The Implementation of Learner-Centered Method in Speaking Skills: The Case of Dilla Primary School Grade Seven Students Gedio Zone, Ethiopia

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Abstract

The main objective of this research was to assess the implementation of learner-centered method in speaking skills in Dilla Primary School of Gedio Zone. To this end, a descriptive method was employed by using both quantitative and qualitative approach. The sample population of the study includes 98 students and 5 teachers of the target school. They were selected using purposive sampling techniques. The data were gathered through questionnaires, interviews and classroom observation. Statistical tool such as numbers and percentage were used to analyze the collected data. The result of the study revealed that the main factors influencing the implementation of learner-centered method in speaking skills in the target grade were found to be the problems related to teachers, students, classrooms and instructional materials. The current level of the students' participation in English speaking class of the target grade is low, classes were mostly teacher dominated. Accordingly, the majority of students were supposed to listen to their teachers' explanation. On the basis of the findings, it was recommended that in order to improve students' participation, above all, students should be committed to practice speaking in the target language in and outside the classroom. To this end, teachers also ought to play prominent role. That is, they should use modern methodologies which give room for students' active participation. Besides, the concerned bodies need to deal with the problem of large class size and instructional materials related factors to alleviate the problem.

Introduction

Learning is a constructive process that occurs best when what is being learned is relevant and meaningful to the learner and when the learner is actively engaged in creating his or her knowledge (Lambert and McCombs, 1998 in Yalew, 2004, p.19). As indicated in the Ethiopian Education and Training policy document, the previous curriculum design and instructional process suffered from old and traditional approach (TGE, 1994). The curriculum organization emphasized academic knowledge and instructional methods, which initiated memorization and simple recall of facts by learners that was provided through official curriculum and presented by teacher's explanation or chalk and talk lecture method. This means teachers dominated the class-room instruction, where students were passively listening.

In relation to this issue, Walklin (1990) argues that in class, using teacher-centered methods may lead to problems, since it is often difficult to establish a norm for the group in terms of tasks and goals, sequence, pace and

learning expectations. Highly anxious students may demand that the teacher controls everything whereas others would prefer a more flexible, individualized learning approach. On the contrary, active learning approach emphasizes on active learning than active teaching; the learner is a focus than the teacher. The learner is actively constructing his or her own knowledge out of the materials that are around. Thus, the teacher acts as a facilitator who provides an environment that is rich in materials for learning. To this end, effective teaching and learning requires the use of different methodologies and pedagogies to meet the demands of the new generation, new techniques and the ever changing educational environment.

As a result, in schools throughout the world, there is a movement away from learning that is made up of memorizing and teacher- centered method to a learner-centered method in speaking skills that emphasize for making connection in the world around us, collecting and using information in active manner (Lue, 2000). Pouring of facts and concepts in to students' heads is not an effective teaching method. Rather, it demands several exposures to materials, to chew on them, to understand them, not jest repetition of inputs. From these perspectives one can understand that before attempting to teach, the teacher must know what he or she intends to teach and what the students are expected to learn as an outcome of the joint effort. In addition to this, he or she must think the appropriate way of implementation of active leaning in class-room (Chickening and Gamson, 1997).

However, there are some constraints which can impede the proper implementation of learner-centered in speaking skills. Some of the factors are connected with curriculum materials, instructional activities, organizational structure, and beliefs or understanding about the curriculum and learning practice (Ornstein and Hunkins, 1998 in Yalew, 2004, p.17). To minimize these constraints, different scholars pointed-out some solutions. For instance, Ornstein and Hunkins, (1998); McCombs and Whisler (1997) suggest that the integration of teachers, program and organization are very important factors for successful implementation of new curriculum (p.292 and p.2). In connection with this, Mehari (2007) stated that effective teaching is the responsibility of a teacher. To do so, "a teacher has to be creative and innovative enough in many aspects, like in materials preparation and in teaching methodology". If a teacher is creative and innovative, students become active learners and critical thinkers. If the students

become active learners and critical thinkers, they are in a position to make their learning meaningful (p. 74).

