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Factors Affect Students’ Oral Communication in English Classes: The Case of Grade 10 Students at Selamber Secondary School in Focus

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess factors affecting students’ oral communication in English classes in the Case of Grade 10 Students at Selamber Secondary School. The study involved the school principals, six English language teachers who have been teaching the language in Selamber Secondary School, and 225 students who have been learning at the same school in southern Ethiopia, Selamber town. The data for the study were gathered through questionnaire for 225 students, interview with teachers, classroom observation and elicitation technique was employed so as to see the actual happening and to triangulate the findings of the various analyses applied. In this regard, the results of the study showed as follows: The teachers and the students who were interviewed understood the benefits of sharing ideas through oral communication so as to develop the students’ target language learning in spite of the fact that the number of the students in each class was large, and the students had poor background knowledge of English. The classroom observations proved that the number of students in each class was large; the desks were fixed; some teachers followed up and monitored their learners while working the activities in groups; the students frequently used their mother tongue rather than English during group discussions; the teachers did not set a time limit for the discussions, and there was little practice of evaluating the oral lessons after learning.

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Factors, Students’ Oral Communication, English Classes, Grade 10 Students, Secondary School.

Introduction

Humans are social being who are in continuous communication and connected interaction with each other and it is essential for situation in which students can face real communication in foreign language (Dorelley, 2005). Most classroom activities should involve communication of real classroom interaction. Teaching-learning process in language classroom requires oral communication. However, as the researchers’ long time experience as a teacher and

education sector supervisor indicated, Selamber secondary school lacks much yet to do to upgrade the students ‘oral communication. In this regard, some writers like Long and Porter (2017), as quoted in Berhanu (2000:26), argue that one of the main reasons for low achievement by many language learners is simply that they are not given the opportunity to practice the new language. Instead, their teacher sets the same instructional pace and content for everyone by lecturing, explaining a grammatical point, leading drill work or asking questions of the whole class. Since teacher-

fronted lessons favor a highly conventionalized variety of conversation, one rarely found them outside classrooms and they may also limit the quality of talk students engage in. This is also the case at Selamber secondary school, which is found in the capital of Kucha people, in South Ethiopia.

A basic challenge to language teaching is to provide learners with plenty of opportunities for using the target language communicatively. However, by simply using language, learners are not able to develop their oral communication continuously (Skehan, 2002). Indeed, language use certainly needs to be practiced in classroom pedagogy in combination with a focus on meaning, instead of form. Second language development involves fostering learners' awareness of the structural or grammatical features of the target language so that they are able to associate those features with their functional usage, which in turn seems very questionable at rural areas like Selamber. The use of both forms and functions properly help for establishing meaningful communication. This, as a result, calls for the implementation of diverse approach to language teaching whereby teachers working as controllers, facilitators, and assessors should adopt a diversity of roles and use a wide selection of activities ranging from accuracy to more meaning-focused interactional tasks through which learners are pushed to interact purposefully with one another.

As Meher *et al.*, (2012), effective oral communication is vital and compulsory in a language classroom in order to perform better in classroom based language learning activities. Good sides of learning language in oral communication perspective are to enable learners to have a very strong ability in self-introduction, classroom presentations, and future professional work environments and to encourage communicative efficiency in varieties of ways. But, nowadays in Ethiopia, let alone talking about secondary school students, whose English background usually goes down, even University and college students lack these features.

Oral communication is the ability to communicate with others to give and exchange information and ideas such as asking questions, giving directions, coordinating tasks, explaining for and persuading persons. As Morreol (1988) states that oral communication includes the ability to speak and listen effectively for purpose of informing, persuading, entertaining, and relating. However, as Shumin (1997) argued that learning to speak a foreign language requires more than knowing its grammatical

and semantic rules, but speaking a language is especially difficult for language learners because effective oral communication requires the ability to use the language appropriately in social interaction. Learners must also acquire the knowledge of how native speakers use the language.

