

## Students' role in enhancing their speaking skills

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### Abstract

Speaking is the process of building and sharing meaning through verbal utterance. It is also considered as a crucial part of second language learning and teaching. In Ethiopia, English language is taught in schools for five days a week starting from grade one and when students reach high school in addition to learning English, they learn all other subjects in English. Meanwhile, the students speaking skill is not as good as a student who spend much time using the language; they are anxious to speak in the classroom or outside due to different social and psychological reasons. So, this study was conducted to explore the students' role in enhancing their speaking skills at two Ethiopian state high schools. The study used descriptive research design, which comprises qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis techniques. Forty students who were randomly selected from the two schools filled out the survey questionnaire and four teachers which were selected voluntarily their classes observed were interviewed. Learners to improve their speaking skills are expected to do different speaking activities in the classroom and outside the classroom. However, the study's finding found that the students are not playing their role in a way that helps them improve their speaking skill; this means they don't expose themselves to learning the skill. It was also found that students are not aware that they have to make an effort to improve their speaking skills.

**Keywords:** students' role, speaking skills, speaking enhancement, speaking strategy, students' participation

### 1. Introduction

Scholars who know about the importance of speaking in language teaching have shown that only the written language cannot give the necessary competence in foreign language learning. The students should not be devoid of the sort of speaking skills that are highly valued in the educational system (Brown,1994). As it has been discovered by many researchers, foreign language learning best occurs through interaction. The more the students make good interaction with their teacher, with their classmates, and with the activity, the more they improve their speaking skills. However, in Ethiopia, many of the learners are anxious to speak in the classroom or outside due to different social or psychological reasons so they keep silent. (Abebe, 2005)

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Improving the students' speaking skills involves two-way interaction between students and teachers. This type of interaction will stimulate learning and make both the instructor and students feel satisfied; Which eventually leads to an effective learning process. According to Wade (1994) most students can benefit a lot from participation such as the enjoyment of sharing ideas with others and learn more if they are actively involved in class discussions.

### 1.1. *Language Learning in Ethiopian High Schools*

English is the teaching - learning language (medium of instruction) in Ethiopian high schools and is essential for their academic achievement. As such, English language lessons are given for 5 days a week for 45 minutes (45 min each day). The goal of giving English language lessons at this level is to help students improve their language proficiency and accuracy. So that they can follow their lessons more effectively. Because of all the lessons (subjects) given in high school, their medium of instruction is English. According to some studies, the language ability of these high school students is not sufficient for their academic performance. And their language ability is deteriorated from time to time according to many English and other subject area teachers.

### 1.2. *Speaking*

Speaking is defined as an interactive process of building meaning that includes producing, receiving, and processing information (Burns, 1997). Speaking is the process of getting and evaluating information in order to produce meaning through the use of verbal symbols (Chaney, 1998). Similarly, Tarone (2005) explains that speaking is the most difficult and complex language skill to acquire. The learning of speaking incorporates listening and comprehending at a time and it depends on communicative competence and the situational context. Thus, speaking is taken as a complex system because it includes the ability to use grammar, sound, vocabulary, and even cultural knowledge of the language. Speaking is the way learners define themselves not only orally but also in a coherent, appropriate and sensible manner.

Speaking is also defined as one of the four language skills that the students should gain well. It has an important role in communication. In the practice of speaking, students face some difficulties the main one is the language itself. In fact, most of the students have difficulty to speak even if they have lots of vocabulary and have written them well. Because students are afraid of making mistakes while doing this productive skill. When we speak, we produce a text and it should be meaningful. In the nature of communication, we can find the speaker, the listener, the message, and the feedback. Speaking could not be separated from pronunciation as it encourages learners to learn English sounds.

It has been regarded as a mere implementation and variation, outside the domain of language and linguistics proper. Linguistic theory has mostly developed in abstraction from the context of use and source of diversity. Therefore, Nunan (2004) said that speaking is fundamentally an instrumental act in order to have some effect on the listener. It is the

outcome of teaching - learning process. Students' effort in making the speech is a core aspect of teaching speaking; it becomes the main aspect for the success of language teaching. If language functions as a system for the expression of meaning, as (Nunan,1998) states that success in speaking is measured through someone's ability to carry out a conversation in the language. We confess that many proponent factors influence teaching speaking success and there are many obstacle factors why it is not running well.

According to Luoma (2004), speaking is described as an ability to express oneself in a situation, or the activity to report acts, or situation in precise words or the ability to express a sequence of ideas fluently. Furthermore, Celce (2001) said speaking is a way of communication that influences our individual life strongly.

