

Practices and Strategies for Teaching Speaking in Large Classes

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Abstract

This study explores the strategies used by secondary-level English teachers to teach Speaking skill in large sized English language classes. This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach. I collected data and information through observations and interviews with two experienced English teachers from two community schools of Kathmandu district. Information from these interviews and classroom observations was analyzed both descriptively and thematically. The findings reveal that teachers use a variety of strategies such as role-play, language games, group discussion, project work, presentations, pair work, and strip stories to promote students' speaking proficiency in large classes. The study also found that teachers integrate speaking activities with other language skills and aspects to encourage meaningful communication. However, teachers face challenges, including classroom management difficulties, excessive noise, limited individual participation, mixed-level learners, and low student engagement. To address these challenges, teachers commonly use group division, peer support, task allocation, and classroom monitoring techniques. Based on the findings, the study recommends that schools and educational authorities provide regular professional development training on managing large speaking classes, supply adequate teaching materials and technological resources, and reduce class size where possible. The study further suggests that curriculum planners should place greater emphasis on practical speaking activities and communicative competence in English language classrooms, particularly in resource-limited community schools.

Keywords: English language teaching, large Class Size, teaching speaking, classroom management

Scene Setting

I was appointed as a secondary-level English teacher at a community school in Dang in 2017 AD. Each class was filled with more than sixty students. At first, I was overwhelmed by the number of students. As a new teacher, my primary concern was classroom management. I managed the classes well, including student seating arrangements, with support from both the school administration and the students. The students were excited to see their new teacher at school. When I entered the classroom, they didn't know how to greet their teacher in English. They also didn't understand when I asked them to take out their books. While going to the bathroom, they used sign language instead of English. As an English teacher, I thought it was my responsibility to help them communicate in English. The English curriculum of secondary level also

aimed to develop communicative skills among the students. They couldn't pronounce or spell simple words from the texts because they had never been taught to speak before. I started teaching them basic vocabulary and pronunciation. I used drilling techniques even for the students of secondary level. They enjoyed my classes a lot. Each day, I selected ten words from the textbook, wrote them on the board, pronounced each, and asked them to repeat after me. After a few months of practice, I transitioned to teaching basic sentences, including everyday classroom language. I also taught them how to introduce themselves in English. I strictly followed the curriculum and its goals. The curriculum was functional and communicative, emphasizing different language functions. I taught these functions as recommended by the curriculum. I was very pleased to see my students' progress. They began communicating in English with their friends and me. From this experience, I learned that students have great potential to learn in any area; however, they need support from their teachers. It is essential to teach them basic language skills, including listening and speaking, though these skills are often overlooked in practice. Speaking fluent English is a common problem among non-native speakers. Speaking is one of the most difficult skills language learners face in language learning (Dalem, 2017). For non-native speakers, speaking English proficiently is a huge challenge. Speaking is one of the hardest things for language learners.

Introduction

Language skills are separated into two kinds: receptive and productive. Receptive skills consist of listening and reading skills. Similarly, productive skills consist of speaking and writing skills. All of these skills are important in communication. Speaking is the ability to produce words, to express, deliver thoughts, ideas, and feelings. In learning a foreign language, speaking is one of basic skills besides listening, reading, and writing (Dhainy, 2025). Speaking is a fundamental ability to deliver thoughts, convey ideas, share feelings, and generate new words. Additionally, speaking is considered a basic skill among reading, writing and listening in the context of a foreign language.

Speaking is one of the important skills that should be mastered by students to communicate in English fluently and clearly. "Speaking involves interaction with one or more participants" (Harmer, 2001, p. 271). This means that effective speaking also involves a good deal of listening. Speaking takes place everywhere and has become part of our daily activities. Speaking is the most difficult skill for students among the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing).

There are two main reasons why speaking skills are difficult for students. The first reason is that the students lack the motivation to learn English. Another reason is the inappropriate techniques used by the teacher in teaching speaking skills in the classroom. Teaching English as a foreign language requires effective learning methods, techniques, language games, or activities, and strategies that promote speaking skills. Babu (2010) argues that a lack of motivation in learning causes students' hesitation to speak English in the classroom. He stated that teachers are not motivating students to

communicate in English.

