

## ***Speaking Proficiency Strategies : Communicative Activities that foster Speaking Skills in College Students***

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*English language speaking proficiency is gaining prominence considering the copious learning strategies the aim of teachers is to maximize learning for the taught. Deficiency in speaking is inevitable in speakers where English is not the native language. Corresponding to speaking, the grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, accuracy communication also suffers a setback. In this globalization era tremendous vicissitudes occur because people have a strong desire to master English language. When people are able to express their ideas and opinions it instills a sense of confidence. Classrooms are an ideal platform to acquire good speaking skills. If various strategies are implemented it goes a long way in developing good speaking skills. Speaking and listening make up 69% of our total communicating time each day. In fact, human beings use their voices ever since they develop a sense communication. Gradually, as they build their vocabulary, they use it to share information and persuade people around you. As you grow older, public speaking seems threatening because it is a new experience in a new context but as you gain experience the fear gradually*

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*lessens. If speaking skills are put to use professionally and you are expected to make presentations it is planning, practice and preparation, the 3 P's that hold the key to success. Be it extemporaneous, impromptu or memorized, delivery of a speech calls for a lot of skill that can be cultivated with practice. The present paper is an attempt to explore the various strategies that aid in honing public speaking skills. There is absolutely no doubt that an effective presentation can only thrive in the prevalence of good communication. There are several roadblocks that hamper communication during presentations and make it slow and less impactful. These impediments, are difficult to cross because at times we are not even aware of their existence. To avoid communication malfunctioning, it is of extreme importance to recognize their effect and the dent they create and ultimately try to push them aside. In communication malfunctioning the blame game shifts from the communication to the communicate. Communication is a dynamic, collaborative process and breakdown can occur at any stage - be it encoding or decoding. Communication cycle is not akin to speeding on a highway - there are roadblocks - several of them invisible, which may slow down or even deviate the message contained.*

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## **1. Introduction**

Language plays a key role in communication. English, being the most widely used languages across the globe and the tool of international communication gains all the more prominence in today's time. Speaking skills get priority because of the multiple purposes it serves - bureaucratic, academic, social, cultural, economic, religious - all require good communication skills. Mastering English requires proficiency in the four language skills namely listening, speaking, reading and writing which are closely inter woven and integrated. The development of one skill automatically leads to enhancement of the other. Speaking and listening, for example, usually go together because to understand someone speaking, the interlocutor needs to listen to what he or she says.

Danielson and Hayden (1963) have rightly remarked "the scientifically valid procedure in language learning involves listening first, to be followed by speaking, then comes reading and finally the writing of language". This clearly states the need to focus and emphasize the teaching of speaking that naturally fosters and enrich vocabulary. According to many theorists of English language teaching, the skill to speak better can be developed through communicative activities like role play, jigsaw puzzle, games, filling information gaps etc. These activities assist conversation to flow

smoothly and offer a launch pad for conversation to take off. Such activities help to create an environment of interaction in a language class. Such communicative activities also build an environment of motivation in the learners and establishes a positive relationship between the teacher and taught and also amongst peers thereby encouraging a supportive environment for language learning.

## **2. Breaking the Barrier and coming out of the Cocooned Existence : Developing Speaking Skills**

One of the most efficient ways to master a language is to use it as a tool of communication i.e to use it as a medium of conversation. Bygate (1987) affirms that “speaking is an undervalued skill and is often thought of as a popular form of expression”. The reason for the undervaluation may be attributed to the reluctance of students to participate in oral classroom activities, inferiority complex due to mastery of language and its limited understanding. Usually, a class consists of students from diverse social media and varied levels of self-esteem. Pronunciation does not come easily and regional dialect overpowers conversation. Grammar and vocabulary do not come easily and so any attempt at a speaking or interaction activity fails miserably.

According to Harmer (2001 : 272), the ability to speak fluently presupposes not only the knowledge of language but also the ability to process knowledge and information on the spot. It is evident that speaking skill is not merely a mastery over grammar; it relates more to the ability of the speaker to convey ideas, thoughts and emotions in proper context using proper language. In spite of this importance attached to speaking skills most language learners are of the opinion that one’s ability to speak fluently is a benchmark of one’s knowledge of language. They rate it over the skills involved in reading, writing or comprehending English language. Progress in learning is assessed in term of their accomplishment or ability to speak better.