Literature shows that speaking can be either transactional or interactional; both have some linguistic variations in their usage. The transactional discourse includes mainly passing information which is "message-oriented" rather than listener-oriented (Nunan, 1991). Such speaking discourse is found usually long, clear, comprehensible, and planned; like news, instructions, documentary programs, etc (Wenden, 1991). On the other side, interactional discourse involves interpersonal use of conversations like small talk, greetings, etc. which are listener-oriented. Interactional speaking occurs face-to-face which helps speakers receive an immediate response. This kind of communication involves facial expressions, and movements of the lips and the body such as gestures, mimics, etc., and in some cases, even silence is thought to have a role in facilitating comprehension. It is interactive, that is: participants involved in such communication contribute to it at the right moments.

Turn-taking is one feature of interactive communication that occurs unconsciously and differently in different cultures. Sometimes, turn-taking can be taken as a source of communication problems for people who are from different cultures and languages (Abebe, 2005). While discussing speaking, another important distinction can also be made between dialogue and monologue. The ability to give fluent oral presentations is different from interacting and communicating in interactional and transactional situations. Even native speakers might find some difficulties talking about a subject to gather. This specific skill should also be addressed in language training. Monologues talks usually include a recognizable format and are similar to written language. Brown (2000) discusses, as teachers must focus on helping students practice in producing speeches such as public talks, and public announcements, in short turns.

### *1.3. The Role of Students in Learning Speaking Skills*

Students play a great role in making the teaching of speaking skills successful. They are expected to participate in the teaching-learning process in different ways. One of the most important outcomes of the movement of communicatively oriented language learning and teaching was the enhancement of the role of the learner in the language learning process (Wenden, 1991). Cameroon (2001) believes that in the formal education context, the most successful learners are autonomous learners; that means

they accept responsibility for their learning and they constantly reflect on what they are learning, why they are learning, and with what degree of success they are learning.

Scharle and Szabo (2000) said, that learners should be autonomous learners to learn the language because autonomous learners are those who have the idea that their efforts are crucial to progress in learning a language and behave accordingly. When doing their assignments, or answering questions in class, they are not aspiring to please the teacher or to get a good mark. They make an effort to learn something. They are interested in cooperating with the teacher and others in the learning group for everyone's benefit (Ibid).

Hedge (2000) states that, an autonomous learner is a learner who is self-motivated, who takes the initiative, who has a clear idea of what he/she wants to learn and who has his/her own plan for pursuing and achieving his/her goal.

Within the idea of education, (Wenden, 1991) characterized autonomous learners as those who are motivated to learn, good guessers, choose materials, methods and tasks, select criteria for evaluation, take an active approach to the task and willing to take risks (Wenden, 1991). Furthermore, Dickinson (1991) characterizes autonomous learners as 'those who have the ability to be active and independent in the process of learning; they can identify goals; formulate their own goals, and can change goals to suit their own learning needs and interests. In addition, they can use learning strategies, and monitor their learning'.

However good teacher the teacher might be, sometimes students will never learn a language unless they aim to learn outside as well as during the class time. This is because language learning is too complex to learn in a classroom. Besides, to compensate for the limits of classroom time and to counter the problem of learning language, students need to develop their learning strategies. So that they become autonomous learners. To develop their learning autonomy, teachers need to help them. (Harmer, 2001).

#### 1.4. *Statement of the Problem*

These days, speaking is taken as the most fundamental skill to acquire. Since the onset of the communicative era it has been considered as the ultimate goal of language teaching and its proper development has become the focus of attention of both teachers and learners. (Thornbury, 2007)

Meanwhile, it is also a commonly recognized fact that achieving proficiency in foreign language speaking in classroom conditions is not an easy task. Even advanced learners often finish a language course with the conviction that they are not sufficiently prepared for speaking beyond the classroom. This difficulty results basically from the character and inadequate frequency of speaking opportunities in the classroom and outside the classroom in comparison to the abundance of natural varieties and genres of oral communication. Meanwhile, selecting the most appropriate type of spoken discourse for classroom practice in a particular language course is a very hard decision which, unfortunately, hardly ever reflects the natural occurrence and distribution of communicative situations. (Dakowska, 2005).

Secondary/ school students in particular, are noted as having great difficulties in expressing themselves and for their poor speaking skills. This shows that students' participation in making themselves learn the skill is passive and the activities teachers are coming up with are not effective in engaging students in the learning.

On the other side, Al- Shabibi (2004) has shown that anxiety and unwillingness to learn by the students in speaking skills lessons are the main obstacles to learning to speak. These are caused when learners fear being negatively evaluated in error correction in front of their friends. In addition, learners with low proficiency who rate themselves as 'poor' become more anxious and are not willing to communicate.

