were applying the speaking component of the curriculum for several years. Here is the table that shows the profile of the participant instructors.

Table 5. Demographic information of participant instructors

Codes	Experience of the instructor	Graduation	Degree that s/he holds
I1	8	English Language Teaching (ELT)	BA
I2	16	English Language and Literature (ELIT)	BA
I3	6	English Language and Literature (ELIT)	BA
I4	12	English Language and Literature (ELIT)	MA
I5	15	English Language Teaching (ELT)	BA
I6	6	English Language and Literature (ELIT)	BA

It can be understood from Table 5 that all of the participant instructors were experienced enough to be claimed that they had the sufficient familiarity with the teaching context and pedagogy. However, only two of them (I1 and I5) were the graduates of ELT departments. The rest graduated from English Language and Literature departments but I4 who was the one and only participant instructor to hold her master’s degree on “educational sciences”. Thus, she also had the theoretical background of language teaching from her master studies but the rest of the participants who were the graduates of ELIT departments familiarized themselves with teaching pedagogy by means of their own experiences.

The researcher tried to include both the students for whom the curriculum was set and the instructors who were applying it as Cohen et al. (2007) confirm that an action research “involves preliminary discussion and negotiations among the interested parties” because they “may draw upon their expertise to bring the problem more into focus, possibly determining causal factors or recommending alternative lines of approach to established ones” (p. 307).

Data Collection Tools

Four different data collection tools were used for the purpose of this action research.

The Interviews: The interviews were held with both students and instructors but they were arranged with three different groups. All the interviews were audio recorded by the researcher with the permission of the participants so that they could be transcribed for the later analysis. The duration of the interviews depended on the interviewee whose precious opinions were valued to a great extent. Here is the table that shows the duration of the interviews.

Table 6. Duration of the interviews with the participants (Minutes. Seconds)

The interviewee	The duration of the interview
LYS1	09.12
LYS2	10.40
LYS3	13.50
LYS4	12.22
LYS5	15.51
LYS6	10.15
I1	16.17
I2	16.23
I3	14.40
I4	18.21
I5	11.24
I6	30.08
CS1	07.50
CS2	12.04
CS3	10.48
CS4	14.05
CS5	08.09
CS6	12.45
CS7	08.48
CS8	11.36

From Table 6, it can be understood that the interviews conducted with student participants took between 10-15 minutes in average whereas the ones with the instructors took between 20-30 minutes in average per person.

The interview questions were written by the researcher considering the research questions mentioned previously in this paper. What is more, the researcher got an expert view before the use of the questions in the interviews from another academic working in the institution where this study was conducted as she was thought to be familiar with the contextual clues. Thus, he made some minor changes in the interview questions taking the expert views of the colleague who wanted to contribute to both the reliability and validity of the study. Wasser and Bresler (1996) define this as “a process when the researchers bring together their different kinds of knowledge, experience, and beliefs to forge new meanings throughout the inquiry in which they are engaged” (p. 13). The interview questions were semi-structured because Gall et al. (2003) think that “in qualitative research, the interview format is not tightly structured because the researcher’s target is to make respondents feel free to express their view of a phenomenon in their own terms” (p. 239).

The practice speaking exams: These were the tests applied by the researcher to the current students of the prep school at the time of the study in the researcher’s own class. They were evaluated both by the researcher in the class and another instructor with the help of the rubric (Table 3) used for the oral exams applied in that institution. Thus, these practice speaking exams were recorded so that another instructor who evaluated the speaking performance of these students with the researcher in the speaking part of the mid-term exam could also assess their skill to increase the rater’s reliability.

The practice exam questions were taken from the book that was being covered at school at the time of study. Thus, students were not asked something with which that they were unfamiliar during these exams. Therefore, they knew what might be asked because they knew the topics for which they were responsible. The students were taken with pairs. In the first part of the exam they were asked questions by the researcher as an assessor and they replied to the questions asked. In the second part of the exam, the students were made to have a conversation with their partner with the help of the tasks given to them. The topics were chosen from the ones covered in the book. These tests were organized to monitor the development of the students in terms of their speaking skills and to find out the efficiency of the speaking component of the curriculum, as well.