## **3. Problems and Difficulties in Honing Speaking Skills : The Road Ahead**

The speaking difficulties encountered by students of English language learning across states include fear of mistake, shyness, anxiety and lack of confidence. While the causes are largely the same the solution lies in establishing an environment of support and

encouragement so that the shell is broken and they are liberated from the fear of speaking. The main purpose of teaching speaking skills is to build the communicative efficiency of students. It enables the learners to develop the interaction skills in the target language. Richards, Platt and Weber (as cited in Nunan 1999 : 226) defined the characteristics of communicative competence as “thus, to help students enhance their speaking skills, the teacher must help students improve their grammar, enrich their vocabulary and manage interactions in terms of who says what, to whom, when and about what. One needs to address the difficulties by formulating useful techniques and procedures so that one can achieve proficiency and accuracy”. If suitable speaking strategies are adopted, they can definitely develop and improve the skills of the learners. If students are equipped linguistically and analytically it increases the confidence level. As soon as the learner gets comfortable to use language to express meaning, he or she can safely assume that the first hurdle to speak fluent English has been crossed. Practice is crucial and integral part of language learning. Guidance for practice leads to effective improvement in speaking skills. If appropriate activities are planned and there is good supervisor of group work it can substantially enhance speaking skills and increases autonomy of learners. Keeping in mind the above difficulties it can be safely deduced that teaching speaking skills is a highly complex activity.

#### **4. Teaching Learning Process : Loopholes and Remedies**

An intensive research into the pedagogical transitions reveal that the difficulties encountered by learners and hiccups to oral proficiency has many loopholes. The teachers are usually bound by prescribed syllabus and the pressure of completing the syllabus prevents them from paying heed to interactive activities that help learners to master the speaking skills. Another major factor is poor vocabulary which led to compromised fluency in speaking in students. Fulcher (2003) rightly remarks “anyone who wishes to speak a second language must learn the grammar and vocabulary of the language and masters its sounds”. A word of caution here is that at times the dominating approach of the teacher hinders the process of learning good speaking skills. Another remedy that can be tried is to develop creativity in students because speaking is also an act of creativity. Instead of only focusing on one skill and one situation i.e. speaking in

classroom context little success can be achieved. However, if more authentic, interactive and intensive material is developed that can work in real life situations greater success can be achieved. Kang Shuman suggests the development of oral activities like newspaper reports or audio clips from radios as input for interaction. Learners are trained to listen to dialogues or monologues interpret, understand and analyze them and be motivated to discuss them in their own words. While watching the students can pay attention how people use language in real life situations, they will be exposed to different registers, accents, intonations, rhythms and stresses (Carrasquillo, 1994 : 140). In fact, it more important to know how to use a language then just knowing about its syntactical structure.

## **5. Story Telling : A Tool for Teaching Speaking**

Speaking has acquired great importance along the history of English teaching since it is referred as an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving and processing information (Brown 1994, Burns & Joyce, 1997). The mastering of speaking skills in English has been the priority for most students specially because English has become the lingua franca across the world. Social contact and interactions play a key function in communication because it is not what you say but how you say it and your paralanguage that conveys more than words. In order to increase the performance of the conversation skills diversity of approaches can be implemented. Instead of memorizing grammatical structures a good teacher should instigate learners to use the knowledge of the formal aspects of language to communicate successfully in real life situations. Developing good speaking skills through co-operative story telling is an effective technique. Telling a tale from memory instead of reading has known to reap great benefits. It is an age-old tradition to convey thoughts and teachings through oral transmission of words and has the potential of fostering emotional intelligence and also helps gain insight into human behavior. Story telling is also a great way to enrich vocabulary and to acquire new language structures. It helps lower anxiety levels and increases motivation to speak. Since story telling involves collaboration with peers it helps create meaningful contexts and enables the learners to decipher meanings in those contexts. Role Play, playing games, singing songs, oral reporting, small group discussions, giving speeches, reading

poetry, news reading are other interactive group activities that can help to strengthen speaking skills of the learners.

## **6. Impromptu Speaking Productive Skill to polish Conversation Skill**

Merriam Webster defines Impromptu as something made on the spur of the moment or improvised instantaneously. Collins English Dictionary explains impromptu as an act composed or uttered without previous preparation. Impromptu is applied to that which is spoken, made or done in the spur of the moment to suit the occasion and stressed spontaneity. Impromptu Speaking is a productive skill which enables a person to speak on the spot on any topic without pre-preparation. It is a skill that one may not be born with but can be acquired overtime and instills a sense of confidence. There is no need to learn or memorize any script and calls for spontaneity and natural ease. It does not give a prior topic nor prior time. The language used is generally simple and the vocabulary used is basic. The sentence structure is also elementary because it depends on basic knowledge of the subject like any other. Impromptu Speaking structure has an introduction, main points and conclusion. As soon as the topic is introduced, the thesis is stated and the main points are previewed. There is a gradual transition into the main point and it is explained at length. The point is asserted and a conclusion reached at. The main points are restated and reasserted towards the end. To make the impromptu speaking a success it is advised to go slow initially. Deep breathing and staying calm facilitate the process. Do not rush, make eye contact and avoid fiddling or showing signs of nervousness. Avoid jargons that you are unfamiliar with and remember to give a personalized touch. Use examples from real life experiences because it enables audience to see you as a real person. It also adds credibility to what you say. At an advanced level impromptu speaking can slide into presentations, debating, interviews and role plays.

