

Oral Activities in an EST Classroom Situation :
Some Practical Problems and Suggested Solutions.

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The term oral activities is used in this paper to refer essentially to communication-oriented activities such as topic discussion, information finding and gathering, and problem-solving activities, done by pairs of students or in groups rather than artificial pattern drills or typical question-answer exercises between the teacher and the students. These oral activities were very strongly recommended by the experts in the Seminar on Teaching of English for Science and Technology organized by the British Council at KMIT on March 30-April 17, 1981. Their advantages, particularly to an EST class, were mentioned and emphasized time and time again. Films taken in authentic classroom situations in England with groups of international students were shown to demonstrate the practicality of these activities. Surprisingly, no matter how strongly recommended the activities were, the participants remained skeptical about trying them with their classes.

The participants had no doubt about the advantages oral activities would bring to the EST class. For one thing, they create interest on the part of the students, and, if designed and conducted properly, can be very entertaining. They take the students away from their usual routine. They can be used to wake the students up from their afternoon nap. Science students at Mahidol University find problem-solving activities enjoyable. Besides, these oral activities are so close to everyday communication that, unlike drilling exercises, they become realistic and practical in the eyes of the students. Their practicality can then serve as a motivation for the students to come to class. Furthermore, such activities as problem-solving have high transferability in the sense that they train the students to cope with future problems. The techniques the students use in solving problems in the EST class can be applied again and again to any type of real-life problems.

Appealing as these activities were, problems regarding their practicality in Thai EST classroom situations were raised by many participants. 'These British Council experts were idealistic and didn't really know the problems in our situations' was one of the complaints made by the participants (behind the experts' back, of course). To

these teachers, such oral activities may be effective in classes of international students going to British universities for post-graduate studies, but they definitely do not work with classes of Thai students here in Thailand. In the paper, I would like to discuss the problems raised by the seminar participants concerning the use of oral activities in a Thai classroom. Possible solutions to these problems will also be suggested. This paper aims to show mainly that, with respect to the use of oral activities in class, perhaps the Thai classroom situation is not really hopeless.

Class Size

The first objection to using oral activities in the EST classroom has to do with the size of the class. The usual EST class averages 35-50 students. 'That is far too many for *any* type of oral activities', grieved one of the participants. Obviously, the class size has been the main cause of headaches for teachers as well as course organizers in many educational institutions. At the Faculty of Science, Mahidol University, we have never had less than 40 students in a class, and the number is increasing at an astonishing rate every year. How to get 40+ students to do a realistic type of speaking exercise, not simply drilling, in a certain period of time (usually less than 50 minutes) is a problem most teachers are faced with.

Given such a situation, it is obviously not easy to have oral work of any kind in class. But is it true that no such activity could be found or designed to fit a large-sized class? In previous literature on teaching methodology, there have been quite a few suggestions for oral activity techniques designed for large classes: Buckley, Bruton and Samuda (1978), Buckley (1979), Bruton and Samuda (1979), Slocum (1980), Shettlesworth (1980), to mention a few. Bruton and Samuda (1979), in particular, suggest a very easy-to-prepare-easy-to-conduct technique for a pairwork oral activity called Tango-Seated Pairwork. This technique was originally intended for large classes in state secondary schools in Singapore, but can definitely and easily be adapted for college or university usage. The tango-seating technique is recommended for the teaching of vocabulary, pronunciation, reading and writing. Shettlesworth (1980) also details some very practical down-to-earth communication games for large classes, which require very little time and energy to prepare, and which can be applied to several levels of students, not taking up too much of the class time.

Time Constraint

Lack of time is another common 'reason' for not doing oral work in the EST class. Apparently, the teacher cannot afford to spend a whole hour doing topic discussion or playing communication games when the course objective is mainly to read and write. Neither can the teacher spend too much time preparing materials for these activities. To make the matter worse, the teacher, (especially in a team-teaching situation) also sometimes has a time constraint on the teaching of each unit

of material. That is, the amount of time the teacher has to finish a certain unit is usually fixed in the course outline. If an oral activity is to be added in the class period, how could a teacher possibly keep up with the fixed schedule?

As has been mentioned in the discussion above on the problem of class size, there are some oral activities that do not necessarily take up too much of either class time or the preparation time. As a matter of fact, each of the activities suggested above can be done in approximately 15–20 minutes and requires about 20–30 minutes for material preparation. These 20-minute activities can be arranged to fit in a class meeting by assigning certain parts of the material or certain exercises to be done by the students as homework.

As for the problem of schedule constraint, the teacher can replace a week-by-week or unit-by-unit schedule with a semester schedule. That is, instead of restricting himself to two weeks per unit, the teacher can set a more flexible schedule of covering 8 units in a semester of 16 weeks. This type of schedule yields the same ultimate result in terms of amount of units done in a semester. Yet it allows the teacher to spend more time on one unit, fitting in whichever activities he thinks appropriate for the unit and to squeeze in another unit that does not require too many activities. It certainly gives the teacher flexibility and freedom to apply more teaching techniques.

(That is to say, lack of time is more of an excuse than a reason for not doing oral work in class.)

