INTEGRATING ORAL COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS INTO THE ENGLISH
CURRICULUM IN DUBAI SCHOOLS

A THESIS IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGES

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ABSTRACT

Formal English language instruction in many parts of the world has shown limited success in developing efficient speaking skills even after years of studying. In Dubai schools, where English is the medium of instruction, many students have serious problems in making themselves understood in English. This causes lots of difficulties later on when these students are required to use English language in doing their assignments as well as communicating with other students and professors in academic settings. Another area of concern for these students is finding suitable jobs, as efficient spoken English is vastly demanded by employers even in those jobs which do not require much professionalism.

For a variety of reasons, English language teachers focus only on reading, grammar, and vocabulary, and speaking skill is still not a curriculum requirement in many private schools in Dubai. Therefore, oftentimes teachers choose not to spend time teaching a skill which is neither a curriculum requirement, nor assessed, particularly since teachers have a heavy teaching load, extra curricular activities to arrange, and many other responsibilities.

In order to find out more about the actual reasons behind such a situation, 30 English language teachers and 105 students in six different schools in Dubai were asked to answer a questionnaire and participate in interviews. Later, with the help of insights from the related literature in this field, for a period of eight weeks, a specially

focused program was introduced in a private school in Dubai, which introduced teaching speaking skills into the pre-determined objectives of the curriculum. This program used the existing school's syllabus accompanied by some extra materials and activities.

Prior to the beginning of this program, a diagnostic speaking test was carried out to determine the participating students' primary speaking abilities. Another speaking test was administered at the end of the program. These two tests provided the tools for measuring the improvements of the students quantitatively. Students were also under an on-going assessment through keeping a writing journal by the teacher-researcher. Moreover, the students through both formal and informal interviews were constantly asked to express their attitudes and opinions about the activities, as well as their self-perceived improvements. At the end of the program another questionnaire was given to the students which asked them to evaluate the whole program they had been presented with.

Results of the first part of this study indicated that the teachers' beliefs about and the students' expectations form the formal English instruction were not consistent. Teachers preferred to begin including speaking skills once the curriculum demanded it. Students, on the other hand seemed to be interested in being given chances to develop their speaking skills. Also, the results from the focused instruction program showed that students can improve their speaking skills in spite of all the time constraints and without much change in their designed syllabus.

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To my beloved husband who never hesitated to offer me help, support, and encouragement.

Chapter 1

Overview of the Study

For more than thirty years English language teaching has evolved in response to the call for more focus on communicative use of the English language, as well as deficiencies of previous approaches such as the Grammar Translation and the Direct methods. As a result, the ability to communicate orally, meaningfully, and fluently became one of the most important objectives in learning a second or foreign language. One method that directly deals with these aspects is Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Although most English language teachers claim to follow the basis of communicative approach (Karavas-Doukas, 1996), the majority of students demonstrate poor speaking skills even after years of instruction.

The UAE context is no exception to this situation even though English is the medium of instruction in almost all private schools. Students in these schools are taught and assessed in grammar, reading comprehension, and vocabulary. Speaking skills are neither taught nor assessed. As a result, many students graduate without having what it takes to enter colleges and universities or find suitable jobs. This study was mainly conducted to find ways to balance between skills the students are taught during their school years on one hand, and what they are supposed to know in the outside, real world on the other.

Purpose of the Study

A lot of research has been done on promoting oral communicative competence among young learners in ESL and EFL contexts. However, there is little research in Dubai's private sector. This study hopes to demonstrate the possibility of the inclusion of speaking skills into the objectives of the schools' curriculum. I believe that the results of this study might encourage English teachers and supervisors to integrate speaking skills in their language classrooms. English language teachers may find the result of this study rewarding enough to adopt its plan in response to students' needs and expectations. The major accomplishment of this study is to raise awareness of language teachers, as well as supervisors and other authorities, of the importance of deploying appropriate techniques which, without substantial changes in curriculum, can equip students with the skills required for overcoming challenges in their academic and social life. My research has investigated the obstacles and barriers

which hinder teachers from including oral skills into the whole program, as well as possible techniques to overcome difficulties and complications on the way.

Finally, the results of this study reveal students' attitudes towards, and their expectations of current English practice in private schools. These results also manifest guidelines for teachers to improve their theory and practice towards what real language learning is about. Regarding school administrators and policy makers in the Ministry of Education, I hope my research will provide information needed for bridging the gap between what is presently taught in the schools and what is needed by the students in their academic and social lives.

Context

Last year I worked in a language institute in Dubai where most of the students were high school teenagers preparing themselves either for work or for university entrance examinations. They were studying in different schools, mostly private ones. I observed that these students faced a common problem. Although they had fairly good knowledge of grammar, reading, and writing skills, they had strikingly poor oral skills which hindered them from communicating in the classroom successfully. Having had experience as an English teacher in a private school before, I knew that language teachers have little time to teach spoken language as most of the time the curriculum does not specify such a goal. To back up my assumption, I carried out a small survey in which I asked 15 school teachers if they teach speaking skills. None said they did.

However, what nearly all teachers said was the fact that they go as far as to correct students' speech grammatically whenever time allows. Time constraints and having too many students in classrooms were the reasons these teachers identified as the major factors why they did not teach English conversation. As a result, many students graduate from high school with very poor conversation performance, facing a gap between what has been taught in schools and what is required by employers or colleges and universities in their entrance exam. Furthermore, high stake exams like PET, CAT, FCE, IELTS and most recently TOEFL, all include a speaking part. Even upon starting their higher education, many students find it difficult to meet the required standards of university students whose mastery of spoken English language is a must.

Research Questions

This study aims to investigate the issue of introducing speaking skills into the curriculum in Dubai schools. Specifically, this study attempted to answer the following questions:

- How do teachers view teaching speaking skills?
- How do students view learning speaking skills?
- Do students improve in oral communicative skills after eight weeks of special instruction?

That is, I hypothesize that by focusing on communicative abilities, while at the same time meeting the constraints of a set curriculum, students can improve their speaking skills.

Overview of Chapters and Appendices

Chapter one provides readers with an introduction of the study, giving a description of the problems and issues concerning formal English language teaching in schools. It also represents the purpose of the study and research questions.

Chapter two reviews what has been said in the past and present literature about promoting speaking skills in language classrooms. It informs teachers of concerns and pitfalls of adopting these activities and provides suggestions for having more successful communicative language instruction. Chapter three contains a detailed description of participants, the development of data collection instruments and related procedures. Chapter four describes how the gathered data was categorized and analyzed. Based on the analysis of the data, findings are included in Chapter four. Chapter five summarizes findings, discusses the pedagogical implications, limitations of the study, and gives suggestions for further research.

Appendix A.1 contains teachers' questionnaire on their attitudes towards teaching speaking skills. Appendix A.2 contains the teachers' interview questions which asked them about their opinions towards teaching speaking skills. Appendix B.1 shows pre-study students' questionnaire. Appendix B. 2 shows students' interview questions. Appendix B. 3 is the post-study questionnaire on students' views about their progress. Appendix B. 4 is a list of activities which were carried out by the teacher researcher during the study and asks students to choose their most favorite activity. Appendix B. 5 contains a check list that students used to rate their

classmates' presentation skills. Appendix C shows the weekly routine and extra activities carried out during the study. Appendix D. 1 contains the pre-study speaking test which is an online sample version of FCE test. Appendix D. 2 shows the post-study speaking test which is yet another sample version of FCE speaking test, and finally appendix D. 3 contains the Marking Scheme which was used to rate the students' speaking skills proficiency level.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

The renaissance that second language teaching has gone through during the past three decades has shifted the focus of formal instruction towards adopting communicative approaches. Mastering the art of communicating orally in a second or foreign language is admittedly one of the most challenging and difficult aspects of learning a language through formal instruction. When it comes to English, it is important since effective communicative skills mean success in academic and social lives in most parts of the world. This chapter reviews the existing literature about the notion of communicative competence and its components, methods of teaching and assessing speaking skills as well as related concerns and challenges.

Communicative Competence vs. Communicative Efficiency

The term "communicative competence" was first coined by Hymes (1972) in reaction to Chomsky's theories of grammatical competence in the late 60's and then the term was extended to second language teaching. Communicative competence refers to the correct and appropriate use of language. According to Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983), it consists of four major components: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. The knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary of a language is referred to as linguistic competence. Burkart (1998) further explains that proficiency in a language takes much more than knowing the grammar and vocabulary as "We also have to know how to interpret sentences within a larger linguistic context and how to construct longer stretches of language so that the parts make up a coherent whole" (p. 4). Such a skill is discourse competence. In addition, depending on different topics and social settings, we should know the appropriate use of the language which is called sociolinguistic competence. The fourth component of communicative competence is strategic competence which refers to the ability of the speakers to restate their ideas in different ways when they do not have the required knowledge of form or vocabulary.

Adding the fact that intelligible pronunciation is also necessary in spoken communication, Burkart believes that mastering a language in all these areas is a real challenge for second language learners. In fact, many other authors and researchers

such as Larsen-Freeman (1991) and Dodigovic (2005) believe that native-like mastery of second language for most learners is very difficult in a classroom setting. The implication of this notion for the second language classroom is that whilst being realistic, teachers should try to optimize students' "communicative efficiency", a term presented by Harmer (1991). Burkart (1998) refers to this term as a more workable alternative to "communicative competency" and explains that,

> The idea behind communicative efficiency is that learners should be able to make themselves understood using their current proficiency to the fullest. They should strive to avoid confusion in the message (due to faulty pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary) and to avoid offending communicative patterns (due to socially inappropriate style. (p. 5)

<div align="center">Fluency versus Accuracy</div>

Richards, Platt, and Weber (1985) note that accuracy in speech refers to producing grammatically correct sentences. Other authors such as Hedge (2000) expand this definition by stating that in order to communicate successfully with the speakers of a language one must have accurate pronunciation and proper choice of words. The more recently stated definition for accuracy is Bailey's (2005) where she explains that "accuracy refers to the ability to speak properly – that is, selecting the correct words and expressions to convey the intended meaning, as well as using the grammatical patterns of English". (p. 5)

Fluency is the other major component in speaking and basically it refers to that natural, spontaneous flow of speech which native speakers of every language possess. Hedge (2000) defines fluency as "the ability to link units of speech together with facility and without strain or inappropriate slowness, or undue hesitations" (p. 54). The author believes that in a communicative approach teachers must ensure that the students not only receive enough practice to develop control over these different aspects of fluency, but also gain the ability to actually use these features to communicate meaningfully.

<div align="center">Balancing Fluency and Accuracy</div>

One important issue to consider when teaching speaking skills is that the students must be guided gradually from highly controlled exercises on handling different circumstances in life where they need to make themselves understood using

the new language to more innovative, free style of speech where the students are supposed to discuss, explain, or give opinions about different issues in more complex contexts like academic situations. Hedge (2000) suggests that in reaching such a goal both accuracy and fluency based activities must be included from the beginning of any instruction.

Quite similarly, with regard to focusing on accuracy and fluency at the same time, Brown (2000) proposes a definition consisting of four characteristics for a typical Communicative Language Teaching classroom. First, all components of communicative competence are considered as important as others which are normally stressed more attentively like grammatical competence. Second, meaningful purpose is at the heart of instruction. Teachers also need to engage students in authentic, pragmatic, and functional language use. Third, fluency and accuracy are regarded as complementary. Fourth, rehearsal of pre-determined pieces of language has given place to productive use of language.

Earlier Riggenbach and Lazaraton (1991) suggested that instead of enforcing accuracy activities and exercises, educators must devise activities through which the meaningful everyday use of language for communicative purposes is encouraged. To pursue this goal, Brown (2000) stresses the use of authentic and not simplified language input. He also strongly emphasizes that the Communicative Language Learning (CLT) classroom context must never compromise fluency.

Moreover, Brown (2000) explains that most non-native speaking teachers find it difficult to keep up with the kind of activities suggested in the CLT classroom and suggests that such obstacles must not prevent the teachers from presenting practices that encourage communicative competencies among students and that they can make use of various technological facilities available. To do this, teachers should upgrade their knowledge and abilities in general and in teaching speaking skills specifically through studying in special programs designed for teacher education.

Speaking Skills Activities

Riggenbach and Lazaraton (1991) divide oral skills activities into four types: "drills or linguistically structured activities, performance activities, participation activities, and observation activities" (p. 127).

In linguistically structured activities, students are provided with pre-determined or "prepackaged" language structures which must be manipulated. These sorts of activities can be carried out in meaningful ways such as interviews where students practice yes/no, or Wh-questions to exchange real information. The authors pinpoint the importance of modeling the structure prior to the activity, by the teacher explaining or writing on the board. Language games, picture games, and psychology games are all among suitable activities for controlled structure practices.

