Reinstating Oral Proficiency among Engineering Students from Non-English-Speaking Backgrounds through Immersive Speaking Activities

[1]Dr. Anitha T, [2]Dr. Alice Evangaline Jebaselvi C, [3]Ms. Shanthi Pawan Hasan P, [4]Ms. Sankavi A

Assistant Professor Sri Krishna College of Engineering and Technology
Professor Nehru Institute of Technology
Assistant Professor Sri Krishna Adithya College of Arts and Science
Assistant Professor Rathinam Technical Campus

ABSTRACT:
One of the most gratifying experiences for an educator in the classroom is witnessing all their students actively participating in a speaking activity. Observing students leaning in, listening attentively to each other, and supporting one another in expressing ideas creates a captivating atmosphere where everyone is entirely focused on the task at hand, seemingly oblivious to the passage of time. The room is filled with the vibrant exchange of students' voices, allowing the teacher to discern the actual process of language learning. This enchanting moment prompts an exploration into its significance, delving into (1) the dynamics of language acquisition unfolding during these instances, and (2) strategies for crafting speaking tasks that consistently evoke the 'magic' of students fully engrossed in meaningful communication. This work breaks down the process of speaking tasks through immersion along with motivating students with concrete examples and feedback. The main objective of this study is to enhance opportunities for students to express themselves with confidence and actively participate in verbal communication without any reservations.

KEYWORDS: communication, immersive activities, task-centric, learner autonomy, effective speaking.

Introduction

When teachers talk to students about their language learning goals, students often say things like, 'I think speaking is the most important skill' (Dörnyei, Adolphs and Muir, 2017). Indeed, a significant number of students gauge their language proficiency based on their ability to converse in the language, often overlooking their grades in tests and exams. This tendency is particularly pronounced among adult learners. It's unsurprising, given that one's language proficiency is commonly assessed by others based on their spoken communication skills. When people inquire about someone's language proficiency, they are typically interested in their ability to converse in languages like French, Arabic, or English, rather than their grasp of grammar or phonetics. The act of speaking is frequently perceived as the ultimate objective of any language course. This perspective is reinforced by evaluation frameworks like the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference), which assess language competence by considering what a student 'can do' with the language.

It is natural, therefore, that students set great store by learning how to speak. At the same time, they often report that this is the area where they have the greatest difficulty (Dörnyei et al., 2017). Students turn to their teachers and English classes with the expectation of being equipped to communicate effectively beyond the classroom. They derive immense satisfaction and motivation when they believe they have successfully navigated speaking activities within the class.

What constitutes 'success' for them? Frequently, it is the full engagement in discussions with peers and the attainment of positive outcomes in assigned tasks. The successful achievement of task goals helps learners feel that they can successfully accomplish concrete tasks in English and are progressing toward their overarching goal of being a proficient speaker of the language. This in turn feeds their continuing motivation and engagement in their English studies (Muir and Dörnyei, 2013).

The Significance of Speaking in the Process Language Acquisition.
Speaking plays an important role in the process of learning a language and it has long been accepted that 'a language is learnt, at least in part, through the students' attempts to use it' (Scrivener and Sayer, 2007: xii). This is borne out in two language learning hypotheses that were developed in the 1980s: the Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1985) and the Interaction Hypothesis (Long and Porter, 1985; Long, 1996).

In her Comprehensible Output Hypothesis, Swain suggests that exposure to comprehensible input is not enough for language learning to take place and that output is at least as significant as input. She argues that speaking not only 'provides the opportunity for meaningful practice' but also provides students with the opportunity to experiment with new language forms and structures and 'stretch their interlanguage to meet communicative needs' (Swain 1993: 159).

Long (1996) also emphasizes the importance of speaking and interacting in his Interaction Hypothesis. He also stresses the importance of negotiating meaning. Plough and Gass (1993) support this view, claiming that negotiation of meaning is a necessary element in language acquisition. When students collaborate to negotiate meaning, they are actively processing language and practicing a wide range of language resources in order to make their meaning clear to their listeners. For more on the benefits of student interaction, see 'Enhancing student interaction in the language classroom', another paper in this series.

