

Reading/Listening & the 4/3/2 on EFL Students' Speaking Skills

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Abstract

In the present study, the relative impact of integrated reading and speaking vs. listening and speaking on the improvement of students' speaking skills with Persian language background was explored. Fifty five Iranian language learners divided into two experimental groups participated in the study. The same materials were used for both groups. Students' speaking ability was evaluated once at the beginning and then at the end of the term (applying Bachman & Palmer rating scale, 1983). The results indicated that both methods were effective in improving students' speaking skills. 4/3/2 technique (Maurice, 1983) was also applied in both classes to improve the students' speaking fluency in which each student spoke three times, each time with a different partner about a favorite topic for four, three, and two minutes in each segment, respectively. The students were recorded doing the 4/3/2 and then for each student, the number of words spoken per minute and the number of hesitations, repetitions, and false starts per 100 words in each of the three deliveries and also the number of errors per 100 words were calculated to investigate their fluency and accuracy, respectively. The control of content was also analyzed by exploring how speakers' talks became more concise each time they were speaking. The technique's positive effect on students' speaking fluency was quite apparent. It also improved students' accuracy since they were repeating the same material each time and also their control of content became much better by omitting some unimportant points and changing the constructions.

Keywords: Fluency, Accuracy, Control of content, Speaking, Listening, Reading

1. Introduction

It is quite undeniable that English with the most speakers thought the world as an L2 plays a significant role in the world." For many people the most important function of any language is communication with other people when traveling, studying or working in a foreign country. Therefore the trend of learning English is increasing and the opportunities for the actual use of the language are becoming more frequent" (Sebestova, 2007, p.6). The most important objective of language learning is to provide students with the opportunities to activate their already learned knowledge and use the newly learned materials in their real life situations.

In the past, skills were taught individually and almost always the focus was on improving one skill at a time viewing learning as mastery of a single skill, such as reading or sub-skills, such as vocabulary items. Language learning and content are not interwoven (Mohan, 1986). Isolated language skills are taught either because discreet skills are believed to be learned more easily or because it is difficult to cover different skills simultaneously. Then, the prevailing belief was that language should be kept whole and "if language isn't kept whole, it isn't language anymore" (Rigg, 1991, p. 522, cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 109). Practitioners and theorizers began to understand the real nature of communication in which a mixture of language skills and subskills are used at a given time to run a natural communication. Communication in nature involves the integration of the four language skills and learners in an integrated-skill instruction are exposed to authentic language and activities that are meaningful and interesting (Shen, 2003).

Integration of listening and speaking in real situation is a common event experienced daily by everyone. Belasco (1967), describes the relationship between listening and speaking, as actualized in real communication, as an intertwined mutual relation in a way that achieving proficiency in listening would result in speaking proficiency. Rivers (1983) follows a similar line of thought as seeing speaking as a comprehension of what is being said by the listener.

The role of reading also in providing a kind of input cannot be denied in the progress of speaking. As Chastain (1988) proposes reading as the facilitation of communicative fluency that is going to include mental processes like those of the other language skills. Hilferty (2000) also stresses the influence of reading on speaking as a kind of reciprocal relationship and believes that speaking and reading both need the same kind of abilities in order to process those kind of materials that are phonologically difficult.

One of the goals of speaking activities, integrated either with listening or reading in language classrooms, is the development of fluency. Pawley and Syder (1983) regard native-like fluency as "the native speakers' ability to produce fluent stretches of discourse" (p. 191). Lennon (2000), focusing on the importance of fluency, points out that "a working definition of fluency might be the rapid, smooth, accurate, lucid, and efficient translation of thought or communicative intention into language under the temporal constraints of on-line processing (p.26)".

2. The Present Study

The purpose of L2 teaching is to help students be able to communicate their ideas, lifelong

experiences and information. To this end, speaking plays the major role. But unfortunately, there is always a mismatch between what is taught and what is learned. This problem either has its' root in the fact that speaking is the least emphasized skill especially in our schools in which the major focus is on grammar at the expense of speaking, or more importantly it is isolated from other skills. As a result, graduated high school students may have a relatively good command of English grammar which is important to cater the examinations but a low level of speaking ability. It was assumed that spoken language was already ignored by the high school teachers in an EFL context, and it seemed to be a necessity to resolve such problems. To do so, an integrative approach was needed to increase the communication skills of the speakers.

This study was carried out to examine the effective ways of improving students' speaking skills through applying reading and speaking vs. Listening and speaking in EFL classrooms.