These practice tests were held once in every week and this meant that each participant took a mock-speaking exam 5 times in total during the five weeks. Therefore, the researcher allocated 2 lesson hours for each week for the speaking practice tests with these participant students so as to examine whether they would gradually improve their speaking skills or not. These speaking exam practice tests were conducted in the same way as the real mid-term and final exams

were conducted and student participants were evaluated for each of their performances in accordance with the criteria formed by the institution considering the CEFR standards in Table 3. Therefore, students were evaluated under four different aspects of linguistic competence in their speaking exams: task achievement (interaction), grammatical range & accuracy, lexical range & accuracy, fluency & intelligibility and coherence. Each criterion was evaluated over 5 points and the total point that they could get utmost was 25.

Observation protocol: This was used for the triangulation purposes as the researcher observed the lesson of one of the participant instructors (I4) twice so that he could understand whether there was an overlap between what she said theoretically and what she did in her real class in practice. The researcher used an observation protocol designed by Charles Darwin University, School of Education in Australia (2019). This data collection tool was found suitable for the purpose of the study because it gave the researcher the chance to record the time of the moment that was specifically related to the purpose of the study, context, the teacher behavior and the responses of the students in accordance with the instructional unit as well as the reason of that specific case in the same row.

The mid-term results: The first mid-term results of the academic term were collected by the researcher to determine the participant students who were going to be tested in terms of their speaking skills. Thus, the results that belonged to the speaking part of the mid-term exam were the main determinants of the participant students in the prep school. Therefore, the results were analyzed and 8 students were selected from 20 students. What was important was that these 20 students were evaluated by two instructors in the mid-term exam to increase the raters' reliability. The average grade that consisted of the two different scores given by two different instructors was the final score of the students. Actually; so as to avoid the highly different scores given by different instructors, the institution organized workshops presenting the "CEFR" standards and criteria composed by the testing office of this institution.

The ones who got between 10 and 18 out of 25 from the speaking part of the mid-term exam were chosen as the participants of the study because these students were examined in the format of oral exam each week to monitor their improvement as a result of the instruction provided at the school. Otherwise, the ones whose scores were over 19 would not reflect the improvement of their skills or the efficiency of the curriculum as those students were already successful in speaking. Certainly, participants were asked whether they were willing to take part in this research and all of them agreed to be a part of this study.

Data Collection

The data were collected qualitatively for the purpose of this study with the aid of the data collection tools explained in detail previously. The data collection started two months after the start of the academic year in the fall semester because the researcher thought it would be appropriate to wait for the students in his class to get accustomed to the system of the school and to familiarize themselves with the different components of the curriculum as well as the speaking part of it. Then, these 20 students took their first mid-term exam after two months. The speaking skill evaluation in the speaking part of the mid-term exam was made by the researcher himself and another instructor for the raters' reliability. The average grade that consisted of the two different scores given by two different instructors was the final score of the students. The rubric in Table 3 was used for the evaluation, which meant that they were evaluated over 25. After the exam, the researcher who was one of the assessors eliminated the students who took 19 and over out of 25 because they were considered as the most successful students who would not make it possible for the researcher to monitor their improvement. Among the ones who got between 10 and 18, 8 different students were chosen getting their consent to take part in this study. These students were taken to speaking practice test once in every week in the following five weeks so that their performance and the efficiency of the curriculum could be evaluated. Meanwhile, students from the previous academic year who were taking their departmental courses in their first year of their majors were interviewed along with the instructors who were applying the speaking component of the curriculum in the school where this research was done. Six different instructors were interviewed about the efficiency of the speaking component of the curriculum and they were asked about their own implementations in their classes. One of the participant instructors was also observed in her own class twice with the help of the observation protocol for the triangulation purposes to see whether there was a match between what she said and what she did. After the five weeks during which the practice speaking exams were held with the eight current students in the class of the researcher, these participant students were also interviewed about the efficiency of the curriculum. Thus, it can be understood that the interviews and the practice speaking exams were the two main data collection tools for the purpose of this study while the mid-term exam results and the observation protocol were the secondary tools to collect data.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the all the data was made in accordance with the research questions. As this was an action research in which qualitative data collection tools were predominantly used except from the mid-term exam results and practice speaking exams, Cohen et al. (2007) state that "analysis here is almost inevitably interpretive" (p.469). Thus, all the qualitative data collected for the purpose of this study via interviews and observation protocol were analyzed "in order to find constructs, themes, and patterns that can be used to describe and explain the phenomenon being studied" (Gall