Generally, in line with the above discussion, the government of Ethiopia is trying its best to establish systems and channel resources to promote active learning in order to produce citizens that are well equipped with the skill and knowledge to solve problems and bring about a difference in their life and the country as well. Learner-centered method is widely accepted and given due attention in Ethiopia to help students use information from their environment and other sources to make a better life for themselves and the society and as a whole for the country. Thus, it is imperative assessing the level of practice of learner-centered method in speaking skills in relation with its opportunities and challenges in the selected primary school of the study area.

Statement of the problem

The Education and Training Policy highly encourages a paradigm shift from the teacher-centered to learner-centered approach. Learner-centered approach leads to effective teaching learning and promotes the development of students' critical thinking and to engage them in the teaching learning process actively and effectively. Therefore, teachers at all levels of education are expected to implement active learning strategies so as to help learners to learn actively. In this sense, students are given the freedom to explore areas based on their personal interests, and accompanied in their striving for solutions by understanding facilitators, not only to achieve high academic results but, also experience and increase in personal values, such as flexibility, self-confidence, social skills and problem- solving capacities (Peter et al, 2000, p. 4).

To this end, primary school teachers are expected to implement learner-centered method to attain the desired goal. But researches and experiences have shown that there is an anomaly between theory and practice in Ethiopian context. This is to mean that what has been stated in the policy might not be implemented practically due to some reasons. In relation to this topic, many studies have been conducted in different parts the country at different levels of schooling .For example, Wendemagegnehu (2006) and Lemma (2006) in their research findings indicated that the level of utilization of active learning was found to be very poor in some selected primary schools of their studied areas. Moreover, Derebssa (2006) has found out that traditional

lecture methods dominated in most of the observed class-room in primary schools of Ethiopia.

The main reason to the ineffectiveness of the practice of learner-centered method in the actual classroom is suggested by some researchers. For instance, Lue (2000) suggested that there are some constraints which can impede the proper implementation of active learning. Some of the factors are connected in the midst of the pressure of syllabus, improper class-room organization and management, lack of trained teachers, school directors and problem with the students, attitude of teachers, etc.

In relation to the above experience, the researcher observed some problems in practicing the learner-centered method while he was working in the zone for some years. Researches undertaken on learner-centered method implementation in speaking skills were limited particularly in Dilla Primary School Gedio Zone. So this is why the researcher kicked off to take an investigation on this issue. Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to assess how active learning strategy is practiced, the attitude of teachers and students, as well as the opportunities and the major problems encountered while active learning strategy is being implemented. The researcher proposed the following research questions to be answered in the study.

- To what extent student centered method is implemented (practiced) in the study area?
- What are the opportunities and challenges in implementing learner-centered method in teaching speaking skills in the study area?
- What is the attitude of teachers and students towards the learner-centered method in teaching speaking skills in the school?

Objectives of the study

The general objective of the current study was to explore the implementation of learner-centered method in teaching speaking skills. The study specifically aims to attain the following specific objectives:

o To examine the extent to which learner-centered method in teaching speaking skills is practiced in the classrooms of the study area.

o To address the opportunities and/or problems/challenges associated with learner-centered method.

o To explore the perception of teachers and students towards implementation of learner-centered method in teaching speaking skills.

Materials and Methods

Research design

The research attempts to describe a study on the problem that factors influencing the development of students' English speaking skills at Dilla Primary School. Descriptive method was employed by using both qualitative and quantitative approach. Thus, mixed method approach is chosen as methodology of this research. According to Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2004) mixed-research method are important and useful to draw from the strength and minimize the weakness of in both single research studies and across studies. Moreover, the study focused on recording, describing, analyzing and interpreting the problems that prevail in the school in relation to problem that affect students' English speaking skills.

Description of the study area

The target populations for this study were grade 7 students and their respective teachers of Gedio Zone Dilla Primary School. The school was selected purposefully because it had been closer to the researcher's working place and familiar with respondents.

The grade level was chosen based on the researcher's observation of teaching experience. In addition to this, the students are required to communicate effectively in English with the teachers of the other subjects and their classmates.

Sources of data and sampling procedure

In this study, purposive sampling technique was employed to obtain best representative sample of a population.

