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What Can I Do To Overcome My EFL Students' Speaking Challenges?

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Abstract

This study aims to overcome the speaking challenges of the students in an English preparatory class of 2020-2021 spring semester at a private university in Istanbul. Qualitative classroom action research design was operated to conduct the study. In the beginning weeks of spring semester, speaking skills challenge among the students was detected and observed. Accordingly an action plan was developed by using Ur (2009)'s advices. Developed action plan was implemented for 8 weeks. The study included 4 female and 2 male students as participants. Participants were chosen by homogenous sampling method that is one of the purposive sampling methods. To collect data, active participant observer technique and e-mail interview technique were employed. Data were analyzed by content analysis technique. As a result, 2 themes called affective improvements and practical improvements and in each theme 3 sub-themes were discovered. Sub-themes are reduced anxiety, increased motivation, improved self-efficacy, increased participation level, gradual ease in speaking, and examination. To conclude, the study shows that students benefited from the action plan which was prepared mostly by Ur (2009)'s advices.

Keywords: EFL Students, English Preparatory Year, Speaking Skill Problems

1. Introduction

In teaching English as a foreign language, it is generally essential for students to acquire four basic skills. These basic skills are divided into two categories, which are called receptive/passive skills and productive/active skills. Receptive skills category includes reading and listening while productive skills category includes writing and speaking.

Rise of communicative methods in language teaching has made speaking skills more important than ever (Öztürk, 2017). Yet it is the most difficult and complex skill to acquire (Esin, 2012; Nunan, 1992; Tarone, 2005; Rocio, 2012). Being able to communicate in a language is what makes students believe that they know a particular language (Koran, 2015). Even if they can read, listen and write very well in English, unless they can express themselves orally, they lack the most important aspect of knowing English since this aspect, speaking, is the proof that speaker is also capable in other skills of the language (Graves, 2010; Ur, 2009). Despite years of teaching-

learning activities, students find themselves saying one classical sentence: “I understand, but I can’t speak.” In most classrooms, teachers do not make time to improve speaking skills unless it is a speaking skills lesson. Thus, during the real-life practice of speaking, students experience challenges of speaking for affective reasons such as anxiety, theoretical reasons such as insufficient knowledge and practical reasons such as insufficient practice.

When students enroll at a university in Turkey, depending on their department’s teaching language percent, it is either compulsory or optional for them to study English preparatory year. If the teaching language is %30 or more in English, students have to study an English preparatory year. However, if the teaching language is Turkish, students may still choose to study English preparatory year. During English preparatory year, it is aimed to have students acquire grammar rules, vocabulary, writing skills, reading and listening comprehension, and speaking skills to express themselves orally (Yükseköğretim Kurulu, 2021). Students’ expectations from English preparatory year are mostly personal development and successful career (Davras & Bulgan, 2012; Şen Ersoy & Kürüm Yapıcıoğlu, 2015). Since English is a global language, every good job offer requires candidates to be able to communicate in English. Candidates, employees or employers may have to give presentations, attend meetings and/or close deals in English (Rao, 2018). Therefore, during the preparatory year, it is essential to have students speak.

Ur (2009) states that successful speaking activity has four characteristics: a lot of learner talk, even participation, high motivation and acceptable level of language which means that the produced language is understandable and relevant. However according to Ur (2009), the reason why successful speaking does not occur can also have four reasons. First reason is called inhibition. It means learners can avoid producing the language due to anxiety, shyness, fear of making mistakes and as a result facing criticism. Second reason is there may be nothing to say. Sometimes learners do not have anything to say about the topic which they are expected to speak about. Third reason is low or uneven participation. Some learners take up most of the speaking and others might feel there is not enough time for them to speak. Finally, fourth reason is mother-tongue use. Learners feel more secure in their mother tongue thus, they tend to use it if their classmates share the same mother tongue with them. This results in avoiding the use of target language and choosing the easier option especially if they are not motivated enough.