The researcher has personal experience with university students and also observed that they are not active participants and don't even know they should play the main role to improve their speaking skills. These fresh University students their base is high school. So, the researcher wanted to see how these students were doing when they were in their basement. So, this is the main reason that initiated this research project.

Abebe (2005) conducted research on students' classroom participation and the development of students' attitude. His finding shows teachers' role in the classroom and the school environment have a direct influence on the students' active participation. Furthermore, Zerihun Samson (2009), Teaching speaking to secondary students and indicated that there are different roles that students play in learning speaking.

### *1.5. Objectives of the Study*

The major purpose of this study, in general, is to investigate students' role in enhancing speaking skills in ELT classes while its specific purpose is to examine students' role in speaking instruction. The following questions will be answered.

- a) The following research question is set in an attempt to accomplish the above objectives.
- b) To what extent does the students' role enhance their speaking skills?

## **2. Methodology**

This study aimed to investigate the students' role in enhancing their speaking skills. The study is descriptive study incorporates both qualitative and quantitative methods. The main goal of descriptive research is to describe systematically the existing phenomena under the study (Gall & Borg, 2007) 4So descriptive research describes the existing phenomena as accurately as possible. The phenomena observed in descriptive research are already available. What is necessary for a researcher to do is collect the available data through the use of research instruments such as questionnaire, interview, or observation

### 2.1. *Data collection and processing*

To collect the data the researcher went to the school and communicated with the director of the school and teachers. Then gave an appointment to see him after two days. Then the researcher selected four volunteer teachers for the interview and three teachers for the observation. After that, the researcher discussed with the teachers the date of the observation and interview and set a program to make the first observation after a week. Because the researcher wanted to get data from the students' questionnaire first to triangulate what the students said with what was there in the classroom. Then after finishing the discussion with the teachers the researcher with the help of the department head took three students from 13 sections (a total of 39) students and administered the questionnaire. The selected 39 students were taken to one free class and with the control of the researcher the students filled out the questionnaire.

After a week started to have observation and observed three sections within one week. The classes that were observed were classes of teacher respondents involved in the interview. The reason why the researcher observed before the interview was to avoid bias or not to give a hint about what the researcher wanted to observe. The interview was held a week after the observation. The interview was held last for two reasons. First, the researcher wanted to modify the questions after looking at the student's replies to the questionnaire and modifying some of the questions. Second, if the interview was conducted before the observation, they might modify the class according to the questions asked. So, the researcher found it better to conduct the interview after the observation.

### 2.2. *Data Gathering Instruments and Sampling Techniques*

#### 2.2.1. *Questionnaire*

To generate quantitative data about students' role in enhancing their speaking skills sample participants were taken from two high schools to respond questions for responding on questions about students' roles and ways of teaching. On the other hand, students were selected using Probability sampling (Random sampling) thinking of giving equal chance to all. So, Probability sampling design as a design gives equal chance to the whole sample. That means individuals are not picked up deliberately from the whole group but picked up by some mechanical process (Richards, 2001). Specifically, Systematic Random Sampling was used as a mechanical process. In Systematic Random Sampling the first unit gets selected randomly then the rest sample is selected in a fixed interval (Gall,2007). For this study the student participants were taken using simple random sampling; 39 students (10% of them) were taken as participants from the total of 394 students from the two high schools. These 394 students were assigned to 13 sections; 30 students in 11 sections and 32 students in 2 sections. From each section 3 students were taken in the interval of 15 students according to their alphabet (the first, the middle, and the last or number 1, number 15 and number 30. Their numbers were given from 1 - 30 according to their names alphabet). The questionnaire was prepared with two themes asking about students' roles and activities that teachers use to teach speaking.

### 2.2.2. Interview

A teacher interview was conducted to generate in-depth information about the students' role in enhancing the students speaking skills. English language teachers in the school were selected for interviews and observations. In this school, there were 10 English language teachers. The researcher with the help of the department head asked teachers to participate and took teachers who were willing to participate. So voluntary sampling was used as a sampling technique because only teachers who were willing to participate in the study were selected; In voluntary sampling potential candidates who were willing and qualifying to participate were selected (Shumin ,1997). There were three observations and three teachers involved in the observation and for an interview there were four teachers involved.

