

A Well Developed Understanding of Task Design is Crucial in Teaching Speaking

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Abstract: In order to design or choose the most appropriate task for the speaking class with the purpose of helping learners to better develop their speaking skills, first of all, the idea of what a speaking task actually is should be clear in mind. Then the elements that constitute a speaking task are also needed to be known and taken into careful consideration before employment. Besides, the knowledge of features of a speaking task is also essential, because it could provide teachers a clear guide in designing successful speaking tasks.

1. Introduction

“The ability to speak in a foreign language is at very heart of what it means to be able to use a foreign language” [1]. Speaking always plays a crucial part of the foreign language teaching and learning. Teaching speaking should aim at developing learners’ communicative skills, thus the learners could have the ability to express themselves and learn the social and cultural rules in each communicative circumstance [2]. Therefore, teaching speaking is so much about developing learners’ communicative skills. Willis defines tasks as “always activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome”. According to Willis’ definition, completing tasks requires learners to use the language based on a communicative purpose. Thus it seems evident that adopting various kinds of speaking tasks in the teaching of speaking could better facilitate teachers to reach the goal of teaching speaking. However, designing an appropriate speaking task is not a simple work; there are many important factors need to be taken into careful consideration, such as the teaching context and teaching materials. If teachers have an all-around understanding of speaking tasks design, it would be a great help to improve the efficiency of the speaking class.

2. The Elements of A Speaking Task

Different conceptualizations of task elements have been put forward earlier by different researchers. Candlin suggests that a task should include input, roles, settings, actions, outcomes and feedback[3]. Nunan articulates his concept of task components as follow: goals, input, procedures and these will be supported by teacher and learner roles and settings. Although these are the elements of general tasks, speaking tasks are not exceptional and definitely contain the similar elements. Based on the conceptualizations of Candlin and Nunan, the following elements mentioned are quite essential and should be taken into account when designing speaking tasks[4,5].

3. Outcome

As mentioned earlier in this paper that whether there is an outcome to achieve differentiates a speaking activity from a speaking task. Canlin includes the outcome in his list and the goal in Nunan’s list has the similar concept.[6] It seems evident that the outcome is an indispensable element of a task. In a speaking task, learners should be motivated to achieve the outcome by freely

using the language. Regardless the teaching context, here is an example to show what is a speaking task outcome in general. Each learner is given a piece of paper with some pictures of different objects on it and only himself or herself can see it. Learners work in pairs and describe the objects to his or her partner by using the sentence structures presented earlier. The partner has to guess what exactly the objects are. Thus this task requires learners to practice the target language structure with the activity of describing and guessing objects with partners to achieve the outcome which is guessing out the objects at last.

The outcome in a speaking task functions as a goal and it marks the completion of a speaking task. It makes the speaking task meaningful.

4. Input

Both Canlin and Nunan put input in their list of elements of task. Nunan suggests that “input refers to the spoken, written and visual data that learners work with in the course of completing a task” [7]. Teachers, learners themselves and many other sources such as authentic materials all can function as the input. Hovor shows that input can be generated from a wide range of sources, such as magazines, newspapers, TV drama, business cards, memo note, menu, map, travel regulations, bus timetable, recipe, shopping list and so on. All the items showed in his list belong to authentic materials. Here comes a matter of whether authentic materials or specially written materials should be used in class as input. Porter and Roberts argue that specially written materials should always have a central place in language teaching, for the reason that specially written materials are always simplified language and it offers learners less processing effort on the language. While Nunan suggests that there always is benefit for learners to be exposed to authentic materials. Specially written materials do not offer learners enough challenge of dealing with the real language they encounter outside the classroom, while authentic materials could provide learners the opportunity to experience the real language inside the classroom[8].

However, there is no strict requirement that teachers have to choose to use authentic materials or not. With the aim to offer learners the most appropriate input in speaking task, authentic materials and specially written materials could be combined together according to the objectives that teachers want to achieve.