Performance activities are those activities which students prepare in advance and carry out in class for their fellow classmates such as speeches and role plays. Riggenbach and Lazaraton (1991) also suggest class debates as a more comprehensive version of mentioned activities for intermediate and advanced learners during which students negotiate about the topic, plan, possible resources for gathering data, and final presentation of their research.

Participation activities are, according to the authors, the most interesting ones as they require students to interact with the instructor and each other using the language in its natural way. Guided discussions are a good example of performance activities where students discuss some problems or a controversial topic. In more advanced classes, the students themselves can lead the discussion.

Observation activities aim at presenting language in its real-life setting. The students normally are assigned to observe native speakers of the language and explore ways to handle different social situations and related verbal and non-verbal interactions. The students then take notes and report their findings to the class. A role-play activity can follow where the students perform what they once observed as the natural and appropriate conversational strategy.

Fluency-Based Activities

There are numerous activities which have been devised, experienced, and proved to have been useful for improving speaking skills in the classroom. Among these activities the most popular ones are role play activities, group discussion activities, surveys, information gap activities, and speech activities.

Role Plays

"Role-play activities are those where students are asked to imagine that they are in different situations and act accordingly" (Harmer 1998, p. 92). Harmer also

suggests numerous possibilities and variations of this particular speaking activity which place students in different social roles and situations where they can rehearse patterns they have learned before. Lazaraton (2001) includes role-plays among her suggested activities to enhance oral skills. Lazaraton specifically mentions that this kind of activity can heighten the sociocultural awareness related to different speech acts among students. In order to give students even more real life experiences, Lazaraton advises teachers to require students to search outside of the classroom environment where different speech acts practiced by native or more proficient speakers can be observed such as a return desk of a shopping center which is a suitable place to find out how complaints are handled.

According to Hedge (2000) what all role play activities "have in common is that the setting, the situation, and the roles are constrained by the teacher or materials but, within these, students choose the language they use" (p. 279) though these activities may be different in their plot and degree of complexity. Hedge (2000) believes that role play activities have a number of advantages over free discussions. First, they encourage a wide range of participation on behalf of students. Second, they are more practical as they are based on real life situations, and therefore, they encourage the promotion of both transactional and interpersonal discourse. Third, they are most students' favorite activities as they require less cognitive ability since the students know at least roughly what to say when it is their turn. Above all, the fun of acting the role of other people amuses the majority of students. Hedge also emphasizes the important role of careful planning and efficient monitoring on behalf of teachers and students` motivations as key elements of a successful role play activity.

Harmer (2001) adds that role plays would be more effective if they are open-ended, and thus let the outcome decided by the participants, or when an agreement has to be reached. Moreover, role play activities are particularly suitable for encouraging shy students who are hesitant to speak up about their ideas since there is no responsibility in voicing the act they choose. As a follow up activity to integrate such fluency activities with writing, Harmer (1998) suggests that students can report on their decisions or results of the discussions, or write letters to people whom they were acting with.

Role play activities are sometimes referred to as simulations by some authors. For example, Chelle de Porto (1997) while strongly advising simulations as effective, highly inspiring activities, points out that simulation activities can provide students with meaningful and real life circumstances which ultimately lead to producing their own sentences. He also points out that one challenging task for language teachers is choosing realistic, motivating situations which at the same time encourage participation on behalf of students. He believes that by introducing simulations, teachers can not only integrate speaking skills into daily classroom activities, since one can adapt them according to the whole curriculum expectations and the text book itself, but also present culture in a lively, attractive way. The author also believes that mistakes should certainly be dealt with to help students avoid fossilization.

Group Discussion Activities

Improving speaking skills through group discussions and strategies to improve the quality of such discussions have been suggested by many researchers. Hollander (2002) believes that discussions not only can encourage group work and collaboration, but also provide chances for correction and giving feed back to students' performance. He also suggests that teachers must be aware that in a real discussion participants must think and give their opinions based on other participants` opinions and not just state their personal ideas.

Harmer (1998) reports that according to many teachers, discussions do not always turn out the way they expect. The author also specifies that one very important point for teachers to consider is the fact that, "the ability to give spontaneous and articulate opinions is challenging in our own language, let alone the language we are struggling to learn" (p. 91). The author suggests a preparation session prior to each discussion in order to first, give students a chance to choose a topic they feel interested in and second, to pick up ideas as well as needed vocabulary to express their ideas in the new language.

Hedge (2000) echoes the same concern when she suggests that some sort of support and structure such as giving information and providing relevant materials is needed on behalf of the teacher as students' level of anxiety rises when formulating opinions on topics that even in their own mother language they are not prepared to talk about or even have ever thought about. Hedge also confirms that discussions

develop students' fluency of speech as in due time they learn to talk about their interests, give opinions, agree and disagree, state preferences, and make comparisons. More importantly Hedge (2000) adds that free discussions provide opportunities for language learners to "practice the strategies required in interpersonal communication, for example, taking and holding turns, introducing a topic or shifting to a new topic, and encouraging responses and other contributions" (p. 277).

There are, however, some drawbacks to free discussions like the students' anxiety about unfamiliar topics, the domination of a few more proficient students, or even the teachers themselves, which according to the author can be decreased to minimum effect by implementing some structuring, planning, and support on behalf of the teacher. To give more clarification, Hedge mentions that one kind of support can be giving students enough information about the topic either by orally explaining to them or by bringing them materials related to the subject. Moreover, teachers can divide the procedure of discussion into phases in order to give students some time to think and analyze the subject. One advantage of such silent phases is that it fosters the strategy of meaning negotiation among members of the groups.

Surveys

Surveys are believed to arouse interest among learners to speak and exchange ideas. Harmer (1998) indicates that conducting surveys, especially if students are asked to prepare the questionnaires by themselves, can be a very exuberant class activity as it requires students to go round, have some physical activity, ask and answer questions, and use language in its authentic and communicative way. This is of course a change to everyday classroom routine. In his later edition, Harmer (2001) specifies the following important advantages for having students prepare questionnaires for carrying out surveys:

> Questionnaires are useful because, by being pre-planned, they ensure that both questioner and respondent have something to say to each other. Depending upon how tightly designed they are, they may well encourage the natural use of certain repetitive language patterns (p. 274).

In order to have maximum productivity, the author also advises the teachers to negotiate the possible survey topics with the students and choose something which is both appropriate and interesting.

Hedge (2000) echoes the same idea by stating that by giving students the luxury of choosing among topics, teachers can not only motivate students to a great degree, but also make the experience of language learning more memorable as it becomes related to personal ideas and feelings and also handling interpersonal situations the learners may face in real world confrontations.

Information Gap Activities

Among other fluency-based activities are Information Gap activities which have been studied and confirmed to be extremely useful with maximum efficiency when carried out in pairs. Basically, the activity consists of pieces of information divided between pairs of different groups and must be matched through negotiations in order to complete the task. Hedge (2000) states that comparing with other common fluency activities, Information Gap activities require more involvement of partners in a conversation, and also the motivation in this type of activity is high, as there are always parts of information missing. This missing piece of information according to Harmer (2001) can be a part of a puzzle to be solved, a picture to be described and drawn, objects to be described and arranged, or similarities and differences to be found between pictures. As a drawback, Hedge (2000) notes that although Information Gap activities encourage a lot of participation, they do not encourage students to use different conversational strategies.

Speech Activities

Goulden (1998) argues that although writing and speaking are both considered as discourse processes, they differ from each other regarding their products and also the way these products are conveyed. Therefore, not just any written text which is read aloud can be considered as speech, and that speech is most distinguished by its transitory nature. Goulden points out further that as all language arts are complementary to one another, integrating speaking and listening with reading and writing would enforce the common elements between these four and give a complete picture of what language is really about. The author suggests activities like informal speaking, formal speaking, and speaking in small groups as ideal ones to manipulate students' four skills properly.

Lazaraton (2001) notes that speech activities can be divided under two main categories: prepared speech and impromptu speech. She explains that both types of

speeches can be manipulated as valuable activities for an oral skills classroom. In assigning prepared speeches, the author advises the teachers to determine the rhetoric genre and also time restrictions while allowing students to decide on the content of their speeches themselves. Lazaraton mentions a challenging problem, related to conducting prepared speech familiar to all teachers who have once tried it, and that is the threatening nature of the activity from the view point of the presenter and also the boredom the audience experience. The author suggests that activating the audience and assigning them to peer evaluate the speaker will not only give them a chance to practice their own oral skills, but also eliminate the boredom issue to a great extent. The guidelines to evaluate the speech can be decided on either by the teacher or by the students themselves, of course once they are more proficient speakers. The students can then summarize the content and also comment on the shortcomings at the speech discussion which follows every speech.

While students can benefit from memorizing and having notes in prepared speeches, impromptu speeches give them opportunities to practice speaking with its natural spontaneity. Lazaraton provides some guidelines on how to plan and carry out an impromptu speech. The author points out that if, for example, a lesson is about using hesitation markers in speech, students can be given explanations on what hesitation markers are and when and how they can be used, and their correct pronunciation. The teacher then assigns students to use hesitation markers while talking about topics which they know little about or even topics that they are quite familiar with but for some concerns they do not want to yield much information. Lazaraton suggests that the activity can be further "expanded by having students who do know the topics give a short explanation of their own after each attempt" (p. 107).

<div align="center">Accuracy Based Activities</div>

The fact that students must be exposed to comprehensive input and the essential role it plays in language learning is an issue which most of the experts in this field agree on. Hedge (2000) believes that learners take off from primary stages to advanced level through the exposure to understandable input and producing output in highly controlled practices. These controlled practices can focus on different aspects of language like grammatical structures, phonological features, or communicative functions. Hedge further explains that what all these controlled activities "have in

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common is a conscious focus on language and a high degree of control over student out put" (p. 273). The author then concludes that if such a primary phase is needed as a foundation, where learners need to pass in order to be able to handle more complicated, freer conversational situations, the implications for the classroom instructions would be first contextualizing the language structures as they happen in normal life.

Davis and Pearse (2000) argue that accuracy practices do not have to be necessarily mechanical. The authors suggest that organizing appropriate contexts to practice forms of language can be fun specifically if they are done on subjects that students are interested in. Furthermore, Davis and Pearse assert that the element of missing information can strongly enforce the need for communication and therefore more practice of forms and structures automatically will follow. An example of such kind of activities is information gap activity. For example, to practice asking and answering about the make of different personal possessions like shoes, bags, and accessories, the teacher can ask the students to look for the required information and answer her questions.

One activity which well improves both fluency and accuracy is "Audio Taped Oral Dialogue Journals." According to Foley (1993), audio taped oral dialogue journals differ from written journals in that the former is supposed to be done orally on tapes. The main goal of the activity is to prepare the students for an unprepared talk which is quite similar to face to face confrontations with proficient speakers outside of the classroom. Foley insists that students must be discouraged from simply reading from a written copy of their answers and be reminded repeatedly that the aim is to encourage spontaneous talk and develop communication strategies. Furthermore, the author emphasizes that according to her experience and expertise if the topics of impromptu speeches are about students' personal interests, better results are to be expected. This is what Hedge (2000) mentions under the title of "Personalizing Language." She reports that "personalized practice makes language more memorable" (p. 274).

Foley (1993) explains further that once the instructor listens to the students' oral journals, corrections of different types of recurring errors can be recorded for the students to attend to. Lazaraton (2001) believes that the only drawback to audiotaped

oral dialogue journals is the fact that in classes with too many students it may be impossible for the instructor to respond to all of the students' works. Lazaraton then suggests some strategies to use as the benefits of audiotaped oral dialogue journals are too many and undeniable. The instructor can correct only some of the students' journals each time, or the students can exchange these tapes and provide feedback to each other.

Issues in Designing Communicative Language Classroom

There are many different issues to consider when designing tasks for a communicative language classroom. Goulden (1998) identifies two areas of concern for the teachers determined to promote speaking as well as listening skills in their classrooms. The author stresses that teachers should have first, "general information about what the content areas of speaking and listening include and how in a practical way teachers can incorporate appropriate instruction for these two language arts" (p. 90), and second, specific information about procedures through which speaking and listening skills can be taught, practiced, and assessed.

Furthermore, teachers must not always wait for the curriculum to explicitly demand the improvement of speaking skills as an objective. Butler and Stevens (1997) argue that it is mostly the teachers' responsibility to foster communicative efficiency among their students. The authors also believe that teachers must inform the students about the primacy of speaking skills and the decisive role they play in their academic success.

Considering students' goals is also one of the most important issues which contributes a lot in the success of a communicative language classroom. Riggenbach and Lazaraton (1991) believe that whenever teachers are free to choose the objectives, materials, and activities, it is wise to consider and implement activities to practice those specific structures which are related to the desired language functions accordingly.