## 3. Findings

Table 1

*Student's role in speaking*

No	Questions	A	U	S	R	N
1	I am willing to do speaking activities	0	3 (6.9%)	1 (3.4%)	14 (34.5%)	21 (55.2%)
2	I participate in pair and group work.	4 (10.3%)	4 (10.3%)	5 (13.8%)	12 (31%)	14 (34.6%)
3	I speak English outside the classroom.	0	3 (6.9%)	9 (24.1%)	11 (27.6%)	16 (41.4%)
4	I plan my way of developing speaking skills.	0	4 (10.7%)	12 (31%)	9 (24.1%)	12 (31.1%)
5	I evaluate my weaknesses and strengths in of speaking English	9 (24.1%)	4 (10.3%)	6 (13.8%)	11 (27.6%)	9 (24.2%)

For the question that asks about the willingness of the learners to do speaking activities, above 89.7% of them reported they are not willing usually. The teacher respondents also said the same; even if they go to class with speaking activities the response, they get from the learners is very passive so they stop even planning to have speaking activities.

Students need to be involved in activities that can help them interact with each other to learn speaking and pair and group work activities are the main (Brown, 1983). However according to the respondents' students rarely

participate in pair and group work activities that is what 65.6 % of the respondents confirmed and 13.8% of them said sometimes and 20.3 % said usually. Practicing the speaking of the targeted language outside the classroom is a must to improve the skill (Anjaniputra, 2013). The student respondents 69% of them said they rarely practice outside the classroom and only 6.9% said usually. This shows that students do not use the language out of classroom. This is also confirmed by teacher respondents in the interview as teachers do not give them tasks to do outside the classroom to make them use the language.

In addition, 55% of them said they do not often plan to develop their speaking skill and 55.2% of them said rarely correct themselves when they feel they are not right. From the interview, the teacher respondents also said most of the learners are not interested or ready to think of how they can learn better and not worried about the errors they make. Because of this even when they make mistakes, they don't bother much; so, they do nothing to correct.

Learners rarely discuss language learning problems and effective learning ways. Most of the respondents confirmed that the students are weak in evaluating their strengths and weaknesses. From the interview, the researcher also learnt that the learners do nothing to find out their problem and look for solutions instead they prefer to go the easy way only and expect everything from their teacher.

This implies that the students are not playing their role. Learners are the one that was supposed to play the vital role of making themselves learn the speaking skill. However, it seems they don't know exactly the kind of role that they have to play. So, the majority of the learners do not perform most of the activities that they are required to perform to improve their skills. If they are not involved well, it is a must for them to be passive. In addition, this shows that the way they are learning the skill is not forcing them to get into the practice of the skill.

Table 2

*Activities used for developing speaking skills*

<b>No</b>	<b>How often do you do:</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>U</b>	<b>S</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>N</b>
1	Information gap activities like as sharing ideas with each other in English?	1 (3.4%)	4 (10.3%)	1 (3.6%)	12 (31%)	21 (51.7%)
2	Problem-solving activities (puzzles)?	4 (10.3%)	1 (3.4%)	11 (27.6%)	11 (27.6%)	12 (31.1%)
3	Role play activities (taking the role of the others and acting)?	4 (10.3%)	3 (6.9%)	7 (17.2%)	13 (34.5%)	12 (31%)
4	Group discussions?	3 (6.9%)	3 (6.9%)	4 (10.3%)	5 (13.8%)	24 (62.1%)
5	Project-based activities (performing certain tasks to learn to speaking)?	1 (3.4%)	6 (13.8%)	5 (13.8%)	15 (37.9%)	12 (31.1%)



6	Preparing monologues (in which each of you are asked to prepare a talk about a hobby or personal interest for two or three minutes)?	4 (10.3%)	4 (10.3%)	9 (24.2%)	11 (27.6%)	11 (27.6%)
7	Drills (dialogues) in which one person asks a question and another gives an answer?	0	5 (13.8%)	10 (24.2%)	12 (31%)	12 (31.0)
8	Opinion gap activities, which involve identifying and articulating personal feelings or attitude?	1 (3.4%)	1 (3.4%)	14 (34.6%)	12 (31%)	11 (27.6%)
9	Reasoning gap activities in which you reason out something?	5 (13.8%)	7 (17.3%)	10 (24.1%)	10 (24.1%)	7 (20.7%)

According to the respondents' information gap activities are rarely used activities because 81.7% of them said so and problem-solving activities are rarely given activities too by their teachers as confirmed by 58.7% of the respondents. In addition, role play activities are not usually used activities 65.5% of them said not usually used. Group discussion and project-based activities are also rarely given activities as above 60% of the students said. This is also true from the interview; they said they only worry about portion coverage and stick to the text even from the text they choose activities and they don't include the speaking activities in their lesson and don't care about the kind of activity they are coming with to the classroom whether it is teaching the skills or not.

Opinion and reasoning gap activities, monologues, pictures and drills are activities that are very interesting for the students. While doing the activities the students use or practice the language very well. However, according to their report above 50 % of them reported that they are activities that they are not familiar with because they are rarely given activities.