In one view, we have the natural approach which emphasizes the precedence of listening to the speaking; the same as, the children adopting the language (Krashen, 1998). But on the other hand, reading also can be an effective input when students actively process the words they see and try to get the meanings out of them. Students will be more successful in learning when they are actively involved in the process of learning. Doing an study which examine the effect of integrated language skills on improving speaking skills can shed light on recognizing the importance whole language and also helps teachers to use activities in which language is kept whole. To this end, the following research questions were put forward.

- Do EFL students who use listening and speaking method outperform those who use reading and speaking method, regarding their speaking skills in terms of accuracy, grammatical and pragmatic competence?
- Does the 4/3/2 technique increase EFL students' speaking fluency?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The subjects participating in this study were two groups of Iranian female students, aged in their late teens (seventeen to eighteen years old), studying Interchange 2 (Richards, 2004) in an English institute. They were divided into two groups of thirty-five and thirty students with rather similar level of English proficiency (according to the results of the institutes' placement test). The first group practiced speaking and listening while the second reading and speaking. The forty-five -minute -long classes were held two times a week (of course the first part of each class in both groups was dedicated to the institutes' pre-determined course book). Besides, both listening / speaking and reading / speaking class had a two-hour speaking class in each week during one term of instruction.

3.2 Instrumentations

First, the students' overall level of English proficiency were evaluated (taking the Institutes' placement test) in order to have two groups with rather similar level of English. Second, students' speaking ability was evaluated at the beginning of the semester. Some general

questions about students and their lives, interests, memories and the like were asked verbally. Students were recorded answering the questions. Third, the same questions were asked at the end of the term and the results were compared and evaluated (applying Bachman & Palmer rating scale 1983).

The fourth method of evaluation were employed in the two-hour speaking class in order to investigate if there was any progress in terms of students' speaking fluency. Here the students were asked to talk about an interesting topic, maybe a memorable experience. (employing the Maurice (1983) 4/3/2 technique). Students' deliveries were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to see if the technique had any kind of influence on students' fluency, grammatical accuracy, and control of content.

3.3 Procedure

Each session started with some kind of friendly greetings in order to reduce students' stress. Then there are some pre-reading or pre-listening activities such as explaining new vocabularies to the students. Afterwards, the main text were read or listened to by the students and a set of exercises were to be done individually, in pairs or groups within a time limit set by teacher. Finally, in order to have some speaking in the class students expressed their ideas in retelling what they had already read or listened or what they thought about it.

Besides, each week students on each group had a separate two-hour speaking class for improving speaking fluency during which they had free discussions with topics chosen according to the students' interests prior to each session in order for the students to know the subject in advance and to be ready enough to talk about it and participate in the discussion. The testing method that was used in this class at the end of the term is called: The 4/3/2 technique (Maurice, 1983) which involved the following steps:

First a student was asked to think for some minutes about a favorite topic (without taking notes) and then talk about that topic in a period of four minutes to a partner. The second time the same student talked about the same topic to a new partner for three minutes and in the last step again the same student talked on the same topic but with another person in two minutes. In fact each speaker were to present the same talk but in a shorter period of time to a different partner each time and during the speakers' talks the listeners were just to listen without any question or interruption.

3.4 Data Analysis

For the first research question, the evaluation of the students was based on a rating scale which was consisted of six levels of rating in grammatical competence and four levels of rating in the pragmatic competence (taken from Bachman and Palmer 1983). At the beginning of the instruction the students' grammatical competence and pragmatic competence, including vocabulary and cohesion were evaluated through answering the evaluation questions. In the same way they were evaluated again at the end of the program to see whether any significant difference had been made in terms of students' skills comparing the two sets of results, together.

Regarding the second research question, applying Maurice (1983) model of 4/3/2 technique, students' fluency were checked by calculating the number of words spoken per minute during each of the three phases of the students' talk, and by calculating the number of hesitations, repetitions, and false starts per 100 words for each delivery. If the speaking rate increased in the third delivery comparing to the first and the number of hesitations decreased from the first to the third version, then we could conclude that speaking fluency had progressed consequently. Accuracy was measured by calculating the errors that happened in each phase per 100 words. To get a percentage for both fluency and accuracy, the difference between the first and the third delivery was divided by the figure for the first delivery and this was multiplied by 100. Control of content was also measured by exploring the different ways learners adopted in order to shorten their talk each time they were speaking. Besides speaking faster, there were other ways such as using different constructions or omitting some unimportant details from their talk to present the same information but in a more concise way each time they were speaking.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Results and Discussions Related to the First Research Question

4.1.1 Listening and Speaking

The students' Grammatical Competence and Pragmatic Competence (applying Bachman and Palmer rating scale presented in appendix1) were evaluated through providing answers to the evaluation questions. The Grammatical Competence consisted of six levels and there were four levels of rating in the Pragmatic Competence.