Ur (2009) gives tips on how to solve these speaking problems that are mentioned above. First of these tips is using group work. Although it is predictable that in group work students will use their mother tongue and make language mistakes, there is still time for useful practice. Second tip is speaking activities should be based on easy language and necessary vocabulary should be revised before the activity. Third tip is choosing an interesting topic and motivating tasks. Fourth tip is giving some instruction in discussion skills so that students know how to do the activity. Finally, fifth tip is keeping student talk in the target language. For this to happen Ur (2009) suggests appointing a monitor student to groups to remind the group to speak in the target language.

Ur (2009) differentiates between two types of speaking activities. The first one is topic-based and the second one is task-based. According to experiences and feedbacks that she got, task-based activities are more motivating since they have a purpose.

In this study, taking into account observed situations, students’ needs and reasons behind the speaking problem, it was aimed to take an action plan to solve the students’ speaking problems in the speaking lesson. To do that, all of Ur (2009)’s tips and some of recommended speaking activities were applied in the speaking lessons for 8 weeks. In a few of the weeks, there were two different activities, but most of the weeks, time was only enough for one activity. There were both group works and individual works. Ur (2009) suggests both topic based and task based activities although she mentions that according to her experiences task based activities are liked more. Since each classroom and student is different, in this study both types were applied. Group works arranged according to Ur (2009)’s tips or adapted from Ur (2009)’s book are as follows:

Discussion about advantages and disadvantages of online education: This topic-based activity was chosen to stimulate students’ interests because they have a lot to say about this.

Choose the right flat mate: This is a task-based activity in which students should decide which of their friends would be the best flat mate for them.

Picture description race: Students chose this activity because in the previous exam they were asked to describe a picture. This activity includes two groups trying to make as many sentences as possible about the picture. The group who makes the most sentences in the given time wins. This activity was adapted from Ur (2009)'s book directly.

Picture description and spot the difference: Students chose this activity because in the previous exam they were asked to describe a picture. This time this is not a race. A picture is shown by the teacher and whole class tries to make sentences about the picture. This activity was aimed to be done individually such as a picture for each student separately. But students preferred to make it as a whole class mentioning that they feel less pressure, so the teacher agreed. This activity was adapted from Ur (2009)'s book directly.

Taboo: One student tries to explain a word and others guess what it is.

Discussion about advantages and disadvantages of online education: Students talk about it critically trying to include every aspect possible.

Individual works arranged according to Ur (2009)'s tips or adapted from Ur (2009)'s book are as follows:

Let's talk about a movie: Students wanted to do this activity and they chose Toy Story 4. Until the following week, both the students and the teacher watched the movie and in the classroom, everybody talked about the movie. Students shared their opinion about the best moment in the movie, their favorite and least favorite character, the reasons behind some characters' actions etc.

Create a story using the pictures: Students chose this activity because they stated that in the main course lesson, they had learned past tenses and they wanted to use it in speaking lessons.

Make a presentation about something you like: Students are asked to make a presentation about anything they like such as their favorite city, video game, food, lesson, movie, actor, singer, pet, planet etc. The reason why they were not restricted to one of these topics is to allow students to make it about their interests as Ur (2009) suggests.

Tell an interesting story about your life: Each student tells a story about his or her experiences which can be fun, weird, sad etc. Others listen until it finishes and ask some questions that they wonder.

Solve a problem: This activity was directly taken from Ur (2009)'s book. However, Ur suggests it as a group work, but in this classroom, it was done individually. In the book, there is a problematic situation about a child at a school. Students were asked to handle this problem the best way possible explaining with reasons. The students in this study are Psychology students, so this activity is thought to be highly suitable for them.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

Speaking lessons take place 2 hours a week online on Blackboard Collaborate Platform where synchronous lessons can be done and recorded. On the official class list, there are 31 students. However, since attendance is not obligatory in online classes, approximately 10 students attend the online lessons each week. Few of these students are capable and eager to speak. However, most of them have problems expressing themselves and using the language at an acceptable level as Ur (2009) described. These students keep attending the lessons although it is clear that they need help.