Another important issue worth taking into consideration is the positive effects of the classroom environment which has been emphasized over and over by different writers. For example, Riggenbach and Lazaraton (1991) explain that if ever communicative activities are to be of any use, they must be carried out in a non-threatening classroom environment where students can confidently practice, "feel free

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to take risks, and have sufficient opportunities to speak" (p. 126). Other authors such as Butler and Stevens (1997) emphasize the significant role of an encouraging, open classroom environment in improving active language skills as students in such an atmosphere do not feel intimidated by being corrected. Thus, the feedback can best work out to enhance their speaking skills. Consistent with this issue, Chelle de Porto (1997), while recommending a suitable, nurturing atmosphere to promote students' motivation to actually communicate for meaning in the new language, asks educators and teachers to view errors as "a natural part of the learning process, never as a drawback" (p. 55). Chelle de Porto believes that errors must be corrected on the spot so that learners can learn the correct form of language.

<div align="center">Teaching Pronunciation</div>

Lack of intelligible pronunciation, apart from breaking down the communication stream between interlocutors, can oftentimes cause embarrassment and frustration, too. Pronunciation is one aspect of language that, no matter how proficient a learner is, requires a lot of natural endowment of speech organs, hard work, and motivation to be overcome. Therefore, teaching pronunciation is considered to be one of the cardinal pillars in developing oral skills in any language learning program.

Similar to most language related instruction, teaching pronunciation has gone through many changes over the past few decades. The present approach to teaching pronunciation is fundamentally different from the past in this regard that it is "moving beyond an emphasis on the accurate production of individual speech sounds to concentrating more on the broader, more communicative aspects of connected speech" (Jones, 2002, p. 175). This was also mentioned earlier by Goodwin (2001) who explains that with more emphasis on communicative language teaching the focus of teaching pronunciation in recent years has been on suprasegmental features such as intonation, stress, and reduced speech. This is quite contrary to what past instruction used to present when it was mainly concerned with the articulation of individual sounds and also the differentiation between vowels and consonants.

The most recent pronunciation practice, however, encourages both of these different areas. Goodwin (2001) illustrates that according to many ESL teachers focusing on fluency and communicative goals is simply not sufficient to provide

intelligibility, and that a mixture of both segmental and suprasegmental features is needed. Intelligibility, according to Goodwin (2001), is the "spoken English in which an accent, if present, is not distracting to the listener" (p. 118).

Intelligibility is that ultimate goal of many pronunciation teachings which has been substituted for a native like accent which, according to many scholars, is simply unachievable for most second language learners. Goodwin (2001) explains that as a very small percentage of language learners have ever achieved native-like English, setting such a goal seems extremely unrealistic. This view is supported by other authors such as Jones (2002) who emphasizes that "few second language learners are able to speak a second language without showing evidence of the transfer of pronunciation features of their native language" (p. 175). Harmer (2001) echoes the same point of view when he advises teachers to expect only intelligibility as their set goal of pronunciation instructions. He further illustrates that achieving native-like English is not even desirable for many students for some cultural and also psychological considerations related to their identity.

Concerns in Teaching Pronunciation

When it comes to teaching pronunciation there are, however, other serious concerns which are worth mentioning. Burgess and Spencer (2000) report that a large number of teacher education programs have failed to equip their native speaker educators with the sort of knowledge needed for teaching English pronunciation. The result is a wide community of teachers who are apparently reluctant to teach and assess pronunciation simply because they do not how to do it.

Harmer (2001) confirms the result of this previous study by reporting that contrary to other aspects of language like grammar and reading, overt teaching of pronunciation has been widely neglected by language teachers for a number of different reasons such as busy schedules and the fact that most students seem to do well without receiving exclusive instruction in pronunciation. Later on Jones (2002) report that many English language teachers "are unsure as to the status of pronunciation and whether or how it should receive systematic attention in a language course" (p. 175).

The alarming inadequacies in teaching pronunciation between language teachers have been furthermore and most recently reported by Levis (2006) when he

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notes that "while most teachers are aware of some consonant and vowel errors, few are able, without training, to speak knowledgeably of other phonological categories" (p. 247). This is when overt teaching of pronunciation proved to help students elevate their speech performance to a great extant. Harmer (2001) recommends that educators should not disregard the huge impact of a formal teaching of pronunciation as it "not only makes students aware of different sounds and sound features (and what these mean), but can also improve their speaking immeasurably" (p. 183). Harmer also explains that teaching pronunciation can successfully eliminate some major intelligibility problems, as well as provide a better understanding of spoken English in general.

To conclude, it is advisable that teachers develop an understanding that explicit teaching of pronunciation plays an important role in eliminating many problems in students' speech performance. Teachers are also recommended to consider both segmental and suprasegmental features of language in teaching pronunciation. This necessitates the development of teachers' own knowledge of rules in teaching pronunciation and the recent trends and techniques in this field which is highly stressed by many scholars.

Speaking Skills Assessment

In order to determine students' current degree of oral skills proficiency and also measure students' progress, it is necessary to know how speaking skills can be assessed. This explains the relative sensitivity and importance of oral proficiency testing. Unlike most conventionally consistent and objectively measurable language skills, assessing speaking competency has proved to be the most challenging.

Perhaps the most challenging issue in designing tests of spoken language skills is that most of the time it is very difficult to choose an activity which can specifically measure oral proficiency without the interference of listening skills. As Brown (2004) points out, "while it is possible to isolate some listening performance types, it is very difficult to isolate oral production tasks that do not directly involve the interaction with aural comprehension" (p. 140). According to Brown, successful speakers depend highly on their listening skills which are not empirically observable.

The second challenge, as Brown (2004) mentions, is "the design of elicitation techniques" (p. 140). Elicitation techniques are carried out to make sure that the test

takers will come up only with certain, pre-determined responses as it is always possible to avoid the target answer by avoiding or paraphrasing strategies. This problem is less of an issue now in 2006 given the relatively easy access to the internet for many teachers. A number of simple prompts can easily be found but more detailed tests are not easy to find and are not free. The free versions are usually not complete and are generally available to all the students reducing their validity. The following links are example of typical free on-line speaking tests: "http://www.bulats.org/samples/index.php" and "http://www.world-english.org/".

Jones (2005) adds other challenges to the above mentioned ones that assessors face, such as the subjective nature of assessing oral skills, practicality concerns, and also time constraints. Jones points out: "as the interaction is fleeting, the rater often has to work under great time pressure while making their judgment about the speakers' ability" (p. 75). Issues related to the practicality, according to Jones, include training a team of raters, which can be very time consuming, and second, the organizational preparations needed for administering spoken tests to large numbers of examinees.

Taxonomy of Oral Production Assessment Tasks

Brown (2004) divides oral production into four different categories concerning different oral performance assessment tasks: imitative, intensive, responsive, and interactive versus extensive. Short descriptions for each of these categories as well as different ways through which they can be assessed are as follow:

The imitative type of spoken language, according to Brown (2004), is "the ability to simply parrot back (imitate) a word or phrase or possibly a sentence" (p. 141) and it only assesses the phonetic systems of language, though some other features of language such as lexical and grammatical ones may inevitably play a role in the performance. During the imitative type of spoken language assessment the examinee relies on her/his listening skills only to store the prompt for a short while.

The intensive type of spoken language is normally used to assess the knowledge of intonation, stress, rhythm, and juncture in a variety of activities such as "directed response tasks, reading aloud, sentence and dialogue completion, and limited picture-cued tasks" (p. 141). Dialogue completion tasks is another example of intensive oral production assessment in which the test takers are asked to complete

missing lines of a dialogue. Brown (2004) states although the activity can gauge the sociolinguistic knowledge and the general spoken abilities of the examinees, it is limited in the sense that it requires literacy and the fact that the task is non-authentic.

The responsive type of speech assessment uses short conversations in the form of test completion, question and answer, paraphrasing, and giving instructions and direction. Questions which demand predetermined answers are called display questions, while those questions which require the examinee to think critically and convey meaning through language are called referential questions.

The interactive and extensive type of speech assessments use two kinds of activities, one which includes fairly long conversations with an interlocutor such as discussions and interviews, and the other which is relatively long but less interactive, like giving speeches, oral presentations, picture-cued story-telling, and retelling a story. Brown (2004) explains that these two different categories of oral production assessment differ in the extent to which the examinee interacts with an interlocutor.

Observational vs. Structured Approach to Assess Speaking Skills

Methods of assessment differ a lot according to the intended purpose of the assessment. Mead and Rubin (1985) mention two main methods for assessing oral competency: the observational approach which gauges the overall behavior of the examinee without raising any noticeable attention to a particular form or task, and the structured approach which addresses a specific pattern to be performed and then assessed accordingly. The authors also state that considering the principles of testing such as reliability, validity, and fairness is a key element in developing any successful method of assessment. Furthermore, Mead and Rubin (1985) point out that these two approaches use diverse rating systems divided into two main categories: "holistic rating" (p. 3) scales which look upon the overall competence of a speaker, and "analytical rating" (p. 3) scales which are more concerned with the specific communication components such as organization, content, and language.

Speaking skills can be evaluated in the classroom setting either through different activities such as giving oral summaries, personal presentations, and daily discussions, or through one-off exams like the end of the term ones. There are also high-stake tests which include a speaking part like FCE and the new generation Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). In addition, there are a number of tests

which have been designed to exclusively measure oral proficiency of the test takers like Test of Spoken English (TSE) and Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI). All of these tests more or less measure a combination of intensive, responsive, extensive, and interactive speech, and a team of trained human raters judge the results.

Speaking Skills Assessment through Classroom Observation

Butler and Stevens (1997) argue that the best assessment of speech abilities is the one carried out on a daily basis observation of the students' performance through different speaking activities, and the classroom teacher has the best position as an assessor. This is because the teachers have the advantage of being involved in daily conversations with students and as a result can be considered long term raters. Jones (2005) refers to yet another important issue, the fact that assessing students throughout a course eliminates the possibility of interfering affective factors existing in short one-off tests which can influence the exam results dramatically.

In addition, as Jones (2005) notes, assessing students throughout a course reduces the anxiety rate "since the testing is taking place in a non-threatening environment in normal classroom" (p. 79). Jones supplements the discussion further by mentioning some of the drawbacks to the human element in assessing speaking skills. Jones (2005) also underscores the crucial role of training courses for teachers to maximize the reliability of assessment which most of the time is not available, and also teachers' bias that reduces the objectivity of assessment. Norm-referencing is another danger which Jones warns teachers against since there is a probable "tendency to norm-reference students i.e. comparing the performance of one student with other students in the class rather than to mark each student's performance on its own merits according to specified criteria" (p. 79).

More importantly, Jones (2005) mentions that "when measuring the extent students have mastered oral skills which have been taught and practiced in a course, it is important to link the content of assessment to what has been taught in class" (p.79). Butler and Stevens (1997) confirm this idea by asserting that applying content validity would benefit both students and their teachers in the sense that it creates "strong interrelationships among teaching, learning, and assessing" (p. 23). It provides students with practical guidelines of what they would be asked to perform and why

and how. Similarly, it enables teachers to use assessment as a meaningful instrument to plan and promote ultimate teaching goals.

Suggested Classroom Activities for Assessing Speaking Skills

Assessing students' oral skills proficiency through long-term observations in different classroom activities, such as interviewing and questioning, giving oral summaries, and also through standardized tests, are all among numerous ways that most authors have suggested. Butler and Stevens (1997) suggest book talks and group discussion tasks for measuring students' abilities to convey meaning and reporting on particular types of information. In doing so, content and delivery are the two main concerns in evaluating students. Content refers to those items that the students are required to gather information about like the name of the author and the title of the book, characters, setting, tone, elements of literature which have been used in the story, their personal opinion about the book and if they recommend other students to read it or not. As for presentation, it is vital that teachers ask students to present what they have found without previous notification, as spontaneous speech is the intended target, not memorization or simply reading the content off a piece of paper.

Another activity suitable to assess speaking skills is group discussion. Group discussion aims at assessing the students' command of language through open-ended discussions. Parts of video clips or stories are used to prompt a discussion among groups of students. Butler and Stevens (1997) believe that such discussions have the advantage of initiating enthusiasm and lead to more participation on behalf of students. The authors also advise teachers not to consider the ethics of the student's answers as a decisive factor and only try to concentrate on language performance. The students are assessed based on the quality and quantity of the information they provide, their efficiency in expressing ideas, and finally the eloquence of their speech. Jones suggests the use of checklists to keep all the dimensions in mind. It is mentionable that the rating scales in such evaluations of speaking skills differ a lot according to the level of proficiency the teachers aim to measure.

Computerized Speaking Skills Assessment

Recently a successful speaking skill assessment has been claimed by a number of computerized tests. One of these tests is PhonePass, which has been employed primarily for recruiting purposes world wide and also in academic settings for

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placement and evaluation of students and its system uses speech recognition technology to rate responses. This is done by "comparing candidate performance to statistical models of native and non-native performance on the tasks" (Alderson, 2000, p. 601). The test is carried out over the phone in ten minutes with a paper sheet for reference which is downloadable. The response modes are oral, mostly repetition, and the result of the scoring is available after a few minutes. The overall score is between 20 and 80 and five sub scores which gauge pronunciation, reading fluency, repeat accuracy, repeat fluency, and listening vocabulary.