It is noteworthy that a greater negotiation of meaning occurs when language learners engage in conversation with each other compared to when a student interacts with a teacher. This is attributed to students assuming the responsibility of constructing meaning themselves rather than relying on the teacher for that task. Nunan (1999: 51) builds on this, saying that 'language is acquired as learners actively engage in attempting to communicate in [the] target language' and that 'acquisition will be maximized when learners engage in tasks that "push" them to the limits of their current competence.' Immersive speaking tasks can offer students the opportunity to do just that – to engage successfully in meaningful interaction.

Task-Centric Approaches to Language Acquisition
Tasks play a crucial role in language learning as they provide learners with meaningful and purposeful activities that engage them in the application of language skills. These activities are designed to go beyond mere rote memorization and encourage the practical use of the language in various contexts. Language learning tasks can include speaking, listening, reading, and writing activities that mirror real-life communication situations.

On the whole, tasks in language learning serve as dynamic tools that facilitate the application of language skills in meaningful contexts, contributing to a more comprehensive and practical language acquisition process. Bygate, Skehan and Swain (2001: 11) offer this very simple definition as a starting point: 'A task is an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective.' The purpose of a task is to achieve a goal which is specific to that task, and which will often reflect a real-life task (Skehan, 1996; Ellis, 2003), such as reaching a consensus, solving a problem or recreating a story.

If students attribute their task success to proficient language usage, they will perceive the task as a stepping stone toward achieving their overarching goal of becoming autonomous language users. This realization enhances their confidence, fostering a positive outlook on their speaking abilities.

Consequently, they become more motivated to actively participate in subsequent tasks. In essence, success begets further success, and motivation sustains ongoing engagement.

Prominence of Immersion

After establishing the definition of tasks within the language classroom and delving into the advantages of employing tasks to facilitate language learning, our focus now shifts to a more in-depth examination of the concept of 'immersive' tasks. In the realm of immersive tasks, dedicating our complete attention becomes imperative. It entails channeling all our energies and engaging wholeheartedly with the specified goal. This form of immersion aligns with the psychological concept known as the state of 'flow.'

The Hungarian psychologist Csikszentmihályi (1990) describes flow as a state when you are so completely involved in what you are doing – playing a musical instrument, figure- skating, writing poetry – that you are lost in the activity, you are unaware of the world around you, time flies and the activity itself becomes its own reward. In a state of flow, he says, we will be performing at optimal levels, pushing ourselves to our limits, intrinsically motivated by our own success. He claims that flow is the secret to happiness, and some applied linguists have wondered whether it might also be a key to successful learning (Egbert, 2003; Henry, Davydenko and Dörnyei, 2015). Schmidt and Savage, 1997) suggest that speaking tasks can lead to flow (or immersion) if they fulfil the following conditions as outlined by Egbert:

1. There is a balance between challenge and skills.
2. The students' attention is focused on the task.
3. The students find the task interesting and/or authentic.
4. The student perceives a sense of control.

Under the fulfillment of these conditions, students will deeply engage in the task, showcasing their optimal abilities. They will experience intrinsic motivation, driving their active participation and determination to attain the task's objective.

Creating immersive Speaking Tasks

As we have seen, speaking tasks are different from practice activities. A task needs to be planned carefully in order to provide an immersive experience. The following guidelines offer some suggestions for the different decisions' teachers need to make to plan an immersive task.

Choosing a Topic

Students are more inclined to participate actively in a task when the topic resonates with their interests. Therefore, the selection of a suitable topic is crucial. Adult learners commonly express a preference for contemporary and practically applicable topics related to their field of study or work, encompassing personal interests such as travel, hobbies, politics, and relationships. Encouraging students to propose topics for classroom tasks not only motivates them but also validates their input. Tasks rooted in their suggested ideas garner greater interest and emotional investment, thereby increasing the likelihood of experiencing immersion and flow. (For further insights on topic selection, refer to 'Using learner-centered content in the classroom,' another paper in this series.)

