

Reflective Teaching through Continuous Assessment: Developing Speaking Skill in an EFL Context

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Abstract: In EFL context, teachers' frequent adjustment with students' particular needs is a pre-condition to facilitate students' active learning of speaking skill. And only a systematic reflection can have a consistent adjustment. Continuous assessment is a process through which both the teachers and the students can feedback each-other and thus can elicit a two way reflection which can have a significant impact in improving both the students' way of reception and the teachers' way of instruction. This paper acknowledges the existing teacher and student assessment process of private universities in Bangladesh and examines how a teacher's regular journal can emerge a more frequent reflective approach in providing face-to-face feedback and in developing specific learner centered strategies.

Introduction

Speaking is such an interactive process where we have to produce, receive and process information simultaneously within a specific time frame and once something unintentional or unplanned is said is not always possible to repair. In certain cases like job interview, project presentation, product marketing and so on, there is none but only speaking skill that is tested and considered as a person's level of communicative competence in English. Although CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) has already been imported into SSC and HSC English curriculum, there is no single provision for assessing students' oral performance even with 400 marks allocation. When they attempt to further studies, their performance reveals not up to the mark. In this context we can mention Kellaghan and Greaney (1992) who found that skills ignored in national examinations are neglected in teaching and learning. The relevance of what Kellaghan and Greaney pointed to can be understood better if we consider the cases below.

Almost all the private universities in Bangladesh have their own proposed continuous assessment process consisting of quiz, assignment, presentation, mid-term and final exam throughout the semester. Still, in developing students' speaking skill a far more frequent approach like assessment on everyday class-performance and respective feed-backs are necessary of course they sometimes become quite difficult for teachers with a large class size (with more than 25 students).

Let us look into the evaluation of teaching quality. If we come to the teacher assessment process, in maintaining the quality of teaching in private universities, we would notice that, here the students have to evaluate on a particular, stereotyped formal checklist. The formality and incongruity of the process initially make the students nervous. They often tick points (evaluate) without realizing the significance of providing feedback to the teacher. Most of them do not write anything as comment. Some students also hold a

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fallacious notion that writing comment means only criticizing the teacher. And if somehow the teacher has any personal dispute with a particular student, the student never misses this opportunity of degrading the teacher. They are not taught how to differentiate between personal and professional relationship. Similarly, some teachers are also found to be offended with negative feed-backs. Many of them do not at all rely on such a teacher-evaluation process, where students are not sufficiently counseled. This in turn does not produce constructive feedbacks on which the ultimate success of an EFL classroom depends. To resolve such a dilemma, this paper attempts to recommend some specific learner-centered strategies by analyzing a teacher's regular journal where she/ he continuously recorded the speaking assessments of a particular group of students, and later provided feed-backs on the basis of reflection in face-to-face teacher-student interactions.

Continuous Assessment

Where assessment is defined "as the act of collecting information and making judgments on a language learner's knowledge of a language and ability to use it", (Chapelle and Brindley 2002, p.267), according to dictionary of MSN Encarta, "Continuous assessment is an assessment of students' progress based on work they do or tests they take throughout the term or year, rather than on a single examination."

We know that there are two important qualities: **validity** and **reliability** which characterize the effectiveness of assessment irrespective of type. A valid assessment only addresses a particular ability. For example, to have a valid assessment of conversational ability, a student should be asked to participate in a dialogue or a role play type activity using the vocabulary taught, where s/he can display her/his conversational ability rather than reading aloud a list of unknown English words.

On the other hand, a reliable assessment refers to consistency in assessment. For example, in a reliable test, a teacher can be confident that a particular group of students will get an approximate score, whether they happen to take it on one particular day or on the next. It also refers to the consistency of marking between two different scorers.