Research on this test has confirmed the construct validity of this predominant repetition part of the test in successfully assessing both phonological and general oral production. Brown (2004) defends the validity of this test by saying that "as researchers uncover the constructs underlying both repetition/read-aloud tasks and oral production in all its complexities, we will have access to more comprehensive explanations of why such simple tasks appear to be reliable and valid indicators of very complex production proficiency. Brown reports that "the scoring procedure has been validated against human scoring with extraordinarily high reliability and correlation statistics (94% overall)" (p. 146).

Alderson (2000) believes that although it may happen that the advancement in technology ultimately enables us to measure what human beings are capable of, still those "highly valued productive skills of speaking and writing can barely be assessed in any meaningful way right now" (p. 595). Fulcher (2000) emphasizes the same issue by saying that the claim of PhonePass for validity is basically problematic in the sense that it connects the results with direct measures of assessing speech competency as "it is possible that an estimate of speech rate would correlate with a direct test of speaking, just as it is possible that the height of a learner in Spain would correlate with a measure of vocabulary size" (p. 290). The author further asserts that comparing the fluency task in PhonePass and the complex applied linguistic tasks which are required in tests like OPI and TSE is fundamentally flawed.

The other concern is that "the PhonePass test measures both listening and speaking skills "emphasizing the candidates' facility (ease, fluency, latency) in responding to unpredictable material" ("Construct Comparison", 1999, para. 18). According to the same article, while speaking skill tests administered by human raters

test the examinees' high levels of international language proficiency, the "PhonePass test is a more indirect test from which practical inferences about conversational proficiency may be made" ("Construct Comparison", 1999, para. 20). This can be regarded as a drawback too, as the test depends on inferences to decide on the outcome results and not direct, measurable standards.

First Certificate of English Test

One of the most well known and widely used tests which includes assessing speaking skills is First Certificate of English (FCE) by UCLES [Cambridge ESOL is part of the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate]. FCE best suits intermediate level language learners at level B2 of the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.. FCE is taken by many test takers every year for a variety of reasons such as entrance to universities and colleges, improving job status, and also as a means to gauge progress in learning English.

Passing FCE proves the examinees' efficiency to communicate independently and successfully with native English speakers in different academic and industrial settings. The speaking part of this exam is carried out by two accredited examiners through face to face interaction. Examinees take the speaking part of the exam in pairs. There are two examiners and two examinees. One examiner never enters the activities and acts just as an assessor while the other plays the role of an interlocutor and of an assessor. Short conversations with the interlocutor who is an assessor too, a long turn (about a minute), and a collaborative discussion between the two participants are the task types during which examinees are supposed to exchange information about a variety of topics, express their ideas, and find out about people's attitudes. Cambridge ESOL exams claim to be designed to be fair to all examinees regardless of ethnicity, gender, and first language issues. The claim goes further to have a whole research team on board to ensure accurate, reliable results. (http://www.cambridgeesol.org/exams/fce.htm)

Overall, what every communicative language classroom aims to do is to develop the learners' ability to converse correctly, meaningfully, and as fluently as possible. Although achieving such a goal oftentimes seems difficult, it is not impossible. The usefulness of the suggested activities and concerns in arranging a communicative language classroom has been advised by many scholars and is backed

up by much research. It seems that teachers' awareness and also expertise in this field play a crucial role in finding opportunities to promote students' speaking skills.

Promoting speaking skills is the focus of this research, that is, to see to what extent students can improve their spoken language without additional time allocation or fundamental changes in the curriculum. For the sake of this study, both accuracy and fluency activities have been stressed. In accuracy activities the explicit teaching of language structures as well as pronunciation was conducted. As for fluency activities, role plays, surveys, prepared versus impromptu speeches, and free discussions have been selected and practiced. Other specifications of a successful communicative language classroom such as creating a friendly atmosphere and paying attention to students' individual needs were also taken care of.

As for the assessment of speaking skills and with regard to the presented literature and previous discussions, it seems that using a multi-measure scale to assess oral proficiency skills is probably the best. Observing students for the whole course through different speaking activities suggested in the literature would give each and every student a chance to display their best possible performance during which they can be assessed by the teacher. The result can be further authenticated by an end of term speaking test, as it provides the teachers with more reliable data to measure their students' speaking improvements.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Design of the Study

The main purpose of this study is first, to investigate teachers' as well as students' points of view about teaching and learning speaking skills at four private and two governmental schools in Dubai and second, to find out the extent to which students improve their oral communicative abilities if teaching speaking skills is incorporated along with other language skills. The inclusion of the two governmental schools in this study was done for the sake of the comparison between these two different, existing systems of instruction.

To address the first part, I carried out a survey in which I asked 30 English language teachers in Dubai to fill in a questionnaire. I also asked 105 students to fill in another questionnaire in which I asked about their opinions and expectations of the English instruction in these six schools. In a follow up, I interviewed volunteers among the teachers as well as the students.

In the second part of the study, to see if the augmentation of teaching speaking skills can actually elevate students' overall communicative abilities, twenty students from grades seven and eight participated in a focused instruction program for a period of eight weeks. Data came from a number of different sources in this study. First, I administered a pre-course diagnostic test to rate the speaking abilities of the students prior to the beginning of the instruction. Second, an on-going informal assessment in the form of a writing journal kept track of the students' improvement. Third, I conducted a post-course test at the end of the focused program to evaluate possible improvement by the end of the experiment. Fourth, informal interviews with students during this time were carried out to give the teacher researcher more insight into how students viewed their improvement and also the given instructions.

The rationale for selecting students from grade seven and eight was primarily due to lack of having enough volunteer students in one grade for participating in the focused program. However, this did not seem to create a wide discrepancy between the students' performance for a number of reasons. First of all, the students in the school where I conducted my research had diverse background schooling histories. Many of them joined the school only a year before I started my research from

governmental schools where Arabic is the medium of instruction and English is presented as a separate subject. We had also students newly coming from other Arab countries with EFL environment who had very limited abilities in English language.

Most importantly, in the diagnostic test, the average performances of the two grades did not vary much. Similarly, according to the obtained results from the post-program test the students' progress in these two different grades was also consistent. These findings will be precisely reported and discussed comparatively in the following chapters. Therefore, the fact that a student was in grade eight did not necessarily indicate the advancement of one extra year of instruction in comparison with those students studying in grade seven. Moreover, grades seven and eight were given almost the same syllabus in both grammar and literature. The students shared exactly the same grammar book, and in literature the assigned stories were all chosen from easy to low intermediate level ones according to the publisher's classification.

The Participants

Twenty-six teachers (twelve females and fourteen males) in four private schools and four (three females and one male) teachers in two governmental schools took part in the first phase of the study. The surveyed students were one-hundred-five from both genders from four private schools, 27 girls and 33 boys, and from the two governmental schools there were 20 girls and 25 boys. These students were in grades seven, eight, ten, and twelve.

As for the second phase of the study, 20 female students mixed from grades seven and eight with the age range of 12 to 14 participated in the focused instruction program. I selected the students according to their last English exam results. I decided to have two advanced students with grades ranging from 85 to 100, six intermediate students with grades from 65 to 80, and two weak students with grades from 50 to 60 out of the overall score of 100. These scores were part of the selection criteria resulting in a class of students of varying levels of competency similar to what a teacher might confront in reality. As the study was conducted in a local single-sex Arabic school, there was no access to male students. The majority of the students in this school are from the Emirates, and the minority are from other Arab nations such as Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Jordan. Around two percent of the whole population of

the students is consisted of students from other countries such as Germany, Russia, and Iran.

Little was known about the sociocultural and socioeconomic background of the participating students since few parents used to participate in parent-teacher association meetings. Also, the school did not require parents to provide a history of their own education and job descriptions. However, since private schools are fairly costly, it can be concluded that the majority of the students were from middle-class to rich families. All I knew was the fact that most of my students in grades seven and eight were not motivated to score higher in their exams as they repeatedly acknowledged that only passing the exams and going to a higher grade was what really mattered for their parents.

<div align="center">The Setting</div>

The school where I carried out the focused instruction is a private one which follows an American syllabus, using the Harcourt series for all subjects, and claims to present English as the only medium of instruction starting as early as the first year of kindergarten. Like most of the private schools in Dubai, the students take nine hours of English studies weekly during which they take literature, grammar, and vocabulary. The literature book, *Elements of Literature*, consists of collections of stories from different parts of the world. These stories are presented mainly as reading comprehension sources. This is probably because of the difficulty level of the texts which is way above the students' English proficiency. In all official school exams the students are not assessed on their reading fluency abilities. Vocabulary learning is limited exclusively to the memorization of the underlined words in the text of the literature book and does not exceed more than eight words per lesson. The students also have one grammar book, which contains language structures and the related exercises. Explicit pronunciation teaching is up to grade four and limited to teaching phonics. Speaking and listening skills are neither frequently taught, practiced, nor assessed.

Data Collection

Qualitative Data

Questionnaires and Interviews

The initial survey was aimed at discovering teachers' as well as students' in selected Dubai private and governmental schools attitudes towards teaching and learning speaking skills. This was done through two questionnaires (see Appendix A.1 and B. 1). During the whole procedure I was accompanied by an Arab co-teacher to assist me by translating into Arabic in case of any ambiguities. Upon distributing the questionnaires, volunteers among both the teachers and the students were called for participating in up-coming interviews where they would be given a chance to talk about their ideas, problems, and possible suggestions in detail. Fourteen teachers and thirty-seven students announced their cooperation and willingness to discuss their opinions (see Appendix A. 2 and B. 2). I also carried out some interviews with the students either as a whole class, or in some cases as groups of six to eight students.

During the second phase of the study more qualitative data were collected. One beneficial source of data were informal interviews in which either individually or as groups of four to five I asked my students to comment on their own progress, the focus instruction program, and also their prospective outcomes. The students were also asked through another questionnaire (see Appendix B. 4) to determine which of the adopted extra activities were more useful to the development of their speaking skills and in what ways. Moreover, during the students' presentation activities, the audience (other students) was given a questionnaire (see Appendix B. 5) and asked to rate the presenter's speech abilities in conveying the information.

The Daily Journal Entry

In addition to questionnaires and interviews, another qualitative source of data was my daily writing notebook. Tips and points to remember and reflect on, my students' common and specific errors and problems, the successful classroom activities, things that went wrong, possible changes to pre-planed tasks, and above all students' view points expressed during the informal interviews, even their comments about the activities, were all among the subjects written after each session.

Quantitative Data

   The outcome of the program was measured by conducting two sample versions of First Certificate of English speaking tests, one at the beginning and one at the end of the study. The tests which were used to gauge the students' progress were taken from the Oxford University official site and took approximately 15 minutes to apply for each pair of students. The exam was administered by a TESOL graduate student from Tunisia, other than the teacher-researcher, who closely monitored the activities during the program and was familiar with taking speaking tests. The results of the pre-program and the post-program assessments provided the quantitative data in the study.

   The Focused Instruction Plan

   I taught grades seven and eight for the first and the second semester in the 2005 – 2006 academic year. Towards the end of the year after conducting a diagnostic oral proficiency test, using a sample version of the FCE test (Appendix D. 1), I separated twenty students from these two grades and put them in one classroom and then started for eight weeks to systematically integrate speaking skills as the main objective in all subjects taught in an English lesson. This means that with the help of insights from the investigated literature in this field, I tried to teach students how to speak, whether it was a lesson in literature, grammar, or vocabulary.

   I had full permission of the administration to freely conduct my research. The administration and my supervisor expressed interest in seeing how these students would measure up in the final speaking assessment, which I was going to administer, as well as their end of the year school exams. During this time, I kept interviewing my students, either individually or as groups in order to stay informed about how they view their improvement in relation to the given activities. In addition to the final assessment at the end of the program, there was an on-going assessment of students' performance in the form of a written journal to keep track of their development.

Weekly Routine

   At the beginning of the first session, I talked to my students about the importance of having clear, eloquent speech. I also talked about communicative strategies and the way they can compensate for some inadequacies of their developing knowledge of language. I told them that we were going to learn more about these

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subjects in due time extensively. Most importantly, I asked them not to be afraid of making mistakes and that when it happened they should not be mortified to the extent of giving up and ending the conversation. All throughout the program I kept reminding my students over and over to pay attention to intonation, rhythm, and stress patterns of different statements during their listening parts of lessons or when they were watching video clips. Facial expressions and body language were two other issues that I tried to raise their awareness about.

During the whole period of the program, I divided the class activities into two major categories: fluency and accuracy. I selected prepared talks, role plays, and discussions as routine fluency-based activities and grammatical structures, phonological features, conversational gambits, and communication functions as accuracy-based activities during which there was high control over students' output.