To address the above situations, there are various effective methods for teaching speaking in the classroom to help improve students' oral proficiency. We can select one of the language teaching activities that suits our students' level. One example is using role-play activities as a technique in the teaching and learning process.

Similarly, information gap activities, simulations, storytelling, dramatization, strip stories, discussions, and debates are some common strategies teachers use in the classroom to enhance students' communicative skills. Therefore, language teachers focus heavily on teaching speech, and it is significant to establish a favorable environment where meaningful learning happens. Rather than leading students to pure memorization, providing a rich environment where meaningful communication takes place is desired (Inamjanovna, 2016).

Literature Review

Language Learning and Class Size

The topic of class size and language instruction is still up for dispute. Language instructors everywhere may concur that class size and language instruction significantly impact each other. A large class requires more instructional attention than a small one. The research and study of Allwright (1989) in his article "Is Class Size a Problem?" focuses on the debate on whether a large class is a problem that may interfere with successful learning. A large class is common in developing countries like Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan.

The concept of a large class is also a debatable issue, as Marcus (1997), in his article "Large Class Size: Strategies for Success", poses the question "How large is large?" regarding the class size. He also presented the ratio of language students in different countries, which explicitly shows that the concept of a large class varies from country to country. Marcus, for instance, shows that the average large class size in the USA is 80. In India, it's 45; in Hong Kong, it is 16; in Singapore, it is 20.

The phrase 'large classes' is a relative term because the large class differs from context or country. In some contexts or countries, large classes may contain 50 to 100 students or more; in others, the large class may contain 40 or fewer students, but this may not be the case in all contexts. UNESCO (2006) says that, "Five to thirty students per one teacher is considered large, while in other countries that is seen to be normal or even quite small. From a teacher's perspective, though, a class is 'large' whenever it feels large." According to Harmer (2008, p.123), "English language classes vary greatly in size. Some students opt for private lessons, so the teacher only has to deal with one situation at a time".

In Nepal, public schools are especially overcrowded, with more than 60 students in a single classroom. There is no uniformity in students numbers to become large classrooms, but the Education Regulation (2059) has suggested that the public school should have a maximum of 50, an average of 45, and a minimum of 40 students in Terai, hilly and mountainous regions, respectively. Furthermore, the document also suggested

that private schools should have a maximum of 44, an average of 33 and a minimum of 22 students in the classroom.

Strategies for Teaching Speaking

Several teaching strategies for speaking are utilized in the classrooms for many reasons. Among others, the strategies for teaching speaking are cooperative activities, role-play, creative tasks, and drilling. Cooperative activities can encourage the negotiation of language items (Newton & Nation, 2009). Role-plays are activities where students are asked to pretend to be in various social contexts and various social roles (Harmer, 2001; Thornbury, 2005; Solcova, 2011). Creative tasks resemble real-life tasks, as Solcova (2011) asserts. Students develop their fluency best if they are engaged in tasks where all their concentration focuses on producing something rather than the language itself. As Thornbury (2005) argues, Drilling is a strategy to improve pronunciation by imitating and repeating words, phrases, and even whole utterances. It makes students pay attention to the new materials and emphasize words, phrases, or utterances in their minds, move new items from working memory to long-term memory, and provide a means of gaining articulatory control over language (Thornbury, 2005).

In addition, designing activities for teaching speaking requires some principles to consider. Firstly, speaking activities must maximize language production to provide the best conditions for autonomous language use (Brown, 2001; Thornbury, 2005). Secondly, the activities should be performed where students can show interest and understanding and ask questions or make comments, which is called interactivity, and include a competitive element where students work together to achieve a certain purpose (Thornbury, 2005).