In this study, qualitative action research design was operated. Action research design, which can be qualitative or quantitative, is very popular among teachers (Berg, 2017). Action research is conducted to solve a day-to-day problem or inform local practices (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). There are different types of action research. One of them is classroom action research, which includes the teacher as a data collector to work collaboratively with the students to improve her practices (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). During the spring semester, an immediate speaking challenge occurred and needed to be solved together with the students and the instructor collaboratively, therefore, classroom action research method was adopted in the study.

2.2 Participant Characteristics

This study includes six students (4 female, 2 male) who are in their English preparatory year at a private university in Istanbul. Students' level in English is A2. Medium age of the participants is 19 and none of them had studied

English preparatory program at high school or attended a course to improve their English. Participants' main field is Psychology at the university.

Participants were chosen by homogenous sampling method, a type of purposive sampling method where all of the members have certain characteristics (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). In our case, this certain characteristic is being afraid of participating and not feeling capable of speaking in the speaking lessons. The reason why these participants were chosen for this study is because they are regular attendants and they told the teacher about their worries and problems during the lessons.

2.3 Data Collection Process

Before and during the action plan, data were collected by participant observation. Participant observation method allows teachers or researchers to observe the participants of a study in a natural context (Berg, 2012). Participant observation method includes active participant observer, privileged active observer, and passive observer techniques. In the current study, active participant observer technique was managed. Active participant observer technique is the way teachers watch and reflect on their own practices during their own lessons. In this technique recording the observations are essential (Mills, 2014). Thus, field notes were used to record these observations. After the action plan, data were collected by e-mail interview method. According to Mills (2014), e-mail interviews are useful tools which can save time by allowing participants to respond in their own time. The reason why this method was chosen for this study is both because it is time saving and students have time to think so they feel less pressured while answering. As a data collection tool semi-structured interview form was used. Before the data collection process, all students were informed about the study and their written and verbal consent was taken to participate in this study. Students filled the form in their mother tongue so they could express themselves correctly.

2.4. The Process of Developing and Implementing Action Plan

In the first few speaking lessons, the teacher was active participant observer and taking notes on a teacher journal. After these observations, 10 specific problems were discovered and to overcome these problems, the teacher prepared an *action plan* using her observations and Ur (2009)'s book as a guide. Challenges and actions are as shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Challenges Experienced by Students and Actions to Overcome Them

Challenges Experienced by Students	Actions to Overcome the Challenges
Students don't feel comfortable with turning on their cameras	Students do not have to turn on their cameras unless and until they want to, however in return of this new agreement, microphones will be turned on. This way both the students and the teacher make a sacrifice
Students make excuses about not having a microphone	
Students give wrong information because of excitement and say that they forget what they know because they are getting excited on the microphone. They ask the teacher what they can do about their excitement	Group work and pair work will be used to reduce anxiety and divide responsibility. In addition, the teacher will make sure students know that they will get help from the teacher where necessary. Looking at the short notes will be allowed so that the students do not worry about forgetting what to say. After a few of these group works, some of which will be taken directly or modified from Ur (2009)'s recommendations, for students to take longer turns, Ur (2009)'s recommended activities for individual speaking will be used
Students are not sure if the teacher will help them when they are stuck while speaking	
Students ask to look at their notes while speaking	
Students tend to speak and type in their mother tongue	The teacher will visit groups one by one and when the teacher is in another group, a student will be chosen to monitor the use of target language (Ur, 2009)
Students are trying to change the topic towards music and movies by asking teacher about her favorites	The speaking activities will be arranged according to students' interests and needs (Ur, 2009). To make sure

Students cannot find anything to speak about so their speaking takes a short time and they say “What more can I say about it?.”	this happens, at the end of each class, students will offer activities for next class or choose from teacher’s options
Students don’t understand some of the related vocabulary used during activities	Needed vocabulary will be revised before speaking activity and activities will be based on easy language which means they will only have to use the words they are familiar with (Ur, 2009)
Teacher talk is so much that students rely on it	The teacher will not interfere to fill silences so that students will challenge themselves to speak (Ur, 2009)

This action plan above was created by using observations of the teacher and Ur (2009)’s book. The action plan was implemented for 8 weeks.