As you can see in table 1 (tables appear after the references), in the listening and speaking class there were ten students whose level of Grammatical Competence first was at level two. This showed that they were relatively weak in part of structures and vocabularies. Twenty-four students were at level two for Vocabulary and for Cohesion Competence there were 25 people in that level. There were sixteen students on the third and four on the fourth level of Grammatical Competence. Finally six students appeared to be on the third level of Vocabulary and for Cohesion there were five people on that level.

Evaluating students at the end of the term of study different results were appeared. In Grammatical Competence those who were at level two progressed to the third level and twelve students were ranked in the fourth level. Sixteen students succeeded to reach the third level of Vocabulary and Cohesion Competence but fourteen students were still at the second level of the scale.

4.1.2 Reading and Speaking

We had no one at the zero level for Grammatical Competence and Vocabulary although there was one regarding the Cohesion, in the Reading and Speaking class. Four students were ranked in the first level for Grammatical Competence. There were five students who appeared at level one in Vocabulary and twelve ones were at the same level in Cohesion Competency. Twelve students were in the second level of Grammatical Competence, twenty-seven in

Vocabulary and in Cohesion Competence the number turned out to be twenty. The rest of the students were divided into nineteen for grammatical competence level three, three people for Vocabulary level three, and also there were two students in level three of Cohesion.

In the final evaluation the zero level of all skills was quite empty. Considering Vocabulary, there was one student in level one, twenty-four in level two and ten in level three. For Grammar there existed one student in level one, five in level two, twenty-three in level three and seven in level four. The ranks in Cohesion were as follows: two in level one, twenty-three in level two and ten students achieved level three. The results illuminated an overall progress in the skills comparing to the first evaluation (you can follow the results in table 2).

Referring to the tables, at the first evaluation students in the listening and speaking class illustrated a higher level of skills but during the period of treatment students' pronunciation and fluency progressed in both groups. There were some students who were not able to speak comprehensively and fluently in the first evaluation but the same students performed quite different in the second evaluation. Their progress could not be denied. Of course this period of cooperation also might have been effective in reducing students' stress and resistance. Comparing the two tables, neither groups indicated such a significant progress that may had been expected. Although in both groups students' level of grammar improved but the results are not considered to be dramatic. So it was concluded that there is no superiority considering the effect of the two methods in improving students' speaking skill.

4.2 Results and Discussions Related to the Second Research Question

In order to investigate the trueness of the second research question, twenty students were selected randomly from among the sixty-five participants of the study (the first twenty students were chosen from a list of the students' names which had been written on the first session and were based on the order of the students' sitting. Since it was the first session and the teacher did not have any background of the individual students' levels and abilities, so it would be an unbiased choice).

Each participant was required to think a few minutes about a topic she was interested to talk about without making notes. After preparing a talk, each student was asked to talk for four minutes to the first partner; for three minutes to the second partner (on the same topic), and finally for two minutes to the third partner again on the same topic. During the activity students' talks were recorded, transcribed and then analyzed to investigate the degree of effectiveness of the technique on fluency, accuracy, and control of content.

Fluency was measured through calculating the number of words spoken per minute in each phase of the talks, and also the number of hesitations, repetitions, and false starts happened in each delivery per 100 words.

To measure accuracy, the errors in each delivery were calculated per 100 words. To get a percentage for both fluency and accuracy, the following formula was carried out: difference between the first and third delivery divided by the first delivery and then multiplied by 100.

Regarding the control of content, the assessment was carried out through investigating different ways in which learners manipulated to increase the conciseness of their talk each time they were speaking since they had less time to do it in each delivery.

4.2.1 Fluency

Analyzing the results (table 3 & 4), in all except two cases the rate of speaking increased in the third version and it was between 107.5 and 196.5. Comparing the third with the first delivery, the range of speed was between -14 (in one of the exceptions in which the speaking rate decreased in the third version unlike others) and 39 percent.

Except one case i.e., student 13 who also had manifested a decrease in the speaking rate, the number of false starts, hesitation and repetitions decreased in all speakers comparing the third to the first version of the talk.