Thirdly, teachers should consider what students need, from a language-based focus on accuracy to a message-based focus on interaction, meaning, and fluency, to encourage the use of authentic language in meaningful contexts (Brown, 2001). Besides, meaningful contexts for each activity are important in relating new material with what has been learned and experienced by students so that it can be stored in students' long-term memory (Brown, 2001; Richards and Rodgers, 2002). Meanwhile, speaking functions, including talk as a transaction, aim to exchange information or goods and talk as interaction aims to maintain social relationships (Brown and Yule, 1999; Brown, 2001; Bailey, 2005; Thornbury, 2005; Richards, 2008).

Speaking is one of the most important but neglected skills in public schools in Nepal. The majority of public schools are struggling with large classes as well. Considering this context, this research is concerned with exploring the strategies used by teachers for teaching speaking in large classes, problems faced by teachers and possible solutions to them. To fulfil this objective, this study answers the following research questions:

1. How do secondary-level English teachers teach speaking in large classes?
2. What challenges do teachers face when implementing speaking activities in large classes, and how do they address them ?

Theoretical Framework

For this research, I have used Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), the Interaction Hypothesis (Long), and Classroom Management Theory.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory highlights the importance of social interaction and cultural context in learning. Peer interaction, group work, and scaffolding are vital for language development in large classes. Similarly, CLT focuses on the ability to communicate effectively and fluently in the target language. It emphasizes interaction as both the means and the ultimate goal of learning. Activities like role-plays, discussions, and problem-solving tasks promote real-life communication, even in large groups. Likewise, TBLT involves using tasks as the core element of planning and instruction in language teaching. In large classes, well-structured tasks can engage students in meaningful speaking practice.

Effective classroom management is essential in large classes to create an environment that supports speaking practice. 'The Interaction Hypothesis' suggests that language development is helped through interaction and negotiation of meaning. In large classes, structured interaction opportunities are vital.

Methodology

Having chosen a qualitative study utilizing descriptive research, I conducted this research at a community school in Kathmandu, involving two English teachers from that school. As stated by Cresswell (2014:4), qualitative research is an approach to exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups assign to a social or human problem. The teachers' class was observed to discover their strategies for teaching speaking in large classes. Additionally, an interview was conducted once to explore the topic further. Data analysis from observation and interviews was performed qualitatively. After collecting the data, it was analyzed using the theory of Miles, Huberman & Saldana (2014). The steps included data reduction, data display, and concluding.

Results and Findings

The result and discussion of the research align with the research objectives, namely, to find out the strategies teachers apply for teaching speaking in large classes.

Teachers' Observation Results

Table 1 Strategies Used for Managing Large Class

No	Strategies for Managing Large-Class	Teacher 1	Teacher 2
1	Group Division	√	√
2	Task Division	√	√
3	Group Discussion	√	√
4	Pair Work	√	√
5	Group leader selection	√	√
6	Pair Presentation	√	—
8	Random Selection of students for speaking	—	√
9	The whole class reading-aloud activity	√	—

Table 1 shows both teachers' strategies for managing large classes to deliver their speaking content. Both classes had more than 40 students. The researcher observed grade 9, where 42 students were present, and in grade 8, there were 45 students. Both classes were English medium. Teacher 1 is a permanent secondary-level English teacher at that school with a decade of teaching experience. She divided the students into five groups at the start of the academic year, which was a new technique for me. Teacher 2 teaches basic-level English for grades 6, 7, and 8 and is also a permanent English teacher. Both teachers used group work, pair work, group discussion, task design, division, and group leader selection strategies to manage their large classes. Teacher 1 asked the students to read as a whole group, while T2 did not do that activity. Similarly, T2 randomly selected students from the entire class for speaking, whereas T2 did not select students randomly. T2 also did not give a chance to students who had spoken in previous classes and prioritized shy students. Both teachers monitored the class well, moving back and forth through the classroom.