2.5. *Validity and Reliability*

In action research, validity and reliability are subject to many threats (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). However, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985) some measures can be taken to improve credibility, transferability, authenticity, dependability and conformability of the study. To improve credibility, member-checking, spending plenty of time in the field and data collection triangulation were used. To improve conformability and dependability research process was supervised by the second researcher.

2.6. *Ethical Considerations*

Before data collection, participants were informed about the study and their consent was taken to participate and give information for the sake of the study. They were also told that they have a right to change their mind about participating the study any time they want. Two participants were unwilling to give information after seeing the questions, so they were allowed to withdraw from the study without giving any information. In the consent form, it is stated that the information would only be used for this study and would not be given to third parties for any reason. Names of the participants and institutions are not shared in the study in order to make sure no harm can be done to them because of the study.

2.7. *Researchers’ Position*

The first researcher in this study is the instructor of the English preparatory class with which the research was conducted. Her B.A. is in English Language Teaching and M.A. is in Curriculum and Instruction. She has been an instructor at university level for six years. According to Berg (2017), action researcher’s role is being a participant in the process when needed. In this study, the researcher is naturally a participant since she is the instructor and a part of the population and situation. The second researcher’s role in the study is the supervisor and advisor of the study. The second researcher holds an undergraduate degree in teaching English as a foreign language and has experience of teaching English as a foreign language in Germany and Turkey. Furthermore, the second researcher has expertise in curriculum and instructional studies. The second researcher contributed to the design of the study, the development of the interview protocol, the analysis of the data, and the presentation of the results and discussion.

3. Results

Following the data analysis, two themes were discovered. The first one is “Affective Improvements” and the second one is “Practice Improvements.” Under each theme three sub-themes were discovered. These themes, sub-themes and categories are presented with details below:

3.1 Affective Improvements

One of the sub-themes discovered under affective improvements is reduced anxiety. Students mentioned that during the process there was an evident “anxiety reduce.” They gave some reasons as to why their anxiety was reduced and one of them was “accepting mistakes as a natural part of the process.” For example, Student 1 said “*I was very anxious about making mistakes in the beginning, but later on I realized making mistakes was not a problem because after making a mistake we are being taught the correct version.*” Student 3 stated the same thing with these words.

In the first 2 lessons, I thought about not attending the lessons. Because I was afraid of making mistakes and did not want the others to see that I wasn't enough. But I am not afraid of making mistakes or saying something wrong anymore. Yes, I admit that I still get a little bit embarrassed when I make a mistake but I started to accept that mistakes are natural. I realized worrying and stepping back were not good options for me. I overcame my fears and just started to enjoy the lessons.

Another factor students mentioned for anxiety reduce is “group works.” For example, Student 6 said: “*Group works are better because we share the responsibility of the task as a group. When it's only me who has to talk, I feel under pressure and stressed.*” Student 4 stated:

In the beginning lessons, I was too shy and afraid of making mistakes especially when we turned on our cameras because I did not know anybody in the classroom. Then I got used to it. I think group works are the best ever to speak in English and get to know each other.

The second sub-theme discovered under affective improvements is “increased motivation.” Students mentioned that their motivation levels increased during the process due to some reasons. The first reason is that their prejudice about speaking was overcome and the second reason is that they started to enjoy the lessons. Student 3 stated this as follows:

In the beginning, I had some worries and if I must add, when they first told us that we would have speaking lessons I just thought to myself ‘What happens if don't attend?’ Then I attended and my thoughts changed from negative to positive. Even if I said something wrong, I just tried to have fun. After the third lesson, I really –so to speak- started looking forward to next lessons. Because I was having fun. Especially the lesson that we played taboo was really nice. Also, doing different activities each week, I think, is keeping us away from being monotonous thus I wonder what will happen each week and long for it.