Students' Attitudes and Participation

Thai students often show obvious reluctance to participate in oral activities. For one thing, to students learning English as a foreign language, speaking English in class somehow seems unrealistic. Unlike groups of the international students in the films, who converse among themselves in English even outside the classes, Thai students feel uncomfortable and awkward having to speak English to their Thai teacher and to their friends. This may also be due to the fact that Thai students have not been trained to be outspoken. They are not used to arguing, discussing or expressing themselves, even in Thai, let alone in English. Their unwillingness to speak out may also result from lack of self-confidence. They may not want to speak for fear of making errors and getting laughed at by their fellow students. All of these problems together can create communication barriers to oral activities. They can create tension in the classroom, which can, in turn, transform a well-designed oral activity into a disaster.

But, believe it or not, in spite of the superficial reluctance to participate in oral work, deep down inside, students do want to practise speaking. This has been admitted in the questionnaires given out to first-year medical science students at Mahidol University. That means there is a motivation for oral work. *What the

students need is actually an effective way of overcoming their initial inhibitions. And there are quite a few things that can be done to break the ice. First, there can be a good, introductory, earnest talk between the teacher and the students, in the form of an orientation perhaps, to remind them of the benefits they will get from the activities. If this still does not ease the tension perhaps a stimulating game will help. Science and technical students often find mathematical and problem-solving games irresistible. When any such game is introduced in class, they get so enthusiastic they lose all their qualms about participating. And before they know it, they are already involved in an oral activity. Gradually, they will feel more relaxed and less conscious of speaking English among themselves. A discussion-type activity can then be introduced. Timing is also important. The best bet is to introduce an oral activity when students are well-acquainted with each other, so there will be no loss of face when an error is made.

Teachers' Attitudes

Teachers, like students, sometimes have negative attitudes towards the use of oral activities in class. Teachers are reluctant to conduct oral activities in class because, first of all, this means an extra load of work. But if they think about this for a moment, they will see that this extra work is well worth the time taken, considering what benefits the students will derive from oral work in class. The teachers' tendency to avoid conducting oral work in class also results from lack of self-confidence in speaking the language in front of their students. Since they do not use English in their everyday life, they are afraid of making mistakes, thus, ruining their own images. Some are conscious of foreign accents in their pronunciation. However, these problems should not cause too much worry for teachers. First of all as has been mentioned before, an oral activity need only take up one-third of an hour. During this period, it should be the students who do most of the talking, not the teacher, for the purpose of the activity is for the students to practice. The teacher is there to give instructions and to help when the students are stuck. Teachers should keep in mind that oral work is supposed to be student-centered; the teacher should not dominate the activity. This then leaves only a few minutes of speaking for the teacher. Besides, the language used in giving instructions for an activity can be very simple. The sentences need not, and should not, be long and complicated, or they will confuse the student. The instructions should be written up in advance in step-by-step detail. To gain self-confidence for the first couple of activities, a rehearsal may help.

It should always be remembered that if one wants to be a good English teacher, one cannot avoid speaking English. Also the teacher cannot hide from his students a negative attitude towards speaking English. And once the students sense his reluctance to speak the language, they will from then on keep their mouths shut,

Students' Roles

Another problem that commonly arises in an oral class has to do with the students' roles. It is not unusual to find in a class some born leaders, extroverts who like acting and showing off, consciously or unconsciously, and who are generally quite fluent in English. Naturally, these students become the group leaders, thus, dominating the scene. While other members of the group are reluctant to speak out, these natural leaders will do most of the talking. Sensing their friends' unwillingness to speak, they may unconsciously act as a shield protecting them by figuring out and answering all the problems themselves. Besides, their fluency as well as their self-confidence may intimidate the rest of the group or turn them off. Obviously, these more active students will benefit most from the practice while the rest of the class will gain very little from it.

In conducting an activity, the teacher has to make sure that all students participate equally in it. This can be done, first, by making the groups small. This makes it hard for out-spoken students to dominate the activity, or for intimidated students to shy away from the scene and get lost in the crowd. Another solution is to group students by their levels of fluency. This can be done only when the teacher knows his students well enough. Fluent students will then be in the same group, preventing each other from dominating the activity. Weak students, when grouped together, will feel less intimidated, less competitive and more relaxed. Grouping students by their levels of fluency is also of great advantage to the teacher. For in conducting an activity, he can focus his attention on groups of weak students, leaving good ones more or less on their own.

Conclusion

It is hoped that by now this paper has shown that the problems once thought to be serious enough to make oral English activities in Thai classrooms impossible are actually not that serious at all. It may be true that an activity that works with groups of international students in British classroom situations may not fit perfectly in the Thai situation. However, adaptations can be made. Besides, the teacher can always design his own activities in such a way that they will be integrated with his reading/writing work, will fit his own personality and will also be suited to his students' needs. After all, who knows his students, their personality and their interests better than the teacher himself?

It is obvious that doing oral activities in an EST classroom situation with Thai students is not easy. It certainly takes a variety of techniques, talent, imagination and much patience on the part of the teacher. But I hope to have shown in this paper that being tedious is not the same as being impossible. It must also be emphasized that if an activity fails the first time, it does not mean that oral work

is impossible. In such a case, the teacher should try to find what went wrong with the activity and patch it up. The same activity, with some modifications, could turn out to be a success the next time.

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