Choosing a task type

A good task needs an objective as well as a sufficient level of challenge to interest and engage learners. To ensure the task contains a sufficient challenge, it is useful to look at Bloom's taxonomy of higher- and lower- order thinking skills. Lower-order thinking skills include remembering, understanding and applying information, whereas higher-order thinking skills require students to analyze and evaluate information and use it to create something new. Tasks usually contain several stages that require learners to use a variety of thinking skills. Below are five commonly used categories of tasks, which activate a combination of these skills. It should be noted that although discussions and debates are task types in themselves, discussion and opinion exchange also take place at various stages of the other task types.

Solve a Problem: These tasks evaluate learners' logical reasoning skills and involve puzzles and problems, each having a single correct solution. For instance, learners collaborate to unravel a mystery.

Make a decision: Learners collect and exchange information with the aim of reaching a decision. While there might be various potential outcomes, they collaborate toward a specific resolution, such as determining the recipient of scholarship funds or planning suitable activities for a particular group during a three-day trip to a popular tourist destination.

Create something: These collaborative tasks result in a product, for example, a poster, an advertisement, a class newspaper, a collectively composed story, or a set of survey results (Willis and Willis, 2007).

Share a personal experience: These tasks are based on the learners' own experiences and include storytelling, anecdotes and memories of the past (Willis and Willis, 2007).

Discuss or debate a topic: These tasks encompass the exchange of opinions and ideas on diverse issues and topics, allowing individuals or groups to reach independent conclusions and even defend their positions.

When delineating the details of a task, it proves beneficial to contemplate three pairs of opposing terms employed in describing tasks. These pertain to the language utilized in a given task, the resulting outcome, and the requisite student interaction to achieve that outcome.

Constructing the phases of the task:
Here are some practical recommendations for crafting an effective immersive task.
Set goals: Set a clear goal and be ready to inform students of the purpose of the task and the conditions for its success at the beginning (Ur, 2012). Set specific interim goals for different stages of the task so learners know exactly what they have to do along the way (Willis and Willis, 2007). For instance, there could be sequential stages such as preparation, research, discussion, presentation, and agreement. Providing and verifying instructions at the outset of each stage, particularly in the context of large classes, proves beneficial. Clearly articulate the desired end product of the task, whether it be a final vote, decision, list, rating, ranking, plan, or a tangible product. Strategically plan the task stages to guide students progressively toward achieving this intended outcome.

Language needed for the task: Ensure that the task's challenge level and the language proficiency required align with the class's capabilities. Determine whether the task should incorporate language elements from prior lessons. Allocate time for students to acquaint themselves with the topic or problem and strategize their language usage before commencement. Decide when, or at which stage, language scaffolding will be introduced. This is occasionally implemented at the outset to maintain a smooth flow, although it may lead students to focus on form rather than meaning during the task. "Useful expressions," often presented as sentence headers on the board or task sheet, may be provided to aid specific stages (such as discussion or presentation), and students can opt to use them if desired.

Opportunities for Leaner Autonomy: Allow students to manage their own task so they can develop skills usually associated with the teacher, that is, topic-nomination, turn-allocation, focusing, summarizing and clarifying (Long and Porter, 1985). Inform students of how much time they have for the task, or particular stages of the task, so they can pace themselves and 'engage in cohesive and coherent sequences of utterances' rather than just hurried, discrete sentences (Long and Porter, 1985: 209).

Managing the task: Opt for pair or group work over whole-class discussion to enhance learner participation and reduce inhibitions. Incorporate pair work at certain stages and utilize group or whole-class collaboration at other points in the task. Deliberate on whether assigning different roles to students within the task would be beneficial.

Vary the pairs and groups: sometimes stronger and weaker students together, sometimes students of the same level together. Develop an additional task for swift completers, such as a variation on the primary task, a brief reading text, a written summary of the task outcome, or a report detailing the steps they took to reach the outcome. Alternatively, teachers could consider assigning them to assist weaker students, provided both parties are agreeable. Facilitate task repetition to enhance fluency and confidence. Rearrange the groups or pairs, providing them with a new context to communicate and listen, fostering continuous improvement.