Strategies for Continuous Assessment

Although continuous assessment provides relatively prompt feedback and thus reinforces the correct learned responses, assists in pacing learning and improving students' quality of improvement, sometimes it is widely assumed to be difficult if not impossible, to utilize it in large classes successfully. To such an assumption, Holtzman, R(2004) proposed a model of continuous assessment which addresses many problems commonly associated with large classes by (a) allowing for frequent assessments of students' understanding and progress, (b) addressing inequalities among students that result from differences in meta-cognitive skills, (c) facilitating students' self-assessment and course feedback, (d) encouraging class attendance and generating participation in a non-coercive learning atmosphere, and (e) challenging students to engage with course materials actively.

It has been found that continuous assessment is more likely to be formative, process-oriented, informal, learner involved, and/or self-referenced in nature. It can take the form of daily work (e.g. essays, quizzes, presentation and participation in class), project/ term papers and practical work etc. In this context we may consider the significant observation recorded by Arthur Hughes. He vindicates, "Assessment is formative when teachers use it to check on the progress of their students, to see how far they have mastered what they should have learned, and then use this information to modify their future teaching plans. Such assessments can also be the basis for feedback to the students. Informal tests or quizzes may have a part to play in formative assessment but so will simple observation (of performance on learning tasks, for example) and the study of portfolios that students have made of their work. Students themselves may be encouraged to carry out self-assessment in order to monitor their progress, and then modify their own learning objectives."(Hughes, 2003, p.5)

Although in course outlines, almost every language teacher addresses cognitive development as an important component of course objective, most of them in practice are seen to have a tendency to prioritize memorization-a comparatively easy way to attain short-termed goal (passing the final exam with a satisfactory grade) within the stipulated time of the semester. They are often seen to justify that behavioural objectives cannot be attained through academic assessment. Addressing such a concept Freeman, Smith and Bennet in their article, Promoting Implementation Success through the Use of Continuous Systems-Level Assessment Strategies in Journal of Positive Behaviour Interventions, (vol.5, 2003), proposed that continuous assessment can be employed to address both behavioural and academic objectives. And performance of speaking skill has definitely some fundamental connection with individual speaker's particular speech behaviour, as the behaviourist psychologists hold that, "Foreign language learning is basically a mechanical process of habit formation." (Rivers, 1964. p.31)

Reflective Teaching

An innovative style of teaching which is developed through reflecting on regular teaching experiences can be called Reflective Teaching. This is such a sort of teaching style, where determination for professional skill development as a teacher is infused. It is a sort of integrative motivation where the teacher reflects, plans, acts and observes not for any materialistic goal (for example, increasing salary) but for his or her own mental satisfaction and personal development. It is learning for the sake of learning itself. Reflective Teaching is not something new. We know that before this model, there were two other teaching models namely:

- (i) Craft Model: Where trainee observes the expert teachers, follows his instructions and practices in the classroom. Thus this is a model based on experience of certain observations.
- (ii) Applied Science Model: Where trainees are taught scientific knowledge and are expected to apply the knowledge in the classroom. For example, a student of Applied Linguistics and ELT is taught Krashen's Monitor Model theory and is expected to apply it in his/her own language class.

With the combination of these two models, Wallace (1991) has proposed the model of Reflective Teaching, where he emphasized not only the combination of the prior models but also on 'reflectivism', which is defined by different researchers in different ways. For example, Richards (1990) elaborated the idea of reflectivism by stating, "Self-inquiry and critical thinking can help teachers move from a level where they may be guided largely by impulse, intuition, or routine, to a level where their actions are guided by reflection and critical thinking." By referring to critical thinking, Richards indicates an activity or process in which experience is recalled, considered and evaluated as a source for planning and action.

Reflective Teaching can be viewed from two perspectives:

- (i) Micro reflective approach: This approach includes reflection on subject knowledge/ language teaching skills, reflection on technical classroom management skills, reflection on institutional social skills and so on.
- (ii) Macro reflective approach: This approach includes reflection on subject/ content education, classroom education and life long teacher development.

Strategies for Reflective Teaching

Numerous strategies can be used for reflection and teachers are also free to approach individual strategies or group strategies. Let us talk about some of them:

Journals

One of the effective strategies of Reflective Teaching is maintaining journals. It is a series of writings in response to daily teaching experiences by a teacher.

