Students' opinion about communicative activities in speaking class: An investigation in grade 10 students from Toan Thang High School in Vietnam

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Abstract

Communicative activities is no doubt an essential part in teaching and learning English as they have the ability to draw students' participation, help students improve their speaking skills and train them for real-life situations. As in [18] proved that communicative activities not only upgraded significantly speaking abilities of students at a secondary school in Thailand but also improve their attitudes toward teaching speaking. However, whether they have been applied effectively in real teaching practice at high schools and whether the application is welcomed by students? Basing on that spirit, a study was conducted to investigate students' opinion about the use of oral communicative activities in grade 10 from Toan Thang High School in Vietnam. The result showed that of all the oral communicative activities, discussion, relaying instruction and problem solving were most often used in the speaking class of grade 10 students. In the application process, teachers follow most of the necessary steps of a speaking lesson. Nevertheless, they still paid too much attention to students' error meanwhile which should be of less consideration than students' fluency and speaking opportunity. Moreover, in application of those communicative activities, teachers tended to be dependent on the textbook which make those activities less communicative than they should be. Additionally, the main difficulties that most of the students encounter in practicing communicative activities are their lack of vocabulary and lack of motivation to speak before their classmates.

Keywords

I. Introduction

In the world of globalization and economic development today, together with the raising need of speaking English language, the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method is also getting familiar and becoming popular among English language educational system as it functions at cultivating communication competence for students. In his survey of developments in fifteen Asian countries, it is proved that "CLT has become a dominant model since the 1980s in this part of the world" as in [12]. And one of the major developments of CLT was the emergence of communicative language teaching in language class.

Communicative activity is one of the important parts in communicative language teaching which can help second language learners develop their communicative competence. As in [12], the most common understandings of the communicative approach is that it provides teachers communicative activities to their repertoire of teaching skills and gives learners the opportunity to practice language skills in class. As being proven by many teaching theorists, speaking skill can be developed through communicative activities which include an information gap, a jigsaw puzzle, games, problem-solving, and role-playing. In addition, reference [5] supports this idea that the activities that can assist better speaking skills are free discussion and role- playing. Also, reference [2] shows that the language activities are important factors in teaching language for communication. A research in reference [18] proves that communicative activities not only upgraded significantly speaking abilities of 11 grades students at a secondary school in Thailand but also improved their attitudes toward teaching speaking. Activities help create interaction in the language classroom. Additionally, communicative activities can motivate the learners and establish good relationship between the teacher and the students as well as among the students thereby encouraging a supportive environment for language learning and teaching, as in [18].

Together with that CLT trend, in an attempt to improve the quality of teaching and learning English in Vietnam, in 2006 the Ministry of Education and Training has officially institutionalized a new English curriculum with methodological innovations. The new documented curriculum states that "communicative skills are the goal of teaching English at secondary schools while formal knowledge of the language serves as the means to the end", as in [14]. According to the author, the text book is the adoption of the "two currently popular teaching approaches, i.e. the learner-centered approach and the communicative approach. By applying the two approaches, teachers will organize classroom activities and provide guidance so that learners participate actively in the learning process through individual, pair and group work. Etc. Learners are responsible for their learning. They should participate in communicative activities actively, creatively and cooperatively.

As other High Schools in Vietnam, in Toan Thang High School, the teaching and learning of English is following the curriculum from Ministry of Education and Training and the textbook English 10. The outcome of those efforts, however, is still limited as a fact that after at least 5 years of learning English, most students of grade 10 in particular and high school students in general still cannot communicate with others in English.

Basing on that spirit, a survey was conducted to address the following questions:

1. What types of communicative activities are often used in speaking class?
2. What are students' opinions about those communicative activities in speaking class?
3. What difficulties do students have in communicative activities?

