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The development of L2 speaking skill and the related components: Insight from philosophical questions

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Abstract

This study was an attempt to find out if philosophical questions and dialogs, introduced for the first time by the present researchers, can enhance EFL college students' speaking skill. It also set out to identify which components of this skill will be developed (more) through a newly developed approach to language pedagogy called Philosophy- based Language Teaching (PBLT). To this end, 34 Iranian students were randomly assigned into two groups of experimental (PBLT) and control (conventional). The results revealed that the students in experimental group (EG) superseded those in control group (CG) on speaking skill and all its related components except one (accuracy). Findings of the study have implications for educationists, in general, and second/foreign language teachers, in particular.

1. Introduction

Excellent thinking, according to Lipman (2003) is critical, creative, and complex. These are aspects of all non-routine thinking which Lipman (ibid) calls higher-order thinking. Recent interest in education in general, and language teaching and learning in particular, has been on how best to promote such thinking in students. Lipman's answer to this question is that the richest resource at our disposal is *philosophy*. The term philosophy, strictly following Lipman, Sharp, and Oscanyan's (1980) paradigm is considered as small 'p'. According to them, by philosophy it is not meant complex philosophical issues among great philosophers such as Socraties, Aristotle, Plato, etc. The aim is not to teach philosophy as an academic discipline but to teach how to philosophize. Philosophy, in this sense, as Cam (1995) indicates is the most powerful tool used for the cultivation of excellent

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thinking and inquiry into the meaning of concepts that are central to our lives. Lipman (2003) holds that this view of philosophy taps one's natural curiosity and sense of wonder and puzzlement. It engages people in a search for meaning and enriches their understanding of different concepts. It strengthens thinking and reasoning skills and builds self-esteem in students. It helps to develop the qualities that make for good judgment in everyday life. Philosophy as such assists us to practice inquiring into the questions most of us have wondered about from time to time; questions which are familiar and meaningful to most people all over the world. According to Gregory (2008, pp. 2-3), we always ask ourselves philosophical questions like "What is reality, beauty, democracy, justice, art, death, love, God, language, truth, mind? What is the right thing to do? Does everything have a cause? What makes something beautiful? Can emotions be reasonable? Is there such a thing as evil? Why are some reasons stronger than others?" and so on. Viewing philosophy from this perspective, people at any age, even children (c.f. Philosophy for Children: P4C, Lipman, 1993) can be taught to philosophize to become social thinkers in future. A typical example in this respect is a study done by Daniel et al. (1999) who posed philosophical questions on mathematics to elementary school children aged 9-13. Questions such as "Does zero signify nothing?", "Was mathematics invented or discovered?" and the like. One gets surprised at the language production and reasoning of these children. More examples of philosophical dialogs between Lipman and Children and McClendon and children could also be found in Lipman (1993).

Inspired by Lipman et al. (1980), this study incorporated *philosophy* as a novel ingredient into the area of second language teaching methodology and gave rise to a new approach called Philosophy-based Language Teaching (PBLT) complementing other theoretical backgrounds to L2 pedagogy such as Linguistics and Psychology (including cognition, counselling, affection, etc.). PBLT makes use of two effective instruments to enhance thinking and communication ability: a) community of inquiry b) philosophical questions. In the community of inquiry (see, e.g., Kennedy, 2004; Leeuw, 2004) students work together to generate and then answer their own questions about the philosophical issues contained in purposeful written materials or a wide range of other resources such as pictures, movies etc. The process of philosophical exploration in this environment encourages students to take increased responsibility for their own learning process and to develop as independent and self-correcting learners. Students develop "intellectual courage" to put forward their views in a group. Philosophical questions, according to Gregory (2008), do not call for correct answer. Such questions refer to problems that cannot be solved by calculation, consulting books, or by referring to one's own memories. To answer such questions, one has to refer to his depth of thoughts. In contrast to routine questions which call upon students to show their knowledge of established facts, philosophical questions require one to think for her/himself and demand further investigations that invite reflection (Cam 1995). He adds that the subject matters of philosophy for discussion are those common and central concepts that cover both general experience of life and all academic disciplines. Here are some exemplary philosophical questions in both areas: Philosophical questions on 'Power' (general): "What is power? Does Power give pleasure? Can you have power without controlling other people or things? Are you more powerful if you know who you are? If you are controlled by others, can you still be powerful, as long as you know who you are? For some people to be powerful, must others be weak? Could everyone be equally powerful? If yes, what would happen then?" Philosophical questions on 'Nature' (academic): "How did the world come to be? Are humans part of nature? What is natural and unnatural? Does nature have purposes or innate values? Can and should nature be controlled? Do animals and eco-system have rights? Can nature be cruel? (Why) Is it bad for species to go extinct?"