The classroom

The classrooms were taken as one of the sources of the data. It was here that where observations were made to see what really happened in the classroom. In order to select classes, lottery system was employed to identify the seven classrooms out of nineteen.

Teachers

Teachers were one of the most crucial elements in the teaching and learning process. Therefore, teachers were considered to be rich sources of data. With this in mind, the researcher used simple random sampling techniques to choose the teacher respondents. Hence, all English teachers who were involved in teaching English language in grade seven were chosen for the study.

Students

Students had also taken as source of data to provide information relevant to the problem at hand. At Dilla Primary School, there are a total number of 480 students in grade seven. Each student is distributed across nineteen sections for the academic year 2007 E.C. There is an average of 70 students in each section. Thus, out of the entire sections seven sample sections were taken by using simple random sampling techniques to conduct the study. In order to determine the size of the students from each of the seven sections, again simple random sampling technique was used. Consequently, 14 students were randomly taken from each sample sections. Hence, out of the total number of 480 students 98 students were taken as representative of the target study. The sample size of the population of this study was taken to be small since the target population is homogeneous and it is likely that the sample can be small (Sarantakos, 2005), and a matter of time.

Instruments for data collection

In order to collect data from the samples for the target populations, the researcher employed three instruments: questionnaire, interviews and classroom observation.

Questionnaires

A questionnaire was one of the vital data gathering tools for this study. It was employed two sets of questionnaire items were designed for both teachers and students in English. The two questionnaires were the same on contents with the exception of minor difference in wording. The items in the questionnaires were all closed ended. This was done mainly because the researcher feels that it was easy to collect and summarize the data.

Interview

In this study, structure interview was employed to get first hand and genuine information from the respondents.

Thus, the interview questions for this study were prepared in such a way that they support the data that was obtained through questionnaire. It was conducted immediately after the classroom observation and questionnaire was over. The Interview questions were carefully designed to meet the main objectives of the study.

Classroom Observation

Classroom observation was conducted to investigate how tasks were being implemented in English speaking classes. It helps to triangulate data gathered through the other instruments i.e. the questionnaire and the interview. The observation scheme in this study was prepared in the form of check list during classroom observation.

Procedure of Data Collection

In order to conduct the study and elicit adequate information from the respondents of the study, first, the purpose and importance of the research was explained to the subjects of the study briefly. Then, the observation was made first to avoid the occurrence of some artificial behaviors and acts which can be exhibited by teachers and students after they get information from questionnaires.

It was made when the actual teaching learning process of speaking lesson is going on. Secondly, the questionnaires were prepared for the students and teachers were administered following the observation of speaking lesson. After that, these questionnaires were collected in the same session. Finally, the interview was made at the end after identifying possible issues that are not well addressed through the questionnaires and observation.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The data collected through classroom observation, questionnaire and interview were analyzed using descriptive quantitative and qualitative data analysis method. Besides, data interpretation of students' questionnaire was worked out using percentages. Since the target of the study is to describe the existing problems, the researcher perceives that percentage is an appropriate statistical procedure.

However, data interpretations of teachers' questionnaires were worked out simply by writing in numbers. To accomplish this, first responses of teachers and students were organized and tabulated into numerical data to be

analyzed quantitatively. Then, the results of the interview and classroom observation were analyzed in integration.

Data analysis and interpretation

Analysis of teachers and students responses on students related problems

Lack of confidence

If students have developed poor perception of their oral ability, they will tend to restrain their speech. Stated differently, when students lack self confidence in their oral production skills, they are less likely to speak out to express their ideas or feelings in front of the others. In this regard, the teachers indicated that students have not confidence to speak freely in the class with a fear of making mistakes and criticism of friends. The respondents during the interview also confirmed that the learners lack the confidence to speak freely in English during speaking activities. They said that students are afraid of making mistakes and criticism of friends. The classroom observations provide a similar result. That is some of the students were stumbling while speaking. This seems that they lack confidence because they making mistakes.

Students were also asked to report whether they have the confidence to speak freely in the class or not. The data shows that 71% of the respondent students responded that they did not speak freely in the class as they have no confidence to do so. The interview and classroom observation also confirmed that students have no confidence to speak English because they are afraid of making mistakes and criticisms of friends. Even during activities that involve only short answer, the students usually make interrupted speeches in their responses.