In students 13 and 16 the rate of speaking (number of words spoken per minute from the first to the third delivery), decreased. In student 13 the number of hesitations, repetitions, and false starts has increased from the first to the third delivery, but in student 16 although the rate of speaking has decreased, the number of hesitations, repetitions, and false starts has decreased either. This indicates that in the case of student 16 there is another reason apart from hesitations, repetitions, and false starts for the decrease in the speaking rate. If you follow the results in the data related to the accuracy, you will perceive that the same student has fewer errors in the third version of her talk than the first. This may be an indication that in the case of this speaker the rate of speaking has decreased because the speaker tends to be more accurate and so has spoken more deliberately during the activity.

4.2.2 Accuracy

Repeating the same talk in each delivery could result in a kind of self confidence in the students. Since they gained a better command of the talk each time they were speaking, their talks appeared to be more grammatically correct in each version.

Calculating the errors each time they were speaking, there was one case in which the number of errors increased, for eleven cases there was a decrease comparing the first and final version and in nine cases the decrease was apparent each time they talked. Generally speaking there was a decrease between 7.66 and 6.54 in the number of errors per 100 words (table 5). Analyzing the results, we can hopefully conclude that the technique had been quite effective in reducing the number of errors as a whole.

4.2.3 Control of Content

Since students had less time to talk in each phase, they had to make use of some strategies like speaking faster, omitting some parts or altering some constructions.

Almost in all cases (except students 13, who has a decrease in the rate of speaking either) in their third delivery, students omitted some unimportant details and added some extra points or changed some constructions to improve the consistency, preciseness and also the conciseness of their talk. Here are some examples:

- The people who take fishes from the sea → the fisherman
- On the first days after my births → as a newborn child
- There are many intelligent students in the institute → in the institute where I study there are many intelligent students
- I had to take a taxi. It was raining → I had to take a taxi, because it was raining.

5. Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

Regarding the first research question, both methods were appeared to be effective in improving students' speaking skill. There observed no evidence of the utmost supremacy of one over the other. Of course since the study was carried out in a rather short term of study, maybe the results would have been different if it continued. making use of interesting storybooks in a course of pleasure reading could also be effective and can be adopted in the course of study in order to increase students' interest and the degree of their participation in retelling the stories in their own words and discussing the topic. The teachers also have an important role in motivating the students by encouraging them through the process and listening to them patiently, ensuring them that he/she is quite interested and is really listening. Error correction also must be done with great caution not to distress and upset the students.

In the case of second research question, applying the 4/3/2 technique, the results verified technique's positive effect on all the three aspects including fluency, accuracy and control of content. This was shown by calculating the number of words spoken per minute and also the number of hesitations, repetitions, and false starts per 100 words. In all case studies except two the rate of speaking increased and in all of them except one, the number of hesitations, repetitions, and false starts decreased from the first to the third delivery. Estimating students' errors per 100 words and comparing the final with the first deliveries, students' accuracy improvement was also verified. Students' control of content was also proved to be much better in their final talks while they were omitting some unimportant details and adding some extra points to improve the consistency and preciseness of the information and by changing the constructions in the third version.

The 4/3/2 technique can be hopefully applied in the classrooms by asking students to retell a story or reading material they have just read. The property of repetition which is in the heart of the method will help students promote their speaking fluency and reduce their hesitations, repetitions and false starts. The technique will also help them to be more accurate and concise during speaking. Students can be set in groups of four and each group can receive a different story or reading material to study and then apply the 4/3/2 to it. This way several students can do the technique simultaneously and it will save the class time but doing this the teachers should make sure that the students have thoroughly understood the procedure in order to avoid confusion. Each group can have its own voice recorder to record students' speech. Students will enjoy listening to their own voice and at the same time they will perceive their own mistakes and problems when they listen to the recording.

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Table 1. The data considering the students' speaking progress in listening and speaking class

	Grammar		Vocabulary		Cohesion	
	June	September	June	September	June	September
Crad0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Grad1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Grad2	10	0	24	14	25	14
Grad3	16	18	6	16	5	16
Grad4	4	12	0	0	0	0
Grad5	0	0	0	0	0	0
Grad6	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	30	30	30	30	30	30

Table 2. The data considering the students' speaking progress in reading and speaking class

	Grammar		Vocabulary		Cohesion	
	June	September	June	September	June	September
Crade0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Grade1	4	1	5	1	12	2
Grade2	12	5	27	24	20	23
Grade3	19	23	3	10	2	10
Grade4	0	7	0	0	0	0
Grade5	0	0	0	0	0	0
Grade6	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	35	35	35	35	35	35

Table 3. The mean of the number of words per minute spoken during each of the 3 deliveries of the talk