et al., 2003, p. 453). In order to achieve this, the field notes in the observation protocol and the recordings of interviews were fully transcribed by the researcher. After the transcriptions of the interviews, the data were firstly classified and categorized so that the researcher could put transcriptions into themes and combinations of categories (Krippendorp, 2004). From these categories which are defined as “the main groupings of constructs or key features of the text, showing links between units of analysis” (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 478); certain codes, which define “the smallest element of material that can be analyzed” (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 477), were all related to the research questions. The codes, found by the researcher from the data of the study, were descriptive and included “situation codes”, which are perspectives of different subjects; ways of thinking about the implementations according to Bogdan and Biklen (1992). With the “codes” available and thematically categorized under the related research question, the data were ready for analysis.

Some of the quotes from the transcriptions of the interviews were also given in the results section as Gall et al. (2003) claim that “direct quotes of the remarks by the case study participants were particularly effective because they clarify the emic perspective, that is, the meaning of the phenomenon from the point of view of the participants” (p. 469). These quotes of the participant students and instructors clarified the case.

The analysis of results of the practice speaking exams arranged by the researcher was also done to determine whether there was an improvement in the speaking skills of the students on whom the speaking component of the curriculum was being applied. With this, the performance of the students as well as the evaluation of the speaking part of the curriculum were both assessed and the scores participant students got from the exams were considered as an indicator of the efficiency of the curriculum.

As this is a contextual case study whose results cannot be generalized for the other contexts, the codes created from the interviews, field notes in the observation protocol, and the practice speaking exam results were all related to the research questions of the study. Therefore, the results were shared in the following considering the research questions of this study.

Findings / Results

To what extent does speaking component of the curriculum help students improve their oral language proficiency?

The scores of the practice speaking exams that the current students took every week during the five weeks when the data were collected showed that speaking skills of the students improved compared to their mid-term results. Table 7 shows the scores that students got from the mid-term and the scores that they got from the practice speaking exams that they took every week throughout the five weeks.

Table 7. The scores of the current students from the mid-term and practice tests

The codes of the students	Mid-term	Practice_T1	Practice_T2	Practice_T3	Practice_T4	PracticeT5
CS1	15	15	18	15	19	19
CS2	15	17	12	20	15	13
CS3	14	20	20	19	18	15
CS4	18	20	24	23	18	20
CS5	10	14	18	18	20	20
CS6	10	13	10	15	13	17
CS7	13	18	18	21	11	16
CS8	15	19	18	19	11	21

It can be understood from Table 7 that there were some fluctuations in the scores that students got but there was generally an increase in the scores that they got from the practice speaking exams with one or two exceptions, which stemmed from the high anxiety they might have felt during these speaking exams. It was also stated by the students that they had high anxiety during these practice speaking exams. Thus, the gradual increases in the grades showed that the practice speaking tests were highly beneficial for these students and they improved their speaking skills quite a lot.

When students were asked in the interviews about their deficiencies that prevented them from speaking fluently, both the current students and the last year students stated that they lacked sufficient vocabulary to express themselves. The current students said that they wanted to express themselves with a wide range of vocabulary but they could not do it and they tried to explain themselves with simple words and this led them to repetition over and over. All of the current students stated that this deficiency stemmed from the fact that they did not study much whereas the last year students said that they were not exposed to such structures and phrases that they might need to express themselves fluently any more in the department so they added that they started to forget most of the structures and phases that they learned last year just because of the lack of practice. CS5 mentioned the importance of “word formation” exercises which might enrich their vocabulary knowledge. CS4 talked about a different issue that led to his deficiency in speaking:

"I cannot think in English. I try to think in my native tongue and then I try to translate what I think in Turkish into English. As these two languages are completely different, I come up with irrational sentences. To sort this problem out, I have to watch British or American channels when I go home so as to make myself familiarize with the structure of the language but I don't do it, unfortunately."

CS4 put a stress on the importance of "thinking in L2", which was a major problem for them. LYS2 and LYS4 stated that they were not competent enough in the proper pronunciation of the language and this prevented them from speaking properly. They also added that this should be one of the crucial elements of the speaking in the curriculum.

