

# Teaching Speaking in the Nepalese Context: Problems and Ways of Overcoming them

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## Abstract

*Fluency-first approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching and Task-based Language Teaching aim at the development of communicative competence in students by engaging them in meaningful interaction. Ability to speak accurate, appropriate and effective English is vital for meaningful interaction that ensures students' communicative competence in English. Unfortunately, in the Nepalese context, especially in government-aided schools and constituent colleges of Tribhuvan University (TU), speaking skill lies on the periphery of English Language Teaching (ELT) owing to several factors. This article attempts to explore those factors that have been a hindrance in developing speaking skill in Nepalese students in general and the students from the above-mentioned institutions in particular. This article draws on the author's experience as a supervisor of student teachers from B.Ed. and M.Ed. programmes and his teaching experience at a constituent campus of TU. Moreover, the article presents some suggestions that can help English teachers to overcome the hindrances.*

**Key words:** speaking skill, interaction, teacher-fronted teaching, learner-centered activities

## Introduction

Speaking is a primary medium of communication. Speaking ability lies at the heart of any ELT programme that aims at making students able to communicate in English accurately, fluently and appropriately. It is often the case that learning to speak in English is equated with learning English as a whole. Stressing on its centrality to the language teaching programme, Ur (2002) writes, "Speaking seems intuitively the most important: people who know a language are referred to as 'speakers' of that language... many if not most foreign language learners are primarily interested in learning to speak" (p.120). Richards and Renandya (2004) are of the similar opinion when they state, "A large percentage of the world's language learners study English in order to develop proficiency in speaking" (p.201). Its centrality is reflected in all approaches and methods ranging from the Natural Approach and the Direct Method through the

Audiolingual Method to Communicative Language Teaching and Task-based Language Teaching. Moreover, current SLA theories and approaches such as the sociocultural theory (Lantolf, 2002), the interactional perspective (Gass, 2002), Long's Interaction Hypothesis and Swain's Output Hypothesis (Cowan, 2009) foreground the role of speaking in second language acquisition with their fundamental premise that people learn a language by speaking or interacting. This implies that speaking is not only an outcome but a process or means as well that ultimately leads students to achieve the outcome i.e. communication.

Against this background, developing speaking ability is the overriding concern of the English language courses prescribed for school and college level students in Nepal. For instance, making students able to communicate orally, and making them able to understand and use the language functions prescribed in the curriculum

are two major general objectives of the Lower Secondary English Curriculum. We can observe the same aspiration reflected in 'English for Communication', a course prescribed for B.Ed. second year students specializing in English education. The course aims at developing students' communicative competence in the use of the English language. Despite such objectives, speaking in the context of government-aided schools is the minimally practiced skill in the classroom and the least assessed skill in the examination, and obviously the marginally developed one in the students. To put it another way, speaking is a skill theoretically well articulated in our language courses but practically not realized in the classroom and everyday use. As a result, our students are not as communicative and expressive in English as the courses expect them to be. They are poor at spoken English despite the efforts expended on getting mastery over this skill. The students specializing in English spend more than fifteen years learning this language by the time they complete their B.Ed.. However, many lack even survival English to interact in and out of the classroom. In many cases, the teachers themselves are unable to supply their students with spoken input that is qualitatively and quantitatively rich. Let us look at the exchanges that took place between a student teacher and a fifth-grader from a government-aided primary school:

T: Where are you come from?

S: I (*pause*) from Jhapa.

T: Oh, you are come from Jhapa?

S: Yes, I am come from Jhapa.

T: Good. Sit down.

Similarly, the teachers teaching eighth- and seventh-graders were found frequently using the sentences like the following :

- Look me.
- Listen me.
- There is exercise in page 162.
- There are many importance of computer.
- It can do very fast.
- Let us discuss about computer..

When I returned back...

The above exchanges between teacher and student, and the sentences that teachers often used to draw students' attention to and explain the subject matter evince the quality of input that the young children are receiving. One can easily anticipate the quality of English these students are going to produce who are exposed to such spoken input.

Based on Thornbruy (1999), and my own teaching experience, and classroom observation of teachers in the practice teaching programme, the following types of learners can be identified:

- Fluent but lacking grammatical accuracy;
- Grammatically accurate but lacking fluency;
- Grammatically accurate, fluent, but less expressive (unable to communicate a wide range of meanings);
- Fluent, grammatically accurate, expressive but poor at the use of paralinguistic elements of speech such as pitch, stress and intonation.

