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The Teaching and Learning of Speaking

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Abstract
Speaking within traditional approaches to language teaching was an undervalued skill. It was perceived as a transient, simple, perhaps even a glib skill, not worth teaching time. The skill of writing, on the other hand, was more prized, and was the focus of most, if not all, language tests. Communicative approaches to language teaching, however, came with a view of the speaking skill as being highly intricate, and complex, requiring the learner to be trained in dealing with the subtle and instantaneous demands of spontaneous communication. Communicative language philosophy also perceive of this skill as being inducive to language learning. The aim of this paper is therefore to better our understanding of the nature of the spoken modality. To this end, the paper outlines the features of spoken discourse as opposed to written discourse. It also distinguishes two modes of speaking, namely the presentational and the interpersonal modes. Given that communicative approaches to language teaching brought about a significant change in the status of the speaking skill, a major aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the line of research, pioneered by Hymes (1972), Krashen (1987), Canale and Swain (1980), which allowed for the development of the notion of communicative competence. The last two sections are devoted to a discussion of the features of a communicative task and of the teacher's role in the development of speaking activities.

1. Introduction

This paper attempts to define 'speaking', first, in juxtaposition with 'writing', and, second, by characterizing its nature within the presentational, and interpersonal modes of communication. This paper also provides an overview of the different features that make speaking both important and difficult. Subsequent sections, in this work, deal with concepts and issues related to the notion of 'communicative competence'. The final section of this paper suggests possible speaking activities to be carried out in the classroom context as well as describes the teacher's role in devising such activities.

2. Defining the concept

One way to define and understand the skill of 'speaking' is by describing it in terms of what it is (features of spoken discourse) as opposed to what it is not (features of written discourse). It is hoped that outlining the major differences between spoken and written discourse will enhance our understanding of 'speaking' and of the ways in which it differs from its counterpart 'writing', being itself a skill that taps on the productive abilities of the learner.

2.1 Written discourse Vs. Spoken discourse:

According to the Moroccan Official Guidelines for ELT (2007: 17), the medium of communication in written discourse is graphic (i.e. use of letters). It is rhetorically highly structured and organized, formal, complex (i.e. with longer stretches of language), more accurate, and includes complete chunks rather than reduced forms (e.g. I will). Written discourse is also less negotiable, interactional, and is standardized since there are conventions as to what proper writing is (i.e. writing mechanics). Written discourse is also more specific in topic, more lasting in space and time, and is densely packed with information. Finally, the audience is absent at the moment of writing, and may not be personally known.

By contrast, the medium in spoken discourse is oral (i.e. use of voice). Spoken discourse is loosely structured, casual, simpler (i.e. with shorter chunks), and includes contracted forms (e.g. I'll) as well as ungrammatical forms at times. Spoken discourse is also characterized by flexibility and adaptability in the sense that it is adjustable, thus making for a great deal of redundancy. The spoken modality also allows for instant spontaneous back-channeling (i.e. feedback), for extra-linguistic information since the interlocutors are usually visible, and for the use of interjections. It is worth noting also that spoken discourse involves more social interactive patterns and fillers, and is less densely loaded with information.

All that has been outlined above may produce the impression that there are clearly delineated boundaries between speech and writing in a way that reduces the two skills into simplistic dichotomies (e.g. contextualized vs. de-contextualized, self-monitored vs. spontaneous, planned vs. unplanned, etc.). However, in retrospect, one should be able to see that the use of comparatives like 'more', 'less', and suffixes like 'er' suggest that the distinction between speaking and writing is not a clear-cut dichotomy, but that the two should rather be placed on a continuum.

