The speaking skill

Introduction

English today is believed to be the most influential medium in bridging the global communication. A large proportion of learners in the world study English hard in order to communicate with native speakers or speakers of other languages. Learning a new language involves skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Among the 4 skills, speaking is said to be the most direct way to talk to people . As Yunzhong (1985, cited in Hughes, 2002, 133) states, many language teachers consider speaking as the most effective means of gaining a fluent reading knowledge and correct speech as the foundation for good writing. Those teachers also argued that during all one's life one shall probably talk more than one shall write. Therefore, to a language teacher, teaching speaking well is often a valued issue in the field of ESL/ EFL.

In Taiwan, English teaching has been implemented to all 3rd – 6th graders in primary schools from 2005. English for those students is a foreign language and English class takes two periods in a week during school semester. According to the Guidelines of the Grade 1-9 Integrated Curriculum (2003) set by the Ministry of Education in Taiwan, the main goals of English teaching in primary schools are to develop students' basic communication abilities and their interests in learning English. Therefore, English teaching emphasize more on listening and speaking than on reading and writing in primary schools. For the past few years, however, many English teachers noticed that some students are good at speaking within a classroom situation yet have problems in real world conversation outside the classroom while others have anxieties or difficulties of speaking out what they want to express in public.

To ensure that English education in Taiwan primary schools is a success, the above mentioned issues should be valued.

This paper set out to describe and analyze speaking skills as well as compare and contrast different authors' points of view toward it. The first section is concerned with the history and characteristics of English speaking and this is followed by the contrast between spoken and written English. In the subsequent section, teaching speaking and its constraints in Taiwan EFL classrooms will be discussed. Knowing students' speaking problems and adopting useful methods to release their learning anxiety and improve their speaking abilities are in the final section of this essay.

Section 1 Speaking Skill

1-1 Historical Background

As Bygate (2001, edited in Carter and Nunan, 2001, 14) states, speaking has occupied a peculiar position throughout the history of language teaching and has begun to emerge as a branch of teaching, learning and testing for only two decades. Bygate concludes that there are three reasons for this. First, the traditional grammar translation methods still have a huge influence in language teaching. Second, tape-recording has been sufficiently cheap and practical to enable the widespread the study of talk and use of tape recorders in classrooms only since the mid-1970s. Third, most language teaching approaches exploited oral communication as only part of their methodology and most of the focus in teaching oral skills was limited to pronunciation. Until recently, speaking has become a special area in language teaching.

It is often said that people undervalued the skill of speaking or communication because they take it for granted. In the next subsection, we can see the nature and features of the speaking skill.

1-2 Characteristics of Speaking

Bygate quotes from Levelt (1989, edited in Carter and Nunan, 2001, 16) that speech production involves four major processes: conceptualisation, formulation, articulation, and self-monitoring. These processes happen very fast and the former three are more or less automatic in L1 speakers. According to Bygate (2001, edited in Carter and Nunan, 2001, 16), speaking skills are also affected by the context. Speaking is reciprocal, people can respond to each other immediately. He also indicated that people can participate in the same oral interaction except the varieties of equal speaking rights. Moreover, speaking is physically situated face-to-face interaction and speakers have to decide on their message without taking time to check it over.

In order to make the characteristics of speaking more clearly, we contrast it with writing in the subsequent paragraph.

1-3 Differences between Spoken and Written Language

Spoken language and written language differ from each other in some respects. As Hussain (2009) indicates, no punctuation is needed in spoken language because people could use facial expressions, gestures and body language to express meanings while talking. Written language,

however, is ineffective and handicapped without proper use of punctuation. Hussain notes that rules of spelling and grammar are often ignored in spoken

language. On the other hand, written language highly focuses on correct spelling and grammar rules.