There is a gap between 'what is' (the existing reality) and 'what it should be' (what students are expected to achieve). Now a need exists to bridge the gap between their actual level of speaking and course objectives. For this, we either redefine or modify the objectives making them less ambitious, or identify and address those problems that have hindered in achieving the objectives. Broadly speaking, we can identify the following problems of teaching speaking, especially in government-aided schools and constituent colleges of TU.

### Situational constraints

To draw on Kachru's (1985 as cited in Harmer, 2007) work that visualizes the global spread of English in three circles, Nepal belongs to the expanding circle where English is not the language of everyday communication, nor is it the language of official transaction. That is to say, we are teaching English in a country where spoken activities are almost exclusively confined to the classroom, keeping aside the case of some urban areas such as Kathmandu and Pokhara, where students can have some access to the Internet, English dailies and weeklies, and have some chances of getting mixed with native speakers in tourist areas and Nepal-based international organizations. Shedding light on such constraints, Bhattarai (2006) states:

The use of English is confined to formal situations only. Even in future there is little likelihood that English may be required as a spoken variety. Since Nepali serves as a lingua franca, English is not required as a language of unification, wider communication or national integration to any extent as in the case of India. (p.15)

Because of such constraints, teachers' English is the main source of spoken English for students in our context. However, teachers themselves lack extensive exposure to spoken English. Regarding exposure, Phyak (2006) drawing on his research work in a government-aided school outside the Kathmandu valley concludes, "The ground reality is measurable. English is taken as the most difficult subject. It is because of lack of exposure to both the teachers and students" (p.92). Speaking skill is pushed to the periphery in real life situation because the existing situation does not require students to listen to and speak English much for everyday transaction. They are devoid of real-life speaking and listening which include casual conversation (making social contact with people, establishing rapport, or engaging in the harmless chitchat), discussion with someone (making or expressing opinions, persuading someone about something, clarifying information) and giving instructions or getting things done, describing things, complaining about people's behavior, or making polite requests, entertaining people with jokes and anecdotes (Richards and Renandya, 2004).

The above mentioned facts about speaking suggest that ability to speak in English is more than just being able to answer orally to the teacher's questions. In fact, it is a complex task that calls for the student's ability "to explore and to formulate the relations between formal events of grammar (words, phrases, sentences and their categories and structures) and the conditions of their meanings and use" (Leech, 1994, p.19). Such relations cannot be developed well unless students get the opportunity to use English in real-life situation. Learning spoken English for our students has become a lifetime endeavor thanks to the constraints imposed by the situation itself.

### **Classroom management constraints**

Large classes are the reality of our situation. The class having 40/50 students seems commonplace in the government-aided schools and constituent colleges of Tribhuvan University. This more than ideal classroom setting calls for teacher-centered instruction in which "everyone in the class, in principle, is expected to do the same thing at the same time in the same way" (Ur, 2002, p.233). Such a classroom setting is suitable for whole-class or teacher-fronted teaching which downplays the role of learner-centered activities necessary for developing speaking skill. For example, thirteen out of fifteen student teachers whose classes were supervised during the practice teaching programme were found using the deductive approach and the explanation technique. Interactional techniques such as dramatic activities and role play were completely absent from their lessons. Only two teachers resorted to pair work and group while the rest did not give students opportunity to explore the subject matter through interaction (see Appendix I). The mode of interaction was exclusively dominated by the teacher. It was mainly in the form of the teacher asking yes/no questions and students responding to them as 'Yes' or 'NO'. These teachers were practicing explanation and discouraging the students to explore the text through group or pair interaction.

Classroom setting is also one of the main problems. Almost all the classrooms have furniture arranged in rows and fixed to the floor which prevents easy mobility required for group work and face-to-face interaction. Such a setting discourages students' involvement in language games and problem-solving activities. Worst of all, language teachers have failed to redefine the classroom as a place for dynamic and meaningful interaction, as a place where students from diverse socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds can participate in language-related tasks utilizing all the available linguistic and non-linguistic resources. This cannot happen unless group work and pair work become integral part of each lesson. During the supervision, I hardly found any teachers respecting and capitalizing on students' diverse experiences. In almost all classes students were sitting quietly facing the board and waiting to

respond to the teacher's questions. It was the teacher who initiated and dominated the classroom interaction. Such classroom setting postpones oral communication. The conventional teacher-fronted teaching often gives the impression that students are fallible and ignorant while the teacher is an oracle, a sage on the stage.