Besides, Holbrook, Hiken and Taylor (1980) stated that language development has largely been neglected in the classroom as a major reason for the inhibition of students' ability to reason and to forecast the progress from lower to higher grades. English has been used as a medium of instruction at primary, secondary and tertiary levels (Monghode *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, this study was aimed to investigate factors affecting the students' oral communication in English classes: the case of grade 10 students of Selamber Secondary school.

According to (Emanuel, 2010; Yulia, 2013), communication is behavioral that always the human race really thinks the past in the present and plans for the future. It helps people to manage relationship with others, to interact with, interpret, and interact with the environment. For students, communication is essential to understand spoken utterances and give appropriate answers. Effective oral communication is learned skill and it is started with understanding, reading, writing, and then presenting. However, as Reddy (2015), many people lack the ability to communicate in English and hence, often, suffer from inferiority complex. They fall back and lag behind others in this competitive world and often fail to reach the pinnacle of their correcting to the lack of oral communication skills.

As Barbos (2013) asserts in the context of learning and acquiring English as a second or foreign language, several factors have been attributed to success or failure of learners in attention to communicative competences. Students who have so much difficulty with their communication skill in English language may not function effectively not only in English language but also on accordance to other subjects.

One of the main reasons for low achievement by many language learners is simply that they are not given the opportunity to practice English language. Instead, their teacher sets the same instructional pace and content for everyone by lecturing, explaining a grammatical point, or asking questions to the whole class. Since teacher-fronted lessons favor a highly conventionalized variety of conversations, one rarely found them outside classrooms and they may also limit the quality of talk students engage in (Berhanu, 2000).

The oral process of learning English in the classroom also shows lack of students in communicating in the classroom when the teacher asks the students to express their ideas or to make conversation. The problem might come from students' lack of confidence, fear, lack of interest and teachers teaching methodology. Therefore, this study attempted to investigate factors that affect Selamber Secondary school grade 10 students' oral communication in English class.

Objectives of the study

General objective

The general objective of this study was to assess factors that affect the students' oral communication in English class at grade 10 Selamber secondary school.

Specific objectives

Specifically, the study attempted:

1. To assess the teaching- learning process of English classes at grade 10 Selamber Secondary school.
2. To identify problems of the students related to oral communication in English classes grade 10 Selamber Secondary school.
3. To suggest possible solutions to the way grade 10 students of Selamber Secondary school improve their English oral communication.

Significance of the study

The findings of this study will help teachers to become aware of and work intensively on common and persistent sources of trouble for students which create misunderstandings during conversations. It also helps teachers to provide students with more opportunities for classroom interaction. Besides, students will have a great deal of confidence in developing oral communication in English classes and outside.

Scope of the study

This study was delimited to assess factors affecting the students' English oral communication at Selamber Secondary school. English teachers, grade 10 students and directors were used as a source of the data.

Materials and Methods

In this section, the research design, methodology, the research settings, sources of data, target population, instruments of data collection, and sampling techniques were presented.

Research design

Research design is a logical sequence that connects empirical data to the study's initial research questions and ultimately to its conclusions (Mertiler, 2005).

In order to describe or delineate, analyze and specify naturally occurring phenomena without experimental manipulation, the researcher used descriptive survey method (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989). It was used to establish the existence of phenomenon by explicitly describing them. In addition, in order to have a clear concept of the nature of the problem, descriptive survey method was employed for this study because it appears suitable for refining research tools, such as questionnaire, classroom observation, and semi-structured interview.

Participants of the study

The total populations of this study were grade 10 students, teachers and directors of Selamber secondary school. The total number of students was 225 who were learning in three sections. There were 135 male and 90 female students at Selamber Secondary School. There were 6 English teachers, one school director, one unit leader, and one deputy director.