Hughes (2002) also provides a summary of some contrasts between the spoken and the written forms language. The first table bellowed represents how the two forms are generated and the second one deals with attitudes to the two forms:

Table 1 Aspect of production (Hughes 2002, 10)

Spoken Language	Written Language
dynamic	static
oral/ aural	visual/ motoric
transient	non-transient
unplanned	planned
context dependent	decontextualised

Table 2 Social aspects (Hughes 2002, 11)

Spoken Language	Written Language
primary	secondary
rhetorical	logical
stigmatised	prestigious
informal	formal
inter-personal	contractual
locus of change	conservative

While talking, neither the content nor the amount of what people are going to say is known in advance. Written forms of language, nevertheless, are already there for the readers. Furthermore, there are usually means to correct one's speech as well as get feedback from others immediately. However, we need to proofread our written work carefully before submitting it.

1-4 Spoken Vocabulary and Spoken Grammar

One of the first corpora to target only spoken language was the CANCODE (Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English) corpus which ' aims to gather data representative of specific contexts, both professional

and social, in which unrehearsed, non-formal spoken language is produced' (Thornbury and Slade, 2006, 41). CANCODE was collected in 1998 under the direction of Mike McCarthy and Ronald Carter and has generated many researches on spoken language. In the use of spoken vocabulary, Thornbury and Slade note that corpus data showing, for example, nice and[]adjectives[] is used more frequent than good and []adjectives[], and good andtends to combine with negative adjectives while nice andcombines with favourable and unfavourable adjectives alike.

Spoken grammar means language features to be used in daily conversations or informal situations. As Paterson (2009) states, short questions are good ways of making conversation. Short questions are those which do not contain a question word or a verb, for examples, ' Any questions?', ' One more time?' Another feature of spoken grammar is vague language. ' Good English-speakers are vague English-speakers!' (Paterson, 2009). Examples of useful vague language are ' He is going to buy cigarette or something.' or ' Is that song's name " Dirty" or anything like that?' Other examples of spoken grammar from CANCODE are:

Ellipsis— ' Richard can play the drum, and Tina the piano.'

Heads— ' All my sisters over there, we all went to pub together.'

Tails— ' He's funny, he is!'

Section 2 Teaching Speaking

2-1 A History

This subsection provides an historical overview in the teaching of speaking. The Grammar-translation approach which is one of the most traditional teaching methods has been in use since the early 19th century. During the instruction, teachers use mother tongue to teach target language. The Grammar-translation approach focuses on learning the rules of grammar and speaking fluency is not emphasized in language classroom. Because it is believed to be unnatural (the natural order of learning both mother tongues and foreign languages is usually said to be listening, speaking, reading and writing), the main stream of teaching speaking turns to a more ' learning-through-conversation' way—the Direct Method.

According to Wikipedia (the free on-line encyclopedia), the Direct Method of teaching foreign languages, sometimes also called the Natural Method, refrains from using the learners' native language and uses only the target language. The Direct Method has developed since 1850s and it focuses on question-answer patterns. The main objectives are to practice daily conversations and to improve oral fluency.

In the 1950s and 1960s, a similar teaching approach—the Audio-lingual Method was widely used in the USA and other countries.

' Like the Direct Method, the Audio-lingual Method advised that students be taught a language directly, without using the students' native language to explain new words or grammar in the target language. However, unlike the Direct Method, the Audio-lingual Method didn't focus on teaching vocabulary. Rather, the teacher drilled students in the use of grammar' (Wikipedia, the

free on-line encyclopedia). The Audio-lingual Method is base on behaviorist theory which believes that language learning is a process of forming good habit and mistakes, the bad habit, should be avoided. Because it was little concerned with language beyond the sentence level and conversation was simply a way of dressing up pattern practice drills (Thornbury and Slade, 2006, 251), the Audio-lingual Method fell from popularity and then the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Method arose.

The origins of CLT are many, one of them is that teachers noticed their students did not learn enough authentic language and knew how to communicate in real situations. Under this circumstance, in the 1970s, this approach developed and became popular afterwards. In the view of CLT, language is a tool to express human thinking and the main purpose of language is to communicate with people. Example activities used in CLT classroom are information gaps, role play, surveys, interviews and pair / group works. Through these activities, Students practice real-life conversations, for example, buying goods in the store or going to see a doctor.

