**SPEAKING CONFIDENTLY IN ENGLISH: CAN ESL LEARNERS BE TRAINED?**

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**Introduction**

A key goal of learning English as a Second Language (ESL) is to be able to speak confidently. When a group of learners who had successfully completed the ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) intermediate level examination conducted by the University of Cambridge, were invited to join the compere group at their International School, their response was: “*We love to join, but we are scared*.”

Vasquez (2014) posits that anxiety and the lack of self-confidence resulting from poor preparedness makes learners reluctant to engage in interactions.  Self-confidence provides learners with motivation and enjoyment when they engage in real communication (Ebeta, 2008).

Scholars researching in ESL speaking have explored strategies that would help second language learners build confidence to speak. Henderson (1982) recommended Impromptu Speech (IS) as a tool to promote non-native speakers’ fluency in English. IS involves delivering a speech without advance preparation” (Trismianti, 2014,  para. 4). However,  Ajeng (2016) points out that in its true sense, an impromptu or extemporaneous speech requires a lot of pre-planning and pre- preparation. The objective of this study was to explore weather IS could help students develop their confidence to deliver a speech.

**Methodology**

Thirty one (31)  ESL learners (15 male and 16 female) aged 15-16 years, studying in Grade 11 at an English medium International School, who have successfully completed the ESOL Intermediate Level Examination volunteered to participate in the study.   They have studied in the English medium for eleven years, but data collected indicate that Sinhala is their home language and that they are rarely exposed to English outside of school.

An action research (AR) comprising three cycles (12 lessons) was implemented over a period of four weeks. The cycles were conceptualized in terms of the three Ps; Cycle I - Preparation, Cycle II - Practice and Cycle III- Presentation. Throughout the intervention, the learners received continuous, constructive criticism from the teacher-researcher (TR), peers and through self-reflection.

Experts’ (an independent observer was appointed to evaluate the learner performance together with this teacher-researcher) feedback, learner self-reflections and self-evaluations were obtained on five aspects of a speech which are: delivery, clarity, introduction, content and ending.

Following instruments were also used to obtain data:

* Critique sheet 1- IS evaluation used by the experts
* Critique sheet 2- self-evaluation - filled by the learners at the end of each cycle
* Learners’ Daily Diary Entries (LDDEs).

The learners were randomly placed in five groups of six students. Experts’ evaluations, learner-self evaluations and learner diary-entries were examined at the end of each cycle. The evaluation criteria included delivery, clarity, introduction, content and ending and feedback was given based on a Likert scale (where 1 = indicated ‘should improve very much’ and 5 indicated = ‘very good’).

**Results and Discussion**

The data was examined cycle by cycle, in order to ascertain whether IS a) can train and motivate learners who are reluctant and tongue-tied, to speak before a small audience, and whether IS b) enhances learner confidence in speaking.



Figure1: Comparison of learner self-evaluations - Cycles I,II& III

The mean scores at Cycle I show that, at the early stage of the IS intervention, learners believe that they are performing at near-average level in the five variants. However, examination of the LDDEs revealed that the number of negative comments exceed the number of positive comments - Positive Comments (PC): 108 (44%) vs. Negative Comments (NC): 140 (56%). NCs suggests poor confidence. The diary entries reveal the specific areas where learners felt they lacked confidence or were uneasy.

L2: *“I was feeling nervous ... …, I forgot the points that I remembered to tell. And I even forgot the ending thing….”*

L21: *I think even if difficult I must go because I can improve. But I feel very  nervous and it is difficult. I wassweating and I don’t think I canspeak in front of a crowd*.

Learners, even those who believe they ‘can improve’ are anxious and tense which, in turn, make them tongue-tied. The teacher and peer presence also had an impact on their confidence. Although the learners gradually became aware of their own lack of confidence and other related weaknesses, they did not seem to be aware of the aspects of speech they needed to improve.

Learner self-evaluations have changed during . This is perhaps a result of becoming aware of the complexities involved in becoming more critical of their own performances. LDDEs show - PCs 169 (68%) NCs 78 (32%). The increase in PCs from Cycle I to Cycle II suggests an increase in confidence and the diary entries reveal the reasons for these changes in their thinking.

*L8: When I went in front of the class today my heart rate went up. However, I amhappy with the way my speech finished. What Madam has taught us helped me.*

*L30:   I have improved a lot. It is great to learnabout giving a speech. Now Iso many words I can use in my speech. I am not afraid to come to the front now.*

The decrease in physical manifestations of nervousness shows that the students have gained confidence. Data revealed that gaining new knowledge and opportunities in a non-threatening and positive classroom atmosphere has the ability to increase the learners’ level of confidence, enthusiasm and their willingness to speak in English before a small audience.

By the end of Cycle III, learner self-evaluations on all five variants have declined. It can be surmised that with the knowledge of techniques and competence gained, learners have become more self-critical. The marks awarded by the two experts confirms this. Figure 2 is a comparison of the mean marks awarded by the experts and the students’ self-evaluations at the end of each cycle.

Figure 2: Comparison of expert and learner self-evaluations – Cycle I, II, and III

It is interesting to note that while the expert evaluations increase from cycle to cycle indicating an improvement in the five areas, the self-evaluations decrease. Since the LDDEs show a progressive gain in confidence it can be inferred that development in knowledge and competencies is accompanied by an increase in confidence.

Table 1: Numbers of PCs and NCs Reflections in LDDEs - Cycles I, II, and III

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Comments** | **Cycle I** | **Cycle II** | **Cycle III** |
| Positive | 108(44%) | 169(68%) | 479(83%) |
| Negative | 140(56%) | 78(32%) | 100(17%) |

The increase in the number of PCs and the decrease in the number of NCs as well as the changes in the ratio between positive and negative reflections in each cycle suggest a significant change in the level of confidence with time.  An examination of the selected LDDEs at cycle III supports this position.

*Introduce these quites. Where are they from? What are they about?*

*L13: I feel I have improved. I know how to find words connected to the topic and how to organize the speech. I am happy.*

*L1:  I am happy that everybody listened to my speech. I felt great about it. I had a good beginning and an ending.*

*L14: If I am to become a good speaker there are so many points to improve. Now I know how to speak in front of the class. I feel confident now.*

Familiarity with the techniques of IS, awareness of how they improved and feelings of satisfaction have promoted learner confidence and create an increased desire to speak in English.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study shows that when intermediate-level adolescent learners in an English speaking environment integrate IS techniques they gradually become competent public speakers. It has also demonstrated that IS is an enjoyable and novel strategy that can motivate adolescent learners who are anxious, reluctant and tongue tied, to speak before a small audience. Furthermore, the process of learning IS sills made the learners more self- critical and self reflective.

IS can be used with adolescents to improve confidence in speaking. However, strategies such as IS demand substantial and sustained teacher preparation and, paying individual attention to students in large classes is difficult.Learners liked the relaxed atmosphere in the class as it reduced student anxiety and facilitated learning. It is recommended that teachers create a tolerant, informal and friendly environment which enables adolescent learners to feel free to express themselves.

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