Sample size and sampling techniques

Among 225 students, 30 top ten students from three sections (i.e. section A-C) were used for distributing questionnaire, and 6 students, 3 from each class were selected using purposive sampling technique for interview. These students were the three top ranking students who were selected to keep the quality of interview data. All six English teachers were selected using purposive sampling technique for the interview due to their limited number in the school.

Data collection instrument

In order to collect relevant data from respondents, the researcher used classroom observation, questionnaire, and interview.

Questionnaire

Questionnaire was used to gather data from large population in a very limited period of time. Two types of questionnaires were used to collect data for the study. The types of questionnaire had two items, which were a mixture of closed- ended and open –ended were set in English. Some of the items were adapted from Schweers (1999) in a way that suits the purpose of the study. The students' questionnaire was intended to be used to elicit pertinent data mainly on two important issues: the attitude of students and teachers towards oral English communication to their actual classroom use of the language.

The administration of the students' questionnaire was conducted in my own presence. Students were given ample time to read each item at their own convenience and fill in their genuine responses appropriately. The researcher's presence had helped them to clear up some of the misunderstandings that they encountered while completing the questionnaire. Enough elaboration was given for the respondent students so as to make the questionnaire items clear. All the questionnaires administered to students and teachers were filled out and returned.

Interview

Unstructured in-depth interview questions were set to solicit pertinent data from teachers. Unstructured interview was preferred because it is thought that it gives a wider freedom to the interviewees to express their views and beliefs (Shohamy and Seliger, 1989; Wallace, 1998). The interview was felt to be suitable for the study for two main reasons. First, it was aimed to generate in depth information from the interviewees on matters related to the use and non-use of oral English communication in the EFL classroom. Second, it was used as a follow-up to the questionnaires' responses.

The interview was conducted after the lessons were observed or noted and the questionnaires were administered. This was because as indicated earlier, one purpose of the interview was to use it as a follow-up to the data obtained through the questionnaires.

Classroom observation

It is true that observation has always been considered as a major data collection tool in second language acquisition researches, because it allows the study of a

phenomenon at close range with many of the contextual variables present (Selinger and Shohamy 1989; Koul 1984). Thus, the main purpose of having classroom observation was to ascertain the prevalent problems given by the teachers during the interview. This is to say that observation was mainly done to cross-check whether the problems forwarded by teachers exist or not. Although there was not a normally prepared checklist to look for in the observed context, the interview results (impediments) were checked. The observation had nothing to do with the lessons taught rather its purpose was to confirm how far the teachers' responses during the interview were serious enough to affect the teaching-learning process.

Three classroom lessons were observed. In each period during my course of observation, one teacher (who took an interview) was observed. In all the observations made, I took the position where my presence did not disturb the class. In other words, the observation was made without intervention in any way. To this end, voluntary teachers were selected for observations and the sections were chosen on random basis.

Data collection procedure

In collecting the data, it is important to use procedures which elicit high quality data, since the quality of any research study depends largely on the quality of the data collected and the data collection procedure. As stated above, this study has employed procedures to collect data from the sample subjects. The researcher, first of all, went to the sample school and introduced himself to the directors and teachers of selected school. Having done this, he randomly selected the classes of three English teachers using the lottery system to be observed from the total of 3 sections of the school. Therefore, a total of 3 English classrooms were used for observation. Then, a number of consecutive interviews were conducted with four English teachers during tea-time and within their staffs when they were available. Tea-time was used mostly because teachers were so busy. Observations were conducted for number of days in each English teacher's classroom, during the time at which the researcher discussed with sample teachers about the classes that would be observed. Permission was also asked from the teachers for observing lessons so as to keep the research ethics. The questionnaire was distributed for students in each section. There were a total of 3 grade 8 sections in the school.

The following specific data collection procedures were also employed so as to keep reliability, validity and transparency of the data. There are a lot of specific data collection procedures, but the researcher selected and used one of them. This procedure was used in order to write notes about students and teachers and it enabled the researcher to see and jot down what was observed from the sample population (Mertler, 2005).