II. Literature Review on Oral Communicative Activities

There are many books about communicative activities and their classification is distinguished according to each author´s point of view. As in [11], they are classified into two main categories, which he calls "functional communication activities" and "social interaction activities". As in [3] the communicative activities with oral and written focuses are explored. So he distinguishes them into "oral communicative activities" and "written communicative activities". The categorization of Harmer seems clearer to the purpose of this thesis when studying the types of communicative activities. However, within the framework of this article, we will look at those types of activities with largely oral focus (although we should not forget the points about skill integration). Those activities are all designed to provoke spoken communication between students and/ or between teacher and students. In this section we will look at those types of oral activities which are divided into 7 categories as: Communication games, relaying instructions, reaching a consensus, discussion, problem solving, talking about yourself, simulation and role-play. They are all based on the principle of information gap.

Oral communicative activities, known as discussion, communication games, relaying instructions, reaching a consensus, problem solving, talking about yourself and simulation and role play, are defined as any activities that encourage and require learners to speak with and listen to other learners, as well as with other people in the program and community, as in [15]. Communicative activities are designed to provide language learning with some main purposes as "Whole- task practice, improve motivation, allow natural learning and create context for learning", as in [11]. Those activities were supposed to bring back such benefits for students as creating more closure to target language, forming more authentic opportunities to use the language, creating fun and interesting for learners and providing opportunities to use authentic materials.

In order to fulfill the purposes of communicative activities and maximize their benefit in speaking class, teachers should follow five principles of implementing them as in [13].

Principle one: Know what you are doing

The need and purpose constitute the nature of communication. People talk when they need to convey meanings. For this reason, the focus of every lesson should be the creating of learning environments in which student may actually perform in the target language, as it is suggested in [13] that: "every lesson should end with the learner being able to see clearly that he/she can do something which he/she could not do at the beginning, and the "something" is communicatively useful". Thus, it is important to create learning situations which are likely to happen in the real life and "when organizing communicative activities we will try to ensure that these activities share the characteristics of communication", as in [4].

Principle two: The whole is more than sum of the parts

Reference [10] compares learning language to swimming which "involves not only separate practices of individual movement- part skill, but also actual attempt to swim a short distances- whole task practice". Therefore, the communicative activities should be designed and implemented in a way that can provide students with practice in total skills in which the students have opportunity to deal with various use of language rather than just a number of grammatical structures. Furthermore, there is no corresponding equivalence between language forms and communicative

functions. So, "Whole task practice" principle helps learners not only functionally but also socially communicates.

Principle three: the processes are as important as the forms

The success of a communicative activity depends much on the process required from the student doing it. According to [13], fulfilling a communicative activity involve the students in three processes which are: filling in the gap between the speaker and the listener, making a choice from his repertoire of language and evaluating feedback from what he has done.

In real life, communication takes places between two or more people. It is the bridge of the information gap. Within classroom term, an information gap activity means that one student or the teacher must be in a position to tell another something that the other does not know. However, information gap may not be considered as communicative tools if no real information is exchanged. Reference [13] pointed out that the concept of information gap seems to be the most fundamental in the whole area of language teaching. Any exercise or procedure which claims to engage students in communication can be considered in the light of it. And one of the main jobs for teacher is setting up information gap situations and motivating students to bridge them in suitable ways. Another crucial feature of communication is that the participants have choice both on what to say and how to say in certain situations under the pressure of time. To the speaker, this means that in such activities as: drills, repletion, substitution or guide exercises, where the speaker and the listener are controlled by the teacher, the students will fail to practice this aspect of communication. To the listener, the choice, which is open for the speaker means that in such activities as: drills, repletion, substitution or guided exercises where the speaker and the listener are controlled by the teacher, the student will fail to practice this aspect of communication. The third process involves in communication is feedback which tells the students whether his utterance is understood as he intended or not, and what criteria are necessary during a particular procedure. The feedback may focus on the language form or the meaning and the nature of activities.

Principle four: to learn it, do it

In language learning, only when the students are required to produce and use the language can their language repertoire be developed. In other words, students can only learn to communicate by communicating and develop skills by using skills. So, designing and organizing classroom activities for students to communicate and develop skills is one of the most crucial jobs for teacher in teaching communicative language.