Indeed, the Official Guidelines for ELT (2007: 17-8) contend that while it is undeniably important that the

students be made aware of dichotomous differences between speech and writing, teachers should, nonetheless, conceive of those distinctive characteristics as on a scale. For instance, the more features such as "spontaneous", "conversational", "instant" are present, the more 'spoken' a modality can be said to be. The official guidelines (ibid.) also stipulate that there are a number of 'dis-fluency' characteristics of the spoken discourse, such as hesitation, false starts, corrections or repairs, pauses, and repetitions. Other aspects of speech execution include delivery, turn-taking, interruption, topic selection and avoidance, negotiation of meaning, different levels of formality, stress patterns, rhythm and intonation, appropriate use of idiomatic expressions, etc. However, not all the aspects mentioned above are always present when producing a message. The presence, or otherwise, absence of some characteristics of speaking are contingent on the type of speaking or mode of communication used.

2.2 Types of 'speaking'

2.2.1 Speaking in the presentational mode

Shrum (2005: 266) distinguishes between speaking within the presentational and the interpersonal modes of communication. In the presentational mode, the speaker produces a message orally for a listener. The presentation usually takes place between one speaker, the presenter, and an audience of listeners. Communication in this mode is unidirectional since the presentational mode of speaking makes no allowances for the negotiation of meaning between the speaker and the listeners. It should be noted that the speaker, according to Shrum (ibid.) may not be personally known to his audience, but that he/she needs to know the cultural perspectives, backgrounds, and expectations of his audience if he/she is to communicate effectively. Shrum (ibid: 267) categorizes the purposes of the presentational mode into five major types: descriptive, narrative, demonstrative, explanatory, and transformative (O' Hair, Friederich, Wienmann & Wienmann, 1995). In descriptive presentations, the speaker engages in the description of a person, people, physical objects, feelings, experiences, events, etc. In narratives, the speaker narrates or tells a story. Demonstrations, on the other hand, offer instructions on how to use something or on how it operates. Finally, while the explanatory type of presentations is aimed at creating or enhancing the listeners' understanding of a concept, the purpose of transformative presentations is to persuade the audience into adopting a particular point of view. The presentational mode, Shrum contends (ibid: 267), presupposes knowledge of how to communicate with an audience (i.e. public speaking skills) as well as the ability to deliver cross-cultural information based on knowledge about the audience's background. It should be noted that presentational communication has been extensively dealt with in the context of writing more than that of speaking. The literature available on interpersonal speaking, however, is more abundant than it is with presentational speaking.

2.2.2 Interpersonal speaking

The interpersonal mode involves a two way communication, usually between two or more interlocutors. Unlike presentational communication, speaking in this mode allows for the negotiation of meaning, the modification of input as well as for the provision of immediate feedback. Additionally, while transactional or presentational speaking is information-based;

that is, more geared toward sharing information than interacting, interpersonal speaking taps on the social dimension of speaking and is more conversational.

In an EFL context, interpersonal speaking, Shrum argues (2005: 223), should not be limited to student-teacher question-response pattern. She (ibid.) maintains that "students should go beyond their traditional role as responder to the teacher's questions, and [that] their interactions must take on the characteristics of typical conversations that occur between native and non-native speakers outside the classroom". Ellis (1994), in the same line, distinguishes between 'traditional instructional discourse' and 'natural discourse'. Instructional discourse, according to Ellis, is aimed at the transmission and reception of information. This discourse arises as the teacher and the students perform, what Ellis calls 'institutional roles' which are predetermined by the teacher. Speaking tasks, in this case, are created and controlled by the teacher. Natural discourse, by contrast, involves more flexible roles established or developed through interaction, and are therefore not predetermined. Tasks encourage equal participation in the negotiation of meaning, and lay focus not on knowledge as product or on accuracy, as is the case with instructional discourse, but on the interactional process itself, and on meaning.

Research, according to Shrum (2005: 223), has shown that learners who tend to show high levels of fluency are those who have been extensively exposed to natural native discourse.

There are major differences between the interpersonal and presentational modes of speaking, but there are also similarities, namely that both modes aim at attaining 'fluency'. According to Hedge (1993: 275-6), fluency can be defined as "the ability to link units of speech together with facility and without strain or inappropriate slowness or undue hesitation." Another broader and more holistic sense for fluency is that of 'natural language use'. Such use, according to Hedge (ibid.), takes place when there is emphasis on meaning and its negotiation, when there is use of speaking strategies, and also when over immediate correction is kept to a minimum.