Data analysis and interpretation

As stated earlier, observation, questionnaires, and interview were the three instruments used to secure relevant data for the study. The data gathered through these tools in the stated order were analyzed as follows: The responses obtained from the students' and teachers' questionnaires were tallied and the frequencies were converted to percentage. Percentage value was favored because it is easier to compare taking into account that a different number of students and teachers participated in the study. The open-ended parts of the questionnaires were sorted out and summarized. Interview data obtained from English teachers were summarized and presented. The data obtained through the three instruments were triangulated in the discussions and interpretations to arrive at sound conclusions regarding the use of oral English language communication in the EFL classroom. An attempt was also made to link the discussions and interpretations with the works reviewed in the literature section of this paper. The data were analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The data obtained through open ended questions were analyzed using qualitative techniques, whereas the data obtained through frequencies and percentages were analyzed through quantitative ways.

Results and Discussions

In this part, the collected data through questionnaire, classroom observations and interview were presented, analyzed and interpreted both qualitatively and quantitatively using percentages and frequencies.

Analysis of questionnaire

Ten closed ended questions were prepared and distributed among students of grade ten. The questions were prepared in order to get necessary response on factors affecting the oral communication of grade 10 students of primary school in the English class. The following table shows the questions and their presentations.

The above table indicates that majority of English teachers, i.e. 105(46.7%) encourage their students to use English language in the classroom, but the other 120 (53.33%) indicated that students do not get encouragement from their teachers. Another problem again raised in questionnaire item 2 in table 4.2 is that students 200 (88.9%) do not get ample chance to practice English. However, the remaining irrelevant number of students 25 (11.11%) answered 'yes', which is needless to mention. Besides, item 3 in the same table showed that teachers do not use English as a medium of instruction in classrooms. The data boldly indicated that the classroom teaching learning process does not expose learners for the actual use of the target language. Half of the majority i.e. 200(88.9%) of the respondents answered yes while the remaining few respondents said no which is an indication of the lack of teachers' use of the target language in the classroom. The field observation results have also forwarded the same issue. I have asked the question that reads "*Does your teacher criticize you when you speak English language?*" in table 4.2, item 4, and respondents argued that an overwhelming number of informants, i.e. 187(83.11%) stated that they get criticized by their teachers when they use English while some 38(16.9%) said no, but it is easy to conclude that teachers criticize their students when they speak English.

According to item 5, in table 4.2, 192(85.33%) respondents gave 'yes' answer to the question in that teachers interrupt students while they speak, and as a matter of culture, this interruption happens in negative way, which in turn led students to keep silent in order not to be laughed at. However, few number of respondents 33(14.7%) said no. But research works indicate that teachers' constructive interruption may have a paramount importance in the students' development in oral communication. Some teachers may give negative interruption or feedback to the students' oral communication mistakes. The data presented in item 6 also indicates that teachers enforce their students to express their idea in English language, and this can be showed by 200(88.9%) the respondents' choice except limited number of students who answered no and it is clear that teachers' motivation, enthusiasm, support and enforcement may help students to be active in any oral communication. In opposite way, as shown by item 7, all students 225(100%) are afraid of speaking English language. This may be the reflection of the students' home background in that some family members expose children to be fearful due to certain reasons and due to this and other reasons, all students are fearing for making mistakes in order not to be laughed. One question is also

asked that reads “Do your friends negatively criticize you when you speak English language? And majority of the respondents, i.e. 199(88.44%) argued that classroom students criticize each other while speaking English, but few of them 26(11.6%) stated no.

Analysis of classroom observations

A total of six consecutive English classroom observations were carried out in the selected sample schools. Seliger and Shohamy (1989) pointed out that descriptive data may be collected by observing the target language learning activity or behavior and noting only those aspects of the event which are of interest for the study. The main use of observation, as Seliger and Shohamy (ibid) further asserted, on collecting data is for examining a phenomena or a behavior while it is going on. To this end, an observation checklist was prepared and used so as to aid the task of observing the sessions.