### **Attitudes to teaching speaking**

Speaking is the least practiced skill in the classroom because of some wrong attitudes on the part of teachers, students and administrators.

#### ***Teachers' attitudes***

Though theoretically identified as a distinct skill, it is often found that speaking is not taught accordingly. For example, out of 600 lesson plans prepared by 20 different student teachers, only 15 lessons were devoted to teaching speaking as a separate teaching item. This evinces the fact that speaking is pushed to the periphery even by those fresh teachers who have specialized in ELT and are theoretically acquainted with Communicative Language Teaching. Interestingly, most of these student teachers were either full-time teachers in government-aided or private schools. Such teachers tend to decide offhand to engage students in speaking activities when they are tired or when they do not have anything planned in advance. This phenomenon common in our context conforms to what Riddell (2001) writes, "We don't have anything planned for the final 30 minutes, so we say, 'Okay, I want you to talk about for the rest of the lesson'" (p.199). Some teachers use teaching activities as 'sponge activities' only to make students busy at the end of the lesson until the bell goes off. This means, speaking activities are not usually planned in advance; language forms to be focused in a particular activity are not specified, and the modality of activities is not clear to students. Teachers are tempted to adopt a 'now-talk-about ...' approach, that is all they need to do is give students a topic and ask them to talk about it.

#### ***Students' attitudes***

Speaking activities may demotivate the students who are in the classroom with fixed expectations to learn new language items every day, because

most speaking activities rather than teaching new language items focus on the communicative practice of those items which they have already learned formally. Such students think that the teacher should always be teaching and students should always be learning new items. They may lack the sense of achievement after the completion of activities. In fact, it is not their fault. The fault lies with the teacher who fails to make them understand and to convince them the value of doing speaking activities for fluency. When students do not take speaking seriously and purposefully, there is every likelihood that they take speaking activities for the opportunity to gossip to their elbow friends

#### ***Administrators' attitudes***

Our traditional educational culture prizes silence. Administrators complain that the English class is noisy, especially during the pair work and group work, and the teacher cannot control noise and maintain discipline in the classroom. Regarding this problem, Rai (2003) has the similar experience to share when she writes, "[Non-English] teachers and administrators often complain of 'noise' which disturbs other classes when there are communicative activities going on like group discussions, role plays, games and chants, etc." (p.118). Such administrators and teachers do not see a significant difference between teaching English and teaching other knowledge-based subjects such as mathematics and science. Since teacher autonomy in the classroom is still a rare thing for us, the English teacher is compelled to conform to administrators' expectations and resort to the deductive approach. For example, one of the teachers teaching a passage about computer to seventh-graders was explaining the theoretical aspects of computer science and different parts of computer throughout the period. It was rather difficult to say whether he was teaching about computer or exposing his students to English used to talk about computer. The teacher looked quite satisfied because his students were listening to him quietly and his class was not 'disturbing' other classes.

The administrators have to realize that fact that English as a set of complex skills requires active performance on the part of students. Students

should be encouraged and even compelled to use it whenever possible. Despite this fact, the author did not find any government-aided school in and out of Valley that had implemented the English-only policy in and out of the classroom.

### Lack of incorporation of fundamental components underlying speaking proficiency into teaching

Drawing on the work of Canale and Swain (1980), Shumin (2004, p.207) shows graphically the fundamental components underlying speaking proficiency:

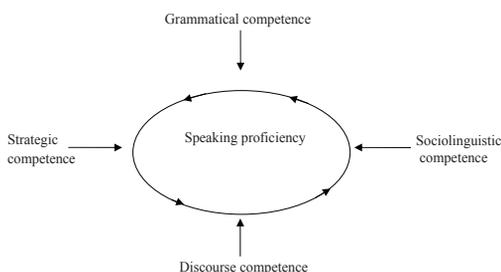


Figure 1: Components underlying speaking proficiency

The premise of this framework is that for students to be able to speak effectively, they should possess the rules of lexico-grammar and the rules of the language use. The framework also suggests that grammatical competence, though one of the essential components, alone is not adequate for speaking proficiency. Despite this fact, our teaching attaches great importance to grammatical competence only. It is mostly because morphology, syntax, vocabulary and mechanics that underlie grammatical competence lend themselves easily to formal explanation. They are relatively easy to teach and test. Moreover, grammatical competence is the major area which is tested in the examination and hence practiced in the classroom. It may be because of this reality, most teachers whose classes were supervised were explaining and summarizing the reading text. They were even found defining grammatical items such as the simple present tense, question tag, wh-question to the young learners. Such definitions were directly picked up either from the students' textbook or from reference grammars. On the other hand, paralinguistic elements such as stress, intonation and pitch; sociolinguistic elements such as socio-