The nature of speaking, in and of itself, implies that much work is to be done on the part of the learner as well as the teacher. Indeed, the teaching and learning of speaking are difficult mainly because a number of

factors interact when producing speech. Bailey and Savage (1994: vii) support this view, maintaining that "speaking in a second or foreign language has often been viewed as the most demanding of the four skills".

3. What makes speaking difficult?

Murcia (2001: 103), quoting from Brown (1994), identifies a number of features that come into play to make speaking challenging. The first reason why it is difficult for learners to learn how to speak a foreign or second language is that they are not familiar with reduced speech or have not had enough practice with reduced forms, such as contractions, vowel reduction/ weak form, and elision, etc. Thus, students need to be exposed to natural speech through listening; otherwise, they will retain their formal-sounding full forms. Students need not only have listening integrated, but also should practise orally through role plays, class discussions, simulations, and debates, etc. Similarly, the official Guidelines (2007: 17) contend that students need to have enough practice with what is called 'clustering' (i.e. fluent speech organized in chunks/phrases rather than in words), as well as with proper use of idiomatic expressions. Another aspect of difficulty relates to pronunciation. Students need to learn about stress, intonation and rhythm. A third aspect of difficulty is the fact that speaking often presupposes more than one speaker. Interaction needs to be accomplished with at least one other speaker, thus requiring the learner, as contended by the Official Guidelines(2007: 18), to make use of a number of strategies, such as monitoring, receiving and interpreting feedback, sending messages and adapting them accordingly, avoiding topics, clarifying, questioning, restating, listening, seeking information, seeking help, evaluating one's contribution to the communication act, modifying that contribution to enhance comprehensibility, and monitoring its effect. Therefore, learners need to be trained to deal with the instantaneous demands of spontaneous communication.

Bailey and Savage (1994: vi), arguing for the difficulty of speaking, contend that it is "an Activity requiring the integration of many subsystems…all these factors combine to make speaking a second or foreign language a formidable task for language learners…yet for many people, speaking is seen as the central skill."

Indeed, speaking, in spite of its difficulty is viewed today as the most important skill in comparison to other skills like reading, listening and writing. Knowing a language has become synonymous with the ability to speak that language. Questioning the importance of learning speaking can be argued against by the simple fact that speech, Murcia contends (2001: 103), is "the most basic means of human communication". However, the importance of speaking has not always figured so centrally in second and foreign language research. Only recently has it been given heed and weight by educationalists and practitioners. Murcia argues (ibid.) that in comprehension-based approaches to language teaching, speaking skills were relegated to a secondary position, if considered at all, prioritizing listening skills as being more important. Murcia also maintains (ibid.) that even in classes utilizing a production-based approach, such as 'the silent way', or in classes following the audiolingual method, speech is mainly controlled for structure and content. Drills and repetition were used to reinforce in the student accurate habit formation of linguistic rules. Even functional communication skills were approached in Graeme's terms (1990: 4) as "unproblematic", "self-evident", and as "mechanistic tricks" which have in their power to make of a student a good speaker and communicator. However, I believe that one cannot reduce communication, not even the simplest communication acts, to a set of simplistic rules and nostrums since such a view dispenses with the fact that "any [real] communication task presents subtle problem-solving choices" Graeme (1990: 4) .Graeme (ibid.) explains that a communication act, by definition, entails choices to be made of how, when, why, and what to say to whom. However, since the 1970s, the status of speaking in language teaching has considerably changed. According to Murcia (2001: 103), since the advent of the theory of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) and the adoption of communicative language teaching, a dire need to create a clearly laid out scheme for teaching oral communication skills as a contextualized sociocultural activity has come into focus in a number of ESL classrooms. Thus, an overview of 'communicative competence' before discussing its implications for the teaching of speaking is needed and provided in the following sections.

