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OUTDOOR PRACTICE OF SPEECH IN EFL LEARNING - A
PRAGMATIC APPROACH

Anat Shoseyov-Kupferman (a)*
*Corresponding author

(a) Kinneret Academic College, M.P. Emek HaYarden, Zemach 1513200, anatshol@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper explores the effect of a new teaching method, designed for junior high school students, aiming to reduce their speech anxiety. It focuses on one out of four categories included in the FLCAS questionnaire - test anxiety. The test anxiety category was examined in accordance to two confounding variables. This new teaching method takes students out of the traditional classroom to outdoor locations for the purpose of practicing their speech (OPOS). This is done by instructing peers on a topic of high value or relevance to their lives. The participants are 65 junior high school students from the Golan Heights in Israel, between the ages of 13-14. The 32 students of the intervention group have experienced the new teaching method and practiced talking outdoors. The 33 students of the control group learn in another school and are taught in their EFL classroom in the traditional way. To measure the category of test anxiety, the researcher has examined a fifteen-item scale that shows an internal consistency of .791 (Cronbach's alpha). Students' scores have been calculated based on their performance across a set of 100 words test. Findings indicate that among the intervention group, the mean grade at the third time point is significantly higher than the earlier two measurements, whereas among the control group, there is a return to the baseline grade. This is shown as an interaction effect between time points and groups. The findings illustrate that anxiety test reduced across the time points regardless the group affiliation.

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1. Introduction

The rapid technological changes in our lives increase people's exposure to a huge amount of information, so that they all are up-dated on any matter in a short time. This new kind of exposure to knowledge requires new skills, strategies and training of the individuals in order to become competent people in a knowledgeable society. Lifelong learning is a perception of learning, aiming to accommodate the new lifestyle and changes. Learning has now become a constant process in one's life. It does not end with the learner's graduation of school. According to Demirel (2009), lifelong learning is a continuous process in which individuals retain and develop knowledge and skills.

He further explains that lifelong learning mainly aims to improve the quality of life, enabling people maximally exhaust their potential. Moreover, the key term in lifelong learning as Demirel (2009) presents, is "information literacy" (p. 1714). This is the skill required for obtaining, using and conveying information which is the basis of lifelong learning. Furthermore, Collins (2009) mentions that lifelong learning does not transpire alone. Rather, it is a supportive process which is stimulating and empowering, namely - an active process which begins with our first breath until our last one. It is not just for knowledge sake but is also a fulfilling experience which applies to our entire life. Those who learn all their lives, must have the abilities to solve problems or make decisions as well as access information easily. A new kind of education is required and educationalists are supposed to provide learners with important skills of lifelong learning. Thus, students will learn how to control their own process of learning which never stops, and use a metacognitive process for addressing day to day changes and new updates. Conscious learning, problem-based learning and metacognitive processes have become essential. Consequently, teaching strategies are supposed to change and be more facilitative; learners are now required to assume more responsibilities for their learning process.

1.1. Lifelong learning as a new strategy of teaching

Collins (2009) divides mental activities which are involved in learning "into four categories: (a) social interaction; (b) processing verbal and other symbolic information; (c) direct experience; and (d) reflection" (p. 616). Collins (2009) explains that learning in life integrates various experiences from all categories and is always connected to social elements. Thus, learning processes at school are designed to focus on a variety of empowering activities. The curriculum should instruct teachers how to teach life skills and provide learners activities that link school and life. The curriculum has to be based on the enhancement of self-esteem and lifelong values. A social curriculum takes into consideration all types of learners and, therefore, no failures are being scored. In the process of reflection, each student evaluates his or her progress without experiencing a sense of failure. Teacher's role has been changed so that they engage in identifying talents and knowledge of other people and parents, encouraging them to be involved and contribute to school activities and provide rapid solutions. Parents are meant to play an active role and teachers, as developers of learning skills, have to involve parents in different events which also promote "school's reputation and satisfy society's needs" (Demirel, 2009, pp. 1711-1712). This approach has been discussed long before the term of lifelong learning had been conceived, namely - encouraging and developing learners' autonomy and responsibility for their learning process. Learners are expected to plan, find information and reflect upon the outcomes thereof.