The routine for every week was to first present the "Words to Own" section of each story together with other difficult words. After teaching the pronunciation, stress pattern, and a short description of the word, students were asked to work in pairs and do the exercises suggested in the Teachers' Edition which mainly aim to contextualize the new vocabulary. I also provided students with different parts of speech of the vocabulary words, again contextualized in the way they might happen in daily conversations. Then as a whole class we discussed the correct answers.

The presentation of the theme of every collection followed after using ideas and suggestions from the teacher's edition of *Elements of Literature*. Also, every story in the students' literature book has illustrations which students had to discuss first in groups and then tell the class about the possible events in the story, guessing the setting, and narrating some parts using the pictures in their books. I kept reminding my students that there were no right or wrong answers to my questions and they could use their wildest imagination to predict the events or guess the characters' personalities. Predicting, giving opinions, and explaining were skills which were practiced during this kind of activity which I had modeled since the beginning of the year so my students were familiar with them.

I chose a combination of stories from both grades seven and eight literature books. I selected eight stories with more interesting topics related to their teenage phase of life. These stories were: Ta-Na-E-Ka, The All American Slurp, The

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Nightingale, The Land I Lost, Eleven, Fish Cheeks, Rikki-Tikki-Tavi, and Aschenputtel. This way I could prioritize learning high frequency vocabulary as well as foster interest among my students. The students were expected to read the story at home and come to school prepared or at least, if the text was a difficult one, having some ideas about it.

The students were divided into groups of four to collaborate as we went through the text. The students read the text silently and individually, but I stopped them from time to time and posed a question to check the comprehension or wrote a clarifying statement on the board and asked them to give me their opinions. They were to discuss the issue or the question first among the members of the group. Then each time one of the members of the group conveyed what they chose as an answer. During their in-group discussions I walked around and monitored the activity. My major concern was to prevent them from switching to their mother tongue while discussing the issue. In each of these groups I included at least one advanced language speaker and asked them to agree between them who was to report their ideas about the questions to the class. I made sure everybody in the groups participated in the activities first by allocating marks for in-group participation and second, by keeping track of each student's accomplishments in the group work.

The questions mostly required the students to give opinions, agree or disagree with each other's ideas, predict the up-coming events in the stories, infer, and conclude. For each of these speech acts I first modeled the language pattern though they were quite familiar with this procedure as they were my own students for the period of almost one academic year. The students then wrote a summary of the story in their own words and read it in the classroom. I permitted taking notes during the speech delivery.

It is noteworthy that all the lessons in the series of books used at the schools are accompanied by audio CDs which are read by different standard foreign accents such as Arabic, Chinese, Vietnamese, Mexican, etc. I had my students listen to these CDs at the end of each session, and then I checked them on pronunciation, especially suprasegmental aspects such as intonation, rhythm, and also reduced speech which could be found in dramas and conversation parts of some stories.

At the end of every week I asked my students to think and write about a memorable experience they wanted to share with the class and then tell us about it without using much of their notes during the following week. Writing about personal experiences was mainly because of the existing literature about "personalizing the language" (Hedge. 2000, p. 274) and its role in motivating students.

As we went through the story, the students were presented with grammar, too. The book provides the students with grammar units specifically related to each story. Every time after teaching the grammar part, I drew my students' attention to the usage of that form in the related sentences in the text of the story. Later, the students were given some drills to practice. A book titled "Daily Oral Grammar", provided by the publisher, includes many exercises aimed at connecting grammatical forms to their discoursal function in context. In most of these texts and conversation parts, the students must recognize and decide which form is more suitable to convey the intended meaning with regard to the setting. In order to tap the students' production skills, I asked them to try and come up with some sentences of their own, using the language form in focus.

Furthermore, to increase students' transactional competency I chose the intermediate level of the commercially available New Interchange series by Richards (2003) as a supplement resource. The book, which has three cassette components, dramatizes different social circumstances similar to situations the students are likely to encounter. After presenting the new vocabulary needed to function in each situation, for example at a bank or a railway station, the students in groups of four were supposed to go through the conversation extract that they had previously listened to and prepare for a role play. Then they came to the front of the classroom and gave a demonstration. In order to give less competent students time to adjust to this new kind of activity, I chose more proficient, assertive students first to model the activity for those who had some difficulties with either the language or the confidence which was needed. There are also sections at the end of each lesson which have been exclusively allocated to presenting intonation, reduced speech, and word stress. I put a lot of emphasis on them. I advised my students that they do not have to set a specific time to listen to their tapes and that they can simply listen to it at odd times, for example on their way to the school. Covering each lesson in this book did not take more than

fifteen minutes at the end of every other day throughout the week. We had always one on Wednesdays which at the time of the study was the last day of the week, when everybody was tired and wanted to try something new.

In order to further establish an understanding of English pragmatics and also to strengthen my students' listening abilities, I allocated thirty minutes of every week to watching video cartoons and teenage movies. These cartoons and movies were: Rapunzel, Atlantis, Mermaidia, Nanny Mcphee, and Movin' On Up. All the movies were checked before being broadcast in the classroom and approved to be culturally appropriate. I converted all the transcripts into English. While watching the clips, from time to time I would stop and discuss the gestures, practice intonation, and also reduced speech in every day, informal speech.

Extra Activities

Based on suggestions from the literature I incorporated survey and role play activities to enhance speaking abilities of the students. During weeks two, four, and six, I asked students to conduct surveys as an alternative to summarizing the stories and narrating personal experiences. There are survey topics related to each story in the Teacher's Edition of the Harcourt books such as finding out about different nationalities and their endurance rituals, table manners, and diverse social norms. Before every survey activity, I talked about the topic in detail using the intended language form and then wrote as many vocabulary words as I could think of on the board. After that the students in groups tried to come up with their survey questionnaires. I went round at these times and gave them help whenever necessary.

The students were asked to gather information from multiple available resources such as books, magazines, internet, and most importantly in order to develop speaking skills through interviewing people. The groups then reported their findings, again in the form of an oral presentation to the class. One written report was required to be submitted to me for grading. I advised my students to present their findings by dividing them between two presenters in order to reduce their anxiety as well as to promote teamwork and collaborative style of accomplishing tasks.

During these short prepared speeches, other students were supposed to fill in a form, rating the presenter accordingly (see Appendix B. 5). I recorded each student's problems in grammar, delivery, or articulation for later private counseling. Then at the

end of each presentation there was a discussion where we all aired our ideas about how the presentation might have been improved together with mentioning the positive points.

I also tried two kinds of role play activities with my students: prepared and unprepared. As prepared role plays I selected two plays from a whole collection of dramas in the students' book. The students presented their plays at the end of weeks five and eight. It took the students four weeks to prepare for each role play. After reading and simplifying some parts, the students started practicing their parts. This was the first presentation of a play on stage throughout the ten year history of the school. With the permission of my students and also the administration I videotaped the plays and gave each student a version. The students who took part in these two dramas were not the same in order to give a chance for almost everybody to participate.

I also carried out four impromptu role plays during the third, fourth, sixth, and seventh week of our program. The first three role plays were adopted from previously covered stories such as "Aschenputtel" and "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves." The theme of the first story was quite familiar to the students as it is a German version of the well-known Cinderella and the second is a famous Persian story. Some students even claimed to have seen movies about these stories on TV. The students knew very well about the needed vocabulary in these stories and were familiar with what was going on with each and every character in the story.

Davies and Pearse (2000) recommend these so called "unscripted role plays" in which the learners do not have a script of what they are going to say and only know about the outcome of the story or the situation. The adoption of these activities was done to save time and also to bring innovation and creativity to the activity. Students were put in groups of four to take the role of opposing characters in the stories. After a short in-group discussion, members of each group were to come to the front of the classroom and depict their chosen events. I advised my students to come up with words of their own while at the same time conduct the outcome of the conversations as it was in the story. This way the students were free to choose words and build sentences of their own. This was completely different from memorizing the characters' parts and repeating them back in front of the audience.

The fourth role play was carried out during week seven. I asked students to form groups of four and select the best articles and surveys they had previously presented as homework. Each member of these groups had to submit at least one summary, or survey. Then I asked them to imagine we were to publish their work in the school board magazine and that they had to give reasons why their articles were better choices to be selected. Prior to these discussions I gave them the necessary vocabulary and also language forms of making suggestions, agreeing and politely disagreeing, and also persuading. The rest of the class then decided which articles are the most interesting ones.

Free discussions were carried out during the two last weeks. As my students were at a low-intermediate level, I did not pose a topic unexpectedly. Before each discussion session I would give them three different subjects. The students then decided which one would be discussed in the coming session. I chose topics that the students were interested in while at the same time are easy to argue about. For example I advised my students to think and arrange their ideas before coming to the classroom.

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

In summary, I used questionnaires and interviews to find out how English language teachers view including teaching speaking skills into their curriculum fixed objectives and if they regard it as necessary. Also, I used the same sources of gathering data to investigate the students' attitudes towards being communicatively competent in today's English speaking world as well as their expectations and capabilities in their second language after years of instruction.

In addition, having considered all time constraints that most of the teachers face, a study was carried out to examine the practicality of the inclusion of teaching speaking skills to the objectives of a school's set curriculum. Data were gathered through conducting two surveys at the beginning and end of the study which lasted for a period of eight weeks with twenty students as participants. Furthermore, information came from my own comprehensive daily report of the procedure. The categorization and analysis of the existing data are presented in chapter four.

Chapter 4

Findings

The qualitative as well as quantitative analyses of the gathered data are presented in this chapter in six main categories:

- Teachers' Attitudes towards Teaching Speaking Skills
- Results of Teachers' Interviews
- Students' Attitudes towards Learning Speaking Skills
    1. The Questionnaire
    2. The Interview Questions
- Students' Pre and Post Course test Results
- Students' Opinions about their progress
- Students' Opinions about the Favorite Class Activities

Teachers' Attitudes towards Teaching Speaking Skills

The survey which was designed to investigate teachers' attitudes about teaching speaking skills consisted of eleven statements and four open-ended questions. There were five options to choose from in reaction to the first eleven statements: Strongly Agree, Agree, Undecided, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. Since it was important to see how many teachers agree or disagree and also to make the analysis of the data easier I combined the options Strongly Agree and Agree, and Strongly Disagree and Disagree together. The results are shown in the table 1.

As can be seen in the table, 80% of the teachers agreed that becoming a proficient speaker is one of the major goals of learning a language. However, 60% of the teachers in Statement 2 disagreed that communicating effectively is a priority for the students. In response to Statement 3, 70% of the teachers disagreed that the integration of speaking skills to the curriculum depends on the abilities of English language teachers, though 50% strongly agreed and 3% agreed to know how to teach speaking skills as well as they knew how to teach other skills, for example grammar (Statement 4).

Digging more in this respect, I decided to carry out some informal interviews to see how well these teachers are informed about the ways of teaching speaking skills. I interviewed eight English teachers. I found out that these teachers have not read any recent book on new ways of teaching English language since they finished

their studies years ago and in some cases many years back. This could be an explanation for the results of Statement 5 with which, contrary to the related literature, 17% of the teachers strongly agreed and 57% agreed that memorizing, repeating, reciting, and reading can be considered as speaking activities.

Table 1. Teachers' Attitudes towards Teaching Speaking Skills (N=30)

No	Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD
1.	One of the ultimate goals of learning a language is to become a proficient speaker of that language.	15 50%	9 30%	2 7%	3 10%	1 3%
2.	Communicating effectively in English is the top priority for most of the students.	6 20%	6 20%	0 0%	14 47%	4 13%
3.	Integrating speaking skills instruction in the curriculum is possible if teachers know how to present it.	3 10%	4 13%	2 7%	15 50%	6 20%
4.	I know how to teach and promote oral skills as well as I know how to teach grammar.	15 50%	10 33%	2 7%	3 10%	0 0%
5.	Memorizing, repeating, reciting, and reading can be considered as speaking activities.	5 17%	17 57%	5 17%	0 0%	3 10%
6.	If a student is proficient in grammar, reading, and writing, s/he can converse fairly well automatically.	10 33%	12 40%	5 17%	0 0%	3 10%
7.	Speaking skills must be taught systematically together with other language skills at school.	14 47%	8 27%	0 0%	3 10%	2 7%
8.	In having a successful communicative classroom, teachers` teaching and language proficiency as well as profound knowledge about the subject, play a decisive role.	20 67%	7 23%	0 0%	1 3%	0 0%
9.	Including teaching speaking skills is a time consuming task.	13 43%	12 40%	0	2 7%	3 10%
10	Time constraints prevent me from teaching a skill which is neither a defined goal, nor a requirement for passing the final exam.	15 50%	11 37%	0 0%	3 10%	1 3%
11.	Being a proficient English speaker is a major contributor to students' success in colleges, universities, and later in finding jobs.	4 13%	2 7%	3 10%	11 37%	10 33%

Approximately 73% of the teachers agreed that if a student is good at other language skills, s/he is able to speak well automatically (Statement 6). There were only few teachers who disagreed and believed that students would not master any skill

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if they did not receive a focused instruction and enough practice on that subject. To find out why the majority of the teachers agree with Statement 6, I talked to three groups of three to five teachers as well as individual talks with my colleagues in which I asked some explanations about their rationale. Most of the teachers, as many as nine, argued that basically speaking is a skill to pick up and not meant to be taught. One teacher asserted that teaching speaking would not promote speaking skills in the same way that teaching for example reading skills or grammar had not promoted their skills in these fields. These teachers reported that generally the students lack the required motivation to study.