Principle five: Mistakes are not always mistakes

While traditional method concentrates on formal accuracy, communicative approach focuses on the success in communication. Traditional method avoids making mistakes by tightly controlling students□ language but communicative approach encourages communication even at the expense of making mistakes.

This principle shares the same idea with other researchers. As in [17] the learners' attention in doing communicative activities principally focused on meaning rather than form. This part of Nunan's definition refers to the requirement of a non-linguistic purpose of the task or the focus on an effective communication. However, this does not mean that form is of little importance in language learning. This interpretation derives from the fact

that students☐ performance should be evaluated according to communicative effectiveness when they communicate in the classroom as in [10] that it requires "the flexibility to treat different things as mistakes at different stage in the learning process", as in [6]. Clearly, an utterance can be considered successful if it fulfills its communicative purpose even though it is formally incorrect. Likewise, an utterance may be "formally correct but fail to convey the intended meaning", as in [10].

It is also proved in reference [9] that "language is not learned by the gradual accumulation of one item after another" and "errors are a natural and valuable part of the language learning process." They also added that students will not get enough opportunity to develop communication ability if the second language program focuses only on accuracy and form. But they will benefit from "opportunities for practice in contexts where the emphasis is on understanding and expressing meaning". Thus, it may be more appropriate to teach forms through the uses or to attach the use to the forms or to integrate them for communicative purpose.

Thus, it may be more appropriate to teach forms through the uses or to attach the use to the forms or to integrate them for communicative purpose. In addition, some techniques as setting out rules like "No silence", "No dictionary", "Ask follow up questions", "Mistakes are okay" and "Give long answers" are also good suggestions for teachers encourage students to speak more.

Besides that, as an speaking activity in language speaking class, during the organization of those communicative activities, teachers should also take in to consideration the main purpose of a speaking activities as hearing and practicing with samples of natural speeches of native speakers, as in [1] and five main characteristics of a successful speaking activities including: learners talk a lot, participation is equal, motivation is high, language is appropriate and teacher monitoring and modeling.

III. Methodology

According to the purpose of this research which is investigating the fact of using communicative activities among the majority of students and teachers in grade 10 and then finding out their opinions. This research will be conducted by mixed method. And questionnaire and observation will be instruments to collect data.

The questionnaires for students consisted of 6 items with the following contents:

Item 1, 2 aim at cross checking the application of communicative activities in speaking class.

Item 3 probes students' opinion about the activities to be used.

Item 4 finds out the reason why students find those activities uninteresting.

Item 5 examines the difficulties that students have in participating in those activities. Item 6 explores suggestions from students.

Besides that non-participant observation will be used as a supplementary tool for consolidating the results from questionnaires.

The observation sheet of the researcher consisted of two main items which are:

Item I explores the teacher's teaching through the organization of the communicative activities.

Item II discovers the students' participation in the lesson in general, in communicative activities in particular.

IV. Participants

According to reference [8], the sample size to be chosen in this study is 169 randomly chosen out of 300 students. Hence, participants of this study are 5 teachers and 169 out of 300 students of grade 10 at Toan Thang high school who are teaching and learning English following the English curriculum with methodological officially institutionalized by the MOT.

N	S	N	S	N	S
10	10	220	140	1200	291
15	14	230	144	1300	297
20	19	240	148	1400	302
25	24	250	152	1500	306
30	28	260	155	1600	310
35	32	270	159	1700	313
40	36	280	162	1800	317
45	40	290	165	1900	320
50	44	300	169	2000	322
55	48	320	175	2200	327

Table 1 : Table for determining sample size from a given population

V. Findings And Discussions

RQ1:What types of Communicative activities are often used in speaking class?

Table 2 : How often are communicative activities used?