According to the classroom observation conducted, there is very limited encouragement from the teachers to motivate students in oral English communication. The traditional teaching that has been used in the class, i.e. teacher-dominated teaching style does not encourage students to give high effort for their learning. In relation to this, the literature on the history of the development of English language teaching methods tells us that the idea of using oral communication, contrary to the written communication, in the foreign or second language classroom was not a respected view during the era of the Grammar Translation Method (Howatt, 1984).

However, immediately following the First World War, a number of serious objections, the main problem being lack of everyday realistic spoken language content, have been raised with regard to the grammar translation method. Since then, all popular English language teaching methods including the recently accepted communicative language teaching method tend to discourage the use of oral communication in classrooms (Cole, 1998; Cook, 1999; 2001; and Prodromou, 2001). Therefore, the research indicates that oral communication should be encouraged in classrooms.

There is also negative criticism from teachers that can demotivate the students’ oral English performance. Irrelevant interruptions, peer negative fault finding laugh and poor pedagogy were found demotivating the students’ oral English language performance. Moreover, the classroom observation result indicated that students,

within their classroom interaction, do not use English as a medium of conversation.

Moreover, they use their mother tongue, Kucha language which is spoken in Kucha, South Ethiopia, to share their experiences, ideas, thoughts, feelings, sorrow, and other daily routines and this scenario is found to make them weak in English oral communications. Although the use of mother tongue was banned by the supporters of the direct method at the end of the nineteenth century, the positive role of the mother tongue has recurrently been acknowledged as a rich resource which, if used judiciously, can assist second language teaching (Cook, 2001). However, some sees its use as negative and harmful to the learning and teaching process while others like Edge (1986:121) as stated in his study, view it as a valuable tool or resource to develop the students’ academic achievement.

Analysis of interview

Dear Students,

I am the researcher working on a paper entitled “*Factors that Affect Oral Communication of Students’ English Language in Grade 10 in the Case of Selamber secondary School*” and thank you for your willingness to participate in my interview session. I would like to hear your ideas and opinions about factors affecting oral communication in the English classroom. Your responses to the questions will be kept anonymous.

1. To what extent do you use English language while teaching English?
2. Do students ask you to translate some difficult words and sentences?
3. Is a teacher interruption is the major factor that affects students’ oral communication?
4. Students have frequent opportunities to use academic English
5. Encourages the learners to use English as a medium of instruction
6. What do you recommend to do to increase the students’ oral communication?

Based on the above interview guidelines, I held interview with teachers in the school. The first question posed for discussion was the frequency of language that grade 10 English teachers use while teaching English. Most of teachers said that the vernacular language is used in the class to elaborate more for the students. They also stated that students ask them to translate some difficult words

and sentences. McNabb (1989), in connection to the translation and the related problem stated that alien concepts which cannot be easily translated into a particular language and dialect differences and lack of standard usage for some words are among the key problems which affect the quality of students' language oral English learning. From this evidence, we can also deduce that the students overtly need English language to

be translated into their mother tongue which is a bottle neck for the students' oral English proficiency. This argument could be substantiated with the Howat's(1984) argument in that a number of serious objections, the main problem being lack of everyday realistic spoken language content, have been raised with regard to the grammar translation method which is not oral proficiency based.