cultural expectations, rules and norms governing speech acts, and strategies to initiate, continue and end communication successfully, are less amenable to formal explanation. They are more difficult to teach and test. Consequently, teachers and students both are tempted to bypass these elements. In the long run, grammatical competence is developed at the expense of other components of communicative competence. As a result, even the student with a good stock of English grammar rules and vocabulary seems unable to speak English effectively.

### Assessment system and its washback on speaking skill

The assessment system has "enormous power to exert how learning takes place" (Khaniya, 2005, p.50). The impact of the assessment system can be negative or positive. The existing English language assessment system of school and university seems to have negative impact on teaching speaking. For example, the English curriculum prescribed for Grade Eight has allocated only 15 per cent marks for speaking skill. Similar is the case with courses prescribed by TU. Very few courses test students' speaking proficiency and they have allocated nominal weightage to the speaking component. Let us take the courses prescribed at Bachelor's level in English education. Out of twelve courses prescribed for three academic years, only two courses entitled 'English for Communication' and 'English for Mass Communication' have made the explicit provision for assessing students' communicative skills. The course aims at developing students' communicative competence in the use of English, and the contents have been selected and organized accordingly. Despite this attempt, there is less likelihood that its goal is going to be achieved, for the assessment system does not assess what the course objective expects the students to achieve. So much is probably obvious that it is the assessment system that largely determines our success or failure in achieving teaching objectives. According to the course, eighty per cent of the students' English is assessed through the annual written examination, which includes the discrete item test (multiple choice) and short and long answer questions. This will obviously encourage students to engage more in rote learning of the exponents than in their practice through interaction. Moreover,

the assessment like this encourages the lecture method and whole class teaching rather than student-centered techniques such as pair work, project work, and cooperative learning, and so on.

### **How to overcome these problems**

How to address these problems is a shared challenge for English syllabus designers, textbook writers, administrators, testers and teachers. Before making any concerted efforts to address these problems, let us reiterate the fact that being able to speak in English is the overriding aim of our students, and speaking is a very complex task that calls for a constant interaction between linguistic and non-linguistic factors. Although it would be unwise to prescribe specific rules of thumb that ensure the students' ability to speak correct, fluent and appropriate English, the author believes that the concerned people, especially English teachers, can benefit from the following suggestions. Some of these suggestions are adopted from Harmer (2007), Ur (2004), Shumin (2004) and Riddell (2001) and adapted to our context.

### **Have students speak in and out of the classroom**

Only telling students about the value of speaking English in their academic and professional life is not sufficient. The teacher should go for such activities that require them to speak English in and out of the classroom. For this, project work can be an ideal activity. There is classroom interaction between the teacher and students, and among students themselves (while discussing and planning the project) which is followed by real-life interaction between students and the target people (while collecting information for the project).

#### *Form English speakers clubs*

The teacher can encourage students to form English speakers clubs where the students can gather once or twice a week and talk about the movie they have recently watched, the stories they have read or the news they have listened to. Depending on their levels, the teacher can encourage them to bring into the club the interesting items from English dailies and weeklies, TV and FM programmes, and to share among themselves.

### ***Use speaking as preparation and stimulus.***

The teacher can "ask the students to discuss on a topic as a way of activating their schemata or engaging them in a topic that they are going to read or hear about" (Harmer, 2007, p.267), or the topic they are going to write about. This integrates speaking into the other skills in every English lesson.

### ***Integrate speaking skill into all phases of teaching***

The teacher can incorporate speaking into all phases of teaching: presentation, practice and production followed by feedback. I have been using the RDWS or LDWS (Read or Listen, Discuss, Write and Say) technique for the last ten years to teach the students ranging from secondary level to master's level. This technique makes speaking important part of every lesson. To follow this technique, students read the passage or listen to the teacher/recorder; they work in groups or pairs to accomplish the task assigned to them by the teacher; then one member in each group or pair works as a scribe. As the time is over, one member from each group or pair goes to the front and presents the work. The presentation is followed by the whole class discussion in which each presenter gets necessary feedback from the teacher and other students.

