Implementing Information-Gap Tasks on Libyan EFL Learners' Speaking Ability

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to see whether implementing information gap tasks in EFL English classrooms affect students' speaking abilities. To have homogeneous subjects, a standardized test was given to 30 high school students studying English at Sebha schools. 12 students whose grades were between one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected and then were divided randomly into two equal groups. One of the groups served as the experimental and the other as the control group. Then, as a pretest, a standardized speaking test, which was in the form of an oral interview, was administered to both groups to determine their level of speaking. Afterwards, a set of communicative tasks based on the information-gap principle adopted from Levy and Murgatroyd (2009) and incorporated into seventeen lesson plans. The tasks were presented to the experimental group as treatment within eight sessions and four sessions for evaluation and testing during the last twenty and twenty five minutes of the class time. In the end, the standard speaking test was administered to both groups as a post test and the results were analyzed using t-test. The results revealed that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the oral interview exam. This study calls for incorporation of information-gap tasks in Libyan EFL classes as an integral part of the syllabus in many high schools.

Keywords: *CLT, Information Gap Tasks, Speaking, Libyan EFL Classroom*

1. Introduction

Language is for communication. It means that people normally use it to exchange their ideas, news and information. They may also use it to express their attitudes and feelings towards others. Therefore in teaching and learning a new or a foreign language, this very important point i.e. communication should be taken into account. Speaking is one of the important and essential skills that must be practiced to communicate orally.

According to Stevick (as cited in Fauziati, 2002, p. 126) speaking refers to the gap between linguistic expertise and teaching methodology. Linguistic expertise concerns language structure and language content. Teaching speaking is not like listening, reading, and writing. Speaking needs practice as much as possible. It is not writing or reading but it must be practiced directly in full expression.

The Information Gap is a kind of structured output activity. These are like completing a task by obtaining missing information, conveying telephone messages, and expressing an opinion. It sets up practicing on specific items of language. It is more like drills than real communication.

According to Ur (1996), the activities and tasks based on the information-gap principle make students participate actively in the process of learning. This will, in turn, result in increasing students' motivation to learn English much more enthusiastically.

1.1 Statement of the problem

Libyan EFL learners experience difficulties in speaking English in high schools. The problem seems that it has arisen from different learning directions. For example, many students are pushed towards memorizing a dialog or a piece of conversation in order to speak. Meanwhile, such a matter may make the students lack motivation. Hence, the problem indicates that these learners need to have effective activities which help them produce the language. Therefore, information-gap activities may help these students to communicate with their peers in the classroom. They can also increase their

motivation towards speaking and using the language.

1.2 Research questions

Do implementing information-gap tasks in Libyan English classrooms affect the students' abilities to speak English? In order to answer this question, another question regarding the effect of implementing information-gap tasks in Libyan English classrooms was developed.

To what extent do implementing information-gap tasks in Libyan English classrooms affect the students' speaking skill?

1.3 Objectives of the study

The study attempts to investigate the impact of information-gap activities on improving high school students' speaking ability. It also focuses on the students' motivation when implementing these activities.

1.4 Hypotheses of the study

It is hypothesized that:

1. Implementing information-gap activities can help high school students improve their speaking skill.

2. Information-gap activities can make the students motivated towards speaking and collaborative with each other.

2. Literature Review

Littlewood (1983, p.1) states, "One of the most characteristic features of communicative language teaching is that it pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language." Richards and Rodgers (2000) maintain that for some, communicative language teaching means little more than an integration of grammatical and functional teaching. For others, it means using procedures where learners work in pairs or groups employing available language resources in problem solving tasks.

Howatt (1984) distinguishes between a strong and a weak version of communicative language teaching: There is, in a sense, a strong version of the communicative approach and a weak version. The weak version which has become more or less standard practice in the last ten years stresses the importance of providing learners with opportunities to use their English for communicative purposes and, characteristically, attempts to integrate such activities into a wider program of language teaching. The strong version of communicative teaching, on the other hand, advances the claim that language is acquired through communication, so that it is not merely a question of activating an existing but inert knowledge of the language, but of simulating the development of the language system itself. If the former could be described as learning to use English, the latter entails using English to learn it.

According to Yule (1985), "CLT is characterized by lessons organized around concepts such as 'asking for things' in different social contexts, rather than 'the form of the past tense' in different sentences" (p.154). Johnson and Morrow (1981, p.56) define CLT "as second language teaching in which communicative competence is the aim of the course."

Chastain (1988) claims that "a communication strategy is the approach speakers take to communicate with someone" (p. 32). Littlewood states that "when language learners are engaged in communication, they often have communicative intentions which they find difficulty in expressing, because of gaps in their linguistic repertoire" (1984, p. 43).