During the 1980s, the task-based language teaching, which is considered to be the strong version of CLT, became a new teaching method that has been widely used in language classrooms. Task-based Learning (TBL) is an approach of language learning that involves doing tasks, for example, eating in a restaurant, asking for directions or hunting a job by using the target language. In the language classroom, TBL provides for natural learning, it is mainly focused on meaning rather than form. As Willis (1996) states, there are six types of task for TBL: Listing and/or brainstorming; Ordering and

sorting; Matching; Comparing; Problem-solving; Sharing personal experiences and story telling. The research findings indicate that because students are free to use what they want for learning and the tasks are familiar to them, they are more likely to participate in and benefit from these activities.

2-2 Fluency vs. Accuracy

Discussions about fluency and accuracy–which one should come first or which one should be put more emphasis on–are always hot issues in ESL/ EFL teaching. Speaking fluency is the ability to communicate with people successfully. Speaking accuracy, on the other hand, is the ability to produce right sentences in any kind of situation. In a language classroom, speaking activities which focus on fluency require students to get things done smoothly through conversation while those which focus on accuracy require them to use correct vocabulary and grammar in dialogues. Normally, more traditional teachers as well as exam-focused educational systems have students practice a great deal of oral drills. In terms of teaching methods, they are more like in favour of the Audio-lingual Method. The users of CLT and TBL approaches, that are also mentioned in the former part, favour fluent speaking instruction instead.

Both accuracy and fluency in language speaking are important for learners. They may need to speak accurately to pass oral tests, yet they can express their own ideas fluently if they are allowed to speak without being afraid of making mistakes. British Council on-line article — ' Accuracy vs. Fluency' (2009) suggests that young students need a balance of fluency and accuracy activities to learn English effectively. As a language teacher, we should try to

put both types in our lesson plans and use them flexibly according to students' needs as well as learning objectives.

2-3 English Speaking Education in Taiwan Primary Schools

According to English Language Ability for primary school level set by the Ministry of Education in Taiwan, the speaking competence indicators are as the bellowed table which is translated by Yu-Ming Chen (2004), Language Arts Learning Area Advisor of Compulsory Education Advisory Group, Bureau of Education, Kaohsiung, Taiwan.

Table 3

English language abilities: (2)Speaking — elementary school level

2-1-1 Being able to read the alphabets in correct pronunciation.

2-1-2 Being able to read common basic words correctly.

2-1-3 Being able to say simple sentences in correct stresses

and intonations.

2-1-4 Being able to

participate oral

practices in class.

2-1-5 Being able to

introduce oneself in

simple English.

2-1-6 Being able to

use simple classroom

expressions.

2-1-7 Being able to

use basic social

manner terms.

2-1-8 Being able to

do simple asking,

answering, and

stating.

2-1-9 Being able to

chant simple songs

and rhymes.

2-1-10 Being able to

make simple English

speech by way of

pictures.

2-1-11 Being able to

do simple role plays

according to pictures

and suggestions.

2-1-12 Being able to

participate simple

children plays.

English teaching has been implemented to the 3rd graders and up since the
academic year 2005 in Taiwan. The proportion of using target language and
mother tongue in classrooms varies all the time according to teacher's
personal belief or local government's policy toward it. During my past few
years of teaching, some teachers insist on ' Whole Language' approach, that
is, ' No Chinese' in English class while others hold the view that mother
language do help learners to comprehend foreign one. Region is also
believed to be one factor of this phenomenon. Normally, school teachers in
urban areas use more L2 than L1 in classes since their students have
relatively more chances to expose to English learning environment. On the
other

hand, children who live in rural areas have limited resources of English
education; therefore, their teachers use more L1 to help them understand
target language. To my own experience, I usually use very simple instruction
in English to the beginners. Later on, as long as students become more
familiar with English speaking situations, I gradually increase the quantity

and the difficulty of L2 to have them being equipped with the speaking ability well.

Although English speaking education in Taiwan, as Table 3 lists, only requires primary level children to have basic conversations and simple expressions in English,

many teachers I know noticed that nearly half of the students from each class have either of the following two problems: 1. Be good at speaking within a classroom situation yet have problem in authentic interactions outside the classroom; 2. Having anxiety about speaking foreign language in front of people but feel alright to speak it to the teacher in private. In order to solve the problems or, at least, to release the predicament, my peer teachers and I often tried to create a more real situation like and a more comfortable learning environment for children. In my personal experience, I prefer to have students to collaborate with others; therefore, I adopted TBL method in my class at times.