Hence, 74% of all the teachers in the study agreed that speaking must be taught systematically along with other language skills at schools (Statement 7). Furthermore, 96% of the participants believed that in doing so, a teacher's teaching and language proficiency as well as profound knowledge about the subject play an important role in having a successful communicative language classroom (Statement 8).

As expected, most of the teachers who participated in this study believed that in order to teach speaking skills there must be specific time allocations as well as curriculum requirement. Responses to Statements 9 and 10 show that a majority of the teachers as large as 83% in Statement 9 and 87% in Statement 10, agreed that teaching speaking apart from being time consuming is not even required by the curriculum or plays an important role in passing the exams.

In the same way, 83% of the teachers (twenty-five) in response to the open-ended Question 12 in the questionnaire which asked them if teaching speaking skills requires specific time allocation stated that logically teaching another skill demands fundamental changes in the time table and syllabus.

Only five teachers answered Question 13 which was about the ways speaking skills can be assessed. Two teachers mentioned the use of interviews and filling the blank spaces in an extract of a given conversation. Three others believed that the speaking mark should be left to the teachers to decide on according to students' class participation. They also noted that this helps when the students are on the verge of failing the course and in urgent need of a boost in their grades.

The following results were obtained from responses to Question 14 in which I asked for any comments the teachers wanted to add. Below are some quotes provided by them:

- When we receive students in upper grades, we are shocked by their poor knowledge of English in general. What do you expect? No one can remedy years of neglect by teachers who taught them in early stages.
- Please do not try add to what has already plagued us.
- Students do not have any motivation in learning English. Research of this kind is suitable for good schools only.
- When the majority of my students do not have any intention to continue their studies, what is the point of going through this ordeal?
- The researcher probably does not have any experience in teaching at schools.
- I believe the students should be good in reading, vocabulary, and grammar before they can begin to speak or write. Most of the students do not know enough words to speak.

Most importantly, in reviewing the teachers' questionnaire and also through interviewing them, I found quite unexpectedly that unlike private schools, teachers in governmental schools, though very limited, do present speaking skills. In fact, when I examined the text books I noticed special sections allocated to speaking in different topics. I asked two teachers about how they arrange these speaking sessions. Both said that they usually give students some background about the topic followed by a whole class talk. In their opinion this way the students can find a chance to talk to a more proficient speaker which will ultimately cause their improvement. The teachers also confirmed that they do not go further than correcting the grammatical and pronunciation mistakes occasionally. Besides, teachers in governmental schools acknowledged that although they have to cover all the sections in the English book including the speaking parts, they are not strictly required to assess speaking skills.

Results of Teachers' Interviews

Appendix A.2 shows the interview questions I prepared to find out more about the teachers' attitudes towards teaching speaking skills at schools. In response to Question 1 which asked the teachers if teaching speaking skills is a curriculum requirement in their school, four teachers who were working in governmental schools

reported that although they practice speaking skills with their students, the assessing is not formal and it is up to the teacher to decide based on students' participation in class activities. Teachers in private schools noted they do not include speaking skills.

As for naming activities through which speaking skills are taught in Question 2, the governmental school teachers mentioned whole class discussions. Through some informal interviews with these teachers, also with the students, I noticed that not all students get the chance to participate in these discussions. When I asked the teachers about an explanation, they told me that it is very difficult in their crowded classes to find the time needed to work with each and every student and encourage them to talk. Moreover, these teachers illustrated that since speaking is a skill at which most of the students are very weak, they do not benefit from group discussions and it is their own responsibility to speak to students individually which practically seems impossible.

Among teachers who were teaching in private schools, only two went beyond suggesting whole class discussions and memorizing pre-fabricated chunks of language to describing prepared speeches, free discussions, and role plays. Eight teachers strongly pointed out that if students are talented enough to learn a language, they should be able to learn how to talk in English by listening and responding to the teacher.

In Question 3 teachers were asked if they believed that being a proficient speaker determines students' success in the admission of colleges and university exams as well as providing better job opportunities. This question was originally Statement 11 in the teachers' questionnaire. When 70% of the teachers disagreed with it, I decided to seek for some more explanations. That is why I included this statement in the interview questions. Two teachers explained that presently speaking skills play a small part, if any at all, in students' admission in colleges and universities and that grammar, reading comprehension, and vocabulary are those language skills which still count in most well known exams. Nine others argued that based on their teaching experience, good students are fairly good in all skills. Consequently, if they do well in what they are currently being taught, speaking will follow suit. For them, being a proficient speaker cannot be considered a major contributor to students' success and it would be a waste of time to try to teach yet another skill which would certainly add to

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their laborious job. The rest believed that prior to becoming proficient speakers, the students need to promote their more essential skills to pass their school final exams which in itself requires a lot of time.

In conclusion, although the majority of the teachers in this study supported the idea that speaking is one of the most important skills in learning a language, they have reservations about devoting time to it, unless it is dictated by the curriculum. Some reasons which were indicated by the teachers in their informal interviews were lack of time, crowded classrooms, lack of enough resources, and the belief that it can be naturally developed as an outcome of other skills.

Students' Attitudes towards Learning Speaking Skills

Table 2 shows the questions and the results of the students' questionnaire.

Table 2. Students' Attitudes towards learning Speaking Skills (N=105)

Statements	SA	A	U	D	SD
1. Being a proficient English speaker determines students' success in colleges, universities, and later in finding jobs.	98 93%	2 2%	0 0%	0 0%	2 2%
2. The current English practice at the school gives me the ability to communicate effectively in the society.	0 0%	4 4%	7 7%	83 79%	6 6%
3. I do not need to speak fluently to be a successful language learner.	3 3%	1 1%	9 9%	74 70%	18 17%
4. I can easily make myself understood in classroom situations.	65 62%	19 18%	6 6%	10 10%	3 3%
5. Communicating effectively is a top priority for me because of its importance in academic and social life.	60 57%	34 32%	5 5%	5 5%	0 0%

As can be seen in the table above, out of 105 students who participated in this survey, 93% strongly agreed and 2% agreed that becoming a proficient English speaker impacts people's academic and career success. Quite surprisingly, with the same statement 70% of the teachers disagreed. The argument was that they believed other language skills still have more decisive roles in students' success.

Students' dissatisfaction about their speech performance is shown in the result of Statement 2 with which 79% of the students strongly disagreed and 6% disagreed. In other words 85% of the students acknowledged that they feel their English

instruction at schools is inadequate and does not prepare them to function effectively in social circumstances. Nevertheless, 62% of the students strongly agreed and 18% agreed that they do not have any problem with making themselves understood in classroom situations (Statement 4).

I had my suspicions about the shared language between students and teachers, since there were no native-English-speaking teachers working in the schools where I carried out my study. I decided to add one more question to the students' interview questions. When I specifically asked three groups of five to seven students in grades seven, nine, and twelve, I came to know that most of the time the students resort to Arabic as a common practice especially when facing a problem, to the degree that some students do not know any other way of learning a second language unless it is taught using their first language. However, the majority of the students believed that if there were strict rules to use only English for communicating in the classroom, their speaking would become far better.

The results above are similar to what I noted in the daily journal writing about my own students' frequent comments. They mentioned that the struggle they went through to communicate with me had positive effects on their abilities, as well as confidence in speaking English since first I began teaching them. Also, 70% of the students strongly disagreed and 17% disagreed with the idea that successful language learning can happen without acquiring good speaking skills (Statement 3).

These results are similar to what I noted in the daily journal writing about my own students' frequent comments. They mentioned that the struggle they went through to communicate with me had positive effects on their abilities, as well as confidence in speaking English since first I began teaching them. Also, 70% of the students strongly disagreed and 17% disagreed with the idea that successful language learning can happen without acquiring good speaking skills (Statement 3).

Moreover, quite expectedly, nearly 90% of the students identified their top priority in learning English as communicating effectively. This is when 60% of the teachers disagreed with the same statement. This huge difference between students' and teachers' attitudes indicates that the presented instructions at least at these schools do not match students' needs and expectations. Riggenbach and Lazaraton (1991) believe that whenever teachers are free to choose the objectives, materials, and

activities, it is wise to consider and implement activities to practice those specific structures which are related to the desired language functions accordingly.

Finally, in response to open-ended Question 6 in the questionnaire, 98% of the students specified that they are weaker in speaking and vocabulary in comparison to grammar and reading comprehension. Grammar was a subject that most of the students claimed to know well. The students illustrated lack of confidence, limited range of vocabulary words, and having difficulty in remembering the known vocabulary as their major problematic issues in speaking English.

<div align="center">Students' Responses to the Interview Questions</div>

The results that I am reporting here are the opinions of 37 out of 105 students participating in the first phase of the study in particular, though what I gained from informal interviews or whole class discussions in both governmental and private schools were the same. In the first question I drew the students' attention to the actual length of their studies and asked them what they think the outcomes of these years should be. The majority answered they had never thought about such an issue and therefore they were not sure about it. Five students pointed out that they expected to become speakers at intermediate level which was far from what they were at the time. As for the second question, I did not have even one student satisfied with his/her performance. Some of these students claimed that their exams are too easy, repeatedly revised by the teachers in advance, and that it cannot be an indicator of their real English language competencies.
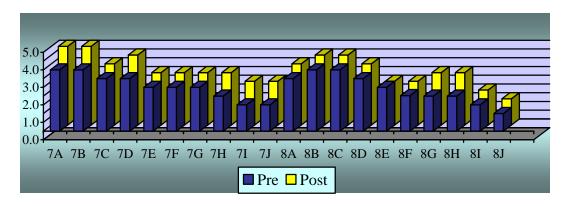
When I asked the students about the usage of Arabic language in English classes, 74% admitted that Arabic is used most of the time by both teachers and students. I asked some of the teachers if they speak Arabic. Eleven teachers reported that lack of time does not let them explain important points in both English and Arabic and that they use Arabic for weaker students who are not few in their classes.

I also asked students for some suggestions they thought would be useful to improve their speaking skills. 53% of the students suggested that they would like to be provided with more speaking opportunities in classroom activities. Also, 20% of the students believed that it was their own fault that they were shy and decided not to participate in conversations in and out of the classroom. The rest argued that since they were weak from the beginning, they did not feel any motivation to learn English.

Students' Pre and Post Course Test Results

As it has been stated earlier, to see if the students can improve their speaking abilities, I began a special focused program during which I tried to enhance my students' speaking skills using the same material I needed to cover according to our school's syllabus. I carried out a diagnostic speaking test before I began the focused instruction which continued for eight weeks. Also, at the end of the program I administered another test to gauge the improvement of my students during this period. I used two sample versions of FCE speaking test (see Appendix D.1 and D. 2). The speaking test scale which I used is adopted from Luoma (2004) with small changes to add the pronunciation elements and also to accommodate the examiner with an easier marking scheme (see Appendix D. 3). Students in these tests were rated on five categories: accuracy, fluency, intelligibility, range of expression, and appropriacy. Accuracy basically measured the ability of the examinees in producing correct forms of language. Intelligibility measurement included pronunciation, stress, and intonation of the students' speech and the extent to which they were understandable. Fluency examined the students according to their natural flaw of language. In other words, hesitations, pauses, and the ability of the examinees to demonstrate speech spontaneity determined their fluency. Range of expression measured the students' knowledge of vocabulary and structure of language. As for appropriacy, the ability to choose the correct words and register depending on different given situations was what counted for students' level of proficiency. Each of these areas received five marks to make a total of twenty-five. To protect students' privacy, they are referred to by alphabetical letters plus number 7 or 8 depending on the grade they were in. Figure 1 compares students' pre and post test "Accuracy" marks:

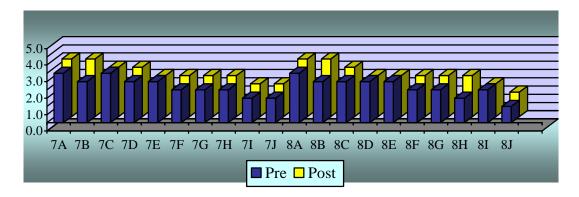Figure 1. Students' Pre and Post Test "Accuracy" Marks

As can be seen in the chart above, almost all the students showed improvement in their accuracy of speech. This is to a great extent due to the feedback and high control over the form during accuracy activities. According to Davies and Pearse (2000), "many successful learners feel that the mechanical drilling they did in class did help them when they eventually tried to use the language for real communication" (p. 42). This was also confirmed by my students in our class discussions since the majority of them believed whatever they practiced in forms of drills helped them to both eliminate more grammatical and pronunciation mistakes and improve spontaneity in speech. It is noteworthy that during the eight-week period of the study, accuracy was one field in which all students demonstrated apparent changes both in their grammar drills and spoken language.