It contains descriptions of events along with relevant reflection. There is a distinction between a journal and a diary. Although both contain descriptions, a journal is different from a diary in its focus on reflections and feelings about them.

- Richards and Lockhart (1996: 7) point out two purposes of journal writing:
 - (i) The proceedings are recorded for later reflection
 - (ii) Keeping the journal itself develops insights, ideas and discoveries about how to improve teaching.

Classroom Observation

Classroom observation is considered to be another device for Reflective Teaching. It is no longer considered to be a craft model observation, where the novice teacher only observes the expert teacher. Currently classrooms are observed with a more analytical approach, where the observers are not only supposed to observe only the experienced teacher's classes but also to acquire innovative techniques from the fresher ones. Through a collaborative approach they can feedback each other. They are also expected to be aware of principles and decision making behind effective teaching and thus to personalize them in their own class.

Feedback from Students

A teacher's own students can play a very effective role in providing constructive feedback. Teachers can use questionnaires, surveys, face to face interaction to elicit students' feedback. Consulting with the students the teacher can emerge new pedagogical materials and methods. This is how the students' feedback can play a significant role in the Teacher's Reflective Teaching.

Continuous Assessment and Reflective Teaching

Continuous assessment as a process is much more than a mere examination of students' achievement. It is also a powerful diagnostic tool that enables students to understand their areas of difficulty and to concentrate their efforts in those areas. This sort of assessment also allows teachers to reflect on the impact and efficacy of their lessons on students' understanding. Teachers can adjust their pedagogical strategies to address both the students not working at the expected grade level and the students who are working at or above. Hence the Continuous Assessment process supports a reflective cycle of self evaluation and learner-centered activities by both students and teachers.

Frequent interactions through Continuous Assessment help the teachers to know their students' strength and weakness. These exchanges foster student-teacher relationship. Students become aware of their teacher's dedication when their assessment outcomes have an impact on the teacher's instruction. This one to one teacher-student communication can motivate students to regular class attendance and to work hard for higher levels of mastery. Through this process both the teacher and the students can visualize their progress towards their goals.

Learner Strategies

Ellis (1985) has addressed certain internal processes through which learners utilize L2 resources in delivering the messages in L2. According to Ellis, a learner has two types of L2 knowledge: **declarative** and **procedural** (Faerch and Kasper, 1983b).

Declarative knowledge consists of internalized L2 rules and memorized chunks of language. **Procedural knowledge** consists of the strategies and procedures employed by the learner to process L2 data for acquisition and use.

Procedural knowledge can be subdivided initially into social and cognitive components. **Social components** refer to behavioural strategies needed to manage interaction opportunities (i.e. the use of the L2 in face to face contact). **Cognitive components** refer to various mental processes in assimilating and accommodating new L2 knowledge.

Some Reflections from Teacher's journal:

For the research, 160 (60 of fall, 2008 and 100 of spring, 2009) students' mistakes in speaking performance in 800 individual speech (5 performances on 5 different authentic situations for each) were recorded in the teacher's journal and assessed. All the students were from Daffodil International University. Through teacher's frequent reflection on individual student's assessment the following weaknesses were identified:

- i. Students' lack of confidence was detected to be the principal problem of undertaking speaking tasks. Whenever they were asked to participate in any speaking activity before their classmates most of them, especially students from outside Dhaka got nervous.
- ii. Sometimes some phonological tools of their mother tongue Bengali were found to interfere with the pronunciation of the target language. Sounds identified as the most frequently mistaken were / tʃ, p, v, f, w, z, dz /. The English affricate / tʃ/ was found to be confused with Bengali sibilant / s /. The students of this group were found to pronounce English 'much' / m ^ tʃ/ , the positive degree of 'more' in English as Bengali / m ^ s/ meaning 'fish' in Bengali. Sometimes / s / was confused as / ʃ / because of some borrowed words in Bengali like 'police', 'gas' etc. A vice versa situation was also found when 'shake' was pronounced as 'sake', 'shelf' was pronounced as 'self' and so on. Some of the students were very often found to add aspiration to English /p/ and thus words like 'pool' were pronounced as 'fool' which distort the total meaning. There was also a tendency to confuse English labio-dental sounds, / f, v/ with Bengali bilabial sounds / ph, bh / which produced a very weird pronunciation of 'flower' and 'very' for example. English labio-dental sound / v / was also found to be confused as Bengali bilabial sound / b / in words like 'visit', 'involve' etc. Besides English semi-vowel /w/ was pronounced as English vowel /o/ and most of the students from Barishal district failed to manage the discrimination between / z, dz /. Besides, / e / instead of / æ / (in 'family'), and / æ / instead of / e I / (in 'able', 'take', 'male', 'gate' etc.) were frequently detected to be pronounced specially by students of Comilla district.
- iii. Their problems in correct pronunciation also affected their spelling when they were asked to write dialogue activities. The students who were found to say 'than' /ð æ n/ used for 'comparison' instead of 'then' /ð e n/ used for 'next' were always found to be confused in writing whenever they were to use any of these words. Sometimes they confused vowel sounds which led to spelling and meaning distortion as well. For example: instead of using / æ / , they used / e I / resulting such sentences as : 'I have **lake** of confidence' (instead of 'I have **lack** of confidence' in talking about personal weakness), 'I have already ordered the **snakes** for you'(instead of ' I have already ordered the **snacks** for you' in treating a friend in a fast-food shop situation).
- iv. Sometimes the students were found to be superfluous in their pronunciation. Some of them were identified inserting an extra / e / before words like 'sport', 'straight' etc; and an extra / I / before words like ' spoon', 'school', 'spring' etc. Some of them were found to pronounce initial / h / in words like 'honorable', 'hour' etc. Some students were also observed using / I ə / instead of / ə / in words like 'conscious', 'ferocious' etc.
- v. Although in order to build up students' confidence and to reduce their level of anxiety, in the initial level students are not supposed to be assessed on the basis of accuracy, in an advanced stage if meaning is reversed, accuracy in the TL (Target Language) is required. A number of sentence constructions with distorted meaning had been identified, some of the most interesting were:

- ‘I **am BBA** at Daffodil International University’, instead of ‘I **am studying BBA** in Daffodil International University’ (in sharing personal information).
 - ‘I **was not** a personal phone’, instead of ‘I **didn’t have** a personal phone’ (in narrating the day someone bought his/her first mobile phone).
 - ‘I have **attested** bathrooms’, instead of ‘I have **attached** bathrooms’ (in a dialogue between a house renter and a house owner).
 - ‘I want to **eat** you guys’ instead of ‘I want to **treat** you guys’; ‘I hope you guys **are like** the restaurant’, instead of ‘I hope you guys **have liked** the restaurant’ (in a dialogue between friends while dining in an expensive restaurant setting).
 - “I **am not** used roof.” instead of “I **don’t** use roof.” in a dialogue between a house renter and a house owner.
- vi. Lack of vocabulary was identified as a noteworthy obstacle in fluent speaking participation. Even students with a lot of ideas were found to be silent when asked to present a known topic in English. They also lacked ranking of meaning of words. For example they could not discriminate between ‘necessary’ and ‘inevitable’, ‘insist’ and ‘request’ and many more.
 - vii. So far as the grammar is concerned; the most frequent areas of mistakes were detected as the subject-verb agreement, the passive voice, the parallel sentence construction, the preposition and the masculine vs. feminine gender. Many of the students were observed starting a speech with ‘he’ and then repeatedly referring to ‘her’ and vice versa.
 - viii. Lack of sufficient schema was another significant obstacle in active participation. Most of the students were found not to be habituated to be exposed to even daily news in newspapers or news related programs on TV channels.
 - ix. In the case of previously set speaking task, almost 90% of them were likely to memorize certain points and were seen delivering the whole speech without any eye contact.
 - x. Sometimes students were also noticed delivering their speaking tasks in a very low pitch as a display of politeness a manifestation of Bengali culture.
 - xi. Some students were identified with a lot of unacceptable body language. Sometimes they were found to move their heads and hands so frequently that the audiences’ attention was distracted. Some of them were found to be habitual leg movers. Some female students’ habit of wearing noisy jewelry also contributed to attention distraction.
 - xii. Some students were identified as habitually introvert.