4. Communicative Competence: A historical background

4.1 Chomsky and Krashen

Before the 1970s, grammar had much influence on language teaching. Jack C. Richards (2001: 7) contends that any one classroom activity would lay focus on an isolated target grammatical feature which learners were required to repeat, practice, and reproduce. Language teachers at the time, Richards (ibid.) adds, had expectancy for correctness because practice activities were accuracy as well as success-oriented. In the 1960s, however, Chomsky proposed that there is more to L1 acquisition than what behaviorist proponents suggest. According to Shrum (2005: 13), Chomsky deems the behaviorists' contention that the processes involved in language acquisition are limited to imitation, practice, habit formation, and reinforcement to be exceedingly myopic. Chomsky (ibid.) points out that humans are predisposed to acquire language because they are equipped with the LAD. This device is said to contain abstract principles of language that are universal to all human languages, and which allow for human creativity in language use. Chomsky (ibid.) argues as well that our L1 acquisition takes

place as children pay attention to features of the language input to which they are exposed. This creative use of language based on meaningful input led to Chomsky's distinction between *competence* (i.e. "the intuitive knowledge of the rules of grammar, syntax, and of how the linguistic system operates"), and *performance* (i.e. "the individual's production of language" (ibid.)). There are two implications to be drawn from Chomsky's notions of competence and creative language use. First, I have come to realize that not only is focus on isolated, discrete grammatical features inconsistent with the very nature of language which, in fact, operates as a system, but also that there should be a shift from emphasis on the sentence as the central unit(the language code) to emphasis on spontaneous, creative and natural language use. Second, according to Richards C Jack (2001: 8), language theorists and educationalists had to reassess the status of explicit grammar teaching, owing to Chomsky's idea of creativity which he believes is peculiar to the human communication systems only.

Based on Chomsky's argument that acquisition occurs through exposure to input, Krashen brought up the Input Hypothesis. Krashen parallels between L1 acquisition and L2 learning, arguing that in the same way a child acquires language through exposure to meaningful input so can an L2 learner acquire a second language through exposure to comprehensible and understandable input. One implication of this is that krashen assumes that comprehension precedes production, and thus input tasks such as listening should be given without making any requirements on the language learner to produce. In Krashen's view, speaking should not be forced; it emerges after a definite period which Krashen calls "the silent period". Krashen also maintains that through comprehensible input, the learner can formulate hypotheses, and test them based on the patterns to which he's exposed. Krashen's theory of the creative construction hypothesis, just described, can be juxtaposed to Chomsky's LAD which enables the child to process the language input, observe and hypothesize about the features of the language heard, and finally select the innate rules specific to the language to which the child is exposed. Krashen goes on to argue that through understandable input, the learner's acquired system after the silent period has taken its course will initiate language performance. By language performance, Krashen means fluency paired with "a feeling for correctness" rather than a conscious knowledge of the grammatical rules being used during language production.

Chomsky's notion of competence, together with Krashen's emphasis on meaning, context, extra-linguistic cues, and on fluency was already paving the way for the broader notion of communicative competence, which will begin to gain ground in the teaching field and second language acquisition research after Long's and Swain's interaction and output hypotheses respectively.

4.2 Long and Swain: Interaction (modified input) and Output Hypotheses

Shrum (2005: 19) reports Long's view (1983) that language learning cannot be reduced to receiving comprehensible input only. It, rather, consists in receiving comprehensible input as well as making one's input comprehensible; that is, making oneself understood. Long believes (1983) there are three ways whereby one can make him/herself understood: first; by adapting one's input; second, by using linguistic and extra-linguistic cues (i.e. familiar structures, background knowledge, gestures, etc.); and third, by modifying one's input or in Shrum's terms (2005: 19) by "modifying the interactional structure of the conversation". According to Long (1983), modification of input through strategies, such as repetition of one's utterances, paraphrasing, seeking clarification, checking understanding, asking for confirmation, questioning, etc can lead to optimal comprehension between interlocutors as well to acquisition (ibid.). Long (1983) postulates that during interaction and modification of input, participants negotiate meaning with one another. Shrum (2005: 19) defines negotiation of meaning, quoting Pica (1989) as "exchanges between learners and their interlocutors as they attempt to resolve communication breakdowns and to work toward mutual comprehension". Indeed, negotiation of meaning allows interlocutors to revise their utterances, and redirect them. One implication of Long's theory is that it is not enough that learners be passive receivers of input, but that they need to be active conversational participants in order to acquire language. Another implication is that as learners attempt to interact and negotiate meaning, specific features of the language being used become implicit. They are noticed by the learners, compared to the features he/she uses in his/her production, and finally he/she incorporates the features into his interlanguage (i.e. his developing language system).

