

Techniques for Improving Speaking Fluency of Students

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Abstract

This paper presents an action plan and its implementation for enhancing speaking fluency of the EFL learners of lower secondary level. It is based on an action research, which presents my students' poor speaking fluency, my interventions and implementations. Similarly, it presents different techniques for developing English speaking proficiency, and their implication, effectiveness and ineffectiveness of them as well. It further shows the role of different techniques to help students for developing English speaking proficiency.

Key words: Speaking proficiency, techniques, fluency

The context

In Nepalese context, there are two types of schools: Institutional and community. Institutional schools are also known as English medium or private schools, whereas community schools are Nepali medium schools. In institutional schools, teachers and directors all are required to speak in English except in Nepali subject, and even Nepali teachers are asked to speak in English outside the class. Likewise, students are enforced to speak in English from grade one. I have been teaching in an institutional school of Kathmandu valley for the last six months. The number of students in this school was comparatively high. I was newly appointed lower secondary English teacher of the session of 2015. There were each three different sections in grade six, seven and eight with around 30 students in a class. They were

from multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-class society. Some of them were Indian, and most of them were Nepali. Most of them belonged to upper middle class. None of them were from community school background. However, they were of mix-talent. I taught 'English II, The Spark English' in grade seven and eight. In grade seven this subject required six days a week including grammar text. So, I taught Spark English for four days in a week; and two days were required for grammar. The speaking environment of the school was English medium. So, students interacted in English with me from the beginning of my days in the school and even with their friends.

Though students were taught in English from the beginning of their schooling, I noticed that many of them did not have fluent English. Fluency is an individual skill,

whereby some students speak fluent English and others do not. So, students were of mixed ability. But, when I observed their speaking, I found that they did not have fluent English for speaking. As Fillmore (1979) proposes, fluency includes abilities to talk without awkward pauses for relatively long time. And talk in coherent, reasoned and semantically dense sentence (pp.85-102). My students could not continue their conversation fluently. I observed that their communicative English was improper. Likewise, when they had to speak in English on a given topic, or when they needed to answer the question they were not fluent, they took long pauses and could not share their ideas freely. They used the term 'only' redundantly. For instance, "I am not talking *only*." (I am not talking.), "There is written like this *only*", (there is written like this). They used Nepali conjunction like, "I'm *ta* not doing ma'am." (I am not doing, ma'am.) Likewise, they mostly used gerund form unnecessarily e.g. "Sound *coming* not *listening* ma'am, ma'am he is all the time *shouting shouting*." Then they used Nepali terms in initial and mostly in final position of an utterance. For instance, "La ma'am I told *na*..." (ma'am I have told.) *thyakkai* my copy" (exactly my copy.). When I asked them how they learnt such English, most of them replied that they did not know how they learnt but they felt comfortable in communication with Nepali words and English gerund forms. So, I assumed that most of my students could not speak fluently with proper English.

Problem statement

I believe language is mostly about speaking and delivering our ideas fluently. However, when my students had to speak in English they were not fluent. According to Hartmann (1976), "A person is said to be a fluent speaker of a language when he can use its structure accurately whilst concentrating using the units and patterns automatically at normal conversational

speed when they are needed." My students hardly used complete sentences without gerund, while communicating. Likewise, they used Nepali terms in English speaking and used the term 'only' unnecessarily. They were not confident to share their ideas from front. Mostly, they used gerund forms unnecessarily to express their ideas. They added Nepali (first language) conjunction marker '*Ta*' between the lines. Likewise, they added *na* (Nepali marker) at the end of the sentences. They wanted to live in comfort blanket, using mother tongue. So, we would be creating such environment which asks them to use proper English in class assisting them to reduce unnecessary use of the term 'only' in their speech. For instance, *I'm ta not doing ma'am., I'm not talking only*'. This improper use of words and structures were affecting the fluency of students' spoken English. It had been developed as their habit. Mostly, they could not stand in front when they had to tell us the answer. They spoke in a haphazard way. According to the CDC (Curriculum Development Centre), the aim of teaching English at lower secondary level is to make students able to communicate and express their ideas fluently with any foreign speakers who speak and write in English (2064). But my students were not able to express ideas fluently in real situation properly without using Nepali terms or *na* and gerund forms. I wondered, it would definitely hamper their interviews and other required English events. Hence, my students were facing crucial problem.