## **7. Effective Presentation Skills: The Art of Overcoming Fear and Speaking Effectively**

The ability to talk fluently, present one's ideas is as important a skill as academic writing is in written communication. Planning constitutes a vital aspect of any form of public speaking. It gives you the essential confidence to connect with the audience. You need to

have the objective of your speaking task clear in your mind, you should have clarity whether it is a mock drill, a competition, a role play or a more interaction. You also need to know who are the recipients of your task i.e., the audience because everything you say or do depends on the audience. The venue, logistics, timing, and knowledge about the set-up is also important. Rehearsing is also essential to success in a speaking task. If the vocabulary you use is familiar it will prevent fumbling and give you an opportunity to rehearse difficult words. If you identify any error, you may make necessary modifications. Speed at which you speak, intonation and tone is also vital for communicating effectively. Pitch of your voice can also be used to add or remove emphasis. However, the golden rule for speaking may be summarized as under three reads : content, credibility and customization. Content is important because “Seeing is believing” so ensure that there is variety in the content and it contains enough interesting anecdotes to keep the audience interested. Efforts should also be made to keep the conversation interactive. This will make your presentation a stimulating experience instead of being a sedative. Credibility in presentation comes from good research. Never play with facts and figures because it adds authenticity to your presentation. Lastly, customize your content to suit your audience because it grabs attention.

## **8. Conquering Public Speaking Fear : It does not have to be Stressful**

Fear can cause stress in public speaking on one hand, on the other it can work like adrenalin in a person to be an effective speaker. Winston Churchill was once asked by a journalist the reason why he was sweating before a speech and he remarked that it was the sweat of perfection. There are several hidden causes for stress generated due to public speaking. Getting weak in knees, trembling voices, jumble thoughts are all signs of fear before public speaking however, if we follow the right guiding principles, adopt the right understanding and have a well chalked out plan of action it is not impossible to overcome the phobia of speaking. Another point that one might consider is that you don't have to be witty and brilliant to succeed even an individual with average talent prone to making mistakes can have the skills of public speaking. What is most important is that you give the listener some food for thought, something value.

Ultimate success comes if you are able to stimulate your audience to thinking and action what you also read is a purpose which suits the task. It has to be assured that the audience is always a diverseness with different set of opinions, judgments and reactions. There may be resentment or appreciation or both. So never attempt to get everyone to think well of you. The ultimate aim should be to give not get humility and humour add value to the speaker's conversation. Humility implies sharing with others your own frailties and weaknesses adding a human touch and creates an intimate environment. It makes you humble and credible on the audience feels a sense of connect and undercurrent of emotion if the speaker has humility.

## **9. Do's and Don'ts of a Good Conversation : Speech a form of Self-portrait**

Conversation is a form of self-expression. It gives the individual an opportunity to assert one's self telling the world just how we feel or "letting off steam". Conversation is not only pooling of information, sharing of interest and bringing together of ideas but also a vehicle for outlet of emotions. It is always good to sound cheerful, good humored, friendly and interested. If you put up a demeanor that gives an impression of being relaxed and not rigid it will spread an aura of positivity. You also need to be tactful and courteous if you want to cultivate the habits of good speaking. Never sound dogmatic and condescending lest you offend the listener. Being overly aggressive and argumentative may lead to casting a negative impression of you as a speaker. Similarly, if you are lifeless as a speaker and give a feeling of coldness the audience will be disinterested. Ego-centricism may cost you heavily if you try to impose the same on the listener. If you are constantly being a mumblor you send negative signals and do not create a good impression on the audience.

To sum up the five canons of persuasive speech, firstly be absolutely clear about the purpose and the proposal should align with the presentation. Secondly, prepare well like know the audience and ensure there is enough value in it for them; thirdly the problem should definitely be listed in the opening itself. Fourthly, explore the possibilities and close the gaps if any. Lastly, shows enthusiasm and handle questions pleasantly. Be mindful of the time too.



## 10. Conclusion

The study delves into the nuances of speaking skills and its importance. It adopts a communicative approach. In its attempt to enhance the speaking skills of the taught by the teacher. Special emphasis and attention have been paid to the problems of structural component of the difficulties faced in the teaching learning process. Inability to communicate effectively is the biggest hurdle for young graduates entering the corporate world. Various activities that help perpetuate healthy social interactions in diverse context have been discussed.

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