One of the TBL activities was undertaken while the topic is about food and drinks. The whole class in the 4th grade was divided into 6 groups of either 4 or 5. Each group received a small whiteboard and markers and every student in each group needed to say out loud the name of food or drinks in turn and the next student wrote it down on the whiteboard. They were asked to produce as many words as they can within 5 minutes and if someone got stuck, the others could help certainly. When time was up, the leader and a assistant from each group came to the front to show what they have had on the whiteboard. The rest of the class checked all the vocabulary together

and note down the ones they have not learned before. In the end of each group's show time, any of the students can say sentences by using the mentioned words. Once a student makes a correct sentence, he/ she earns one point for the team. This was then followed by serious of relevant speaking presentations and exercises.

During the task, students used target language naturally either in spoken or written form. The topic related to their daily life and, therefore, they became more interested and motivated. Students as the center of learning apparently considered the task to be rather meaningful than merely repeated drill practices. Moreover, working in groups encouraged the spirit of cooperation. This kind of activity, however, is relatively time consuming and classroom management faces difficulties during the task which is carried on in groups at he same time. Hence, it may not be taken as normality in classroom activities.

Section 3 How to Improve Students' Speaking Ability?
3-1 Knowing Students' Anxiety to Speak an Foreign language
Although English teaching is now implemented to all 3rd -6th graders in Taiwan, it was found that some students began to learn English earlier at bilingual kindergartens or English language institutes. Students' levels are actually different form one to another in the same grade. Some students may be able to speak English fluently because they learn it from native speakers or their parents spend a lot of time practicing it together with them. However, others may not be so lucky. They often feel frustrated or even shame if they can not speak English as good as their peers in the class. This might cause anxiety to those students and it is also a challenge for

teacher whether they are able to balance their teaching approaches according to deferent levels of learners.

It is said that parts of the speaking anxiety come from students' confusion to classroom instructions. When children encounter a new language, they will try to make sense of it by recalling the schema which helps them to understand the language. At this point, the teachers should try to support their students by making it easy to connect speech with meaning. As Cameron (2001) concludes, meaning must come first while learning the spoken language; if children do not understand what a teacher said, they are not able to learn it. In the final subsection, some meaningful and joyful activities are provided to help young learners to learn speaking.

3-2 Teaching Speaking Through Games to Young Learners

Teacher-centered teaching can often destroy children's motivation rather than enlighten them while learner-centered activities will be more interesting and require active participation from learners (Cameron, 2001). This viewpoint is as well applied to my teaching experience. During amusing activities, especially more exciting or challenging games, my students can shout the correct sentences out loud without hesitation. The slow learners and even the quietest one can fulfill the speaking task too and forget the anxiety totally. The speaking games frequently adopted in my class are ' Big wind blows', ' Heart attacks', ' Role play', ' Roll the dice and say', ' I went to the supermarket', ' Bingo', ' Whisper', ' Mime and say', ' Guessing game', ' Sentence hangman', ' Guess who', ' Tongue twister'.

Conclusion

In the beginning of this paper we have try to outline the speaking skills by reviewing the literatures. We describe and analyze the nature of speaking as well as contrast it with written language. In the second section, the history of speaking teaching, from the most traditional method to the more communicative approach, is introduced chronologically. Subsequently, there is a debate on whether accuracy or fluency is more important in oral output. In the last part of this paper, we find out, discuss and try to provide solution to the English speaking learning problems exit in Taiwan EFL classroom.

Students may feel nervous in speaking a foreign language due to lacking of confidence or having pressure to speak loudly. Language teachers should spot this and do their best to create an easy and cheerful learning environment for their pupils. One of the strategies to help students, especially young learners, to speak English well is to adopted relative games in class. However, we need to choose suitable games for children rather than merely play them for fun, as Richards and Renandya (2002, 202) suggests, ' Classroom activities should be selected on the basis of problems learners experience with different aspects of speaking and the kinds of interaction the activities provide.'