Data collection procedures

My problem leads me to form the research question as: How I can help my students to improve their speaking fluency? As Cohen (2007) claims, "The relevant data from various streams provide collective answer to the research question (p.468)." Firstly, I kept note of their improper speaking to confirm the problem. I asked one of my

colleagues to observe my class. She prepared an observation list and I started to work on it. I also used observation note, interview, reflective journals, audio and video recordings as well as field notes. I used observation note for the data of inside classroom during 40 minutes, about the type of language they used and their fluency, whereas field note was used to record data of their speaking outside classroom. Reflective journals included both inside class and outside class activities regarding their speaking activities. I interviewed students about their feelings and perspectives towards different techniques implemented in class. They wrote answer. It was the written interview. I recorded audio and video for their performance in some interventions like group work, pair work, verbal boxing, and formal presentation along with sharing yesterday's event and end class summary. I observed almost every class and noted the reality of how they speak with friends sitting back. Likewise, I kept the field note even outside of the classroom. Most of the time, their speaking activities were noted down. During the action intervention, I recorded audio for their presentation and work in speaking. At the same time, I had video recording of students speaking and their communication. After the completion of each day's class and my intervention, I wrote reflective journals, where I could write our feelings and required revision for the way of presenting action in class as well. At the same time, I had asked our students to share their feelings for the class, after invention of different techniques.

Action plan implementation

I implemented all the techniques in class 'Seven B' according to my action plan with slight modification. Larsen-Freeman (2007) talks about materials and techniques including "authentic materials, scramble stories, language games, picture story and role

play (pp. 132-134)." By studying the book of Freeman along with my own ideas, I intervened the following action for developing the fluency of my students:

- a) Sharing the events of previous day
- b) Peer work
- c) Verbal boxing
- d) Group discussion in complete English environment
- e) Formal oral presentation on textual topic
- f) Telling class summary at the end of the class
- g) Picture description
- h) Story telling

In my action plan, peer conversation and group work were separate action plans for different weeks, but as in the demand of content, in most of the weeks I asked students to do peer work and group work along with different interventions. The extreme point is that all the techniques were implemented in strict English speaking environment. The first intervention was 'sharing or expressing yesterday's events'. They could share both good and bad experiences. It was intervened for the first week. Then it moved to pair work and formal textual presentation. These two interventions were intervened together for the week. I felt the need to implement different action plans in a single day, which could go for longer days, since students were enjoying the class and asking me to do the previous activity. So, I implemented verbal boxing, end class summary and picture description together for many weeks. For a week, I made the classroom full of pairs and groups of learners, where they worked together and presented in front of the class. Likewise, storytelling technique was used for a week, where different students shared the story,

which they had heard in the past but not from the reading text. After that, again verbal boxing, end class summary, formal textual presentation, and expressing yesterday's class activities were intervened in smooth way. I modified the technique, expressing yesterday's event to expressing yesterday's class.

Outcomes

I was able to make my class systematic with the intervention of eight different techniques in eight different weeks in a much planned way. In the beginning, I had informed them about their speaking picking up their own language and said, *"I am planning to do an action research to improve my students' speaking fluency, but I am confused in which class and in which section to do this."* Then all of them asked me to do it in their class. Bijaya and Patel said together, *"Ma'am, do in our class na."* And then, I made them to promise that they needed to be serious and disciplined. In addition, they kept their promise too in class. There were different outcomes and experiences of each technique in the class.

Expressing yesterday's event

It was our first intervention of action research. With delimitation of our study, we asked two of our students Jeevan and Abhinav to go to the front and share what they had done after their school the previous day. For Jeevan it took around 20 seconds. He just spoke, *"..., I (auh) went and (stop). (auh) eat lunch at first. Then I went to homework. Then I start reading. Then, (Long pause) ma'am this much."* It took 0.59 minute to say these words. Then Abhinav started, *"I...(pause) played with my pet. Then I made my lunch and read."* It was the first day, so it helped us to prove our problem again that our students did not have good English speaking fluency. It was

very new for them and we shared that it was the first technique.