Table 2: Strategies Used for Teaching Speaking

S.N	Strategies used	T1	T2
1	Guessing Title	√	√
2	Creating Context	√	√
3	Question and Answer	√	√
4	A whole class discussion on a given topic	√	—
5	Reading aloud activities	√	√
6	Translation	√	—
7	Roleplay	√	√
8	Presentation on a given topic	√	—
9	Creating dialogue and presentation	√	—

S.N	Strategies used	T1	T2
10	Encourage students to speak in English	√	√
11	Describing daily activities	—	√

Table 2 shows the strategies teachers used for teaching speaking in large classes. Both teachers used similar methods, but some differences are clear. T1 used the translation technique in class to deal with vocabulary issues and clarify terms, while T2 did not use this method. Her instructions were only in English. T2 asked students to describe their daily and leisure activities at home to encourage them to speak in English. T1 started the semester by dividing the class into five groups and assigning tasks. Students had to create a dialogue based on a given situation. They discussed within their groups, exchanged writings, and finally presented in pairs in front of the class. Both teachers included role-play activities in their lessons. They often used a question-and-answer strategy to get students to speak. Both teachers also used an inductive approach to present speaking content by giving examples, showing model dialogues, and asking students to identify the expressions. The researcher noticed a lot of noise in the classroom, which is common in speaking classes.

Result of Interviews

Materials for Speaking

Teachers were asked about the types of teaching materials they use in their classes to teach speaking. Materials play a crucial role in improving speaking activities in the classroom. T1, a secondary-level English teacher at that school, used materials based on the content. She mentioned that it depends on the topic. She regularly used flashcards, word cards, charts, and games. Similarly, T2 said she used an interactive board in the classroom. She played audio and videos to enhance students' speaking skills. She also added that students are very interested in e-based teaching materials. Additionally, she used pictures from the textbook for speaking activities. Sometimes, she took students outside the classroom, asked them to observe objects, make reports, and present their findings.

Teaching Pronunciation

Teaching pronunciation is a key part of teaching speaking. How do you teach pronunciation to students? That was a question asked by the teachers by the researcher. T1 replied that pronunciation goes hand in hand with speaking itself. She taught pronunciation to students as recommended by the curriculum. T1 selected difficult words from the textbook and used modeling techniques for pronunciation. She also used modeling to teach silent words to students. Similarly, T2 taught pronunciation by introducing a sound system. She first explained the basic concepts of vowel and consonant sounds before beginning instruction. She used a project-based approach to teach pronunciation to students.

T2 stated that she requested the students to download a dictionary to enrich

vocabulary and pronunciation. However, the problem, as she stated, is that students do not use cell phones for learning purposes. Their parents complained about the matter in school.

Strategies to manage large classes while teaching speaking

Teaching in large classes is often taken as a challenge by the teachers. What strategies do they use while teaching speaking in large classes? The researcher raised the question with the teachers. Both teachers said they use group division, selecting class representatives to manage large classes while practising speaking.

Integration of speaking with other skills

Language consists of four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Among these, speaking is a fundamental language skill. Do you incorporate speaking when teaching other skills and aspects? The researcher raised concerns among the teachers. The common response they received is: “Yes, we teach speaking while teaching other skills and aspects in the classes.” This makes sense because teachers often integrate speaking while teaching other language skills and aspects. Teacher 1 said, “While teaching reading, I also engaged students in speaking activities. She added that loud reading is a kind of speaking activity.” Reading always accompanies speaking. The discussion above shows that teachers incorporate speaking skills while teaching other skills and aspects.

Improvement of students' speaking skill

It is very difficult to provide time for each and every student to speak in large classes. If the teachers do not provide space for students to be involved in speaking, they fail to develop communicative competence among the students. In this regard, teachers are asked how they improve the students' speaking ability in the classes. T2 responded uniquely that she always speaks in English with her students. She didn't respond until the students responded in English. Shy students didn't want to talk to her, so they walked on the other side of the road when they met their teachers.

Speaking Activities Frequently Used

Both teachers are using those activities suggested in the curriculum by the Curriculum Development Center. Such activities include role play, simulation, group work and pair work, language games, strip story, picture description, picture narrating, etc. Teacher 2 said, ‘I'm using project work and presentation strategy to teach speaking, especially in our large classes’. From the above discussion, we can conclude that teachers are using various kinds of speaking activities in the classes to develop the students' communicative ability, as suggested in secondary and basic-level English curricula.