1.1. How a PBLT class runs

A typical PBLT classroom session starts with students reading a source text not practiced before. After reading, the students will be asked individually or in collaboration with their peers to make one or two philosophical questions to show that they have formed a philosophical mind and that the text has made them think about or wonder about. These questions, which are primarily constructed based on the concepts used in the text, set the agenda for discussion. Each student then reads her/his question to the whole class and the most interesting one(s) will be selected by students themselves to be discussed. In order not to lose their train of thoughts, students will be allowed to code switch when necessary while discussing the issues. The teacher as a facilitator, conducts and monitors students' discussions and helps them to keep on the track. During oral discussion, the instructor takes some personal notes: writes down the main points discussed, the important words used, and translates the L1 words used by students into L2. At the end of the discussion and while students have a break, the instructor divides the board into two halves and outlines the main points raised under one column and puts the important words and those translated into L2 under another. Then students are asked to write individually an essay on the main points using the

materials on the board if needed. Then, essays will be checked by the instructor out of class for each session and returned to them with feedback before the next class hour. Each class session lasts for two hours with the following time allocation: reading the text and making question: 15 minutes, oral discussion: 1:15 minutes, and writing: 30 minutes.

Given the potentialities of philosophical discussions in terms of their power to improve students' communication skills and thinking abilities, it seemed promising to conduct research in this area in an EFL/ESL context. Therefore, the concern of this study was to introduce a philosophical approach to L2 pedagogy and show how it could be implemented in L2 classrooms. Accordingly, the following research hypothesis was formulated: H1: EFL students exposed to PBLT will outperform those exposed to conventional ESL instruction methods in regard to their speaking ability and its relevant components.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

To select participants, an invitation letter was installed in the bulletin boards of three colleges of Engineering, Sciences, and Humanities of a major university in Iran. English major students were excluded from the invitation given their distinct level of English proficiency as compared to other students. 82 students from the three disciplines with different majors replied to the invitation letter and participated in an interview session with three experienced raters who ranked students. 53 students within the age range of 19 to 25 who turned out to be at the same level of proficiency (intermediate) were chosen, but finally 34 students could arrange to take part in the study. The rest could not attend the class due to their class overlap. Using an experimental design, the students were placed, through random assignment, into experimental (N=17: 10 female and 7 male) and control (N=17: 9 female and 8 male) groups.

2.2. Materials

The basic instructional materials were 17 texts (each for one session) of differing length and topic with the criterion of having the potentiality of being subjected to deep and philosophical discussions. The average readability index of the texts was 75.1.

2.3. Data collection procedures

The classes were held four days a week (two days for experimental and two days for control) over one semester (17 sessions).The participants in both groups received pre and post test and their performance was audio recorded with their consent for subsequent rating. Their speaking was rated using "The Speaking Scale: Analytic Descriptors of Spoken Language" (Council of Europe, 2001). The components of speaking were: accuracy, range, fluency, coherence, and content. The intra- and inter-rater reliability indexes were 0.92 and 0.90. Before the embarkation of the main research, the instructor took part in several philosophy training sessions to become familiar with the procedures of running a philosophical community and how to provoke students to raise philosophical questions. Moreover, a pilot study was conducted for nine sessions with a group of 13 subjects and two philosophy experts were invited to provide the instructor with necessary guidelines.

3. Results

To compare the speaking ability of the participants in both groups, gain scores were computed using their pre- and post-tests. As it is illustrated in Table 1, the gain scores are 11.70 and 22.17 showing that students in the experimental group outperformed those in control group.

Groups		pre-speaking	post-speaking	Gain score
Control	Mean	44.58	56.29	11.70
	N	17	17	17
	SD	7.73	7.09	2.08
Experimental	Mean	43.94	66.11	22.17
	N	17	17	17
	SD	7.88	10.13	4.034
Total	Mean	44.26	61.20	16.94
	N	34	34	34
	SD	7.69	10.04	6.18

To find out if the difference between the above gain scores was significant, ANOVA test was used. As Table 2 indicates, there was a significant difference between the two groups in terms of students' performance on speaking skill approving the research hypothesis.

Table 2. Results of ANOVA test of between- subjects effects

Source of Variance	SS	df	MS	F	P<
Between Groups	931.882	1	931.882	90.364	.001
Error within group	330.000	32	10.313		
Corrected total	1261.882	3			

To compare the components of speaking skill between the participants in both groups, gain scores were calculated based on their pre- and post-tests. Table 3 illustrates that students in experimental group received higher gain scores than those in control group in all components except one.