The next day, it was very surprising. When teachers' call the individual students in front of the class, the students usually seem nervous and hesitated; but when we called the name of Supreme then all of others started raising their hands saying *"ma'am call me too."* He said, *"The interesting thing was yesterday at COC when my toffee is 768, my toffee directly went to 800."* And Syujan, *"Yesterday, I got scold from my mother without any reason."* They did not worry about explanation, just came and said the specific event.

In the continuum of same technique, the next participant was Ujjwol. He spoke for 1.9 minute and said,

After. I leave for my home (auh) on the way near a home (auh) there was a big crowd, and (long pause) near an electric pole and I, I went there (auh) I saw that in that electric pole there was fire and it was burning. And... I immediately went to my home and asked my brother to off the main switch and, called the police... Then police came there after 15 minutes. That...police threw...that... fire and said we cannot do anything, call the electrician. And people called electricians.

Students were being familiar with the techniques, and their hesitation was eliminated and they were excited to share their previous day's events. In comparison to the first two days, students seemed ready for speaking. Most of them raised hands to share their previous day's experience. One of the students told me outside the class with dissatisfaction, *"ma'am I was being ready to share one event and I tried in home too but, you did not call my name."* As

Hedges (2010) defines, fluency is “the ability to link units of speech together with facility and without strain or inappropriate slowness or undue hesitation (2010, p.54).” My students started developing their fluency. They seemed more confident and excited to share their ideas in front of the class.

Pair work/formal textual presentation

The next intervention was pair work. This intervention was continued for two weeks along with other tasks. I asked my students to be in pair and managed pairs for those students who were not in pair. The topic of lesson was how to give instruction, so I gave them different topics. They were having content based English discussion. It was very satisfactory co-operative class, sharing their ideas in English. When the turn came for presentation, it was happy moment to see them standing in front with pair without having any hesitation. We did not find any Nepali words in between, and they did not explain in unnecessary gerund form. Even in between, students were not interrupting in Nepali. In each class, pair work went smoothly and effectively. However, in some places students used ‘only’ like, “I said same *only*.” But still there was management problem. When first pair was presenting, others were busy with their own task and were not listening to friends. Gradually, we made rule that some of them may re-explain what their friends had said. They would be asked questions from their friend’s presentation, and they had to make comment as well. This helped to manage the classroom and develop their attention. Pair work assisted students to be interactive in class for conclusive discussion. As they had to perform, all of them were active in discussion.

Before the intervention of formal oral textual presentation, students were already familiar with it since I used it previously in class.

However, it made oral textual presentation systematic. Firstly, Bijaya and Jeevan presented about the text ‘In the Farmyard’ (a poem). Rather, considering grammatical mistakes, our focus was on their content fluency and presentation skill. It was pair presentation; they spoke all in English to explain the text and they were good in content, where they just shared their understanding of the text within 1.42 minutes, without Nepali words, without ‘only’, and without gerund as well. When it was the formal presentation, they took it seriously and tried to make it fluent. With pausing, most of them covered the content of their given text. The next participant Samana gave textual presentation, which was comfortable and spoke for 1.37 minutes, who summarized and explained the text “A Loving Parents”. However, she used the discourse marker (auh.) many times, which still shows the lack of fluency.

The observation note presents that students were confident to go in front and share ideas, and the pronunciation of words were very comprehensible while having formal textual presentation. If we changed the technique, then they made us to remember the formal textual presentation. Their concern about presentation reveals their positive attitudes towards formal textual presentation.

Verbal boxing

This technique is very common and influential all over the world, as I was informed by the trainer Tomes Jone, in a training. In this technique, two speakers become ready for speaking without listening to each other. The classroom students give two different topics for two different speakers, where they need to speak on their own topic at the same time. Whoever stops first, s/he is a loser. It is claimed to develop speaking fluency of the learners.

We intervened it in class. For the first time, we asked students to give the common topic where they could speak like *momo*, *panipuri* (The familiar eating items). It was very interesting, and they could not continue it for long time since they blasted into laugh. The next day, they were very excited and had tried in their home, so they really spoke without much laughing. Gradually, we made them speak in two different texts, which had already been discussed in class. They spoke so fast and fluently that they completed their textual information within 20 seconds, (Samana and Nischal) to a different text entitled 'In the farm yard and Rautes', and continued to add their own point. Including us, all of the class members were surprised since they did it without being disturbed.