Student 4 also underlined this as follows:

In the beginning, I was stressed and contemplating about how the lesson would proceed and all. I didn't want to attend because of my shyness and got bored. But then I overcame it. I stopped thinking about that and started to focus on the activities. I think the biggest help for me to overcome these things is the activities that we did and your attitude.

The third sub-theme discovered under affective improvements is “improved self-efficacy.” Except one student, all students mentioned this topic. The categories emerged under this sub-theme are “less hesitation in speaking,” “positive attitude” and “self confidence in participating.” Student 1's statement about “less hesitation in speaking” is as follows; “*I was meticulous about attending all the lessons so I had a chance to practice more. My pronunciation got better. Before, I had hesitations in speaking but now I can make myself clear because I feel more comfortable.*”

Student 3's statement about “positive attitude” is as follows:

At first I did not have self-confidence and I was really embarrassed, so the first two lessons were really hard for me. However later on, with some positive energy from my teacher and some effort from my own, I gained my confidence.

Student 6's statement about "self confidence in participating" is as follows:

To be honest, in the beginning I was praying to God that my turn to speak would not come. I was shy and anxious. But in time, I just wanted to participate. I am happy with my participation but I am also aware that I should improve myself a little more in terms of speaking.

3.2 Practice Improvements

One of the sub-themes discovered under practice improvements is "increase in participation level." While all of the students agreed on the increase, four different reasons behind it were mentioned. The reasons mentioned by students are "having a say in the content," "teacher attitude," "being informed about the activity beforehand," and "getting used to the lessons." Student 5 expressed the first reason as *"I had fun and benefited all the activities but I was more active on the weeks that we as students chose the activity. Because that way, we also feel that we need to participate, because that was our choice."*

Student 3 expressed the second reason as *"Teacher's energy is great and it is reflecting on us. I totally overcame my speaking fear thanks to her. I like the fact that she can understand what we want to say even if we can't say it correctly."*

Student 1 stated the third reason as *"Teacher always informed us beforehand about the activities and was very clear in explaining. So, we could prepare ourselves."* Student 4 stated the fourth reason as *"In the beginning my participation level was so low. It was because of both my shyness and my inexperience. But later on, as I got used to the lessons and understood what I should do, my participation increased."*

The second sub-theme discovered under practice improvements is "gradual ease in speaking." Students said that their speaking became easier due to some factors such as easier activities and provided vocabulary. Before the explanation of the activities taking into account Ur (2009)'s advice, students were provided with needed vocabulary to use during the activity. Student 2 stated this as:

In the recent activities, I have learned many words and I think previous activities were more difficult for me. Now I can say it is better. Because teacher helps us with words when we are stuck and that way we can learn related words. Previous activities were also nice but I couldn't benefit much because of the lack of vocabulary.

The third sub-theme discovered under practice improvements is "speaking exam." Students had different ideas about this theme. In the exam, there were two parts. In part one, students were asked different but familiar questions and expected to answer the question after thinking for one minute if they needed. In part two, they were shown a picture and asked to describe and answer some questions about the picture, again they could think for one minute if they needed. Some students stated that activities were helpful for the exam; some students stated that activities were not enough to be ready in the exam. For example, Student 3 stated:

If I must evaluate myself about the exam, I really get excited. The worries I overcome in the lessons come back up and I make weird sentences. I usually make grammar mistakes and I believe I should improve myself on that.

Student 5 also stated a similar idea as; *"I don't see myself enough, maybe there can be more exam-like activities in the lessons."*

However, there were opposite ideas about the lessons' impact on the exam. Student 1 stated; *"I think exam was doable thanks to the activities done and materials used in the lessons. However, I think participation in the lesson should also be taken into account in evaluation."* Student 4 also stated the same idea as follows:

The activities we did lately were really helpful for me. When we were doing them, I realized I was improving especially compared to the previous activities. For example, picture description activity that we did before the exam week was really really beneficial for me. I think the reason I got full point from the exam was that activity.