Students' beliefs about language learning

One of the problems that affect students' English speaking skill is related to their beliefs about language learning. In language education the literature shows that learners particularly, adult learners, have explicit beliefs about learning second or foreign language. These beliefs can influence their learning behavior and how they learn the target language. Concerning this, all the respondent teachers as well as students replied that learners prefer to learn grammar and vocabulary than speaking. In the same way, respondents during the interview also mentioned that students prefer teachers' explanation than doing different oral activities. Students usually need to

learn grammar and vocabulary lessons mainly because these are the items that appeared in exams. It was also observed that most of the students gave special attention to teachers' explanations and follows him actively. But, they prefer silence when the teacher asks them even short oral questions. Thus, it can be inferred that students' beliefs about language learning made them reserved from involving themselves in speaking activities.

Mother tongue use

One of the determinant problems that affect English speaking skills of students is related to the frequent use of mother tongue language in the class. In carrying out speaking activities, students feel less exposed if they are speaking in their own language. Thus, in relation with this, the teachers as well as the students were asked to report whether students use their mother tongue in various activities of speaking lessons or not. In their response, the majority of the respondents (students 70% and teachers 88%) of them replied that they use English whenever they were asked to do short speaking activities in the class; otherwise, they use their mother tongue in and outside the classroom environment.

Students feel extreme anxiety or become tongue tied when they face shortage of words in their speaking practice. This may discourage their attempt to speak and make them lose confidence and become silent in the middle of their practice. In addition to this, the respondents in the interview also expressed that when the students did pair and group tasks their participation would be less to speak in English. They felt free to express their ideas with their classmates when they used their first language than English. The classroom observation also confirmed the same result. Although the students were instructed to do speaking activities in English, they were observed to use their mother tongue after a while and they made no effort to speak English. Therefore, from this it is clear that the students' dominant need of translating English to their mother tongue in any of classroom activities is influencing their performance to speak English.

Shortage of vocabulary and lack of practice

Vocabulary knowledge of the target language is also very essential in developing ones speaking skills. Since students have no knowledge of words in the target language, they are usually unable to use the language for communication. In line with this, the respondents were asked to report if students have adequate vocabulary to

express their ideas in English language. In this regard, all of the respondents (100%) suggested that they do not have adequate vocabulary knowledge to express their ideas in English. Similarly, the interview result also reflects that some students tend to prefer silence or be reluctant to involve in group discussion because of their lack of vocabularies to express their ideas. The classroom observation result also approved that when students are obliged to speak English by their teachers in various activities, they usually start speaking, but soon end with fragments of unrelated ideas or shift the target language to their L1 or become silent without conveying any idea.

Any language can only be learnt by practice, and teachers usually have a supportive role in the improvement of students' speaking skills. Actual practice makes students to use the language for actual needs. In relation to this, the respondents were asked to report whether students practice speaking English in and out of the classroom situations or not. The majority of the respondents (students 83% and teachers 92%) responded that students do not like to practice speaking English in and outside of the class due to fear of errors and their friends. The respondents during the interview also expressed that students had no authentic exposure to speak English out of the classroom environment. Consequently, students cannot practice speaking English in the community. Besides, the observation result strongly supports this idea and a few students were observed when they practice speaking English only in the class.

Analysis of teachers and students responses on teachers related problems

Beliefs about language teaching and teaching methodology

Teachers' and students' belief towards language teaching and learning are indispensable elements in language instruction. Teachers' teaching method is also vital in language learning especially in making students practice speaking skills. In this section, the respondents were asked to report what kind of teaching method teachers employ in their EFL classes. Based on the information obtained from the response, all respondents gave emphasis on the use of language forms and structure (grammar) than communicative activities.

Learners are hardly exposed to practice speaking activities due to teachers' use of teacher-centered method. The teachers explained that the amount of time given for the period and the number of students in a class did not enable them to apply student centered method. The result of the interview also shows teaches' dominantly use of the class for explaining various issues of the lesson rather than making students focus on the practical aspects of the language. For the 'why' question raised from the researcher during the interview, the teachers explained that it is the easiest way of presenting lessons for students and it is also a means to finish the textbook on time. The respondents also explained that there was a resistance from students to use student centered method. In this way, students are simply supposed to listen to their teachers with no any active involvement in the lesson. The class room observation also proves the teachers' dominant use of teacher-centered method in the instructional process.