Instructors were also asked whether they could observe any improvement in the speaking performances of the students. All of them agreed on the fact that some of their students improved a lot but they mentioned two reasons for it: motivation and grammar. All of the teachers apart from I2 talked about the importance of grammar. They said that with the help of the new grammar structures that had been taught to them they could express themselves better but there were still some students who were confused with more complicated grammar topics and could not make proper sentences in speaking. I2 stated the importance of motivation:

"The improvement in the speaking ability of the students highly depends on the students' motivation level. The more motivated a student is, the more successful s/he will be in speaking as well because I do my best and show everything that they need so as to speak well in accordance with their own level, there are still some students who cannot do it because they consider speaking as a burden in class activities. However, the ones who are more enthusiastic to speak in the class can do much better the others."

The deficiency of the students in terms of speaking was attributed to different factors by the instructors and students themselves.

What are the perceptions of the instructors and students in terms of "speaking" component of the curriculum?

When current students were asked about their expectations from speaking classes, CS1, CS2, and CS8 stated that as it was a compulsory part of the curriculum, this would make them feel the necessity to study speaking. CS2 stated:

"Speaking is not evaluated in other Schools of Foreign Languages as far as I know from my friends and this seems to be scary at the very first glance but this is for the benefit of us because we do our best to improve our speaking because we know that we will be evaluated. This will determine whether we can pass or fail."

CS3, CS4, CS5, CS6, CS7 all articulated that all they wanted to have after the curriculum was covered was that they could speak fluently and express themselves.

Last year students were also asked about their impressions about the speaking component of the curriculum and whether it met their demands. All of them said that it satisfied their needs because they did not expect much from it at the very beginning as LYS1, LYS3, LYS6 stated.

All of the current students except from CS3 who wanted speaking classes to improve herself in her major wanted to improve their daily speech in speaking classes. They said they were expecting to express themselves and their needs in daily life when they completed the curriculum.

Last year students were also asked what the aim of the speaking part of the curriculum was. All of them answered that the aim was to make them fluent in expressing themselves in daily language as well as the necessities that they needed when they were in the department such as asking questions to the lecturer who was giving his/her lecture in English and presenting a project. LYS4 stated the aim of the program was:

"... to make ourselves speak the daily language to express what we want and need in our life to survive in a foreign country where English is used either as an official language or a mother tongue. Thus, we dealt with daily topics in the first term but we started to talk academic subjects in the second term as our linguistic competence improved. However, if you would like me to give a ratio, the curriculum focused on daily speech with a ratio of 70 % and on academic speech with a percentage of 30 %."

This quotation also showed that the curriculum included the daily topics in the first term and the academic topics in the second term when the linguistic competence of the students improved compared to the previous term. LYS5 and LYS6 also stated that the aim of the speaking part of the curriculum was to make students gain the self-confidence that they needed to speak a foreign language with foreigners.

Current students were asked in the interviews whether sufficient amount of importance was given to the speaking component of the curriculum and what could be done to improve it. CS2, CS6 and CS7 emphasized that there should be a separate lesson allocated for speaking in which they could focus only on speaking improvement. CS1 claimed that more time could have been allocated for the speaking by saying:

"Speaking is more important than reading and writing because if we can speak the language, this means that we can solve every problem that we face in such a global world. Writing is equally important but if we can speak properly, this means

that we can write as well. Thus, if we have 5 hours of lessons a day, we should allocate 2.5 hours for speaking and the rest of the time for the other skills (reading, writing and listening)."

Last year students also agreed with the current students that more time should be given for "speaking". LYS1, LYS2, LYS3, LYS4 added that there should be separate speaking lessons when the mere focus of the both instructors and students should be on the speaking skill. LYS2 and LYS5 also complained that writing tasks were taken more seriously than speaking in the second semester. LYS2 articulated that speaking should be given as equal importance as writing in the second term as well and the speaking task topics should be academic.

Instructors were also asked what the objectives of the speaking component were. I1, I3, I4, and I6 all stated that students were expected to express themselves in daily language to say what they wanted and to understand what was asked from them. All of the instructors accepted that they focused on daily speech first and then they wanted their students to improve their speaking skills that would make it possible for them to speak about academic issues. I2 said:

"We want our students to use the accurate and appropriate structures and vocabulary to express themselves. What is important is that we have certain expectations from each level in accordance with CEFR standards. They will be able to communicate with their interlocutor easily at the end of the academic year."