Shrum maintains (2005: 20) that while the reception of input by the learner is imperative, it is certainly not a sufficient condition for language acquisition to take place. She (ibid.) points out that learners need to be provided with opportunities to produce output (i.e. speech); that is to say, they need to try out speaking the language if higher levels of language growth are to be achieved.

Shrum (2005: 20), subscribing to Swain's view (1995), argues that if students attempt to produce their own utterances for the purpose of communicating their ideas on a topic of their own choice, they will, first, be able to realize the gap between what they are able to say and what they want to say. Second, through output, learners will be able to try out new rules, new structures and vocabulary, and to modify them as the need arises. Third, learners will have an opportunity to assess and reflect on their message behaviour, and on what they know about the target language. According to Swain, if students are engaged in the production of output as often as needed,

they will move gradually from what they want to say (content words or vocabulary needed) to how to say it (e.g. the grammar and syntax students need to encode meaning that is appropriate to the context). Shrum (ibid.) points out that Ellis supports Swain in her view that "the use of linguistic knowledge becomes automatic only when students make use of interlanguage knowledge under real conditions of communication". Indeed, I believe that students can develop automaticity and spontaneity in speech as their knowledge about the target language is put to use, or in other words, as their language competence concretizes into actual performance. They will not only be able to use the language, using what they already know (e.g. familiar structures and vocabulary), but also, as they proceed in interaction, the need for certain new vocabulary, and functional structures will be created. It is then where the role of the teacher, and more capable peers, during a communication act, comes. Production of output will also enable the students to monitor their speech gradually, to hypothesize about the correct structure, to modify his/her input accordingly, and to reflect on the forms of the language being used. One implication of Swain's and Long's theories is that focus on form would naturally and implicitly arise as students attempt to communicate their ideas in an intelligible way.

Shrum (2005: 13), quoting Bachman (1990); Campbell & Wales (1970); Canale; and Swain(1980); Hymes (1972); Savignon (1972), defines 'communicative competence' as "the ability to function in a communicative setting by using not only grammatical knowledge but also gestures and intonation". In his pioneering work, Shrum (ibid: 13) presents the most recent model of communicative competence (suggested by Pica, Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, & Thurrell, 1995) which characterizes 'discourse competence' as the core concept in communicative competence, being surrounded by four other competences: linguistic, socio-linguistic, strategic, and finally actional competence.

Shrum (2005: 14) defines 'discourse competence' as "the way in which language elements, such as words and phrases, are arranged into utterances in order to express a coherent idea on a particular topic". Linguistic competence, according to Shrum (ibid.) refers to the ability to make meaning when using form such as morphology, syntax, vocabulary, and spelling. Socio-cultural competence, on the other hand, refers to "knowledge about context, stylistic appropriateness, non-verbal factors, and cultural background knowledge" (ibid.). Finally, Shrum (ibid.) defines strategic competence as "a set of skills which enables people to communicate and compensate for deficiencies in the other competences". Strategies such as seeking clarification, paraphrasing, circumlocution, receiving and interpreting feedback/input, sending message and adjusting them to the audience, topic selection and avoidance, questioning, restating, seeking information, and evaluating one's and others' speech behavior are all part of communicative competence.

