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Information Gap Activities to Enhance Speaking Skills of Elementary Level Students

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Abstract

Speaking is considered as one of the most essential means of effective communication. Teaching English-speaking skills to elementary level students at university is especially challenging. The most demanding issue for teachers is how to assist students to apply the knowledge learned in the class to real-life situations. The biggest problem with low-level proficiency students is that they lack motivation and confidence when they speak. They are usually very silent and passive. They hesitate to answer any question or take self-initiative when needed to participate in class activities. Second, most students lack the vocabulary. Students are not able to bring their ideas and also comprehend the information well because they have very limited vocabulary and are not able to pronounce the words well.

In many studies, students' speaking competences have been shown to be influenced by their exposure to the target language. Having this in mind, teachers should create and use activities that will be authentic, up-to-date, that will be fun and motivate students, so that they can actively be engaged in the learning process.

One of the speaking activities that promotes communication competences is Information Gap activities. In these activities, students have to use the target vocabulary to share the information. This paper aims at examining the methodological strategies that Information Gap technique provides and its effectiveness to increase speaking competence. The paper will describe the implementation of Information Gap activities to the elementary level students and its impact to the students' speaking performance. The Information Gap techniques are activities that are designed practicing on specific items of language and short sentences. The research results revealed that the use of Information Gap activities helped students improve their speaking skills. After the implementation of these activities, students felt more confident to speak in English; they were enthusiastic in doing the activities; and their motivation for learning and using the language improved.

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1. Introduction

Speaking is one of the most commonly used skills for communication. People use it on an everyday basis for exchanging their ideas, news and information. In recent years, English language teaching has focused on teaching the language rather than teaching about the language. The emphasis is not only on linguistic competence of the language learners but also on the development of their communicative ability (Asrobi, Seken, & Suarnajaya, 2013, p. 2). In order to speak the language fluently, students need more opportunities to practice the language and use it communicatively inside and outside the language classroom.

According to Stevick (in Fauziati, 2002, p. 126), speaking refers to the gap between linguistic expertise and teaching methodology. The students tend to measure their success in language learning based on how much they have advanced in their speaking. In order to make the students interested in learning English, especially in acquiring the speaking skill, teachers try to use various teaching techniques in order to suit the students' level of proficiency.

The concept of Information Gap is one of the aspects of communication in classroom. The Information Gap refers to structured output activities. Its concept is based on completing a task by completing missing information, such as conveying a telephone message, expressing an opinion, etc. It sets up practicing on specific items of language. It is more like drills than real communication. According to Penny Ur (1996), the activities on the information-gap principle make students participate actively in the process of learning. This will, in turn, results in increasing students' motivation to learn English much more enthusiastically.

2. Literature Review

The Information Gap is an optional approach to language teaching where activities engage students in 'real-world' contexts, using the four skills: reading, listening, speaking and writing. Among various activities in communicative approach, the "Information Gap" seems very beneficial for those who try to practice interaction in their classrooms. It is a type of activity which requires students to use the language to exchange some information and get their meaning across. It takes the students' attention away from the grammatical form and directs it toward meaning. In other words, it makes students accomplish a task through using the language while concentrating on meaning rather than structure of the language, so therefore learners learn by doing. According to Spratt, Mary., Pulverness, Alan., and Williams, Melanie (2005: 35), sometimes students speak more willingly in class when they have a reason for communicating, e.g. to solve a problem or to give other classmates some information they need. The following section includes some definitions presented by some of them. Swan (1985, p. 94) views Information Gap as "a basic concept in contemporary methodology." He argues that: "When one student talks to another, we feel that it is important that new information should be transmitted across the 'gap' between them". To accomplish this task, exercises are created in which half the class are provided with data to which the other half do not have access; those who lack the information then have to find it by using language in an appropriate way. As Penny Ur (1996) states, Information Gap is, "A particularly interesting type of task which is based on the need to understand or transmit information finding out what is in a partner's picture, for example". Larsen-Freeman (2000) claims that; an Information Gap exists when one person in an exchange knows something that the other person doesn't and they complete the task by giving each other a clue or solution to the problem.

Research carried out by Defrioka (2009) confirmed that the implementation of Information Gap activities has improved the students' interaction in speaking class. Student-centered classes included pair work and group work also contributed to advance the result. Many researchers have argued the advantages of applying Information Gap activities in teaching speaking. Another study conducted by Karimi (2010) revealed that the EFL learners' degree of learning was enhanced when they learn new words by the use of information-gap tasks in the classroom. Also, the learners in the experimental group – taught through the use of information-gap tasks – were gradually seen to become less dependent upon teachers' assistance (Watamni & Gholami, 2012). Another research conducted by Jondeya (2011), investigated the effectiveness of using Information Gap on developing speaking skills for eighth graders in Gaza governorate schools. For achieving this aim, she used the experimental approach. The results showed that there were significant differences in the mean scores between the pre- & post-speaking test of the experimental group in each level of speaking skills in favor of post-test.

In his research, Ur (1996) lists the characteristics of a successful speaking activity:

- **Learners talk a lot.** As much as possible of the period of time allotted to the activity is in fact occupied by learner talk.
- **Participation is even.** Classroom discussion is not dominated by a minority of talkative participants: all get a chance to speak, and contributions are fairly evenly distributed.
- **Motivation is high.** Learners are eager to speak: because they are interested in the topic and have something new to say about it, or because they want to contribute to achieving a task objective.
- **Language is of an acceptable level.** Learners express themselves in utterances that are relevant, easily comprehensible to each other, and of an acceptable level of language accuracy to achieving a task objective.