Probing into the problem from both teacher’s and students’ reflection

Through teacher’s and students’ interaction the following reasons were identified as the underlying factors behind students’ speaking weakness:

- Lack of trained teachers in rural areas
- Speaking not tested in HSC and SSC level

- Interference of local dialect (especially if L variety is used in residence)
- Interference of puberty
- Lack of technological resources
- Large class size (30-46 students per class)
- Problem in pedagogical instruction (as the teacher was sometimes seen to spend time adopting lecture mode on vocabulary, sentence construction, pronunciation etc.)
- Students' individual negligence
- Teacher's lack of planning

Recommendations

The students were found to be almost satisfied with the speaking tasks where a lot of authentic materials like dialogues on different real-life settings, newspaper photographs and newspaper articles of common interest, vocabulary and idiom lists, news from different TV channels were used. Still through a number of teacher-student face to face interaction the following recommendations were proposed as learner- centered strategies:

- To ensure students' spontaneous participation, Krashen's Affective-filter hypothesis can be used where keeping anxiety level to the least, students' utmost participation can be confirmed.
- Students have to be counseled that using low, unclear pitch in speaking tasks is treated as students' lack of mastery over the given topic and a distorted eye-contact is to be considered as a lack of confidence. They can also be instructed to dress modestly avoiding something excessively extra-ordinary or noisy which can distract attention and thus can affect accurate evaluation.
- More speaking opportunities are required in both inside and outside the class. An English speaking environment has to be ensured. In language classroom, during speaking activity STT (Student Talking Time) has to be increased reducing TTT (Teacher Talking Time).
- Finding out the individual learners' difficulty, teachers can help them out with necessary vocabulary, sentence structure and pronunciation feedback during counseling hours.
- Extracts from popular movies (age and culture friendly), cartoons and even TV commercials can be used in providing language input.
- A well-organized lesson plan for each and every class is a must. Handouts are to be prepared at least a day before the class. The technological factors (requisition of multi-media, projector etc.) are also needed to be confirmed in advance.
- A teacher's good relationship with his or her students can elicit a lot of student response. Even a teacher's memorization of individual student's name can have a significant impact on student motivation.
- A teacher can play a significant role in forming a student's language behaviour. By providing extra-care an introvert can be turned into an extrovert.

Conclusion

Speaking skill is an important skill in determining a person's communicative competence. Although it is no doubt challenging for students who are introvert and are less exposed to the TL (Target Language), it is not impossible to acquire even to the satisfactory level if both the students and the teachers be a little more systematically reflective. Continuous assessment together with individual feedback can make both the teachers and the students, conscious of their insufficiencies. By reflecting both from micro and macro level, a teacher not only can utilize the utmost infrastructural facility of the institution and come up with planned materials ensuring learners' declarative and procedural competence but also can attempt a life-long vision of his or her own professional development. Similarly being encouraged to reflect, a student can understand that it is s/he who has to personalize the input provided by the teacher, if a persistent development is to be attained.

Through the face-to-face interview with the students, it is realized that even the least reflection and the resulted dedication on the part of the teacher is recognized by the students and in return, they also try to prove their commitment towards. In such a situation the institutions should also not lag behind. They should also be co-operative and thus should ensure a suitable teaching environment with standard class size where teachers can invest sufficient time on individual student with maximum infrastructural facility.

To sum up, Reflective Teaching, as a humanistic approach, together with continuous assessment is a form of acknowledgement that it is not impossible to change the ways we teach as well as we learn. Although most of the time Continuous Assessment is treated as something burdensome from both teachers' and learners' point of view, once it is mastered, it is definite to be a piece of cake producing high-payoffs at low costs.

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