Developing speaking skills with games:
towards a co-operative learning approach

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Abstract

This study takes a student-centred, co-operative approach to developing ESL speaking skills, with the pupils playing an active role to work together and lead the activities. Using data gathered from observation and interviews, the study aims to investigate how speaking can be improved from word level to a meaningful conversation with a co-operative approach using games. The results, together with the pupils' positive response to a co-operative approach to developing speaking skills with games, support the need to organise learning activities in a way that pupils interact and complete tasks together, with a shift away from the dependence on the teacher. The study concludes with suggestions about how the approach of developing speaking skills with co-operative learning through games can be incorporated with teaching for promoting continuous progress in speaking.

Keywords

Co-operative learning, learner-centred approach, ESL speaking, games

Introduction

Some pupils are willing to speak English, but they do not seem to know how to initiate or develop a conversation and can only answer simple questions, often with isolated words. It seems that this is because they lack the opportunities to speak English and build on what they have learnt, and more importantly, they rely too much on the teacher when they speak and rarely get to interact and co-operate with their peers to complete speaking tasks on their own.

1 Background

The study was conducted through a volunteering group running ESL speaking activities for grade three and four pupils in a primary school in Hong Kong. There were 10 pupils in our speaking group. All pupils joining our speaking groups are from working class and some are new immigrants from mainland China, with a relatively low standard of English.

As the speaking group was conducted outside class, we aimed to provide an English-speaking environment where children can develop their speaking skills in a relaxing and interesting way. Games were chosen as the pupils expressed that they enjoyed playing games very much; therefore, the speaking activities were designed in a way that the pupils get to speak up and exchange their ideas in order to play the games.

1.1 Idea of co-operative learning

Co-operative learning, one of the learner-centred approaches for learning has been adopted.

> Co-operative learning is a group learning activity organised so that learning is dependent on the socially structured exchange of information between learners in groups and in which each learner is held accountable for his or her own learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others. Olsen and Kagan (1992, p.8)

It was hoped that in getting the pupils to speak and do things together, they will be getting used to interacting with the others and ultimately be moved away from the dependence on the teacher as they speak.

1.2 Problems

Co-operative learning was a completely new idea to the pupils as they rarely talked to each other in English, let alone doing group work in English. Because of the lack of chance to communicate in English, the pupils did not have the vocabulary and skills to establish a conversation with the others.

2 Approach of study

2.1 Observation of team-games tournament

The Team-Games Tournament approach to co-operative learning involves three steps, starting with input from the teacher, then group work, followed by a tournament (Slavin, 1990).

When the pupils worked together for the game, the volunteer teacher walked around and offered help only if necessary. The instructor tried not to intervene but acted as an observer during the game and let the pupils run the game and do most of the talking.

2.2   Interview with pupils

The pupils were interviewed informally for their views at the end of the third week.

3   Pupils' performance and discussion

3.1   Interview with pupils

The pupils enjoyed both the games and the initial learning very much, possibly because the goals of learning were made clear to them. They also said that sometimes they also have games in their English lessons, but always led by the teacher. It seems that pupils had gained a lot of self-satisfaction and motivation for learning when they were given the opportunities to co-operate and take up more responsibilities in the speaking activity.

3.2   Pupils' development of speaking skills

Some core elements of co-operative learning could be observed as the pupils develop their speaking skills:
(1)   Positive interdependence
(2)   Face-to-face promotive interaction
(3)   Individual and group accountability
(4)   Interpersonal and group skills
(5)   Group processing
(Marzono, Pickering & Pollock, 2001, p.85-86)

4   Implications

Learning speaking through games seems to be an effective way to develop speaking skills for young learners. Not only are games an important part of their everyday life, the game setting also allows children to co-operate and interact, a natural way for developing speaking skills. When the children speak to prepare and run the games, they are not just answering questions or asking questions, but interacting with the others by making suggestions, responding to others' suggestions, asking questions and evaluating the answers from the others.

5   Suggestions

The speaking activities can be easily incorporated into the English classes. While it might not be possible to have student-led games and discussion in every lesson, they can be added towards the end of a learning unit as a consolidation.

In addition, the teacher might also consider reflecting on the group work experience with the pupils. In this way, co-operative learning takes place not only among the pupils, but is extended to an exchange of ideas between the pupils and the teacher, a means to develop interactive communication.

Conclusion

Through the co-operative approach to developing speaking skills with games, pupils learn not asking and answering questions mechanically, but interacting with the others and applying what they have learnt to ask and answer questions intelligibly responding to the audience's needs. At present the young learners still need to be taught the phrases and expressions for the interaction, which explains why the theme of our speaking activities is "*towards* co-operative learning". It is hoped that the pupils will, in the end, develop their speaking *through* co-operative learning as they continue to learn and become better speakers.

References

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Appendix. Learning outcomes of speaking tasks.

	Grade three	Grade four
Week one	1)<u>Describe</u> the action shown on a picture using **one word.** 2)<u>Discuss</u> and decide the order in which the pictures are shown using **simple words.** 3)<u>Respond</u> to others using **"yes" and "no".**	1)<u>Discuss</u> and decide the order of the objects put inside the bag using **simple words**. 2)Touch an object and <u>describe</u> it using **one adjective.** 3)Give <u>instruction and response</u> using **one word.** 4)<u>Respond</u> to others using **"yes" and "no".**
Week two	1)<u>Suggest an action</u> to be demonstrated in the game. 2)<u>Ask questions and describe</u> the action demonstrated using **one sentence.** 3)<u>Show agreement and disagreement</u> to ideas using **set phrases.**	1)<u>Ask questions and compare</u> two things using **one sentence.** 2)<u>Respond</u> to answers using **set phrases and comparatives.**
Week three	1)<u>Suggest an action</u> to be shown in the game and <u>where it takes place</u>**.** 2)<u>Ask questions and describe the action and place</u> shown on a picture using **one sentence.** 3)<u>Give tips</u> to help the others make a better guess.	1)<u>Suggest</u> an item to be compared among the representatives from each group. 2)<u>Ask questions and compare more than two things</u> **using superlatives at sentence level**. 3)Give <u>simple instruction and response</u> using **set phrases**.