Activities	Mean scores
1. Discussion	3.5
2. Communication game	2.2
3. Relaying instructions	3.7
4. Reaching consensus	2.8
5. Problem solving	3.8
6. Talking about yourself	2.7
7. Simulation and role play	2.3

In this question, seven main oral types of communicative activities referred to in the literature review will be evaluated with a certain point ranging from 1 to 5 corresponding to the level of frequency they are used in the speaking class. The result of the questionnaires, then, was measured by mean value in comparison

with the standard average value of 3.0. And the result turned out that of the seven main types of oral communicative activities referred in this thesis, discussion, relaying instruction and problem solving are most often used in English speaking class with the mean scores of 3.5, 3.7 and 3.8 respectively, above the average one. Meanwhile communication game, reaching consensus and simulation and role play ranks the bottom with below average mean scores.
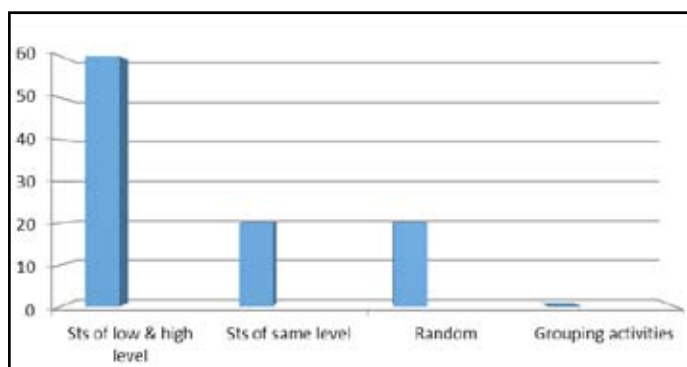

Fig.1 : Grouping method used by teachers

The ways that teachers put their students into group in communicative activities are reflected in the figure 4. Accordingly, 60% of teachers choose to group students of high studying level with those whose English proficiency is low. 20% of them group students with same level together in group or pair work. The same amount of teachers group their students randomly. And none of them use grouping activities such as students of the same favorite sport, color or of the same birth day, etc. Meanwhile, grouping activities are currently considered as one of the most useful ways to put students in effective team. Moreover, it is shown in [9] that learners produce fewer mistakes in their speech when interacting with students of similar level than when speaking with those of more advanced level. However, researchers also found out that if students of similar proficiency communicate with each other in a group, they will not provide each other with information that could help them to correct their errors. Therefore choosing students randomly or using grouping activities should be applied frequently in order to create more chance for learners to get access and learn more from students of variety level. Felder & Brent (2001), as in [19] also suggest forming teams with members who are diverse in ability level. So, it is obvious from the result that the way teachers put students into group are not as diverse as they should be.
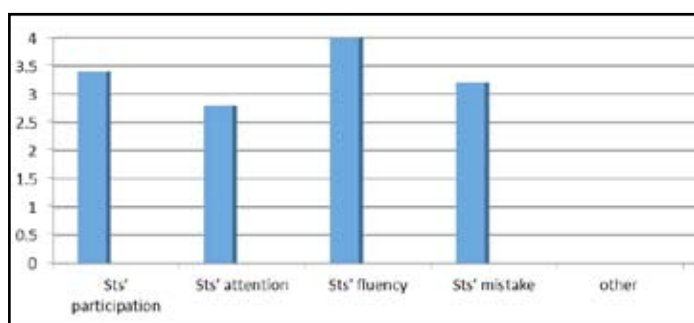

Fig.2 : Teachers' attention level in the class

The teachers' attention to each 5 categories was assessed in a scale from 1- 5 according to the increasing level of frequency. And then, the final result showed is calculated into mean value. As being illustrated in the graph, most of teachers tend to pay much attention

