

Enhancing First Year Students' Speaking Skills through English Club



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ABSTRACT: The study aimed at investigating the potential role of English club as a mean to improve students' English speaking skills. The study focused on figuring out whether the application of English club could help enhancing students' speaking skills or not, and identifying students' attitude towards the activities of English club. The participants of the study were 90 first year students and 3 teachers of English at College of Education, Thai Nguyen University. The data collection instruments including questionnaire and class observation were employed. The analysis of the data collected revealed that the students had good scores in their speaking skills by joining in the activities of English club. The results from the questionnaires and observation were also reflected positive attitude of students towards the activities. On this basis, implications for teachers' preparation, classroom practices and future research were proposed.

KEYWORDS: speaking skills, learning attitude, English club, learning activities, speaking activities

I. INTRODUCTION

Speaking is considered to be the most important active skill (Widdowson, 1994) for a foreign language learning in the modern society. It plays an important role in everyday situations all over the world and deals with all aspects of life. It is the language of science, information, technology, politics, economics and education. Cameron (2001: 40) believes that speaking is about making people understand about the speaker's feelings and ideas by using the language.

Speaking is necessary to be integrated in the development of effective communication (Boonkit, 2009: 1306). Therefore, teachers need to create an enjoyable and conducive environment for students to practice speaking. Hence, learning environment plays an importance role in the process of teaching and learning the language, and it has been explored by researchers. Chang & Shu (2008) state that a good learning environment should help to improve the learning outcome. As a result, students can master English speaking quickly and be able to communicate if they are supported and have a good learning environment to study. One of the activities is through learning English in English club. The activities are useful for the students to strengthen their speaking competence. They feel secure if they learn English in a community because they have the same interest and it is easier to communicate with each other in English. Additionally, the students have more time to participate in learning English. In this community, the students are able to learn by taking part in many kinds of activities. They will not feel under pressure and also do not think about score, and can be motivated by other members to learn English.

English club has been widely spread out in society. It is a place for the students with the same interest in English to improve their language skills. This community facilitates students to improve their speaking ability. English club has many divisions that categorize the students basing on their desire and ability. Even though the students are still a newbie and feel worse with their English, they should not be worried, their English will be improved as long as they take an effort to practice hard. These divisions are formed for students who do not only want to improve their English but also want to join English competitions outside the class. Meanwhile, there is a regular class which is an enjoyable learning class consisting of exciting activities to provide a good environment for all members to join and learn.

The study aimed at investigating the potential role of English club as a mean to improve students' English speaking skills. The study seeked for the answers for the following research questions:

- *To what extent does English club help enhance students' English speaking skills?*

The participants of the study were 90 first year students and 3 teachers of English at College of Education, Thai Nguyen University. To collect data, questionnaire and class observation were used.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definitions

Speaking is considered to be an important active skill (Widdowson, 1994) for a foreign language learning. It is the successful oral ability that must be learned in order to face up to the possibility that English will always be used as a contact device. Speaking is characterized as an interactive meaning-building process involving knowledge creation, reception and treatment. Its form and sense depend on the context and the intent of expression in which it appears (Burns & Joyce, 1997). Chaney's definition describes speaking in a similar way saying that speaking is "the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts" (Chaney cited in Kayi 2006).

Speaking is a productive skill which involves many components to learn so the learners can produce language verbally. According to Chastain (1988), speaking is a productive ability that includes a wide range of components such as grammar, strategy, sociolinguistics and voice. In addition, according to Nunan (2003), speaking is the way for someone to transmit the meaning by formal verbal communication. It produces utterances for messages, and it would be impossible to comprehend because there is no formal verbal utterance.

2.2 Components of speaking

According to Jill (2008), there are 5 expression elements that should be taken into consideration when learning to talk, as it can affect the ability to communicate:

✓ *Pronunciation*

Understanding the aspects of speech allows learners to understand while listening to the language (Jill, 2008). Pronunciation plays a significant role in the area of intelligibility. However, it is not necessary for the learners to deliver English perfectly. Harmer (1998) claimed that the user of the language must learn how to pronounce the term properly. This awareness is made up of three areas: tones, vibration and intonation.

✓ *Grammar*

Grammar is a description of the structure of language which tells us how words are organized in sentences, how we mix them and how we adjust the terms in order to change their meaning.