Allen (1983) proposes various communication experiences for teaching vocabulary to students of different levels. On the presentation of some examples of communicative activities Chastain (1988) states that "communication activities may be of several different types, but all share certain similar features, and the teacher should structure them in specific ways to ensure that the students will achieve the objectives of the activity" (p. 361), then she goes on to present some examples of communicative activities. These mostly include: affective activities, role-play, open-ended scenario, simulation, interview, survey, dramatization television programs, communication games, discussion and debates; content activities, problem solving, and information gap.

Information gap amongst various activities in communicative approach "information gap" enjoys a great deal of popularity for those who try to practice CLT procedures in their classrooms. It is a type of activity which requires students to use the language to exchange some information and get their meaning across. It takes the students' attention away from the form and directs it towards meaning. In other words, it makes students to accomplish a task through using the language while concentrating on meaning rather than structure of the language. Many scholars have defined information gap, the following section includes some definitions presented by some of them.

Swan (1985, p. 94) views information gap as "a basic concept in contemporary methodology" then he goes on to elaborate more on information gap: When one student talks to another, we feel that it is important that new information should be transmitted across the 'gap' between them. To do this end, ingenious exercises are devised in which half the class are provided with data to which the other half do not have access; those who lack the information then have to obtain it by using language in an appropriate way.

According to Ur (1996) information gap is "a particularly interesting type of task which is based on the need to understand or transmit information finding out what is in a partner's picture, for example" (p. 54).

Larsen-Freeman (2000) claims that; an information gap exists when one person in an exchange knows something that the other person doesn't. If we both know today is Tuesday and I ask you, 'What day is today' and you answer, Tuesday, our exchange isn't really communicative.

This section argues the identified gaps in the body of literature concerning information gap in speaking ability on EFL. Many of the oral-exchange activities preceding the communicative era were mechanical in nature and have little communicative value because there is no real information being exchanged.

On the other hand, information gap is a questioning technique in which learners respond to a question whose answer is unknown to the questioner in contrast with 'display questions' that both the sender and the receiver know the information. The question is not a real question, and the answer is not a real answer. So, information gaps in this way will be mechanical and artificial.

According to the adherents of Communicative Language Teaching effective communication is the ultimate goal of language learning, Littlewood (1983). Therefore the ultimate goal of language teaching should be to teach the language based on the communicative principles. It means that some communicative activities should be carried out in English classrooms in order for the students to develop their communicative competence, and to make them able to communicate through using the language. This is what has been ignored to a great extent in Libyan English classrooms. That is, in these classes the focus is mostly on teaching and learning grammar rules and a certain number of vocabulary, and there is not much attention towards communicative aspects of language. Perhaps that is why our high school students are not able to speak communicatively in English despite their considerable knowledge of grammar rules and vocabulary. There are various types of activities and tasks assigned to communicative language teaching which make students communicate with one another in order to exchange their ideas or some information. Some of these tasks are based on the information-gap principle.

3. Methodology

3.1 Design of the study, population and sampling

In order to see the effect of information gap on speaking ability of EFL learner's quasi experimental method design was adopted. As shown in table 1, two groups of students, experimental group (receiving treatment) and control group (without treatment) whose size estimated based on Cohn Table have been selected quite randomly. In the next stage collected data of students' speaking ability using standardized oral test were analyzed. To put research hypotheses to test covariance analysis and t-test for independent groups were done through inferential statistics.

Table 1: Profile of participants

Number	Age	Context of Study	Level
6	16-20	Othman Ben Affan High School in Sebha	3rd year
6	16-20	Fazzan High School in Sebha	3rd year

3.2 Instruments and data collection

To collect some data, the researcher made use of Pair-work and Group-work Book published by Cambridge University Press (Levy, M., & Murqatroyd, 2009), at both pre-test and post-test stages for both experimental and control groups. The above test with different components including vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, fluency and comprehension comprised of four points goes to. It is notable that all above tests have been done orally (through oral interview) for both experimental and control groups for about 10 to 15 minutes.

3.3 Procedure

The teacher prepares a master handout based on information, language structures, and vocabulary the students have been working on (see Appendix B). Then, the teacher deletes pieces of information on two sets of handouts. For example, Handout "A" will have some information deleted that handout "B" will provide.

1. The techniques of teaching the experimental group were based on information gap concept and communicative approach which were hypothesized to develop speaking skills while the control group was taught by the ordinary method.

2. The researcher himself applied the experiment and prepared all the needed aids and materials (lesson plan, worksheets, laptop, pictures, songs, video, digital camera, and others).

3. The researcher listened to students' opinions and suggestions all around the sessions to evaluate the process of teaching by using information gap activities.

4. The pre-test of speaking skills was prepared by the researcher with some key words and students' marks were recorded by using oral speaking rubric. It was applied upon the experimental and the control groups. The results were recorded and statistically analyzed.