Language testing system

Teaching and testing language cannot be viewed in isolation. If students are not assessed for what they do in the class, they did not give credit to the activities they learn. Thus, if we teach these skills (speaking in this case) we have to give appropriate credit both in school and national exams to justify the teaching input. As suggested by respondents in the questionnaire, all the teachers and students agreed that teachers usually evaluate student's performance only through objective questions like multiple choice or matching items than oral presentations. The respondents in the interview also expressed similar ideas mentioning some of the reasons not to let students to take oral presentation tests. They said that since there are large numbers of students in the class, it is difficult to administer oral presentation in the form of assessment within a single class in limited period. Therefore, instead of oral presentation, teachers use reading comprehension, vocabulary and grammar questions to evaluate their students' language performance. From this one can infer that teachers' language testing system made students to focus only on linguistic competence than fluency with a direct influence on the improvement of students' speaking skills.

Teachers' use of teaching aids

Teaching aids are instructional materials used by teachers to supplement classroom instruction and make the learning environment interesting and engaging. Regarding this, the respondent teachers and students were asked to report whether teachers use various

teaching aids in the class to promote speaking skills or not. All the respondents (100%) revealed that English teachers did not use teaching aids or any other authentic materials in speaking classes. The interview made with both teachers and students also confirmed that teachers did not use teaching aids like tape recorder, cassettes, radio programs or any other authentic materials in the class since there is no any access of teaching aids in the school. Likewise, the classroom observation also strongly confirmed that teaching aids are not used in the EFL classes.

Analysis of teachers and students responses on classroom related problems

The classroom is the other constraint for the practice of students' English speaking skills in the teaching learning process. That is, a classroom with a large number of the students is found to be inconvenient for teachers to help all the students in speaking activities. Thus, in connection with this, all of the respondents replied that there are large numbers of students in the classes with inconvenient seating arrangements. In the same way, all of the respondents during the interview also explained that it was impossible for teachers to help students by giving different oral activities in pairs and group works due to large class size and unsuitable seating arrangement. They said that since there were more than 65 students in a single class and fixed desks that are not comfortable to organize students in groups and pairs work activities, teachers were reserved to apply student-centered way of teaching approach. A similar result was gained from the classroom observation results. Classes were characterized by large number of students, overcrowded spaces and fixed desks.

Analysis of teachers and students responses on instructional materials related problems

As Amare (1999: 53) says instructional materials are related to all forms of materials with which students and teachers interact for the purpose of learning and teaching. They are the instruments with which a teacher teaches and from which students learn. Thus, the degree to which teacher utilize teaching materials has become one of the challenge in the field of education. This is because teaching materials have its own roles in the effectiveness of teaching learning process. Consequently, assuring its accessibility and assessing the extent to which teacher utilize teaching materials during instructions becomes crucial.

To have successful teaching and learning process, instructional material has its own role. Therefore, assuring its accessibility and assessing the extent to which teacher utilize teaching materials during instruction become significant. In conjunction with this, 90% of the respondent teachers revealed that there is no shortage of teaching materials like textbooks in the school. Besides, the interview respondents explained that students have a 1:1 ratio access to textbooks and they have no problems in this regard. On the other hand, the interview and observations result shows that teachers and students do not use any instructional materials except the textbook in the teaching learning process. Thus, teachers are restricted only to students' English textbooks to develop speaking lessons.