✓ *Vocabulary*

Vocabulary is essential for learners and acts like bricks to a building. According to Jill (2008), vocabulary can be introduced in dialogs and reading passages where new words appear in meaning and in conjunction with other words. Hence, learners should be able to speak whether they read and listen to words in a variety of ways.

✓ *Fluency*

Nation (1991) describes fluency as the capacity to get through communicative thoughts without too much delay and too many delays to create gaps or a breakdown in communication.

✓ *Interaction*

Interaction is the capacity to truly understand and be familiar with events, facts, etc. As a speaker, it is important to talk plainly in order to hear the audience, in case of avoiding a misunderstanding between them. In the culture, the learners need to communicate as plainly as possible in order to be effective in conversation. The audience can understand what they're thinking about, and will respond quickly to what they're doing.

2.3 Types of speaking activities

According to Brown (2001: 272) there are five types of speaking activities:

✓ *Imitative*

One of types of speaking performance is the ability to simply (imitative) a word or phrase or possibly a sentence. Drilling is a part of the communicative language classroom offer students an opportunity to listen and to orally repeat certain words of language that may cause some linguistic difficulty, either the phonological or grammatical. They offer limited practice through repetition; they allow one to focus on one element of a language in a controlled activity.

✓ *Intensive*

Brown (2001) indicates that intensive speaking goes one step beyond imitative to include any speaking performance, that is designed to practice some phonological and grammatical aspect of language. Intensive speaking can be self-initiated or it can even form part of some pair work activity, where learners are going over certain form of language.

✓ *Responsive*

A good deal of student speech in the classroom is responsive; short replies to teacher or students' initiated questions or comments. Responsive assessment tasks include interaction and test comprehension but at the somewhat limited level of very short conversation, standard greetings and small talk, simple requests and comments ...

✓ *Interactive*

Brown (2004: 142) states that interaction can take the two forms of transactional language or interpersonal exchange. It means that, transactional language has the purpose of exchanging specific information.

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✓ Extensive

Students at intermediate to advanced levels are called on to give extended monologues in the form of oral reports, summaries, short speeches, or perhaps story-telling, during which the opportunity for oral interaction from listeners is either highly limited (perhaps to nonverbal responses) or ruled out altogether.

2.4 English club

A school club or society is characterized as a community of people with an organization, a constitution, laws, regulations and student leadership. Members have the same motivation and have the same aptitude, commitment and desire to work diligently on their tasks in order to accomplish their goals. According to Hyland (1993) most teachers know that the only way to promote collaboration in the classroom is to abolish the classroom. By establishing a successful learning environment, the limitations of the classroom are reduced, such as a location like the English language club.

Carter and McKathy (2001) states an English club is a place for students to use English in a fun environment and the students will have an opportunity to practice speaking skills based on real situations; encouraging students to practice English authentically in terms of real-life situational context; inculcating self-confidence among students; and broadening students' communicative competence in terms of primary socialization process and create a friendly social atmosphere among students.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1. The Overview of Activities at English club to enhance students' speaking skills:

To collect information, a number of activities were organized for students during a semester. Students were required to participate in these activities under the supervision of teachers and the researchers. Below is a summary of the club's activities.

Table 1: Activities used in English Club to enhance students' speaking skills

| No | Activities | Participants' requirement |
|----|-------------------------|---|
| 1 | Small games | Students were asked to join all the games and interact with their partners. These games included Bingo, Slap the board, Hang man, Lucky Stars... |
| 2 | Ring the Golden Bell | Students were asked join the "Ring the Golden Bell" show which was held by the teachers. Each of the students was given a white board to write their answers. The ones who had the wrong answer for each question was removed from the game. The last person left in the game was the winner |
| 3 | Who is the Millionaire? | Students were required to answer 15 questions of different topics. The difficulty level of the question was increased and the reward was bigger and bigger. Students had 3 helps: ask friends for advice, consult the audience and use cellphone. |
| 4 | Short Drama | Students were asked to choose a short excerpt from a favorite movie to make a short play with a maximum length of 10 minutes. In this activity, students had to work in groups of 4-5 people. Costumes and equipments for the play were encouraged to use recycled materials to stimulate their creativity. |

3.1. Design:

This study used descriptive approach to collect data. Three classes of students were allowed to join the English club for a semester to assess the level of contribution of English club activities to students' speaking skills. Questionnaires and observations were the two main methods to collect data for the study.

Questionnaires is a commonly used method in educational research because it allows the researchers to collect data from a large number of participants at the same time. Observation can help the researchers understand the reality of joining English clubs to improve students' speaking skills.