### ***Plan speaking activities properly***

Teachers should know that teaching speaking is more than having students answer their questions orally. Speaking activities should be selected and sequenced thoughtfully. Teachers should specify in advance what language items are to be focused in the chosen speaking activity.

### ***Increase weightage to speaking skill***

Students give more attention to that language skill which they are required to perform in the examination. It is, therefore, imperative that English courses give more weightage to speaking skill.

### ***Lower inhibition and demystify the teacher's role***

Teacher-centered teaching inhibits students from expressing their ideas freely. Teachers should

be ready to lose their traditional role– the role that expects them to be an authority, a lecturer or a knowledge-giver. To encourage student interaction, teachers should ‘demystify’ their role as a facilitator, as an active member of the class. They should treat themselves as a guide standing or walking by students’ side rather than a sage on the stage preaching all the time. No horizontal communication can take place between teachers and students so long as the distance between them exists. Communication games, drama, role plays, songs, group work and interactive activities can be used to make the classroom environment more student-friendly and to lower students’ inhibition.

### ***Think in advance how to best manage the classroom***

A large class, if managed properly, can be more beneficial for teaching speaking. First, it is full of ‘potential teachers’. Second, in a large class, “humor is funnier, drama is more dramatic and a good class feeling is warmer and more enveloping than it is in a small group” (Harmer, 2007, p.127). Therefore, rather than complaining, teachers should know how to best manage large classes to involve students in meaningful and genuine interaction.

### ***Welcome ‘meaningful noise’ in the classroom***

Despite the complaints from administrators, English teachers should not silence the class in the name of maintaining discipline. Language itself is noise but meaningful and purposive. So long as students are discussing or interacting in English in order to carry out the assigned tasks under the teacher’s supervision, noise is not the problem. However, the teacher should know whether they are interacting or gossiping in groups. This is one of the ways that I have been defending the use of speaking activities and the ‘noise’ generated by the students.

### ***Follow the task-based model rather than the traditional presentation-practice-production (PPP) model.***

The task-based model has many advantages over the PPP model. One of the main advantages is that the task-based model begins with production which

is the last phase in the PPP model (Thornbury, 1999). Unlike the PPP model, it does not postpone communication. Put another way, task-based activities require students to speak English from the outset of the class and it integrates speaking in other language aspects and skills.

### ***Promote learner autonomy.***

Since ability to speak in English is influenced and determined by many factors, it is next to impossible to develop this complex ability by confining students only to the teacher-controlled classroom environment. Students should be taught how to practice English in general and speaking in particular independent of their teacher outside the four walls of the classroom. They should be trained how to exploit audio-visual resources available in the library and the resources such as English news channels, English movies, English programme on TV and radio, dictionaries on CD-ROMs, etc. for focused and unfocused practice of speaking.

## **Conclusion**

Broadly speaking, ESL/EFL students’ overall English performance is rated for their ability to speak English effectively and appropriately in every context. Unfortunately, in the Nepalese context, especially in government-aided schools and constituent colleges of TU speaking skill is marginally developed in students. Rather than following any teaching method or technique unwisely, it is wise to take on board those factors that have been a hindrance to developing speaking skill. While teaching speaking the teacher should provide students with the ample opportunity to relate syntax (rules of grammar) and morphology (vocabulary) to semantics (meaning) and pragmatics (language use) by means of interactive activities.

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*Appendix I***Observation Checklist**

SN	Grade	Teaching item	Teaching approach	Teaching technique
	Seven	Dialogue	Inductive	Picture demonstration followed by pair work
2	Six	Reading	Deductive	Reading aloud and explanation
3	Eight	Reading	Deductive	Reading aloud, explanation and summary
4	Five	Adverb	Deductive	Defining and explanation
5	Four	Interrogatives	Deductive	Defining and explanation
6	Five	Vocabulary	Deductive	Explanation of meanings
7	Seven	Reading	Deductive	Reading aloud and explanation
8	Four	Reading	Deductive	Reading aloud and explanation
9	Six	Reported speech	Deductive	Explanation
10	Five	Yes/no question	Deductive	Defining and explanation
11	Eight	Active/Passive	Deductive	Defining and explanation
12	Eight	Question tags	Deductive	Defining and explanation
13	Six	Reading	Deductive	Reading aloud and summarizing
14	Five	Simple present tense	Deductive	Defining and explanation
15	Seven	Language function (Apologizing)	Deductive	Long explanation followed by few exchanges between teacher and students and pair work