The emphasis was on the communication skills needed by the students in parallel with CEFR standards. I2 and I5 emphasized the importance of certain structures and vocabulary to be taught to be able to achieve the main objective: to make students speak properly.

The instructors were also asked whether sufficient attention and importance was given to the speaking in the curriculum. All of them confirmed that there was enough emphasis on speaking in the curriculum applied in that institution. I1, I2, I4, I5, and I6 stated that the materials they had to cover highly gave enough space for speaking activities so it was almost impossible to skip them without paying any attention. As a matter of fact, all of the instructors who participated in this study reached a consensus that the curriculum gave importance to speaking.

What are the objectives of the speaking component of the curriculum applied in this school? Do they match with the expectations and needs of the students?

The current students were asked what they would do if they had the chance to determine the content of the speaking topics. All of the participants except from CS7 who wanted to cover the daily issues said that they would like to have daily topics first and then they would like to have academic topics in their speaking sessions. Actually, the curriculum of the institution was arranged in that way. Last year students were also asked which content they benefited most during their studies in the prep school. They all said that they benefited both from the daily speech conversations and academic discussion topics but LYS2, LYS4, LYS6 emphasized that the academic discussions were more beneficial than the daily speech conversations if they were to compare.

The current students were asked whether the activities done in the class for speaking were sufficient. Half of them said "yes" the others said "no". Students seemed to be indecisive for this matter. Thus, CS2, CS5, CS6, CS8 said that they were sufficient. However, CS1, CS3, CS4, and CS7 complained that the speaking activities were not adequate for them to improve their speaking skills and they needed more. CS7 gave some details:

"Unfortunately, we are giving more importance to reading activities here in the class. However, we can do reading at home as well so we have to allocate more time to speaking because we do not have a chance to practice our speaking skills on our own at home."

Last year students were also asked whether the speaking activities done in the class were sufficient. They all reached a consensus on this question and they said "yes".

Both the current students and last year students were asked in the interviews whether the speaking activities in the class prepared them for the mid-terms and all of them said "yes". Then, the former ones were asked whether the activities, especially the practice speaking tests conducted for this study were beneficial for them to improve their speaking skills. All of them said that these class activities helped them a lot to improve their speaking skills. CS6 said:

"The grades that we have got for all through the five weeks show that our speaking skill has improved because there is a gradual increase in our grades."

CS1, CS3, CS4, CS5, CS7, and CS8 also said that with the help of the speaking activities they gained their self-confidence and learned some of the useful expressions and structures that they needed to express themselves. CS2, CS5, CS6 and CS8 also commented on the practice speaking exams during the five weeks and they all said that they felt the responsibility to study at home by looking up some phrases that they had already learned before coming to the class. These speaking exam practice tests were stressful but they helped them study in advance.

The current students were also asked how they would like to have the speaking activities in the class and they all said that they would like to do the speaking activities as a pair-work activity. The last year students were also asked the

same question. LYS1, LYS3, LYS4 and LYS6 said they had benefitted more from pair-work activities. LYS2 said that she benefitted more from the project work while LYS5 preferred to have individual speaking activities.

Students were also asked what they expected from the instructor during the speaking lessons. CS2 and CS4 said that they wanted the instructor to correct them while they were speaking but the rest of them (CS1, CS3, CS5, CS6, CS7, CS8) did not agree with them. They wanted the instructor to wait while they were speaking and correct them later on. The same question was asked to the last year students, as well. LYS1, LYS3 and LYS5 said that the instructor should provide them with a relaxing atmosphere during the speaking activities. LYS3 stated that the instructor should give them some vocabulary and the input before s/he wanted them to speak. LYS5 said that the instructor should correct her while she was speaking with a positive manner because the instant feedback was more beneficial as it was more permanent for her. LYS2, LYS3, and LYS4 preferred the feedback given after the speech. LYS1 and LYS6 said they wanted the feedback both during and after the speech. LYS1 explained why she thought in that way:

"The instructor should encourage me to speak and listen to me carefully while I am speaking. S/he can correct me while I am speaking because I will never forget the mistakes corrected during my speech and I will never make them again. When my speech is over, s/he can comment on my deficiencies. S/he can say that I am not good at this and that so I should concentrate on these and those."