Nischal once said, "The best activity was verbal boxing." The field note shows they were trying it with friends from different section even in lunch-break. They shared that they were practicing in home and wanted to show us. All the time they asked us to do that activity.

Group work/ picture description

The next technique that we implemented in classroom was picture description. We simply asked our students to describe the textual pictures individually. They had to describe each aspect of picture according to their assumption and inference. But at first, they could not do it properly, they hardly inferred correctly. For example, there was the picture of a farmer separating paddy from straw; but Bijaya said, "What doing what doing..." It helped them to use their free language. Some students who were already prepared for speaking could describe it longer, whereas few students described the picture in one or two utterances. However, they did not use Nepali terms and could say without being disturbed and hesitated.

Group work was the familiar and continuous technique, which was intervened in our class. It makes them talk to each other and share their ideas to one another. According to Ur (1996), "Communication or the speaking in the learners can be fostered if learners talk a lot, motivation is high and language is of an acceptable level (p.120)." At first, it was time consuming. It took two classes for completing the group work for the first time. Then we created time limitation. During discussion, once or twice we could hear Nepali interjections "*Aiya* (auch!), *hya* (showing irritation)" but for the discussion, they were discussed in English because we had shared the different paragraphs of a text. To manage the classroom and time, we created the time limitation and they had to finish their work on time. Thus, language development was found clearly enhanced through collaborative group work. Like previously, they had to listen to different group's presentation and answer their questions. At the same time, they had to make comment on their friend's presentation.

End class summary

The end class summary is one of the interventions implemented in the class. In this technique, after the completion of the classroom discussion, students need to share what happened in class and mention the core content of the class. At first, we asked one of the students who seemed less attentive, but he could not express. The next day, we asked one student, but he failed to cover the core content. It happened so as students were not habituated. Prashant said, "Today, ma'am came to the class. We greeted her and she started our class. She asked for our homework and taught for 35 minutes and then asked me to tell the summary." When we instructed them what to include and what not to include, they started to tell the core summary. Swekshya explained the activities of the classroom

with content, who spoke for 1.12 minutes. It had been the regular activity in the class. It was done only for five minutes at the end of the lesson.

Story telling

Story telling intervention was implemented as a warm up activity for influencing the students' speaking fluency. Harmer (2007) states, "Students need to be able to tell stories." It is obviously connected with speaking fluency. When we introduced it first, most of the students were puzzled. For the first time, we let students to tell the plot of any textual story. It looked somehow related to the formal textual presentation. Before leaving class, we reminded them that we would ask any of them to tell any short story which is not from textbook. They could tell any ghost stories and others that they had heard or read somewhere out of text. Students started to come with different stories to share. Kirsch (2008) says, "Story encourages learners to tell, read, write and perform their own stories." It made them very creative and interactive. But we just allowed two short stories in a day. The other students had to comment and share their ideas. While telling stories students used Nepali terms, since the story was of Nepali language, where they could not find English equivalents of the Nepali rustic words. The class was communicative with short stories.

After the intervention of those techniques for eight weeks, I could find their ways of expressing ideas. As Selinker (2008) claims, "How much of language is learnt is seen in interaction of the speaker, the conversation that is made is the evidence of the language learnt." The observation list proves that my classroom was very interactive. Anjal had written, 'In my view, it was a really good way to boost our confidence and to help us talk confidently.' Abhinav has written, 'Wow! It was fun learning about so much. When I started speaking, my legs were trembling

because of fear. But when I kept on talking the fear disappeared'.

Conclusion

There was a fluency problem among my students of grade seven, where students were from English medium school. They were of mixed ability, who could not express their ideas and understanding in proper English. Whenever they had to speak, they used Nepali terms and gerund form unnecessarily. With the expectation of improving their fluency, I implemented eight different interventions. Along with some management problems, I was able to develop my students' fluency, whereby they expressed their ideas in groups or in front with confidence and they did not use Nepali term while speaking. Along with fluency, those techniques helped to manage the classroom.

Ways forward

These things improved their formal way of speaking with teachers and in contextual speaking in a fluent way without mixing Nepali and gerund forms. However, they still speak some code-mixing language while communicating with their friends. Now, new action research is required for addressing their communicative skill with friends.

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