1.2. The new teaching method

This study engages in the development of oral proficiencies and the reduction of EFL learners' speech anxiety. Hence, the writer has decided to implement a new teaching method and conduct an intervention program, in which students get the opportunity to practice English in outdoor locations. The idea stems from the understanding that, in order to practice speech, teachers have to offer their students real life situations. This kind of authentic practice is what EFL students need in order to compensate for the lack of pragmatic competence. Furthermore, the acquisition of any language is based on a speech community which provides pragmatic experiences, defined by Hornsby (2014) as "the way in which meaning is produced and understood in context" (p. 198), despite the fact that interactions are often disorganized. The idea to allow EFL students to practice their English in outdoor locations, is supported by the theory of Dewey (1938) who argues that a relation between actual experience and education is necessary. His basic assumption was that in order to accomplish education, "both for the individual learner and for society, (it) must be based upon experience - which is always the actual life-experience of some individuals" (Dewey, 1938, p. 89). However, Dewey (1938) clearly warned teachers not to set experiences with immediate joy, since they might engender hardness and insensitive attitudes which will not provide the learners with the ability to control future experiences. This does not mean that EFL in-class activities do not offer sufficient experiences. However, like Dewey who questioned the character of the experiences in traditional schools, this study of outdoor practice of EFL spoken language is derived from questioning the effectiveness of EFL in-class activities for the EFL learners' spoken competence.

The new teaching method constituted the experimental part of the study. Its aim was to enable students to acquire a topic with a social value/need and be involved in the process of learning for the purpose of presenting their topic to the public. The stages of the new teaching method, according to Shoseyov-Kupferman (2019) are as follow:

- (a) Teachers choose a topic of high value for the students' lives.
- (b) The teacher presents an essential question which is intended to encourage students to think "outside the box", to be critical and motivated to work in groups.
- (c) Students decide about the final product to be presented to an audience at the end of the process.
- (d) The aim and the assessment method should be clear to all participants in advance.
- (e) Students are divided into groups.
- (f) Students hold a brainstorming session about the way of presenting their speech in public.
- (g) Students extract information about the chosen topic from various resources.
- (h) Students summarize the material.
- (i) Students submit their drafts to their teacher for corrections.
- (j) When a well-written passage is ready, students start practicing their speech with their group members.
- (k) Students practice talking in-class, in front of their classmates.
- (l) Students guide their peers (or other participants) on the topic they have learned in an outdoor location, e.g. a specific trail in nature (English Trail) or a fair, etc.
- (m) Students reflect on their process of learning.

2. Problem Statement

Israeli EFL students start studying English in the 4th grade and continue until they graduate high school, at the age of 18. Yet, they still suffer from language anxiety in English. Being an Israeli English teacher and students' instructor, this observation calls for looking "at the social and cultural obstacles to learning and the inability of the school to adjust to the social situation" (Labov, 1972, para. 39). According to Shoseyov-Kupferman (2019), the empirical literature comprises a very high number of descriptive articles about speech anxiety. Moreover, it discusses recommendations for various in-class activities of speaking. However, there are no practical plans for addressing the need to provide EFL learners natural situations to practice their language. The researcher's aim is to overcome the school's inability to set new social situations in order to accommodate EFL learner's needs for practicing the language as well as examine sociolinguistic patterns of Israeli EFL students who suffer from speech anxiety.

3. Research Questions

The research addressed the following research question:

How does EFL students' outdoor speech practice affect their anxiety level and speech competence?

3.1. Research hypotheses

- The anxiety level in the intervention group will be reduced in a significant and linear manner, while the anxiety level of the control group will be reduced more moderately.
- The new teaching method will show a significant difference in EFL students' speech competence.

4. Purpose of the Study

EFL learners do not have a speech community in order to acquire pragmatic competence. Therefore, it is necessary to provide real life opportunities to EFL learners so that they can practice English in natural situations. The intervention program that is presented in this study, is based on a new teaching method which involves taking learners out of the traditional classroom to outdoor locations. There, they can practice their speech by instructing their peers on a topic of high value or a particular need in their life (Shoseyov-Kupferman, 2019). It is assumed that talking about a meaningful topic will motivate students to overcome their speech anxiety. Students in the experiment group guided their peers on a particular topic they have acquired and practiced in class. The practice of speech outside the classroom and the exposure to the public, were designed to increase students' awareness of all the language aspects, including the way their speech organization and clarity is evident. The learners' real-life practice of speech enables their speech to be in context.

This study aimed to:

- Examine the effect of a new teaching method on EFL junior high school student' speech competence (8th graders).

- Collect quantitative data about the speech anxiety levels of junior high school students, (8th graders), from two different schools, at the beginning of the year, throughout the year, and at the end of the school year.

5. Research Methods

This research is a case study of an action research approach, conducted according to the mixed method paradigm. The research design is based on seven main parts which are connected to the logical aspects of a triangulation research and are bound by its ethical requirements.

5.1. Research population

The research population comprised 65 Israeli junior high school girls at the age of 14, from two different schools in the north part of Israel: 32 students in the intervention group and 33 in the control group.