5. The Communicative task

5.1 Definitions and features

As the notion of communicative competence gained ground in EFL teaching, within the standards-based approach, there came a growing and concomitant need to dispense with the traditional notion of "exercise" (which is based on drill, and practice methodologies) to what is known in the literature as "the task principle", which mainly refers to fluency-based activities. In this paper, I will present three different definitions for 'task':

> [A task can be thought of as] an activity or action which is carried out as the result of processing or understanding language (i.e. as a response). For example, drawing a map while listening to a tape, listening to an instruction and performing a command, may be referred to as tasks.[…] a task may or may not involve the production of language. A task usually requires the teacher to specify what will be regarded as successful completion of the task. The use of a variety of different kinds of tasks in language teaching is said to make language teaching communicative…since it provides a purpose for a classroom activity which goes beyond the practice of language for its own sake.
>
> (Richards, Platt, and weber, 1985: 289)

In the same token, Nunan (1988: 6), quoting Breen (1987: 23), provides another definition of 'task' in relation to classroom undertakings, characterizing it as:

> …any structured language learning endeavour which has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedure, and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the task. 'Task' is therefore assumed to refer to a range of work plans which have the overall purpose of facilitating language learning – from the simple and brief exercise type, to more complex and lengthy activities such as group problem-solving, simulations, and decision making.
>
> (Breen, 1987: 23)

A more inclusive and relevant definition is provided by David Nunan (1987:18):

> [A task is] a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than on form. A task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right.
>
> (Nunan, 1987: 18)

Now, if I am to consider Nunan's definition, and more particularly, the key words 'comprehending',

'manipulating', 'producing' and 'interacting', then it follows that having students comprehend the task and its requirements entails that one feature of a communicative task is that it is meaningful, and thus purposeful.

The second key idea, being that students should 'manipulate' the conversation, presupposes that it is the students who decide what to produce (i.e. content) and how to produce it (i.e. functions and rules). Neither the teacher nor the conversational participants can predict what is going to be produced during the interaction, save the teacher's and students' knowledge of the general situation and context of the conversation. The latters might be determined by both teacher and student. The term 'manipulation' in Nunan's definition leads us to the second and third features of the communication task, being those of choice and unpredictability. Students have control over the content (i.e. vocabulary used) as well as over the functions and structures in which such content will be conveyed. It is true that students have a repertoire of functions and structures to choose from, but they are not to be forced to use one particular language form; otherwise, no real communication will take place. If neither content nor form are prescribed, and scripted for the students a priori, as was the case before the 1970s; then, the teacher cannot predict which structure among the range of possible and appropriate structures the students will be using during the interaction.

Another feature implied in the last term of 'interacting' is that a communicative task should involve negotiation of meaning as well as information gap. Information gap means simply that the task should require one participant to fill in gaps with information that the participant lacks. For example, the gap might be filled by giving one's opinion or providing information to one's conversational partner. It is true that the teacher has but little interference and control during students' interaction, but he/she definitely has a paramount role in the pre, while, and post stages of the task cycle.

5.2 The teacher's role in designing communicative tasks

According to Nunan (1987: 26-27), the teacher's role is crucial, especially during the pre-task stage. For instance, the teacher has to determine the purpose of the speaking activity, and ensure that the goals of the task are made amenable to students' understanding. Second, he/she should design a task that should yield an interaction, approximating a real-world conversational model. Third, the teacher should keep in mind that a task does not only have a meaning, and a conversational-based aspect, but also has an appropriateness-based aspect. That is, the communicative task should be motivating enough, and should match students' interests. The task should also be appropriate to the goals set by the teacher. Additionally, the teacher has to make sure that students have had sufficient input in the form of either receptive reading or listening tasks before they are required to engage in communication. Moreover, the teacher has to ensure that the task is appropriate to the input data. Another point is that he/she should be aware of the type of processing-skills (bottom-up or top-down) that the task will stimulate students to use. Furthermore, he/she has also to ensure that the task designed involves some information gap or problem which should prompt negotiation of meaning. Another instance of the teacher's task preparation is that the task should be designed such that it will allow learners to communicate and cooperate in groups. The teacher can think as well not only of the type of language that may be stimulated by the task, but also of structuring the task in a way that it can be undertaken or approached at different levels of difficulty. It is noteworthy that the number of features to be included in a communicative task, such as information gap, and negotiation of meaning, etc, are to be determined in relation to the level of difficulty of the task, which in turn, is contingent on the level of language proficiency of the students. In actual fact, the features of a communicative task can be placed on a continuum. That is, a task is either more or less communicative, depending on the number of features included in it.