Information Gap activities involve all of the above mentioned criteria. The teacher's role is as a facilitator as he/merely explains the activity and reviews the vocabulary needed for the activity. Students are then on their own to accomplish the activity. Each student has a role and the activity cannot be accomplished without everyone's participation. Most of the Information Gap activities are very motivational because of the various tasks. Activities that require the solving of a problem are especially effective.

3. Participants

The participants in this study were SEEU undergraduate students, between the ages of 18-25. The total sample of participants consisted of 56 students, male and female, from different faculties (law, public administration, languages, and computer sciences) all in a multicultural classroom setting and are taking English classes as mandatory courses. Their level of proficiency is elementary. The study took place over a 10-week period of time.

4. Method

The study attempts to answer these questions:

- What is the students' perception on the Information Gap activities in the classroom?
- Can Information Gap activities foster learners' autonomy in academic settings?

Study data was collected through student questionnaires and results from the final oral exam. The questionnaires were distributed to the experimental group students. In order to see the effect of Information Gap on the speaking ability of EFL learners, quasi experimental method design was adopted. The study is conducted on a sample of two groups: an experimental group and a control group taught conventionally. A pre-test activity of speaking skills and post-test activity were given to assess the effect Information Gap activities had on the students' oral interaction. The first data (pre-test) scores were collected from students' first introduction class. Everyone was given three minutes to introduce themselves to their classmates. At this point, the teacher took notes on a speaking rubric for each student. The post-test results were collected after students were exposed to the Information Gap activities, again based on the same grading, speaking rubric. During the semester, the experimental group was given a topic to be discussed in the group. Students, in pairs, discussed the tasks assigned to them, for example: greetings, ordering food in a café, describing and finding places in town, finding the differences between two pictures or texts, solving a problem, etc. At the final exam, based on the topic of oral test or speaking, the students were asked to speak about their family or make a description about place and person in a maximum of three minutes.

A rubric for assessing the students' oral interaction was used to assess the students' performance before and after implementing Information Gap activities. The results were recorded and compared with the pre-test scores.

5. Findings

5.1. *What is the students' perception on the Information Gap activities in the classroom?*

Students' general impression was that Information Gap activity learning provides a relaxed atmosphere to promote target language use. Students' answers to the questionnaire revealed that they felt more motivated by the Information Gap activities which connect to real-life situations than the activities in the book. They enjoyed the

work group activities. Information Gap activities teaching offered the opportunity for ‘natural’ learning inside the classroom. Students were very happy to be able to use the vocabulary and grammar they know, rather than just follow the target language of the lesson. Students claimed that the use of Information Gap activities is a good way to improve English vocabulary and give them more chances to practice English. The Information Gap activity learning assisted learners to enjoy learning English. Students claimed that learning new vocabulary helps students become more fluent because the more words they know, the easier it is to express themselves. Acquiring new vocabulary make students feel that they are learning new things and not relying only on previous knowledge.

Table 1. Perception on the information gap activities in the classroom

Question	Yes	No
Information Gap activities offered the opportunity for ‘natural’ learning	83.5%	16.5%
Information Gap activity learning provides a relaxed atmosphere	68%	32%
I enjoyed work group activities	62.5%	37.5%
I improved my vocabulary	74%	26%
I had more chances to practice English in the classroom	66.5%	33.5%
It’s easier for me to express myself when I use Information Gap activities	87.5%	12.5%
I feel motivated learn in English	91.5%	8.5%
I feel confident to speak in English.	71%	29%
Information gap activities is more efficient than conventional technique	85%	15%

Based on the result of the data analysis presented from the oral grading rubric, it can be concluded that using the information gap technique is much better than conventional techniques for teaching speaking skills to elementary level students.

After the implementation of information gap activities, the students’ speaking skills had improved. The improvements could be seen from the result of the progress in the class activities and from the oral exam scores. Despite the fact that the students at the beginning were confused with information gap activities, they had more opportunities to speak and interact with their friends.

6. Conclusion

Based on the result of the data analysis it can be concluded that:

The improvement of the students’ speaking skills was highly related to the use of Information Gap activities in the teaching learning process.

First, information gap activities were conducted in pairs or in groups, which gave the students more opportunities to practice their speaking by communicating certain information to other friends. The activities required students to use the target language to fill in the gap. Hence, by using the target language continuously, the students felt motivated and confident to speak in English.

Second, they were able to comprehend the target language spoken by the teacher.

Third, the use of Information Gap activities in the speaking class also facilitated the students to interact with others by asking and giving the required information in the target language.

The improvement also reflected from the teaching learning process. The students were more active in the speaking class. They discussed well by actively asking and answering the questions. Besides this, the students also understood the classroom English very well. They were able to comprehend the target language spoken by the teacher.

Finally, based on the discussion and findings, it can be stated that the use of information gap activities is much more efficient than conventional techniques for teaching speaking skills to the elementary level students. Students were more eager to learn, and often excited, in contrast to those who only followed book activities. The approach is

especially beneficial in mixed ability classrooms, as it supports cooperative learning, where students working together can help each other.

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