Summary, conclusions and recommendations

Summary

The objective of this study was to assess the implementation of learner-centered method in speaking skills, with particular reference to grade Seven in Dilla Primary School of Gedio Zone. Hence, So as to achieve the research objective descriptive method with quantitative and qualitative approach was employed. To collect the required information questionnaires, interview and classroom observation were used as data collection instrument. Then the data collected using these instruments were analyzed, interpreted, and discussed in an integrated manner. The results of the analyzed data have the indicated the following major findings:

Teachers' related problems

Some of the teachers' related problems that affect students' English speaking skill as indicated by the study are:

- Teachers' emphasis on grammar and vocabulary and failure to give appropriate speaking activities were found to be the main problems for students to learn English speaking skills.
- Teacher center method of teaching has been found to be the other problem. Simple explanation of speaking lessons couldn't improve students' speaking skills.
- Teaching without using any teaching aids and evaluation with no emphasis on speaking skills were found to be the other teachers' related problems in the study.

Students related problems

Students' English speaking skills were affected by the students themselves. The study indicates some of the problems related to students' English speaking skill as follows:

- Emphasis on grammar and vocabulary and lack of self-confidence to speak English for the fear of making mistakes and criticism of friends.
- Lack of adequate vocabularies, frequent use of first language and lack of interest to practice speaking in and outside of the classroom environment.

Classroom related problems

The condition of the classroom was also the other constraints for the students' English speaking skills in the class. A class with a large number of students and improper seating arrangements were considered to be inconvenient for teachers to help students to promote their speaking skills.

Instructional material related problems

As revealed in this study, lack of access to teaching aids has also been found as the other problem that affect students' English speaking skills in the target school.

This section presents the conclusions the researcher reached based on the findings of the study. English speaking classrooms are most likely devoid of students' active participation in the target grade level. It was discovered that the classroom activities were dominated by teacher fronted method. This made the learners passive recipient instead of actively involved in the speaking activities. As it was seen from the results, teachers put less emphasis on using the language for oral communication (that is much emphasis was given to the teaching of grammar and vocabulary). This has a direct influence on the students' learning of English speaking skills.

Similarly, teachers' inability to create opportunities for learners to interact in the target language is the other teacher related problem due to their preference of teacher-centered method. However, as mentioned in the literature, one important feature of modern techniques of teaching speaking is that it provides learners with great opportunity for oral interaction (speaking) in the target language as a means of developing their speaking skills.

Thus, the attention given to oral communication is not encouraging. The study also illustrated that teachers' language testing system and students' lack of confidence, frequent use of mother tongue in speaking lesson and low practice of the language in and out of the class were the other problems that affect students' speaking skills. Moreover, a large number of students in a class, inconvenient seating arrangement and lack of teaching aids were also considered as the other problems that affect students' speaking skill in the school.

In general, students' belief about language learning, lack of confidence, mother tongue use, and shortage of vocabulary and lack of practice were among the major problems encountered in the students' English speaking skills. Besides, inconvenient classroom condition and teachers' method of teaching, language testing system and use of teaching aids were the other major problems teachers face in helping students to promote their speaking skills.

Recommendations

Based on the finding of the study, the researcher forward the following recommendations for the improvement of students learning process of English speaking skills in the target grade level.

- The study revealed that teaching and learning is meaningless without active participation of learners. Thus, to improve students' participation, above all, students have to practice speaking in pair/group using English in the class. Teachers also should use CLT method or student center method in their lessons for active involvement of students.
- Teachers should encourage students to speak using target language in the class frequently to expose students more to English language. In addition, for learners to improve their speaking skills, they should speak using target language when undertaking classroom tasks and outside classroom, speak English at home with classmates or friends, join speaking club for instance drama, debate and speak in front of a mirror.
- Oral presentations should be part of their assessment to encourage students to speak. It is advisable not to interfere to students for every mistake during their speaking practice.
- Teacher should use the allocated time properly in a period to cover different activities during a single period.

- The problems of large class size and inconvenient seating arrangement need to be improved by the concerned bodies. Teaching aids for speaking lessons should also be designed in a way that they should be related to the context of the learners' exposures. These may increases students' interest and efforts of involving in both fluency and accuracy developing activities as well as spoken English. Besides, school administrative bodies should intervene to the hindering factors like lack of pedagogic center or its non-functioning by allocating budget, and encouraging teachers to prepare teaching aids, and promoting them for their effort in preparing and using instructional materials in speaking lessons.

- The school directors should work with state holders to build addition class rooms in order to make balance the number of student with class room size. They also should discus with school comminutes how to solve the problems of student centered method in the school.

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