Last year students were also asked during the interviews what they would do if they had the chance to change something related to the speaking component of the curriculum. LYS1, LYS3, LYS4, and LYS6 stated that there should be a separate lesson for speaking. LYS2 and LYS5 also agreed with their friends in that there should be some extra time for speaking but they said these sessions should be face to face with the instructor.

Instructors were asked how they would do the speaking activities in the class. All of the participants accepted that they did the activities as they were in the book. Only I4 said that she was bringing some extra materials for the speaking sessions. I1 and I2 said that they were showing an example model dialog with a student for the whole class and then they were expecting their students to do the similar ones. I1 and I4 said that they were deciding whether the activity should be a group work or pair work by looking at the activity type while I2 and I5 said that they were preferring pair-work most of the time. I2 explained:

"I mostly apply pair-work activities. I have a dialog with a student as an example or a model for others. Then, I want all the pairs to do similar dialogs. While they are doing, I am walking around them and if I hear mistakes, I immediately correct them."

I1 and I5 said that they were determining either the groups or pairs because they both said that they wanted students to work with someone whose level was higher so that they could learn from their partner.

Instructors were also asked whether the speaking activities done in the class prepared the students for the mid-term and final exam and all of them except from I4 said that the activities and the topics discussed in the speaking activities were the similar to the ones asked in the exam.

The instructors were also asked what they were doing during the speaking activities and how they were handling them. All of the instructors said that they were walking through the aisles of the class for their students to ask something that they might not know about. I6 said that she was not interrupting them at all because she did not want to influence their self-confidence in a bad way so she did not give a detailed feedback any time. She added that she would not make a detailed comment on their performance unless they asked for it. However, I3 and I4 supported that it would be better if detailed feedback was given after the students spoke. I4 elaborated on the issue by saying:

I am determining the group members and I take myself back for them to get prepared to speak. When they are ready, they come to the front of the class and speak but I do not let them hold papers in their hands. While they are speaking, I do not interrupt them. I only take my notes because interruptions lead to their losing self-esteem. After they have done their performances, I give them a detailed feedback by explaining their mistakes on the board.

This was what I4 who was observed in her class twice did in her real classroom as the researcher had an observation with the observation protocol which included this implementation.

I1, I2 and I5 claimed that corrections both during and after the speech were more beneficial than one-way correction. I5 explained that the timing of the appropriate correction depended on the student profile so she was correcting students both during and after the students' speech depending on the student.

Instructors were also asked what kind speaking activity would be more beneficial for their students and all of them except from I4 who supported the efficiency of group work because it did not threaten their self-confidence said that they applied pair work in the classes. I1, I4, I5 and I6 also stated that speaking activities based on individual work should also be used in the classes.

Do the materials meet the needs of the students in terms of speaking?

The current students were asked whether the materials used were satisfactory and sufficient. Only CS2 said that they were both satisfactory and sufficient though CS1 and CS3 said they were sufficient but not as satisfactory as they had thought. CS3 said that the materials used in the class were adequate within the class time but they should be given extra materials for their self-study out of class time. CS1 touched upon another issue about the materials and said:

"The books that we use are sufficient but not satisfactory because the books that teach English are written and sold for a wide range of countries all around the world. This creates a problem from time to time because the topics that we are expected to discuss does not comply with our culture so I do not find much to discuss about these topics that I am unfamiliar with. Therefore, some books written by authors that know my culture are needed because I know what to say and how to discuss the topics that are parts of my own culture."

CS1 emphasized the importance of culture in the content of the books and how this affected their speaking performances. I6 also touched upon the same issue by saying:

"There are some sensitive topics in our books about which my students do not want to talk. For instance, there is a text about strange foods in the Asian cuisine and the speaking activity wants them to talk whether they would like to try strange food. Unfortunately, my students did not want to talk about this topic and I changed the topic and asked another question."

CS3, CS4, CS6, CS7 and CS8 said that the materials were not sufficient and they needed extra materials and books to improve their speaking skills. The sufficiency and efficiency of the materials were also asked to the last year students during the interviews and all of them said that the materials were sufficient. However, LYS3, LYS4, LYS5, and LYS6 added that there should be extra materials only if there was a separate speaking lesson offered in the school.