Table.1 Questionnaire Item on Factors Affecting Students' Oral Communication

Item No.	Questionnaire Items	Alternatives	Freq.	%
1.	Does your teacher encourage you to use English language in the classroom?	a. Yes	105	46.7
		b. No	120	53.33
Total			225	99.99
2.	Does your teacher give you ample chance to speak in English?	a. Yes	25	11.11
		b. No	200	88.9
Total			225	100
3.	Does your teacher use English language in your classroom learning?	a. Yes	25	11.11
		b. No	200	88.9
Total			225	100
4.	Does your teacher criticize you when you speak English language?	a. Yes	187	83.11
		b. No	38	16.9
Total			225	100
5.	Does your teacher interrupt you when you speak English?	a. Yes	192	85.33
		b. No	33	14.7
6.	Does your teacher enforce you to express your idea in English language?	a. Yes	200	88.9
		b. No	25	11.11
7.	Are you afraid of speaking English language?	a. Yes	225	100
		b. No	0	0
8.	Are you afraid of making mistakes when you are speaking English language?	a. Yes	225	100
		b. No	0	0
9.	Do your friends negatively criticize you when you speak English language?	a. yes	199	88.44
		b. no	26	11.6

Table.2 Observation checklist points

R.No.	Observation checklists	Alternatives	
		Yes	No
1.	Does the teacher encourage students to use English in the classrooms?		
2.	Do teachers use English language while communicating with students?		
3.	Does the teacher use practical teaching methods?		
4.	Does the teacher give chance for students to practice oral English?		
5.	Does the teacher interact students when they speak English language?		
6.	Does the teacher criticize students when they make mistakes?		
7.	Do students ask and answer questions in English?		
8.	Teachers do not use English well?		
9.	Teachers don't ask and answer questions in English?		
10.	Language used during interaction by students- English or mother tongue?		
11.	Activities provide opportunities to use academic English.		
12.	Students have frequent opportunities to use academic English.		
13.	Encourages the learners to use English as a medium of instruction.		

Conclusions are as follows:

This study was carried out to investigate factors affecting oral communication of grade ten students of Selamber secondary school in English class. To do this, students and teachers of Selamber secondary school were purposively selected as the main participants of the study. Questionnaires, class observation and interview were used as data gathering instruments. The gathered

data were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The finding of the study found that the students' oral English communication is too low; there are many factors affecting the students' oral English communication, such as fear of criticism, lack of teachers' encouragement, lack of practical teaching methods, poor elementary school background, negative feedback from teachers, lack of motivation both from teachers and students, fear of making mistakes, and some

other uncountable factors are affecting the students' oral communication, and these factors further exalt the students' anxiety in language classes. Further report from respondents revealed that most teachers do not use English as a medium of instruction, and instead they frequently use the students' mother tongue. The most important issue what the writer of this paper would like to point out under this topic is that language learners in Elementary as well as in the second cycle primary schools, even in the most higher institutions accept what they are provided with. But, the main target of the researcher here is not to rule out the existing situations in most schools. But the main problem, what the researcher intends to touch, is that the students' language learning ability could be influenced by what they are taught and served. It is again seems to be true that English language learners can only learn the language they are exposed to. However, it certainly is not the case that students learn everything they are taught or that they eventually know only what they are taught.

In short, the data holistically indicated that teachers' carelessness, lack of motivation, poor pedagogy, lack of well- trained teachers, lack of encouragement in oral communications of English and the students' fear of critics were major factors affecting the students' oral communications either in class or outside the class. The data generally reflected that successful implementation of universal school education requires availability of teachers in the right quantity and quality. Besides, target language teaching should have proper language skills; contextual information about the cultural milieu of the target language and appropriate attitudinal orientation as well as professional skills that enable teachers to bring about the desired behavioral change in the learner (Ghermai, 1998).

From the arguments that have been put on in this study, it is not difficult to see factors that affect the student's oral English communication. However, I cannot generalize from these limited data, such factors are very likely to be seen in other similar schools, and therefore, it is reasonable to put some suggestions. Taking into account the way English teaching and learning has been handled in primary schools, there should be restructuring programs so as to strengthen the position of teaching and learning the language. Teachers should get proper training that improve their teaching skill. There should also be follow-up programmes, such as workshops, and seminars; text books and other teaching materials should be evaluated and improved from time to time and be equally given.

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