Students	Version 1 (4 minutes)	Version 2 (3 minutes)	Version 3 (2 minutes)	Percentage
1	80.5	92	107.5	33.54
2	86	93.33	107.5	25
3	92.75	107.33	119	28.30
4	117.5	128	138.5	17
5	122.75	134.33	142.5	16
6	125.75	144.66	157.5	39
7	129.25	139	161	24

8	141.25	157.66	172	21
9	140.25	155.33	169.5	20
10	150.5	163.33	177.5	17
11	151.75	159	165.5	9
12	155.75	162.33	173	11
13	151.75	125.66	129.5	-14
14	162	165.33	182.5	12.65
15	167	177.33	184	10
16	158	150.33	147	-6.9
17	166.5	176.66	186.5	12
18	170.25	182.66	190	11
19	174.25	188.33	194	11
20	183.5	193.66	196.5	7.08

Table 4. The mean of the hesitations, repetitions, false starts per 100 words in each version of the talk

Students	Version 1 (4 minutes)	Version 2 (3 minutes)	Version 3 (2 minutes)	Percentage
1	7.33	6.5	4.5	38.60
2	6.33	4.5	4	36.80
3	5.66	4.5	4	29.32
4	5.25	4.66	3.5	33.33
5	4.75	4	3.5	26.31
6	5	4	3.66	26.8
7	4.4	3.25	3	13.81
8	5	5.75	4.5	10
9	5.75	4.5	4	30.43
10	6.33	5.66	4.75	23.72
11	5.66	5.5	4.33	23.49
12	4.75	5	3.5	26.31
13	4	6	8.5	-52.94
14	5.25	4.5	4	23.80
15	4.75	5.5	4	16.78
16	6.33	5.66	5.5	13.11
17	4	4.75	3.75	6.25
18	4.75	4.5	3.5	26.31
19	4	3.25	3	25
20	3.75	3	2.5	33.33

Table 5. The mean of the number of errors per 100 words in each delivery of each student's talk

Students	Version 1 (4 minutes)	Version 2 (3 minutes)	Version 3 (2 minutes)
1	8.5	7.66	7
2	7.66	6.54	6
3	6.5	7.5	5.66
4	8	7.5	6.33
5	6.5	7	5.66
6	6	6.66	5
7	6.33	5.5	4.66
8	5.5	5.66	4.75
9	6	5.5	4.75
10	5.66	6.33	5
11	5.5	6	4.33
12	6.5	5.66	5
13	4.75	5	5.66
14	5	5.33	4.5
15	5.5	5	4.66
16	4.33	5.25	4
17	4.5	4.66	4.23
18	4.66	3.75	3.5
19	3.68	4.22	3
20	3.5	3	2.5

Appendix

Appendix 1. Scale of grammatical competence (Bachman & Palmer 1983a)

RATING	RANGE	ACCURACY
0	No systematic evidence of morphological and syntactic structures	Control of few or no structures; errors of all or most possible types
1	Limited range of both morphological and syntactic structures	Control of few or no structures; errors of all or most possible types
2	Limited range of both morphological and syntactic structures, but with some	Control of some structures used but with many error

	systematic evidence	types
3	Large, but not complete, range of both morphological and syntactic structures	Control of some structures used, with few error types
4	Large, but not complete, range of both morphological and syntactic structures	Control of most structures used, with few error types
5	Complete range of morphological and syntactic structures	Control of some structures used, with few error types
6	Complete range of morphological and syntactic structures	No systematic errors

Scales of pragmatic competence (Bachman & Palmer 1983a)

RATING
VOCABULARY

- 0 Extremely limited vocabulary (a few words and formulaic phrases. Not possible to discuss any topic, due to limited vocabulary.)
- 1 Small vocabulary (difficulty in talking with examinee because of vocabulary limitations.)
- 2 Vocabulary of moderate size (frequently misses or searches for words)
- 3 Large vocabulary (seldom misses or searches for words.)
- 4 Extensive vocabulary (rarely, if ever, misses or searches for words. Almost always uses appropriate words.)

RATING
COHESION

- 0 No cohesion (utterance completely disjointed, or

discourse too short to judge.)

- 1 Very little cohesion (relationships between utterances not adequately marked; frequent confusing relationships among ideas.)
- 2 Moderate cohesion (relationships between utterance generally marked; sometimes confusing relationships among ideas.)
- 3 Good cohesion (relationships between utterances well-marked.)
- 4 Excellent cohesion (uses a variety of appropriate devices; hardly ever confusing relationships among ideas.)