3.2. Participants:

The study was conducted with 90 first-year non-specialized students at Thai Nguyen University of Education. They were required to participate in different kinds of activities in the English club for a semester. Three teachers at Foreign Language Faculty of Tha Nguyen University of Education also joined to observe the students.

3.3. Data collection

- Questionnaire: All 90 participating students were asked to answer the questions of the questionnaire after participating in English club activities during 1 semester. The questionnaire is mainly designed with questions to collect information about students' attitudes and evaluations about English club activities in improving speaking skills.

- Observation: In order to eliminate the subjectivity of the questionnaire, the author's team observed students' activities in the English club. This observation will focus on students' language skills through interactive activities in English at the club.**IV.**

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IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Results of classroom observation

One of the effective strategies was organizing English activities in English clubs. However, students were not all aware of the role of English activities in enhancing speaking skills in English learning. After observing the two classes, the result was that students were willing to take part in the activities and were excited to choose the topic they are interested in.

The result from observation also focused on the students' language output. Students must practice until they speak fluently before giving speech in class. They are also willing to answer questions raised by other students to indicate that they were eager to interact in English and were very active in being a language creator. The results approved that organizing English activities in English club works effectively to improve students' motivation as well as their English speaking skills. Taking part in English activities has successfully motivated English speaking for students so they enjoyed the learning process. The level of interaction between students and speaking activities is enhanced. However, this change is not much; the level of students' interaction was slightly improved.

4.2 The contribution of English club activities toward the improvement of students' speaking skills

The explanation of the research finding of three English teachers about the contribution of English club activities toward the improvement of students' speaking ability was explained briefly in the form of table and statements below:

Table 2: The contribution of English club activities towards students' speaking skills

| No. | Statements | Reasons |
|-----|-------------------------------|---|
| 1. | Build up self-confidence | The students are habituated to speak up in front of the people even the new ones. |
| 2. | Enhance vocabulary | The students are habituated to play games about vocabularies and read many texts. |
| 3. | Enhance pronunciation | The students are drilled to pronounce words and accustomed to watch several of English videos. |
| 4. | Master grammar | The students are habituated to make texts and read several of the text related to the news articles nowadays. |
| 5. | Speaking fluently | The students are forced to speak up using English in their practice and play games. |
| 6. | Organize ideas | The students are habituated to speak up either practicing their parts or having a conversation with others. |
| 7. | Build critical thinking | The students are used to knowing many issues and criticizing those in many perspectives. |
| 8. | Have an open-minded | The students are used to knowing many issues and looking at them from many perspectives. |
| 9. | Enhance creativity | The students often remake the stories by looking for an interesting and trending topic. |
| 10. | Enhance general understanding | The students read and watch many kinds of issues in this status quo whether in articles or in videos. |

According to the teachers' observations during the students' participation in the English club of three English classes, students remarkably improved in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary as well as their confidence in speaking. Through their participation in games and interaction with other club members, students were forced to use English and thus their confidence and fluency improved.

In addition, other soft skills supporting English speaking skills were also enhanced. These skills included thinking skills and creativity. At the same time, interactive activities at the English club were also a good opportunity to help students learn to be more open-minded and improve their social understanding. This helped students develop their ability to stimulate their critical thinking and criticize problems from many sides.

V. CONCLUSION

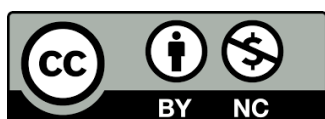
It could be concluded that club activities gave many advantages to the improvement of the students' speaking skills. In the same manner, the members who are being subjects stated that they got benefit from English club activities. All the members of the English club agreed that the more they practice speaking in English, the more advantages they get. Those are building their self-confidence, increasing pronunciation ability, mastering grammar structure, increasing speaking fluency, organizing ideas fast, building critical thinking, being open-minded, increasing creativity, and increasing their general knowledge.

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English teachers can motivate students to learn English in a variety of ways such as role-play, problem solving and decision making and projects. By using these activities, teachers can create real situations to help students learn English in a natural way. In order to deal with the disadvantages of organizing English activities, teachers should base their work on the textbook and work with other colleagues to design the tasks that should be suitable for students. In addition, there are valuable suggestions on the group activities that should be used in teaching English in this study. Hopefully, the teachers can reflect upon these instructions and improve their teaching quality to make their students learn English better.

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