



Coordinator: Mehdi B. Mehrani
Assistant professor of ELT, English
Department, University of Neyshabur
Email: Mehrani@neyshabur.ac.ir

Guidelines for Publishing in Action Research

We have recently specified a special column in Roshd FLT Journal for publishing small-scale research studies that teachers conduct in their own classes. We intend to publish at least one action research report in each issue of Roshd FLT Journal. Thus, we encourage you to submit the reports of your classroom research to be published in our "Action Research Column".

We accept papers on the basis of their relevancy to our readers, simplicity, readability, and freshness of viewpoint. Your papers do not have to follow the standards of scholarly, academic research papers. We do not use complicated statistical analyses, technical terms or footnotes. Thus, write in a simple, plain and easy to understand manner. Please cite all of your sources within the text, and provide a list of references at the end of your article. When writing your paper, please include the following information in your report:

- Your research questions and your plan for answering the research questions
- The actions that you did over a period of time in order to answer the questions
- Your evaluation of the effects of the actions and any evidence that support your evaluation
- Your conclusion and suggestions for other teachers

To be accepted for publication, your articles need to:

- Be maximum 2500 words, including references
- Be on a topic of relevance or interest to Iranian language teachers
- Include an abstract of no more than 200 words, and a list of references

We are looking forward to your action research reports. Should you have any inquiries about how to prepare a report of your action research, you can send an email to Dr. Mehrani at the following address: meh.mehrani@gmail.com

Improving Listening and Speaking Skills through Controlled and Liberal Techniques

Majid Jafari Saray, Assistant Professor of English University of Neyshabur. Iran
Email: Majidjafari08@gmail.com

Abstract

This action research project intends to evaluate the eclectic method practiced in an English conversation class in Neyshabur. The method included a repetition drill method which started with role-play of the exact dialogue and repetition of the structures distancing the learners gradually from the context by encouraging them to move from drills to more free drills and ultimately free production of their own structures based on the real situation. The results showed that repetition of the predesigned structures positively influence the short-term memory extension and fluency of the learners. The comparison of the scores of the two sample groups, Group 2 following the method of the author and Group 1 practicing the normal common methods followed in most language institutes, supports the conclusion that repetition of the drilled patterns by Group 2 improved their listening and speaking skills more than Group 1. This reveals the significance of repetition in improving the speaking skills in general.

Introduction

Traditionally, in the Iranian context, English learners are expected to speak fluently to be considered successful English speakers (Mehrani & Farhady, 2016). However, experience shows that, compared to reading and writing, listening and speaking skills take longer struggles for students to gain enough of the skills in designated time limitations. Students with acceptable listening ability are usually more enthusiastic and committed learners in comparison with those who have weaker listening competence. Consequently, they are not sufficiently involved in speaking activities. The main aftermath of this vulnerability is their overall underdeveloped language skills and lack of confidence in real-world

communications.

In this article, I am going to report on the results of an action research that I conducted in my own conversation class in order to help my students develop their speaking and listening skills. In doing so, I relied on the basic assumption that the "audio memory extent" and "oral muscular capability" are two determining factors affecting language learners' listening comprehension and speaking fluency (Randall, 2007). In fact, empirical research has revealed that auditory abilities influence students' language acquisition outcomes (Tsao, Liu, & Kuhl, 2004). In real situations, language learners often try to imitate the surrounding, while attempting to produce new sentences based on the already memorized structures. These

structures can be learnt only by listening to and decoding correct examples (Friederici, Mueller & Oberecker, 2011). I translated this assumption into a practical technique of prompting the students to listen and repeat the exact structures within the conversation context. Thus, throughout this article, I explain how I attempted to implement this technique in my class with the goal of developing my students' oral skills.

Planning

The context of the study was an English conversation class in a private language institute in Neyshabur. The learners participating in this research project were 10 adult language learners, 19-25 years old, attending the conversation class for 1.5 hours twice a week. The students' proficiency level was pre-intermediate as measured by the institute's placement test. The choice of this class as the focus of the study was motivated by the students' characteristics, mainly because they were considerably reticent in speaking sessions. They had sufficient vocabulary and grammatical knowledge to be able to handle most communicational situations. However, their listening and speaking limitations hindered them from getting fully involved in the interactive environments. Therefore, I decided to use a number of various strategies to encourage my students to improve their oral skills in English. By improving these two skills, they were expected to develop their linguistic autonomy and confidence too.

Action

Prior to the initiation of the project, all of the participants were given a pre-tests on listening and speaking and their scores were registered for comparison with the

results of the post-tests that I decided to take at the end of the project. Table 1 and Table 2 show students' initial scores for listening and speaking skills. Then, class members were randomly divided into two groups of five (Group 1 and Group 2 each of 5 members), and then were asked to follow different procedures designated by the author to improve their listening and speaking skills. Group 1 was given enough liberation to perform listening and speaking activities similar to a panel discussion. In doing so, they were allowed to freely use various grammatical structures, and different sets of vocabulary. They could initiate their talks in different ways, participate in discussions whenever they wanted to say anything, and terminate their contribution as they wished.