Figure 2 shows the progress students made in their speech range of expression. Apart from four students who remained the same, improvement can be seen in most of the students' performances. Students 7A, 7H, 8B, and 8H showed a 20% increase in their performance. In general, the majority of the students showed a vaster range of expressions when speaking. According to my daily journal entry, the improvement of the students is closely related to their participation in different classroom activities.

Another reason for the higher scores is the activities through which the students were required to practice their transactional English. The language patterns which are normally used in different social situations such as shopping, asking for information, giving directions in a Taxi, and so on helped students to internalize more commonly used expressions. Students with substantial change in their performance were highly motivated, extroverted, and eager to take part in designed activities and

also the assigned homework. Also, according to students, the cartoons and movies which we saw and analyzed helped students in learning and using language expressions, a resource which must not be underestimated.

Figure 2. Students' Pre and Post "Range of Expression" Marks

"Appropriacy" marks are shown below in Figure 3. The improvement demonstrated in the post-test was expected as the students were completely unfamiliar with the structure and setting of the pre-test. It seems that activities through which students practiced giving opinions, agreeing and disagreeing, and comparing different situations and illustrations contributed to their better results in the post test including the weaker ones, especially students 7I and 8J who showed a noticeable change. Students like 7A, 7H, and 8B showed 20% of improvement, a complete higher level, in comparison with their previous status. There were students such as students 7B, 7D, 7E, and 8C who although scoring better than before, did not reach the 20% improvement students 7A, 7H, and 8B achieved. Students 7C, 8A, 8D, and 8F did not show any apparent difference in this aspect of their speech performance.

Figure 3. Students' Pre and Post Test "Appropriacy" Marks

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Figure 4 shows how students have measured up in regard with their speech fluency. None of the students failed to show spontaneity enhancement. This result is in harmony with my own on-going assessment of the students' performance throughout the study. Lots of practice and student talk could be the reason why the students became more comfortable and spontaneous in their conversations. Students 7I, 7J, and 8J who were almost always silent, began to show interest and speak, though with very short and even sometimes incomplete sentences. Throughout our discussions I found out that these students did not believe they could ever talk because every time they attempted to speak, they were labeled as slow and incompetent. Student 8J told me personally that she was a slow speaker even in her native language and that she wanted her teachers to show more patience with her mistakes. Average students (according to their school exam grades) such as students 7F, 7G, 7H, 8I, and also some already advanced students like student 7A and 8A manifested notable progress in comparison with what they were at the beginning of the course. Students' changes in their speech fluency was higher than any other aspect of language based on which they were assessed.
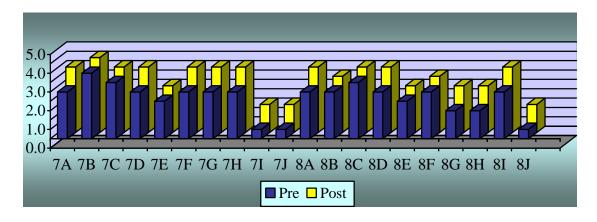
Figure 4. Students' Pre and Post Test "Fluency" Marks

The students' pre and post test pronunciation marks are represented in Figure 5 with little or no changes even in advanced students. The examiner reported that initially the students did not have any major problem with pronouncing individual sounds. The problem was with the suprasegmental aspects of language such as intonation and stress pattern which did not make any improvement during the focused instruction program. Comments in the existing literature about the pronunciation and

the fact that it is probably the most challenging skill to overcome explain this failure. However, since "systematic cognitive and sensory training, regardless of age and the aptitude for pronunciation, helps all learners to improve their skills in the acquisition/learning of L2/FL pronunciation" (Odisho, 2003, p. 6), it is anticipated that a longer period of instruction and practice will probably lead the students to demonstrate better results.

Nevertheless, the pre-test marks indicate that the majority of the students demonstrated quite an intelligible pronunciation which to some extent is due to the fact that these students were taught with the specific purpose of accommodating students' desire and need to become better speakers for a year before starting the focused instruction program. In comparison with the pre-test results, students 7A, 7E, 7H, and 8F performance showed clearer pronunciation but that was not enough, according to the test marking scheme, for the examiner to rate them with a full higher level (20%) improvement.
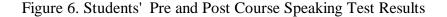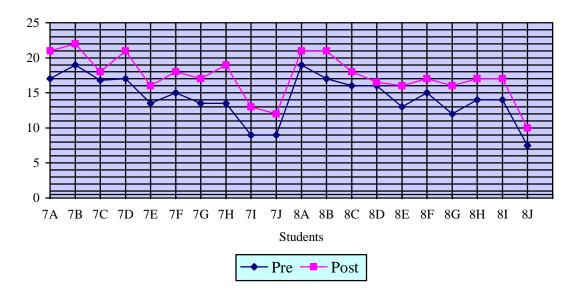
Figure 5. Students' Pre and Post Test "Pronunciation" Marks

Students' Overall Advancement

It has been stated before that the overall advancement of the students during the intensive focused program has been measured by two sample versions of FCE speaking tests as pre and post program tests of which the results are presented in Figure 6.

Figure 6. Students' Pre and Post Course Speaking Test Results

As can be seen, all the students more or less achieved higher scores on their general performance in the post program speaking test. Depending on their participation, each student showed a different degree of progress. However, the satisfying result is that they all improved from the initial stage where they started, which was from an overall average of 14.37 to 17.35 out of 25. Most importantly, the focused instruction program for the very first time gave the students an opportunity to systematically practice and assess their speaking skills. It is noteworthy that in order to set realistic expectations both pre and post exams were assigned as criterion-referenced and used the typical performance of a non-native grade eight top-student studying in an international school as the highest level of five. The marking scheme of these two samples of FCE speaking tests were taken from Luoma (2004) (see Appendix D. 3).

Although comparing the students in the study with an advanced, very competent student studying in an international school may seem unfair, concerning the students' development, it does not seem to be an unachievable goal as an overwhelming majority of the students showed a lot of enthusiasm and talent in learning and following the assigned activities in the focused instruction program.

According to figure 7, the average performance result of the grade 7 students in the pre-course speaking test was 14.40 while students in grade 8 scored an average of 14.35. The same comparison between grade 7 and 8 students in the post-program

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speaking test is presented in Figure 8. The average of grade 7 students is 17. 70 in comparison with the students in grade 8 who measured up the average of 17.
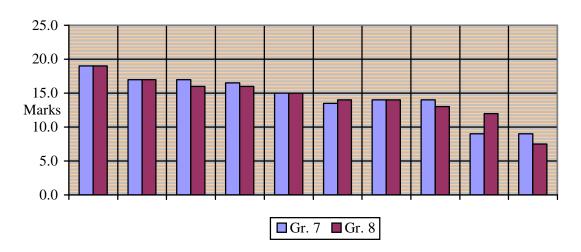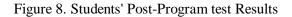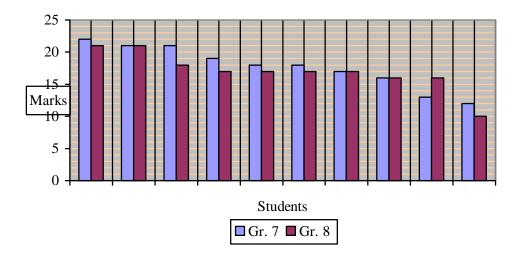
Figure 7. Grade 7 & 8 Diagnostic Test Results

Figure 8. Students' Post-Program test Results

Therefore, it seems that the selection of the students based on their schools exams was a suitable criterion for grouping students with compatible abilities since they all have measured up in the pre-program test quite coherently and there is no evidence that grade 8 students out performed grade 7 because of their advantage of having one extra year of instruction. In fact, though by fractions, students in grade 7

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manifested better results. Overall the rate of improvement did not seem to vary much across the participating students regardless of their proficiency level in English.

<div style="text-align:center">Students' Opinions about their Progress</div>

Table 3 shows the questionnaire that I prepared to find out how students rated their own progress during the focused instruction program. To ease the process of analyzing the data I combined the results of the option Agree and Strongly Agree as well as Disagree and Strongly Disagree. Out of 20 students, 17 agreed that their confidence in speaking English had increased. They reported the same idea in their informal interviews. Moreover, the students stated that in addition to practicing, they actually enjoyed doing the activities during this period.

Table 3. Students' Self Evaluation about their Progress (N=20)

No	Statements	SA	A	U	D	SD
1.	I feel more confident now when speaking in English.	9	8	1	0	2
2.	The instructions on speaking skills have been helpful.	18	2	0	0	0
3.	The activities in which we were involved such as group discussions and book talks were more motivating than before.	15	3	2	0	0
4.	Overall, I think I have improved my speaking skills.	9	10	1	0	0

In response to Question 2, all of the students acknowledged that the program had been helpful in the betterment of their speaking performance. This claim can further be proved by the result of the quantitative data gained from the post test speaking test. Also, 18 students believed the activities to be more motivating in comparison with routine English classroom chores in previous years. In fact, I had students who through our group discussions and interviews repeatedly declared their previous lack of interest towards learning English and the way the focused instruction program changed their minds.

Moreover, 17 students responded to the first open-ended question in the questionnaire which asked them about the ways they think the activities had been helpful. The students were asked to write their opinions in Arabic to make sure they have the necessary resources to express their thoughts and then one of my Arab

speaking colleagues helped me with translating their answers. Almost all mentioned the element of more participation as the most efficient element in their progress. Group work was mentioned by 11 students. Two students specifically stressed that the pair and group work were not appreciated by other teachers as they were assumed to be noisy and useless. The students mentioned that they received feedback as well as support while speaking English with their classmates.

The second question asked the students if the speaking activities have helped them become better in their other language skills. Nine students noted that the discussions about the stories not only helped them better internalize the vocabulary words, but also use them in their own speech. Four others mentioned that they became more conscious about speaking correctly. Almost all the students agreed that watching cartoons helped them learn chunks of language and also notice the intonation and different meanings it can create.

To conclude, it seems that teachers' and students' opinions about the inclusion of speaking skills to other presently taught language subjects in schools differ greatly. Teachers seem to be reluctant to teach speaking skills unless it is dictated by the curriculum and accompanied by necessary provisions. They also complain about their schools' restrictions and also the crowded classrooms and the fact that teaching a time- consuming skill like speaking is simply impossible.

On the other hand, students believe that speaking is an important skill without which success in admission to higher education establishments as well as finding jobs seems impossible. Also, an overwhelming majority of the students believe that more enhanced English instruction at their schools will help them reach their future goals more conveniently. As for the second purpose of this study, the results supported the hypothesis that by integrating the teaching of speaking skills, students can improve their overall communicative proficiency. Indeed, most of the students did make progress in their speaking skills during the eight weeks of focused instruction, using the same devised material together with some additional activities which did not take up more time.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Implications

Summary of the Findings

This study was carried out to first, investigate the teachers' as well as the students' impression about including speaking skills into their schools' syllabus and second, to discover if students can improve their speaking skills without much of a change in the decided material and allocated time.

The results of the teachers' questionnaire, formal and informal interviews indicate that although most of the English teachers consider speaking skills as an important part of learning a language, they have serious reservations about adopting necessary changes in order to include teaching speaking skills in their mandated teaching objectives. Most of the teachers firmly held the belief that there should be a specific curriculum requirement and that there should be sufficient time given if ever such a challenging plan can be carried out successfully.

This can be justified by the fact that first, most of the time teachers have little room to maneuver and are required to follow the rules very strictly. According to my own personal experience, and also through some informal interviews with teachers, I found out that the majority of teachers are under control even for slight changes such as classroom seating arrangements and that they are not allowed to pair or group students lest they may end up having an out of control situation.

Moreover, concerning the fact that speaking skills are not assessed in the schools where I carried out the study, teachers are de-motivated by the notion of teaching a skill which is not going to account for students' success in final exams. The third reason for the teachers' obvious reluctance about integrating speaking skills may originate from the misconception that speaking can only be taught at certain times and requires using special materials. In fact, as it has been mentioned earlier, 83% of the teachers agreed that teaching speaking skills is a time-consuming task.

One major finding of the teachers' questionnaire and interviews is that few teachers are informed about the past and present literature on ways of teaching speaking skills since most of them could think of only whole-class discussions as the best example to teach speaking skills. Most of these teachers believed that skills such as grammar and reading should be the top priority in teaching and learning since by

mastering these areas, speaking would follow automatically. These findings might indicate that the majority of these teachers simply do not have a clear idea about teaching speaking skills.