5. Procedure

Nunan states, “Procedure specifies what learners will actually do with the input that forms the point of departure for the learning task” [9]. It’s about what learners are exactly going to do in a speaking task. Candlin and Edelhoff argue that in language teaching the issue of authenticity should not only be considered on the selecting of the input materials, the processes learners actually experience with the materials should also be authentic. Porter and Roberts also point out that it will cause severe limitation to the language learning if the authentic materials are used in non-authentic ways. From these arguments, it is suggested that procedure of speaking tasks should also be authentic. That is to say it is much more meaningful to use the authentic input materials in an authentic way. As Nunan argues, “Tasks are justified on the grounds that they will help the learner develop the skills they will need for carrying out real-world communicative tasks beyond the classroom” [10]. Thus in designing tasks, teachers should parallel the procedure of doing tasks as closely as in the real world.

6. Features of Speaking Tasks

In order to design or choose the most appropriate speaking tasks, beside the knowledge of what is actually a speaking task and what elements should be included in a speaking task, there is another important aspect that also needs to be well familiarized, which is how to assess whether a speaking task is communicative and facilitates teachers to reach the ultimate goal of teaching speaking or not.

Thornbury characterizes the communicative task in his book 'How to teach speaking' in terms of the following features:

- 1)The motivation of the activity is to achieve some outcome, using language;
- 2)The activity task takes place in real time;
- 3)Achieving the outcome requires the participants to interact;
- 4)Because of the spontaneous and jointly constructed nature of the interaction, the outcome is not 100% predictable;
- 5)There is no restriction on the language used.[11]

Thornbury's proposal of these features is said to be of communicative tasks, so it could be work as a guideline to evaluate whether the speaking task is communicative or not. This is very important when teaching speaking, because as Littlewood mentioned the ultimate objective of speaking is to communicate freely with others. These features proposed can also function as a checklist of whether a task can count as a real speaking task. Whenever teachers want to take some speaking tasks to use in the class, they can assess the speaking tasks before use according to these features, because the more features which are included the more communicative the speaking task is, which means this speaking task could offer better opportunities to learners to experience the real language use.

7. Conclusion

The speaking ability is an important aspect representing learners' overall foreign language proficiency, thus it is widely accepted that the teaching of speaking is very important in foreign language teaching and learning [12]. Teaching Speaking is developing learners' ability to communicate effectively in a foreign language [13]. Appropriate and well designed speaking task is a good means which can better facilitate teachers to develop learners' speaking skills in teaching speaking. Therefore, a well developed understanding of task design is crucial in teaching speaking.

The knowledge of the elements of a speaking task is very essential for both learners and teachers. Teachers and learners should be clear in mind about what are exactly teaching and learning in a speaking class[14]. Harmer identifies four elements which are necessary in teaching speaking: connected speech, expressive devices, lexis and grammar and negotiation language. These four elements compose the knowledge that learners need to learn when learning foreign language speaking. Thus, it is important that teachers take all these elements into account when preparing speaking class and designing or choosing speaking tasks.

Beside the elements of teaching speaking, there are some overall factors that could be greatly influence the teaching of speaking. First of all, the teaching context is very important factor that need to be taken into careful consideration. It includes physical, social and personal aspects. Secondly, suitable teaching materials is other factor that should be thought about. Then appropriate tasks adopted to use for teaching speaking is another factor that could greatly influence the teaching of speaking. Littlewood puts forward that the language learners' ultimate objective is to communicate freely with others, well designed speaking tasks could help to maintain learners' learning motivation. Appropriate speaking tasks are of great help in teaching speaking, thus well develop understanding of task design is quite crucial[15].

There is no specific good or bad speaking task, but appropriate or not appropriate. By taking all these important factors have been discussed in this assignment into account, teachers could be able to either design or choose the most appropriate task for their speaking class.

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