Feedback and Reflection Stages: Offer constructive feedback on the task, emphasizing successful collaboration and task accomplishment. Provide feedback on valuable words and phrases observed during the task. If necessary, give corrective feedback, but exercise caution as excessive correction may be discouraging.

Incorporate a reflection stage at the conclusion, allowing students to assess their own experience and share it with the class. This can encompass reflections on their fluency, linguistic resources, acquisition of new language, present and future needs, task success, and task enjoyment. Taking their reflections into consideration can inform the design of future tasks.

Planning the Task: As previously mentioned, the crux of an immersive task lies in meticulous planning. To illustrate, envision a scenario where a teacher of a beginner's class aims to create a engaging task for practicing language introduced in a previous lesson on music and music genres. The teacher begins by selecting a task type and devising a fitting task. In this instance, the teacher opts for a decision-making task: students collaborating to curate a music playlist for a class party. The teacher delves into the specifics of the task, choosing it to be focused as she anticipates students recycling language from the prior lesson (such as different music genres, and terms like music, playlist, band, singer, song, album). The task is intentionally left open-ended, allowing students the freedom to propose their own choices for the playlist. It is designated as a convergent task to foster increased collaboration and discussion as students work collectively toward a shared outcome. Subsequently, the teacher outlines the stages of the task:

Students Familiarization: Familiarize themselves with the topic, understand task requirements, and plan the language they will use.

Pair Discussions: Discuss their musical preferences in pairs, then collaboratively formulate a list of mutually agreed-upon choices (utilizing internet research for song names, singers, etc.).

Comparison with Class: Share and compare their lists with the class to identify common choices.

Class Consensus: Reach a collective agreement on the final selection of ten songs for the playlist.
The teacher possesses confidence that this task aligns well with the proficiency level of her class. She anticipates that it will stimulate both lower-order thinking skills (such as remembering, understanding, and applying) and higher-order thinking skills (including analyzing, evaluating, and creating), ensuring a comprehensive engagement. Knowing her students' enthusiasm for discussing music, she is assured that they will be eager to collaborate on this task. In essence, she has crafted an immersive task—one that genuinely captivates her students, providing them with a sense of accomplishment in successfully achieving a task in English.

Conclusion
Immersive tasks play a crucial role in supporting learning by offering a secure space for speaking, enhancing self-esteem, and fostering intrinsic motivation. They enable learners to participate in conversations and interaction patterns akin to those encountered in the 'real world' beyond the classroom. As emphasized earlier in this paper, students seek the assurance of making strides in their speaking abilities. Accomplishing immersive tasks, marked by moments of flow, not only maximizes their progress but also provides a tangible perception of their advancement. Lightbown and Spada said, 'The principal way that teachers can influence learners' motivation is by making the classroom a

supportive environment in which students are stimulated, engaged in activities that are appropriate to their age, interests, and cultural backgrounds, and, most importantly, where students can experience success' (2006: 185).