to students' attention in the class with mean value of frequency of 4 over maximum level 5. The aspect which receives second highest level of attention from teachers is students' participation with mean value of 3.4. And students' mistake also receives comparative high level of attention with mean value of 3.2. Meanwhile students' fluency, in comparison with accuracy, should be the aspect of more consideration as it is the specific characteristic which clarifies between teaching spoken language and written language.
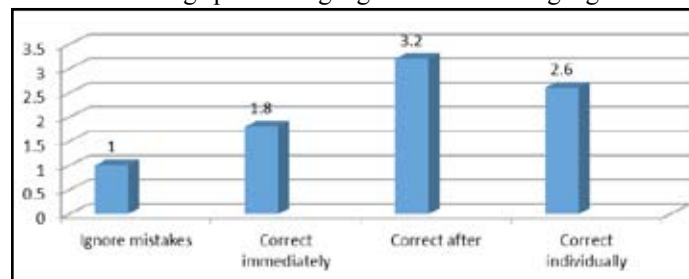

Fig.3 : Errors correction method of teachers

The table above illustrates the way teacher feedback to their learners errors. Each column in the table represents the level of frequency that the error correction method is used in speaking class. As far as the result, correcting mistake after the communicative activities finish is used most frequently by teachers with the level of frequency of 3,2 over maximum value of 5. Correcting mistake for individual students is the method that has second highest level of frequency in the graph. However, with the mean value of 2,8 over 5 point, this techniques of correcting error seems to be not often used in this context. Correcting errors immediately, which is one of the most popular techniques used in traditional teaching method as grammar- translation method, is not the often choice of the teachers in Toan Thang High School. And ignoring learners' mistake is the least often used by teachers here as the mean value of frequency for this option is only 1- the minimum value which equivalents to the option of "never". So, it is implied from the graph that correcting error is still of great concern in teaching speaking in this high school.

RQ 2. What are students' opinions about those communicative activities in speaking class?

Table 3 : Students' assessment on the interesting level of communicative activities

Activities	Mean scores	
	Level of use	Level of interest
1. Discussion	3.5	2.25
2. Communication game	2.2	2.27
3. Relaying instructions	3.7	2.1
4. Reaching consensus	2.8	1.95
5. Problem solving	3.8	2.1
6. Talking about yourself	2.7	2.17
7. Simulation and role play	2.3	2.32

The above graph implies students' opinion on the interesting level of the referred communicative activities. The assessment is also calculated in mean value with the range of value from 1 to 3 equivalent to the increasing level of interesting. According to the findings, in students opinion, the most interesting communicative activity is simulation and role play with the highest value of 2.32 out of 3. The next highly evaluated ones are communication game and discussion with the value of 2.27 and

2.25 respectively. Relaying instruction and problem solving are assessed at average level of 2.1. And the activity which is evaluated the least is reaching consensus with only 1.95. Meanwhile, as being illustrated in figure 1, discussion, relaying instruction and problem solving are the most popular activities used by teachers. Therefore, there is a little difference between students' favorite activities and teachers' choice.

RQ3. What difficulties do students have in communicative activities?

Table 4 : Difficulties in practicing communicative activities

Difficulties	Percentage
Students do not understand activity	50%
Students prefer other skills	23%
Students lack of vocab	70%
Students lack of idea	58%
Students lack of motivation	60%
Students are overlapped by their partner	27%
Other sts do not participate	19%
Sts avoid making mistake	70%
Sts feel ashamed	40%

It is clear from the graph that the lack of vocabulary and their afraid of making error are the biggest challenges that affect to students' participation in speaking class. 70% of the students refer to these two difficulties when they practice speaking. Besides, 60% of the participated students meet difficulty with motivation to take part in those communicative activities. And 58% of them feel their difficulties come from the lack of idea to continue the activities. Half of the students find it difficult to join in communicative activities as they do not understand clearly the activities. In addition, such factors as students' reservation in speaking before their friends, their partner's participation or their preferred skill seem not to affect too much to their practice in communicative activities.