This implies that, this is the main reason for the students' weak speaking performance because most of the activities that should be used to practice speaking are not usually used. So, if the activity that helps improve the skill is not frequently used there is no way for the learners to involve in the learning of the skill.

#### 4. Discussion

To study the students' participation and teachers' role in enhancing the students' speaking skills, data was collected using questionnaire interviews and observation. The questionnaire was administered to the students and an interview was administered to the teachers and observation of three classes was also made by the researcher. So here, the data gathered using the mentioned tools is discussed.

##### 4.1. Students' role

According to Richards and Rogers (2001), speaking was taken as the main part of language. From the four language skills, speaking seems

important as it is one of the most frequent means of interaction in the teaching and learning process and it is suggested that people who know about a certain language are referred to as 'speakers' of that language.

Speaking is learning by doing skill; so, to learn speaking students are expected to be involved directly in the speaking practice. According to Chaney (1984), teachers are not the only players in the success of the students' learning of speaking in particular. Students are also primarily concerned with the achievement of their successes and failures. So, learners themselves should plan and get in the task for better results.

Students are expected to plan their way of developing speaking skills; that means they should be willing to be involved in speaking activities, speak English outside the classroom, participate in pair and group work, discuss their effective learning ways, and evaluate their weaknesses and strengths in speaking. However according to the data collected from the questionnaire, interview, and observation the students' participation was found weak.

Students do not frequently participate in speaking activities as most of the teacher respondents said students refuse when they are asked to participate in the practice of speaking. Most of them are afraid of speaking English in front of their friends because if they make a mistake their friends may laugh at them. In addition, they are not having enough motivation and encouragement from their teachers. Harmer (2010) puts infancies about students' encouragement to speak English in the classroom. So that they can have the opportunity to practice real-life speaking in the classroom where they likely feel free and practice well.

Some students might perform less in their oral production, because they may not get sufficient opportunity to practice extended oral interaction, because textbooks may not give more genuine speaking activities with adequate time, or because teachers' teaching techniques or strategies for dealing with oral activities may not generate students' active participation. Consequently, the students' oral proficiency is limited Chaney (1984). Students who came to secondary school from different elementary schools have little language experience, so, they may not be active in speaking. If students lack previous speaking experience, they may not dare to speak English in front of their peers (Chaney (1984).

So, students might come from different backgrounds which ends up with poor performance. As the data shows most of the students are from poor background, their prior experience and their prior knowledge of the language is very poor. So, in the speaking class when they are given the chance to practice, they refuse or they don't want to use it.

According to Shumin (1997) some of the reasons why some students fail to speak English fluently with confidence are: sometimes extreme anxiety occurs when EFL learners become tongue-tied or lost for words in expected situations, which often leads to discouragement or a general sense of failure and sometimes some students are concerned with how they may be judged by others. They are very cautious about making errors... fear of making mistakes could make them tied up. So because they are afraid of making mistakes in front of their friends and teacher, thinking their friends might laugh at them and mock them they become reluctant to speaking practice.

However, still these students are from poor and uneducated families even when they go home there is no one they can practice with, let alone practice speaking English most of their parents do not have any idea of their kids learning. So students get no support from the parent side. Speaking practice needs direct and conscious involvement of them, so like their teachers the students don't want to bother themselves they prefer the easy way. So they find themselves very lazy, careless and resistant. Even when some teachers, sometimes, come to class with activities that let students practice they refuse. Unless the teacher uses force or other mechanism, hard to find at list a student who participates voluntarily. So the students background, lack interest and being unwilling to move like a hope full 1youngster are the main factors under student factor.

## **5. Conclusion**

The present study explored the students' role in enhancing their speaking skills in high school students in Ethiopia thorough studying mechanisms. The study found that, students are not playing their roles well enough to improve their speaking skills. The way they are trained and given the practice and even the attitude the learners have about their speaking practice is below what is expected from a high school student. Most of the activities that are supposed to be done by the learners are not done according to the findings. Bringing all the findings together, students are not doing different speaking activities in the classroom and outside the class room to improve their speaking skill. So, the researcher can say that the students are not playing their role as expected to enhance their skills.

## **6. Recommendation**

In response to the research question, the study found out that the role the students have in improving their speaking skills is very low. The kind of activities that students should get involved in and the effort the learner should make are missing. So, because they are in their secondary education they need to be guided by their teachers. Most of the activities that students should be involved in to learn speaking should be provided by their teachers. Unless students cannot do it by themselves. This means that to make students play their role the help of their teachers is quite significant.

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