Group 2 was asked to follow a relatively controlled, three-step procedure. It included an initial round of listening to and repeating the sentences from the textbook and role playing the conversation with a partner. For the second round they were asked to replace the keywords of dialogues with new ones from their memories and finally repeat a similar conversation with their books closed. Finally, the students were supposed to role play, using the same grammatical structures but in a context different from the original one. This way the learners were expected to gradually develop autonomy by building up the correct structures based on the original ones. In designing this technique, I was inspired by the way infants gradually develop linguistic independence in the process of acquiring their first language in a natural context.

The project lasted one educational semester with 18 sessions, including 16 sessions of instruction and two sessions of midterm and final examination which

were taken in the 9th and 18th sessions respectively. The educational materials that I used throughout the term included Top-Notch series, plus a handout that I personally prepared. The evaluation materials in each round of testing included a standardized listening test and a set of interview questions designed based on students' textbooks that students were asked on a one-at-a-time, individual basis.

Observation

In order to compare the effectiveness of each technique and to evaluate students' progress, I basically relied on a comparison of students' initial and final scores. In addition, at the end of the course, I asked my students to write a reflective paragraph, and explain their attitude toward the effectiveness of each technique. It is worth to note that the obtained results merely represent the sample groups involved in the project. I had already employed the same techniques in one of my French conversation classes too. Although the French class was not involved in the present research, the activities yielded similar results. Results of the tests can be seen in Table 1 and Table 2 below:

scores followed an ascending trend for both groups. Group 1 had 1.7 points of increase in their average score, while Group 2's average score increased 1.9 points. This difference was more visible in speaking skill since listening could reveal its influence in improvement of speaking which, in turn, included more active performances such as role-play. Table 2 below shows the results of the speaking scores for each group separately.

Table 2 displays the differences in the

Table 2: Speaking scores before and after the project for Groups 1 and Group 2

Students	Group 1: liberal procedure		Group 2: controlled procedure	
	Before	After	Before	After
1	12	14	13.50	17.50
2	9	14	11	15.50
3	11.50	15.50	12	17
4	14	17.50	12	15.50
5	11.50	13	13.50	16
Average	11.54	14.80	12.34	16.30

Table 1: Listening scores before and after the project for Group 1 and Group 2

Students	Group 1: liberal procedure		Group 2: controlled procedure	
	Before	After	Before	After
1	13	15	14.50	16.50
2	12.50	13.50	17	18
3	14.50	17.50	15	16
4	16.50	17	12	15
5	16	18	11	13.50
Average	14.50	16.20	13.90	15.80



scores students achieved after following the procedures for one semester. Members of Group 1 who were involved in free discussion sessions gained 3.26 extra points after the project, while Group 2 raised their average score from 12.34 to 16.30, gaining 3.96 more scores after the project. Group 2 performed listening and repetition and practiced speaking sections based on the listening formats while gaining gradual distance from the textbook during the same session.

Analysis of students' reflective paragraphs also showed that they were generally very positive about both techniques and the classroom procedures. Students also appreciated my attempts to set goals at the beginning and to hold regular assessment sessions. Statistically speaking, almost two thirds of learners expressed that they spoke more English in the class setting because educational goals for speaking were set. Some others also believed that speaking activities helped them feel more confident about using English. Though not directly related to the focus of this study, a few students, admired the teacher in their comments for giving them more confidence which made them try hard and improve their interactive abilities.

Reflection

Although, arguing for the importance of repetition seems to be outdated, as repetition is associated with the Audio-lingual method (Richards & Rodgers, 2000), the results that I obtained from this study support the significance of repetition of the patterns in improving the speaking and listening skills of the learners. Repetition of the predesigned structures seems to have both mental and physical rehearsal benefits for the students. It seems that classroom drills and memorizing dialogues could extend the capacity of the students' short-term memory which is involved in the comprehension of listening materials on the spot even in real situations. I believe that repetition also helped the learners develop their articulatory system for producing sounds and intonation as well as structures and sentences. The outcome was the general improvement of the performance of the learners in both listening and speaking skills and more confidence in real situations when they face new people speaking the target language. I suggest that the effects of the procedures used in the current study be investigated further by other teachers. Specifically, they can consider the outcomes and students' feedbacks in their classes in order to see if they obtain similar or different results.

References

- Friederici, A., Mueller J. & Oberecker, R. (2011). Precursors to natural grammar learning: Preliminary evidence from 4-month-old infants. *PLoS ONE* 6(3): e17920.
- Mehrani, M. B. & Farhady, E. (2016). How we helped our students speak: A practical action research. *Roshd Foreign Language Teaching Journal*. 31 (1).
- Randall, M. (2007). *Memory, psychology and second language learning*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins
- Richards, J. C. & Rodgers, T. (2000). *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tsao, F., Liu, H. & Kuhl, P. (2004). Speech perception in infancy predicts language development in the second year of life: A longitudinal study. *Child Development* 75,