VI. Conclusion

In general, teachers and students followed strictly all the procedures in applying a communicative activity in a speaking class. However, there still remained some main points that may affect to the success of the activities. Firstly, the ways teachers put their students in group work and team work were not diverse and flexible enough to create chances for students to interact with partners of different levels. Secondly, teachers tended to pay too much attention to correcting students' errors while the most important aspect in communicative activities is students' fluency and their chance to speak in the activity. And thirdly, although the activities in the textbook are in the form of communicative ones, they are, in fact, not really communicative. Take task 1 in each speaking lesson of the textbook as an example, which is often called "role play" activity, just requires student to replace different words or phrases in the unchanged situation. It is clear that this activity lack of information gap which is one of the factors raising interest for students. And teachers, however, depend too much on the textbook. In the effort of carrying out various methods of research, the study explored the difficulties in the application of communicative for grade 10th students' English speaking classes at the school. They were initiated from both subjective and objective factors. The

subjective ones related to students' interest in the speaking skill in general and in speaking topics in particular, the teachers' activities and their control over the class and the students' participations in the activities. The crowded class lead to the challenges for teachers in controlling class is the objective one. With these findings, the researcher hoped that they could help the teachers and students at the school improve their quality of teaching and learning English, especially speaking skill.

VII. Suggested Solutions

The success of a speaking lesson in general and a communicative activity in particular depended much on the teachers. Without the teacher's careful preparation, the lesson might not achieve success. For this reason, this part offers some useful implications on applying communicative activities for grade 10th classes at the school based on the research findings and the researcher's experience on trial teaching. First of all, the teachers need to design new communicative activities from tasks in textbook. The reason is that tasks in textbook were not real communicative activities. For example, the task requests the students to work in pairs and talk about some information but they all were in textbook. Both students could see them so they did not need to ask and answer or talk each other about the information. A communicative activity provides the students an environment to exchange something they do not know with their friends. Therefore, to help students practice with real communicative situations the teachers should change some activities appropriately into ones having certain features of a real communicative activity. However, the re-designing should follow the goals of the lessons. If not, the lessons were also not successful.

Secondly, controlling over the class should be well-done because students might be strange with some activities and their habit to speak in Vietnamese is popular, which hinder the instruction giving process of the teacher. For this reason, the teachers need to be well-controlled. If not, the students might be not clear the instructions, and, hence, might not get involved in the activities. Those affected the lesson a lot. Additionally, choosing a type of class arrangement was very important. Depending on the number of students in each class, the setting of the class and the goal of the activity, the teachers should consider a suitable type of class arrangement. Some activities might be appropriate with pair work while some might be done well with group work. Some needed students' movement for better effects but some did not. The teachers had to think of and choose the best apposite. To carry out a successful communicative activity was quite difficult for the teacher because of many affected factors. The way to make this work be easy to do was mentioned in the theory of communicative activities.

Besides, the teachers could spend more time for the students' talking by reducing time used in other stages like pre-teaching vocabulary. Because 45-minute periods are fixed, the teachers could not teach the lessons in 2 or more periods for example. However, the teachers might save time by teaching vocabulary more quickly then gave students handouts instead of spending time for them to copy down. In addition to that, integrated skills lesson may be a good suggestion to overcome the difficulties that students referred in the survey. By that way, teachers can link the vocabulary lesson and reading lesson with speaking lesson. So that, the vocabularies that students picked up from reading class and vocab class can be useful for them in the practicing of communicative activities. Moreover, giving instructions should

be clear and easy to follow. The teachers should consider the language used in instructions so that it was short and clear; students could be clear immediately. If the language used is too long and complicated, students may not comprehend and the teachers have to spend time to explain in Vietnamese.

Additionally, to improve students' talking, speaking topics should be of thorough consideration. For what topics the students are not familiar and might lack of vocabulary to talk, the teacher could use topics outside as they have done and provide students with vocabulary related to the topics to help students speak more in English. Besides, the teachers might change tasks in textbook into activities requiring more interactions.

Communicative activities should be used, which helps students to be familiar from the start, even time was only enough for one activity. Gradually, they are accustomed to the activities and willing to join. The setting of the class prevented students from taking part in some activities; therefore, suitable kinds of class arrangement should be used to overcome this difficulty.

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