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Table 3. The gain scores on the components of speaking skill of the two groups

Components		Accuracy	Range	Fluency	Coherence	Content
Control	$\overline{X}$	1.24	10.78	12.35	12.05	10.85
	SD	(4.57)	(6.04)	(2.57)	(3.97)	(2.79)
Experimental	$\overline{X}$	3.78	19.60	23.52	21.76	27.60
	SD	(4.11)	(4.85)	(3.42)	(3.92)	(13.27)
Total	$\overline{X}$	2.51	15.19	17.94	16.91	19.23

To see if the differences among the above components were significant, MANOVA was applied. As table 4 demonstrates, there was a significant difference among all components of speaking skill: 'range, fluency, coherence, and content' except 'accuracy' between the two groups.

Source of Variance		SS	df	MS	F	p<
Between Groups	Accuracy	55.065	1	55.065	2.912	.098
	Range	661.765	1	661.765	22.008	.001
	Fluency	1061.765	1	1061.765	115.520	.001
	Coherence	800.735	1	800.735	51.247	.001
	Content	2382.527	1	1282.527	25.907	.001
Error within group	Accuracy	605.095	32	18.909		
	Range	962.237	32	30.070		
	Fluency	294.118	32	9.191		
	Coherence	500.000	32	15.625		
	Content	2942.917	32	91.966		
Corrected total	Accuracy	606.160	33			
	Range	1620.001	33			
	Fluency	1355.882	33			
	Coherence	1300.735	33			
	Content	5325.444	33			

4. Discussion

Considering the equal conditions in both groups, the only factor which led to the enhancement of speaking ability among the participants in EG was probably the type of philosophical questions (PQ). These questions had three unique features: 1) PQs demanded the students to refer to their own self, ego, depth of thoughts, inward doubts and reasoning rather than their knowledge, memories, texts, etc. 2) There was no one correct answer to these questions. 3) Words begot words; that is, such questions would be generated out of the responses provided. Given these characteristics, the participants in EG would be unconsciously stimulated to actively contribute in class discussions. Moreover, since PQs were not information-based and every participant in EG could share in such negotiations by referring to her/his depth of thoughts, communication in such a group, unlike that in CG, would automatically continued. In addition, language learners in EG were so much involved in thinking and reasoning processes that they would hardly notice the time passing. This indirect way of language acquisition, on the one hand, and the students' enthusiasm to pursue discussions, on the other hand, gradually resulted in the development of EG learners' speaking ability.

The reason why the result of 'accuracy' (which is related to language form), was not significantly different between the two groups was probably due to the fact that PBLT's main concern is meaning not form or structure. So in a conversation class in which the main focus is on meaning and exchanging of ideas, there could hardly be any room for language accuracy to flourish drastically. In contrast, the highest differences, in order, were among 'content, fluency, coherence, and range' between the two groups. This can be justified in this way that the evaluating criteria of 'content' in the speaking scale (used in this study) were 'recognition and interrelationship between several aspects of the subject, originality, definition, clarification', etc. These criteria, among others, are regarded and listed among 'the components of thinking and reasoning skills' (Cannon and Weinstein, 1982, as cited in Lipman, 1993, pp. 598-602) which develop as the result of philosophical community of inquiry (Lipman, 2003, pp. 167-171). Taking this coincidence into account, the good performance of EG students in 'content' can be attributed to philosophical dialogs. Moreover, the development of 'fluency' among the students in EG can be due to the

characteristics of PQs as well. As it was mentioned before, PQs stimulate students to talk further. Therefore, the more they talk, the more they become fluent. With regard to 'coherence', as Gregory (2008, p.73) states: "in philosophical discussions the negotiators usually use reasoning tools such as 'since----then', 'if -----then', 'I wonder----because', etc. to connect sequences of thought to finally reach a conclusion". These reasoning tools are named 'cohesive ties' in the speaking scale and are defined as connectors used to link utterances into a coherent discourse. Considering this link, the better performance of the students in EG in using transitional terms can be related to the features of PQs. Besides, the negotiators in philosophical dialogs attempt to reach a conclusion based on the premises, syllogisms, reasons, etc. To this end, they should have a coherent language which itself, as Lipman (1993) holds, originates from a coherent mind formed in a philosophical community of inquiry. Coherent language, by the same token, is listed as one of the criteria under 'coherence' in speaking scale. Accordingly, the improvement of coherence among the participants in EG can be explained. On the other hand, in philosophical dialogs, as it was pointed out earlier, questions generate questions. As such, each individual question requires students to talk about a particular subject and every single subject calls for its own related words. This, in turn, would give rise to a broader scope of vocabulary. This sequence may be accepted as a way through which the wider 'range' of vocabulary of the students in EG can be justified. Information-based questions, however, seem to have a big problem: if one does not know the answer due to her/his lack of knowledge or information, communication stops. But by raising philosophical questions which are not information-based, communication goes on and students talk more and use more words.

  This study did not consider L2 teaching as an end but a means to overall education of students through which they deepen their ideas, find justification, raise logical reasons for their opinions, deconstruct their assumed beliefs, prejudice, and concepts, and finally do not accept blindly whatever is fed into their mind by imitation and memorization.

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