Problems and Solution

Both teachers faced many problems dealing with speaking in large classes. They said that controlling class in speaking is very difficult. Regarding this, T1 shared her

experiences by saying that in speaking class, all students are not involved. There is unnecessary noise in the class. T1 also complained about the boys' manner in the speaking class. She said that boys in grade 10 are manner less. They go out of the context. T2 didn't face lots of problems in speaking class. Her students are quite obedient.

Both teachers pointed out the names of the shy and introverted students in the class. They encourage them to speak in English. Regarding the manner of students, T1 gave more attention to them, made frequent eye contact with them, and called their names in front of the whole class.

Discussion

The researcher requested some of the teachers who have been teaching English at the secondary level in Kathmandu-based schools to observe their classes related to teaching speaking, but they said that they won't teach speaking. This is just an example. This kind of scenario is present in other schools as well. Most of the teachers are not ready to observe their classes by others. Speaking is a basic skill for communication, but it is the most neglected skill. The curriculum allocated 10% weightage to speaking skills. Maybe for this reason, teachers are not teaching this skill. Their major focus is on writing and reading.

The examination results show different procedures utilized by the teachers who taught speaking in large classes. They don't teach speaking regularly. Their speaking class is based on the activities given in the textbooks. The speaking section is there in each and every unit of the textbook. Both of the teachers designed activities following their textbooks. Several strategies are employed by teachers to teach speaking in their classes. The common techniques are group discussion, pair discussion, role play, strip story, chorus reaction, question and answer, drilling, reading aloud, describing objects and whole class discussion. There are no significant differences between the techniques used in large classes compared to small classes for speaking activities. Activities can be the same, but the teachers have to focus on managing the large classes to conduct them but the teachers have to focus on managing the large class so that they can conduct activities properly.

Student diversity in large speaking classes is viewed as an opportunity for most the language teachers. They use various innovative technologies and code behaviors to reduce noise levels. Getting written feedback from their students to cater to mixed abilities, most of the teachers use teaching material and classroom management advice, i.e. peer work and group work activities, role plays, whole class activities, discussion, and presentations tasks are some of the speaking and communication skills activities, used by most of the teachers in speaking and communication skill classes.

Conclusion

The aim of the research is to find out the strategies used by teachers to teach speaking in large classes. The research is also oriented toward knowing their problems and possible ways forward for them. Large classes vary from country to country. In the context of

Nepal, large classes have more than 40 students (Education Act, 2028).

The findings suggested that teachers took the large class as an opportunity and made use of diverse backgrounds in their teaching fields. Additionally, they use various strategies to enhance speaking skills. Furthermore, they manage large classes using different strategies. They suggest to the other teachers who are not teaching speaking that they must teach speaking. It is the primary skill, and the curriculum intends to make students communicate in English. After reading English for 16 to 17 years, our students couldn't even produce sentences in English. That's why teachers shouldn't neglect this skill in comparison to other language skills.

Implications of the Study

The following recommendations are suggested to teachers, institutional management and policymakers for the improvement of teaching speaking skills in large classes:

Large classes for teaching speaking and communication skills are a bad idea because they are productive skills and need proper attention. If individual attention is not provided, the learning process may be hampered. Additionally, novice teachers are not found ideal to deal with large speaking classes because they may find it difficult to deal with large classes if a novice teacher should have particular training or professional development courses. The next suggestion is that speaking should not be taught in isolation because it is integrated with listening as "Listen, to Respond, to Speak" is a strategy suggested by the experts. If the above recommendations are applied in the daily teaching routine, it will help manage the class speaking skills efficiently.

Directions for Future Research

This study investigates teachers' perceptions of teaching speaking skills in large classes. For future studies, researchers may investigate the opinion of teachers about teaching other skills regarding speaking, i.e. (receptive skills, teaching reading and listening skills (literal to inferential activities), challenges/ issues and their solutions.

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