Instructors were also asked to evaluate materials. I1 and I5 said that the materials were satisfactory and adequate for students to improve their speaking skills. I2, I3, I4 and I6 stated that they needed extra materials such as a supplementary book for their students to improve their speaking skills.

Does the school apply the CEFR standards in terms of "speaking"?

Both the current students and last year students were asked whether they knew anything about CEFR. Every participant in the last year students' group said they knew nothing about CEFR whereas only CS1 claimed he was familiar with the term among the current students who did not know anything about CEFR much.

The instructors were also asked whether the institution could take CEFR standards into account while teaching speaking. All of the instructors except from I4 said that they were applying CEFR standards in their classes. I1, I3 and I6 also said that they were applying CEFR standards in their institution but there were still some other things to be done so as to reach a satisfactory level.

Discussion

When the findings of this study were given some more thoughts, it was clear that participant students in the prep year were aware of their deficiency in vocabulary, which made it difficult for them to speak fluently. It has been shown in the study conducted by Khan et al. (2018) that lack of vocabulary is one of the reasons why students cannot speak properly. However, the last year students talked about the lack of practice whose importance in speaking was stressed by Nelson et al. (2007). They also added that they were deprived of the knowledge of how to pronounce the words properly. Pronunciation is an inevitable part of the speaking skill which can be completed with a perfect articulation (Leeds, 2003).

The importance of the practice was also shown in this study as the practice speaking exam results clearly displayed the gradual improvement in the speaking skill of the participant students who also agreed that those practice tests contributed a lot to their speaking skill. Thus, students must be given the opportunity to practice their speaking within the class hour as Turkey is an EFL context where they do not have the necessity to use English officially when they are out of the campus so they must speak it as much as possible during the class hours under the supervision of their teachers (Rao, 2019). Instructors emphasized the importance of grammar and motivation in terms of speaking skill. Surely, learners will not be able to make accurate sentences without grammatical knowledge which will facilitate their production process. What is more, motivation plays a key role in learning in general (Deci, 1975; Entika & Ling, 2019; Ihsan, 2016; Liu, 2010; Maslow, 1970; Weiner, 1986).

When it comes to the contents of the speaking program, both the current students and the last year students said that it focused more on daily issues rather than academic topics. This comment was understandable for the current students as they were in A2 level and exposed to daily talks in the program which were arranged to improve their "Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills" (BICS), which will provide them with the ability to express themselves in the daily life and socialize with the speakers of that language (Cummins, 1979). However, the program of the second semester (spring) was organized to improve their "Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency" (CALP), which was needed by the students who take English-medium-instruction in their faculties so they must be familiar with more academic terms.

The efficiency of CALP for English language learners has been supported by Bonenfant (2012) as last year students wanted to have more of CALP in the curriculum. Therefore, they explicitly stated the need for extra speaking lessons demanded by the current students, as well. The participant students in the study conducted by Bilasa and Taspinar (2020) also state the need for extra lessons for speaking skill improvement.

Both the participant students (CS and LYS group) and instructors claimed that certain amount of attention was given to speaking classes because they knew that this skill would be tested so there was a positive backwash effect, which means that speaking skill is taught/learned considering the fact that it will be tested. Ur (1996) justifies the importance of “backwash effect” in terms of speaking by saying that “if one has to test speaking then more effort will be put in, to teach it” (p. 134).

Another striking point to discuss in this study was the importance given to pair work activities both by participant students and instructors. These two different groups predominantly chose to have pair-work activities rather than group or individual work for speaking practices. The study recently conducted by Usman et al. (2018) showed the importance of peer evaluation to improve speaking skill in the higher education level. Some students do not work as effectively as the other group members in group works and they do not share the workload equally, which causes one person to take over more responsibility than other members of the group. However, Darmuki et al. (2018) showed in their study that cooperation among the students was an effective methodology to improve their speaking skills. Surely, the contextual factors also play a significant role in terms of the efficiency of these techniques to be used in speaking classes. As a matter of fact, “L2 teachers of speaking also believe in the use of pair or group-work to give students opportunities to practice using English” (Farrell & Vos, 2018, p.3).