5.3 Speaking activities

Murcia (2001: 106-7) suggests three major types of speaking activities which can be used in an EFL classroom: discussions, role plays, and speeches.

Within a skills' integration framework, it would be advisable to stir a follow-up discussion after introducing the students to a related topic in a listening or reading passage. The teacher's role is crucial. He/she will need to plan the activity, decide on whether the activity will require group or pair work interaction pattern, plan the groupings or have the students decide on the groups with which they would like to work. All these decisions will have a bearing on the success or failure of the activity. Therefore, such decisions need to be informed by the consideration of variables such as gender, ethnicity, background and degree of talkativeness, etc (Murcia, 2001: 106). The teacher should also assign roles to students. Within each group, each member should have a role and none should be left out. Some would have, for instance, to keep the time, to take notes; another might have to report the results, etc. It is preferable, according to Murcia (ibid.) to let students be given leeway in deciding what members of the group would be assigned which roles. The teacher would also need to give clear instructions as to what to discuss, why, and what outcomes are expected from the discussion groups. Murcia adds (2001: 106) that the students would be more motivated for the discussion if they are allowed to choose the topics to be discussed and to evaluate their peers' performance. I believe that discussions can enhance students'

group skills, one of the categories of communication skills in addition to intellectual, functional, and interpersonal skills. Graeme (1990: 15) defines these skills as "the ability to become involved effectively in group activities, and contribute well to groups". Group skills, in this author's contention (ibid.), are concerned with the student's ability to participate in the group by suggesting ideas; appreciating and approving others' ideas; constructively criticizing them and evaluating such ideas; and finally summing up effectively, etc. I believe that the ability to manage conversation as a group leader; to respect turn-taking are also part of students' awareness of group dynamics. According to Graeme (ibid.), group skills are also to be practiced, and drawn out of activity.

Speeches are the second major speaking activity type suggested by Murcia (2001: 106-7). Topics for speeches will depend on the students' level and the objectives of the class. Again, the students should be free to decide on the content of their talks. The teacher, however, might help by suggesting a structure for the speeches, its rhetorical genre (i.e. descriptive, narrative, etc), and by setting a time limit. To avoid boredom, and involve students, the teacher might assign roles for groups of students to evaluate the speeches following some predetermined guidelines, to note strengths and weaknesses, or to summarize the content of the speech, etc. In addition to planned/prepared speeches, there is the impromptu speech, which is spontaneous and allows no or little time for preparation. According to Murcia, the impromptu speech compels students to think, and to speak without the help of notes or of memory.

Finally, role play, another common type of speaking activity is said (2001: 107) to be "suitable for socio-cultural variations of speech acts", such as, complaining, giving and receiving advice, complimenting, suggesting, accepting and refusing suggestions, etc. Role plays can be performed based on prepared script or can be written or created based on knowledge and expressions gained by prior instruction. Using a model dialogue as input would be very much recommended before students actually engage in role-play. Other types of speaking activities, suggested by Murcia (2001: 108-9) are conversations, and audio-pated oral dialogue journals. The pressure to meet the mainstream requirements of this work may not leave room for a focus on these last two types of speaking activities.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have outlined those features characterizing speaking, making it simultaneously challenging and important in the measurement of a learner's language proficiency. Given that developing learners' speaking skills is one aspect of promoting their overall communicative competence, much room was given, in this paper, to the notion of communicative competence, its historical background, and its implications for devising communicative tasks and speaking activities.

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