Reference

1. Bygate, M., Skehan, P. and Swain, M. (2001). Researching Pedagogic Tasks: Second Language Learning, Teaching and Testing. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.
2. Csikszentmihályi, M. (1990). Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience. New York: Harper & Row.
3. Dörnyei, Z., Adolphs, S. and Muir, C. (2017). Investigating English Language Role Models. Unpublished raw data. EPSRC IAA grant (Ref: RR1402).
4. Duff, P. (1986). Another Look at Interlanguage Talk: Taking Task to Task. In Day, R., (Ed.) Talking to Learn: Conversation in Second Language Acquisition. Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers Inc., pp. 147–181
5. Egbert, J. (2003). A Study of Flow Theory in the Foreign Language Classroom. The Modern Language Journal, 87(4): 499–518.
6. Ellis, R. (2001). Investigating Form-Focused Instruction. In: Ellis, R., (Ed.) Form-Focused Instruction and Second LanguageLearning. Malden, MA. Blackwell Publishers, pp. 1–46.
7. Ellis, R. (2003). Task-Based Language Learning andTeaching. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
8. Grabe, W. and Stoller, F. (1997). Content-based instruction: Research foundations. In Snow, M. and Brinton, D., (Eds.) The Content-Based Classroom: Perspectives on Integrating Language and Content. White Plains, NY: Longman, pp. 5–21.
9. Henry, A., Davydenko, S. and Dörnyei, Z. (2015). The anatomy of Directed Motivational Currents: Exploring intense and enduring periods of L2 motivation. The Modern Language Journal, 99(2): 329–345.
10. Jiang, Y. (2009). Applying Group Work to Improve College Students' Oral English. International Education Studies, 2(3): 136–139.
11. Lee, Cynthia Fong King. (2004). Language Output, Communication Strategies and Communicative Tasks: In the Chinese Context. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America.
12. Lightbown, P. and Spada, N. (2006). How Languages Are Learned. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
13. Long, M. (1996). The Role of the Linguistic Environment in Second Language Acquisition. In Ritchie, W. and Bhatia, T. Handbook of Second Language Acquisition. San Diego: Academic Press, pp. 413–468.
14. Long, M. and Porter, P. (1985). Group work, Interlanguage Talk, and Second Language Acquisition. TESOL Quarterly, 19(2): 207–228.
15. Muir, C. and Dörnyei, Z. (2013). Directed Motivational Currents: Using Vision to Create Effective Motivational Pathways. Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching, 3(3): 357–375.
16. Nunan, D. (1999). Second Language Teaching and Learning. Boston, Massachusetts: Heinle and Heinle.
17. Nunan, D. (2004). Task-Based Language Teaching. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
18. Pattison, P. (1987). Developing Communication Skills. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
19. Pica, T., Kanagy, R. and Falodun, J. (1993). Choosing and Using Communication Tasks for Second Language Instruction and Research. In Crookes, G. and Gass, S., (Eds.) Tasks and Language Learning: Integrating Theory and Practice. Clevedon, Avon: Multilingual Matters Ltd, pp. 9–34.
20. Plough, I. and Gass, S. (1993). Interlocutor and Task Familiarity: Effects on Interactional Structure. In Crookes, G. and Gass, S., (Eds.) Tasks and Language Learning: Integrating Theory and Practice. Clevedon, Avon: Multilingual Matters Ltd., pp. 35–55.
21. Schmidt, R. and Savage, W. (1992). Challenge, Skill, and Motivation. PASAA, 22:(2) 14–28.

22. Scrivener, J. and Sayer, M. (2007). Straightforward: Beginner Teacher's Book. Oxford: Macmillan Education.
23. Skehan, P. (1996). A framework for the implementation of task-based instruction. Applied Linguistics, 17:(1) 38–62.
24. Snyder, B. and Tardy, C. (2001). 'That's why I do it': Flow and teachers' values, beliefs, and practices. Paper presented at TESOL Annual Convention 2001, St. Louis, MO.
25. Swain, M. (1985). Communicative Competence: Some Roles of Comprehensible Input and Comprehensible Output in its Development. In Gass, S. and C. Madden, C. (Eds.) Input in Second Language Acquisition. Rowley, MA: Newbury House, pp. 235–253.
26. Swain, M. (1993). The Output Hypothesis: Just Speaking and Writing Aren't Enough. The Canadian Modern Language Review, 50(1): 158–164.
27. Swain, M. (1998). Focus on Form Through Conscious Reflection. In Doughty, C. and Williams, J., (Eds.) Focus on Form in Classroom Second Language Acquisition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 64–81.
28. Ur, P. (2012). A Course in English Language Teaching. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
29. Willis, D. and Willis, J. (2007). Doing Task-Based Teaching. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
30. Willis, J. (1996). A Framework for Task-Based Learning. Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman Limited.