Another point that needs some further consideration for this study was the feedback type that learners had got. The students were unsure because some of them wanted to have instant feedback for their speaking performance while some wanted to have it at the end of their speech. What is more, instructors were also unsure of when and how to give the proper feedback. However, the important point is that teachers must encourage the learners to do their best to make attempts to speak in the class hours and not to be afraid of making mistakes as the mistakes are part of this process to learn. What is more, they must be active intervenors to improve their students’ speaking skills (Goh & Burns, 2012). Brown (2007) emphasizes the importance of mistakes and the feedback in the learning process by saying:

Learning to swim, to play tennis, to type, or to read all involve a process in which success comes by profiting from mistakes, by using mistakes to obtain feedback from the environment, and with that feedback to make new attempts that successively approximate desired goals (p. 257).

Brown (2007) adds that the type of feedback must be determined according to the needs of the students and contextual factors. Therefore, it is significant for the efficiency of the feedback that “teachers need to know general information about the students before and during the teaching and learning process” (Castro & Villafuerte, 2019, p.292)

Both the sufficiency and the efficiency of the materials were questioned both by the students and instructors. Some of student participants complained that the culture presented in the materials did not conform to the norms of their society, which was also approved by I5. Canagarajah (1993) claimed in his study in ESL classes in South Asia that the students felt alienated and negative towards the target language and culture. There are also other studies that show the hostile attitudes of the students towards the target culture (Bex, 1994, for ESL students in Europe; Hoffman, 1989, for Iranian ESL students; Ryan, 1994, for students of English in Mexico;). However; as culture can be considered as the core of the language teaching (Kramsch, 1993), it cannot be separated from the language teaching. According to Poole (1992), “classroom discourse features encode cultural norms and beliefs” (p. 593), what is more, culture-based tasks help students improve their communicative and linguistic competence (Doğanay et al., 2013).

Last but not least, it was detected that learners were not familiar with the CEFR, on which the curriculum of the school was based. They were unaware of the categories of CEFR on which their linguistic competence was evaluated. Harsch (2017) stresses that “since its publication in 2001, the CEFR has strongly influenced many foreign language classrooms, coursebooks, curricula, and tests, as well as learners more directly by way of the European Language Portfolio” (p. 251). Therefore, learners must be informed about this and they should be oriented about the program that they have been exposed to.

Conclusion

Both the students and instructors seemed to be satisfied with the speaking component of the curriculum to a certain extent even though they had some complaints in terms of the efficiency of the materials and the time allocated for this part of the curriculum. These could easily be overcome with some minor modifications on the school curriculum. However, students’ unfamiliarity with the CEFR, which is widely used for language education all through Europe, can be considered as the most prevalent weakness of the curriculum because awareness of the criteria for their linguistic competence both within the borders of the school and in their future professional lives will contribute a lot to their development of their speaking skill with the ability to determine their own deficiencies according to the CEFR standards.

Recommendations

Supplementary materials must be added to the curriculum as for the speaking part because students also need them to improve themselves out of the lesson hours when they need some extra materials for self-study. What is more, the lesson hours could be increased in accordance with the needs of the students. More importantly, an orientation meeting at the beginning of the term about the criteria adopted by the school must be arranged so that students will be more aware of what they are doing and what is expected from them according to the CEFR standards.

As this is a contextual study, the results may differ in another context so this study could be conducted in different research settings to better understand the factors that affect the efficiency of the speaking component of the curriculums in language schools and to compare the results.

Limitations

Just like every study, this one has some limitations, as well. First of all, it took just one single academic term (four months) for the researcher to collect the data to carry out the study. If the researcher had been given the chance to collect data for the whole academic year instead of one single semester, he could have reached more data to analyze.

Another limitation of the study was the selection of the participant students who had previously taken the prep year. They were all from engineering faculty in which they were taking their first-year courses. Thus, their profile did not show as much versatility as the current students in the prep school who were from different faculties and departments. Unfortunately, the researcher could only reach those students who were willing to reflect on their previous experiences in the prep school so they could be interviewed only. If more students from different faculties and grades had been chosen, it would have been more perfect.

Last but not least, no academics teaching in the faculties where English medium-instruction was given and where prep students started to get their education after they had passed the proficiency test of the school were interviewed. However, these lecturers would have given quality feedback on the speaking abilities of the faculty students who had been exposed to the curriculum of the School of Foreign Languages where this study was conducted.

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