In contrast, almost all the students have recognized and specified in their questionnaire and interviews that speaking fluently is one of the most crucial factors contributing to their success in academic and social life. Moreover, many students are aware of the deficiencies in the current English instruction in their schools. The evidence for this claim is that 98% of 105 students mentioned that they had more difficulty when it comes to speaking in comparison with other language skills. Also, 53% of the 37 students whom I personally interviewed believed that when given more chances to them to converse in the classroom setting, they would definitely overcome their problems such as lack of spontaneity and confidence in speaking.

As for the second part of this study, it is noteworthy that the obtained results confirmed the practicality and usefulness of the speaking activities suggested by the existing literature on oral instruction, since the focused instruction program helped almost all the students enhance their speaking abilities. Admittedly, the range of improvement varied among students. Likewise, students did not improve in all aspects of their speech consistently. For example, in terms of accuracy, students exhibited more obvious improvement compared to their pronunciation developments. According to the existing literature, the results of the study manifest pronunciation as the most challenging and hard to improve aspect of language. However, concerning the fact that students had rather intelligible pronunciation, even in the speaking test which was carried out prior to the beginning of the program, further practice and time dedication can guarantee better results.

Implications of the Study

This study, as limited and small as it is, has proved not only the possibility but also the practicality of including speaking skills into teaching objectives in a private school in Dubai, but also shown the apparent improvement in students' communicative competence over a period of eight weeks. I believe that the rewarding results of this study might encourage teachers to take the necessary changes in order to gain more control over their teaching practice, so that they can provide their students with better results in their studies. Following the idea of Butler and Stevens

(1997) who argue that it is mostly the teachers' responsibility to foster communicative efficiency among their students, I think that in the end no one would stop teachers from enhancing the students' performance and it is ultimately up to them to decide to make a change.

The result of this study can also provide clearer insight for decision makers, curriculum developers, and the schools' administration into students' needs and potential capabilities. I must admit that the success of the focused instruction program was to a great extent due to the freedom that my supervisor and also the administration provided me with. Therefore, this study is a clear example of the fruitful results of giving teachers the authority to make minor changes within the curriculum.

Most importantly, the results of the qualitative part of this study reveal the attitudes and opinions of teachers which may help the authorities to seek the reasons behind these rather negative attitudes. Similarly, students' attitudes, motivation, and expectations shown throughout the study can inspire curriculum designers to tailor more up-to-date curricula and thus provide our new generation with a suitable English instruction focusing on speaking skills.

Limitations of this Study and Directions for Further Research

Each part of the present study has its own limitations. The first part was carried out in four private and two government schools with thirty participating teachers who were working at the time in those schools. Such a number of contexts and participants, though sufficient for the purposes of a humble study as such, are undoubtedly inadequate for reaching a reliable conclusion. Certainly, there would have been a much more complete picture of what really goes on in Dubai's schools if more schools and teachers had been investigated. This way it would have been possible to generalize the current English practice in a vast spectrum needed for implementing fundamental changes in schools' curricula.

There could have been some misunderstanding on the part of the teachers' and students' when answering the questionnaires. Since the participants were not provided with a precise definition of speaking skills, there is no way to determine if they had similar assumptions of this term as to the teacher-researcher's. In a future study such as this, clear definitions must be given.

Moreover, based on my personal observation through five years of teaching in different schools and institutes, there are two major obstacles to teaching and assessing speaking skills. First, few teachers have ever received professional training in teaching speaking skills especially pronunciation. Particularly, in assessing speaking skills teachers may not have the expertise to recognize and correct their students' speech errors. Burgess and Spencer (2000) report that a large number of teacher education programs have failed to equip their native speaker educators with the sort of knowledge needed for teaching English pronunciation. The result is a wide community of teachers who are apparently reluctant to teach and assess pronunciation simply because they do not how to do it.

Therefore, prior to having any plans for integrating speaking skills, the issue of training teachers must be well taken care of by the authorities. That is, the onus is on the Ministry of Education to provide training for teachers in this area, not simply make it a requirement that teaching speaking skills be part of the curriculum.

Other limitations are related to the second part of the study. First and the most critical limitation is the time factor which prevented the genuine results of such a program to blossom. It is likely that if this pattern of instruction went on for the period of a whole year, more obvious advancement in students' speech performance could have been seen. This is particularly true in regard with more challenging and difficult to overcome skills such as pronunciation and range of expression.

Time limitations and curriculum requirements were other elements which stressed out both the students and me. Although we managed to meet the deadlines and finish the expected material, I must admit that without my students' enthusiasm as well as the cooperation of the administration committee, it would have been absolutely impossible to carry out all those extra curricular activities. If we had not been pressed to cover numerous lessons, we could certainly better the quality of the instruction.

Conclusion

In the end, this study would have shown more reliable results, had it been carried out over a longer period of time. However, the positive results may encourage other language teachers to follow suit. I strongly believe that once teachers decide to enhance their instructions, obstacles such as time and material limitations can be dealt

with. The success of any language classroom is determined by teachers' will and expertise. However, for a larger scope of more effective changes in order to include teaching speaking skills officially into curriculum agenda, help is needed on behalf of curriculum designers, schools administration, and perhaps the Ministry of Education in Dubai.

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Appendix A. 1

Teachers' Attitudes towards Teaching Speaking Skills

No	Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD
1.	One of the ultimate goals of learning a language is to become a proficient speaker of that language.					
2.	Communicating effectively in English is the top priority for most of the students.					
3.	Integrating speaking skills instruction in the curriculum is possible if teachers know how to present it.					
4.	I know how to teach and promote oral skills as well as I know how to teach grammar.					
5.	Memorizing, repeating, reciting, and reading can be considered as speaking activities.					
6.	If a student is proficient in grammar, reading, and writing, s/he can converse fairly well automatically.					
7.	Speaking skills must be taught systematically together with other language skills at school.					
8.	In having a successful communicative classroom, teachers` teaching and language proficiency as well as profound knowledge about the subject, play a decisive role.					
9.	Including teaching speaking skills is a time consuming task.					
10	Time constraints prevent me from teaching a skill which is neither a defined goal, nor a requirement for passing the final exam.					
11.	Being a proficient English speaker is a major contributor to students` success in colleges, universities, and later in finding jobs.					

12. In your opinion does teaching oral skills require specific time allocation? Why or why not?

13. In your opinion, what are some ways which speaking skills can be assessed?

14. Any other comments?

Appendix A. 2

Teachers' Attitudes towards Teaching Speaking Skills

Interview Questions

1. Is teaching speaking skills a curriculum requirement at your school?

2. If you teach speaking skills, what are some activities through which you present speaking?

3. Is being a proficient English speaker a major contributor to students` success in colleges, universities, and later in finding jobs?

Pre-study Students' Questionnaire

Please read the following questions and answer carefully:

Statements	SA	A	U	D	SD
1. Being a proficient English speaker determines students' success in colleges, universities, and later in finding jobs.					
2. The current English practice at the school gives me the ability to communicate effectively in the society.					
3. I do not need to speak fluently to be a successful language learner.					
4. I can easily make myself understood in classroom situations.					
5. Communicating effectively is a top priority for me because of its importance in academic and social life.					

6. How would you rate your English speaking abilities in comparison with other skills such as reading comprehension, grammar, or vocabulary?

7. What are your strengths/weaknesses when speaking in English?

Appendix B. 2

Students' Attitudes towards learning Speaking Skills

Interview Questions

1. By the end of high school, you will have finished almost fourteen years of studying English language. You also study Science and Math in English. In your opinion what should the outcomes be?

2. Do all these years of instruction help you communicate in your second language confidently and efficiently?

3. Approximately what percentage of your English class conversations is actually in English?

4. What suggestion do you have to make your English Speaking skills better?

Post Study Questionnaire on the Students' Self Evaluation about their Progress

Please read the following statements carefully. This questionnaire aims to investigate your opinions about your speaking activities you have received during the past eight weeks:

No	Statements	SA	A	U	D	SD
1.	I feel more confident now when speaking in English.	9	8	1	0	2
2.	The instructions on speaking skills have been helpful.	18	2	0	0	0
3.	The activities in which we were involved such as group discussions and book talks were more motivating than before.	15	3	2	0	0
4.	Overall, I think I have improved my speaking skills.	9	10	1	0	0

5. In what ways do you think the activities have been helpful? Why or why not?

6. Has speaking activities facilitated learning and internalizing other language skills such as vocabulary and grammar? Explain.

Appendix B. 4

The Most Favorite Class Activity

Since the beginning of this program, what activity/activities have you liked more or found most beneficial?

1. Reading and discussing the stories   -----
2. Summarizing the stories   -----
3. Watching and discussing cartoon clips   -----
4. Practicing transactional English   -----
5. Grammar lessons   -----
6. Carrying out surveys   -----
7. Role plays   -----
8. Discussions   -----

Appendix B. 5

Presentation Peer Check

Name of the presenter: …………………………

Look at the following statements and rate the presenter. Circle the number that best describes the presentation.

No.	Statement	Not at all (1)	A little (2)	A lot (3)
1.	The presenter researched the subject.			
2.	The presenter was well organized.			
3.	The presenter was well prepared.			
4.	The presenter helped me learn new information and vocabulary through the presentation.			
5.	The presenter has worked on pronunciation, intonation, fluency, etc.			
6.	The presenter used effective use of body language, eye contact, hand movements, facial gestures, and loudness of voice.			

Overall I think the presentation was

1 = bad   2 = Below average   3 = Average   4 = Good   5 = Excellent

Adopted from:

Brown, J., D. (Ed.). (1998). *New ways of classroom assessment.* Bloomington: Pantagraph Printing.

Appendix C
Weekly Routine and Extra Activities

Weekly Routine

1. Reading a new story
2. Story related discussions
3. Summarizing the events
4. Grammar lesson
5. Transactional English
6. Watching cartoons/movies

Week One
1. Short speeches about Personal Habits, Journeys, and Hobbies

Week Two
1. Conducting a Survey

Week Three
1. Impromptu Role Play

Week Four
1. Conducting a Survey
2. Impromptu Role play

Week five
1. Role Play (on stage)

Week Six
1. Conducting a Survey
2. Impromptu Role Play

Week Seven
1. Free Discussion
2. Selecting The Best Articles (Role Play)

Week Eight
1. Free Discussion
2. Role Play (on stage)

PAPER 5 : SPEAKING
Part 1

5

PAPER 5: SPEAKING

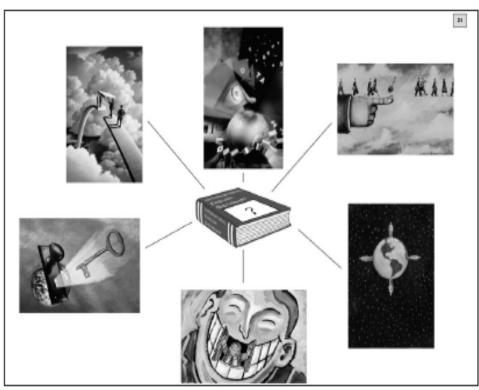Parts 1 and 2

75

PAPER 5: SPEAKING

Parts 3 and 4

Appendix D. 3

Speaking skill Assessment Marking Scheme

Adopted from:

Luoma, S. (2004). *Assessing Speaking.* Madrid: Cambridge University Press.

Accuracy

1. Many serious errors, in effect a non-communicative

2. Many errors which do affect communication and require repair/clarification by the interviewer

3. More serious errors of form but which still do not seriously affect communication

4. Occasional minor errors of form which do not affect communication

5. Almost completely accurate use of forms

Intelligibility (Pronunciation, Stress and intonation)

1. Errors are so frequent that communication is difficult. A limited or non-user

2. Many errors which seriously affect clarity/intelligibility and require frequent repair.

3. Some errors which affect clarity and require a little repair by the interviewer

4. Minor errors which do not affect clarity/intelligibility

5. Clear accurate pronunciation and use of appropriate stress and intonation.

Fluency

1. Slow to respond, limited to brief response on specific points and unable to discuss.

2. Many pauses, hesitations, requires frequent prompting and repair from interviewer.

3. Some pauses and hesitations which make it necessary for interviewer to prompt but interacts naturally with the interviewer.

4. Responds immediately, interacts easily with the examiner, occasional pauses and hesitations to search for right form/word.

5. Responds immediately, interacts naturally with the interviewer and produces longer utterances as required.

Range of Expression

1. Extremely limited range of vocabulary and structure restricted to a few formulas and short phrases.

2. Limited range of vocabulary and structure which severely restricts communication

3. Generally effective communication hampered by limited vocabulary and structure.

4. Fluent communication with occasional inappropriate use of vocabulary and structure.

5. Fluent communication with appropriate use of wide range of vocabulary and structure.

Appropriacy

1. Inappropriate usage in most of the situations set in the test

2. Frequent lapses in word choice and register

3. occasional lapses in word choice and register

4. Most contributions are appropriate with few minor lapses in word choice and register

5. Responds appropriately in situations presented in the test

VITA

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