4. Discussion

In this action research study, it was revealed that the action plan was mainly beneficial in two areas called affective and practical. Students mostly stated the benefits in these areas and accordingly six sub-themes emerged called reduced anxiety, increased motivation, improved self-efficacy, increased participation level, gradual ease in speaking, and examination. In addition, according to teacher observations, students mainly improved affectively and practically. Although there are still grammatical mistakes in the utterances, the language became at an acceptable level as Ur (2009) describes it as a characteristic of a successful speaking activity.

Under the first theme “Affective Improvements,” three sub-themes emerged. The first sub-theme was reduced anxiety. Students told some reasons as to why their anxiety was reduced. Accepting mistakes as a natural part of the process and group works are these reasons. When reviewed in the literature, fear of making mistakes is the biggest reason behind speaking anxiety (Çavuşoğlu Deveci, Buyruk Arslan, Erdoğan, & Yücel Toy, 2016; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014). Group works took place as advice of Ur (2009)’s to make unwilling students participate and it worked out as students themselves mentioned.

The second sub-theme was increased motivation. High motivation was Ur (2009)’s another characteristic of a successful speaking activity and she stated that the key to it was to choose topics that stimulate interest. This was a part of the action plan and in some weeks, students were allowed to choose the activities they want to do in the following weeks, so the activities would certainly be of their interest. Students stated that they started to enjoy the lessons and their prejudice was overcome. Although reduced anxiety, increased motivation and increased participation levels are different sub-themes, it can be said that they are related. Azizifar, Faryadian and Gowhary (2014) states that because of anxiety, students’ participation, motivation and self-confidence may reduce. In this study, it was also revealed that students’ self-confidence was increased which can be a result of reduced anxiety. The third sub-theme was improved self-efficacy. This sub-theme had three categories called “self confidence in participating,” “less hesitation in speaking,” and “positive attitude.” Except one, all of the students showed an improvement in self-efficacy. This could be caused by the first sub-theme “reduced anxiety.”

Practical improvements theme had three sub-themes and the first one is increase in participation level which had four reasons as follows; “having a say in the content,” “teacher attitude,” “informing about the activity beforehand,” “getting used to the lessons.” Having a say in the content could be related to one of Ur (2009)’s solutions to solve speaking problems called “make a careful choice of topic and task to stimulate interest” as it increases the motivation and motivation affects participation. Teacher attitude is also an important point to consider about participation in speaking lessons (Koran, 2015). Students can be demotivated when their mistakes or pauses are met with intolerance (Soureshjani & Riahipour, 2012). In this study, students mentioned that they were not afraid of neither participating nor making mistakes thanks to the teacher’s tolerance. Informing about the activity beforehand is also important for students to be able to participate. Saltan (2003) suggested doing activities that does not require the students to speak immediately since it makes them nervous, which is compatible with student statements in the study.

The second sub-theme was gradual ease in speaking. All of the students mentioned that they started to speak more easily due to provided vocabulary and easier activities. Ur (2009) suggests basing the activities on an easy language and teaching the related vocabulary before the activity. This suggestion was part of the action plan and it can be said that it worked out. In the literature, it is also stated that insufficient vocabulary is one of the biggest reasons of speaking problems (Çavuşoğlu Deveci et al., 2016; Boroujeni & Fard, 2013; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Gan, 2012).

The third sub-theme was examination. Some students believed that activities in the lessons were also helpful in the exam. Some students believed that there could be more exam-like activities in the lesson.

As a result of this study, some suggestions can be made. As stated above, in the exams, some students do not feel as relaxed and capable as in the lessons. Therefore, in some of the weeks, students may be asked random questions like a pop quiz to prepare them to react calmly and wisely to random questions. However, teacher should be careful to do that in a way that does not increase anxiety. In addition, the teacher of the lesson should take part in the

speaking exam as students may feel better and less shy if they know the teacher. Other than that, some students mentioned that they would improve better if the speaking lesson hours were more. Some of them believe that 2 hours a week is not enough. Finally, Ur's recommendations and tips worked out very well for this classroom. Even though it cannot be generalized, they can be applied and tried in other preparatory English classes to see if it results the same.

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