5.2. Research instruments

The quantitative part of this study is represented by the following research instrument: Both groups, the intervention and the control group, responded to the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) questionnaire. The 33 items of the questionnaire were divided into four categories of causes of foreign language classroom anxiety: communication apprehension (CA), test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation and general anxiety. The CA factor represented the "individual's level of fear or anxiety in either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey, 1977, p. 78). The present paper focuses on a fifteen-item scale, being only part of the FLCAS. This questionnaire was administered to all 65 research participants every 2-3 months as a repeated measure analysis in order to check the differences in students' speech anxiety throughout the year. Additionally, two confounding variables were examined according to an additional questionnaire, checking the differences and similarities between both groups. Moreover, all students were requested to pass a 100-word test (hereinafter, "students' grades"), which was based on the Israeli Revised English Curriculum (State of Israel Ministry of Education Pedagogical Secretariat Language Dept. English Inspectorate, 2013), Band II list, consisting of 3200 words Israeli students have to learn until the age of 15. The qualitative part of the study is based on recordings of 10 Israeli participants from the intervention group.

6. Findings

Modeling strategy. The model of the generalized estimating equations (GEE) by Hardin and Hilbe (2013) was used as a framework to estimate the intervention effect over time, which assess the increase or decrease in behavioural response and performance from one point to another. This statistical instrument allows to integrate the three repeated measures of each of the two dependent measurements. These repeatedly measured grades and test anxiety scores were analysed separately, that is, a model was built for each dependent measurement subject to group affiliation, intervention versus control, and two controlling confounders: self-confidence in English studies, and the last year grade in English. These two confounders controlled for possible effects on the marginal means. That is, at this point of time the researcher assessed

the means of grades and anxiety for the three-time points and the two groups beyond these confounding effects.

Descriptive statistics. Table 1 provides the overall descriptive statistics for the intervention group and the control group. These measurements were taken from the first time point before intervention. The self-confidence measure was slightly higher among students in the intervention group versus the control group (mean = 4.03 versus 3.85), however this difference was insignificant. Similarly, previous year grades were insignificantly higher (mean = 2.81 versus 2.64). There was also no difference in the first time point of test anxiety (mean = 3.26 versus 3.27). In other words, the two groups started with similar levels of anxiety to exams. In contrast, grades were higher among students of the intervention groups at the beginning of the experiment ($t=-3.46$, $p<.01$). These differences required a more cautious analysis in the comparison over time.

Model results. The GEE results are presented in Table 2. Each column in Table 2 is assigned to a different dependent measurement, e.g., students' grades in the 100-word test and test anxiety scores. In each model the researcher estimated time, group and interaction effects as well as the confounding effect of self-confidence and last year grades. The marginal means were calculated accordingly, in the following rows marked by small Latin letters for ranking, based on a pairwise comparison corrected by the Bonferroni's criterion, which takes the number of pairs into account, where "a" was set for the lowest mean and so on. Time and group differences were found in students' grades (Wald=81.48, $p<.001$; Wald=13.54, $p<.001$; respectively). The post-hoc ranking resulted in higher grades at the third time point and lower at the second. The intervention group received higher grades overall. The interaction effect (Wald=7.77, $p<.05$) allows to determine the time difference divided by groups. More specifically, there was a significant increase in students' grades among the intervention group (marginal means at time 3 was greater than the marginal means at earlier time points). Conversely, for the control group, these early and late grades were similar ("b"), although higher than the middle point marginal means ("a"). This interaction effect is illustrated in Figure 01. It shows that beyond the systematic difference between the control and the intervention groups, there was a difference in the changing pattern as described earlier.

Table 01. Descriptive statistics of research measurements, before starting the new teaching method

	Control Group N=33	Intervention Group N=32	df	t-value
	Mean (S.D.)	Mean (S.D)		
Students' self-efficacy	3.85 (1.15)	4.03 (0.86)	63	-0.72
Students' final grades in English in the previous school year	2.64 (0.60)	2.81 (0.40)	63	-1.39
Test anxiety	3.27 (0.61)	3.26 (0.65)	60	0.08
English Word Grade	33.65 (27.38)	55.03 (20.86)	60	-3.46**

** $p<.01$.

Table 02. Generalized Estimating Equations Results for Group and Time subject to Confounding Controls

	Students' Grade	Test anxiety
Model Results		
Group	Wald=13.39***	Wald=0.17
Time	Wald=80.49***	Wald=9.67**
Self-Efficacy	5.50* (2.24)	-0.18** (0.05)
Last year grade in English	11.49** (4.39)	-0.09 (0.13)
Marginal Means		
Control group	32.56 ^a (4.19)	2.60 (0.09)
Intervention group	53.33 ^b (3.63)	2.55 (0.084)
Time 1	44.32 ^b (2.79)	2.72 ^b (0.07)
Time 2	33.61 ^a (2.99)	2.53 ^{ab} (0.08)
Time 3	50.90 ^c (2.90)	2.48 ^a (0.08)
Group X Time Interaction		
	Wald=7.47*	Wald=1.47
Marginal Means		
Cont. Time 1	34.44 ^b (4.52)	2.69 (0.09)
Cont. Time 2	26.00 ^a (4.37)	2.55 (0.10)
Cont. Time 3	38.07 ^b (4.11)	2.55 (0.09)
Inter. Time 1	54.21 ^b (3.51)	2.75 (0.12)
Inter. Time 2	41.38 ^a (4.13)	2.51 (0.12)
Inter. Time 3	63.34 ^c (4.25)	2.40 (0.12)

*** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05; Latin letters for marginal mean ranking, (a) the lowest; Standard errors in parentheses

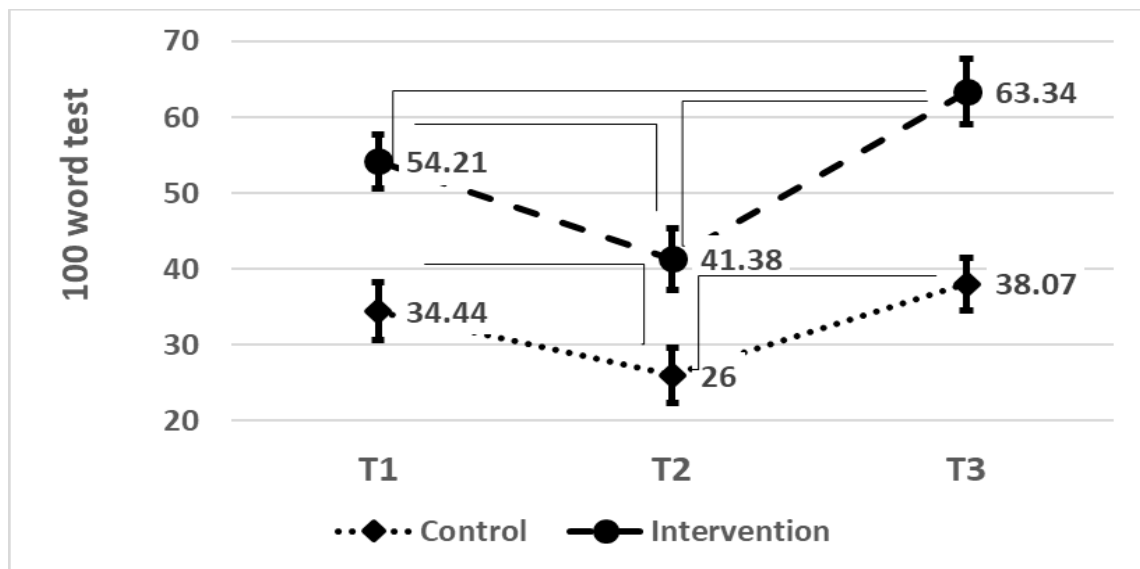


Figure 01. Interaction between time and group on English word grade

7. Conclusion

This paper aims to present preliminary findings related to the category of test anxiety which is one of the four measurements obtained from the FLCAS questionnaire (communication apprehension (CA), test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation and general anxiety). The test anxiety category was examined in

accordance with two confounding variables (self-confidence and last year grades), and the 100-word test. The confounding variables and the 100-word test were checked in order to examine external differences between the groups, in addition to the effect of the new teaching method on students' speech anxiety level. Based on the results, it can be argued that the intervention group made more progress in grades with respect to the baseline grades in comparison to the control group, although the starting levels differed. For test anxiety. The finding showed that this anxiety reduced over time regardless the group affiliation (Wald=9.67, $p<.01$). The level of the later anxiety was lower in comparison to the earlier anxiety measurement ("a" versus "b"). However, the second measurement did not differ from the early and the later as well ("ab"). Note that self-confidence was found as positively associated with grades and negatively associated with anxiety ($b=5.13$, $p<.05$; $b=-0.18$, $p<.01$; respectively). In other words, students with higher confidence in English studies, received higher grades and demonstrated lower anxiety. The other confounder, last year grades, had no effect on the grades and anxiety levels.

At this point of time, the results partially corroborate the research hypotheses. Anxiety reduced over time linearly, but the findings did not indicate that this reduction was steeper among students in the intervention group. On the other hand, their control group counterparts partially corroborated hypothesis 1. However, students' grades at the last time point were better in comparison to the earlier grades. Nevertheless, only students from the intervention group attained higher grades, thus partially corroborating hypothesis 2, which may get further support by the analysis of the findings in the qualitative part.

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