5. The process of teaching the two groups followed the time planned of the experiment included (12) English Language sessions for each group plus four sessions for evaluation and testing.

6. The post test of speaking skills was applied upon the experimental and the control groups. The results were recorded and statistically analyzed. The statistical analysis is illustrated in chapter four.

3.4 Scoring (The Oral Speaking Rubric)

The oral speaking rubric adopted in this study is based on Harris's testing scale model with some modifications to rate students' oral performance. According to Harris's model, this study also assessed students' oral performance on five major criteria: comprehension, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and fluency. Each criterion's characteristics are defined into four short behavioral statements as stated in the frame. This helps to make the test reliable, since it avoids subjectivity because it provides clear, precise and mutually, exclusive behavioral statements for each point of the scale. The amount of maximum score gained was 20 for each question of the oral speaking test.

4. Data Analysis and Results

The objective of the current study is to investigate the effect of implementing information gap tasks in Libyan English classrooms on students' speaking abilities. The findings of the study are presented in this chapter according to the following research question. "Do implementing information-gap tasks in Libyan English classrooms affect the students' abilities to speak English?" In order to answer this question, another question regarding the effect of implementing information-gap tasks in Libyan English classrooms was developed. To what extent do implementing information-gap tasks in Libyan English classrooms affect the students' speaking skill?

To test the research hypothesis: Since the goal was to examine the mean differences in speaking ability of the control and experimental groups, T-test for independent groups was used.

In order to make sure of the homogeneity of the groups (i.e., experimental and control groups), as displayed in figure 1, the researcher calculated the means of their performance on pre-test.
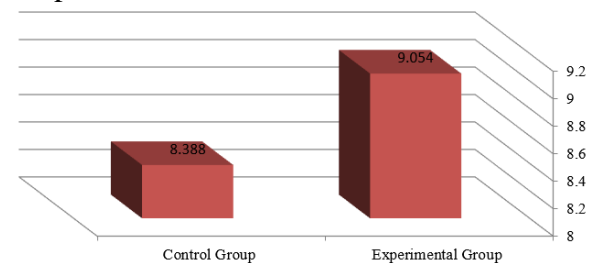

Figure 1: Mean scores of the control and experimental group in pretest

As shown in figure 1, no significance difference was seen between the means of the control and experimental groups in pre-test.

As it was mentioned previously, the test used for pre-test, was administered to both groups simultaneously at the end of the experiment. The purpose was to find out if intended special treatment had produced any significant differences in the performance of the subjects. On the basis of this assumption the researcher developed the null hypothesis, i.e., there is no meaningful difference between the means of the groups after the treatment. The results of post-test for both experimental and control groups are presented in the following figure.
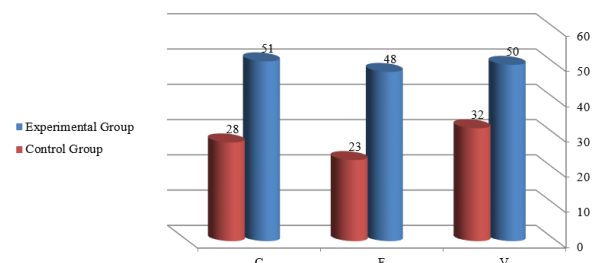

Figure 2: A comparison of experimental and control groups concerning pronunciation and grammar performance
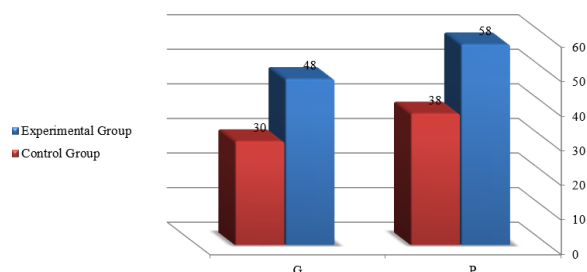
Figure 3: A comparison of experimental and control groups concerning vocabulary, fluency and reading comprehension performance

Table.2: Mean scores of the groups for the post-test (speaking)

Group		No.	Mean	Std. Deviation
Speaking	Experimental	6	2.667	0.611
	Control	6	1.278	0.4609

Statistical studies concerning the above test with the significance level (0.000) table 4.2 is indicative of a statistical significance difference in a level less than 0.001 suggesting a significance difference in speaking ability of the experimental group (M=2.667) compared to the control group (M=1.278). So the above hypothesis is proved statistically with 99% of certainty and one can maintain that implementing information gap tasks in EFL learner classrooms affects students' speaking ability.

5. Discussion

The results of the researcher's findings are in line with the conclusions from several previous studies in using information gap activities in EFL learners. A research conducted by Defrioka (2009) proved that the implementation of information gap activities can better improve the students' interaction in speaking class. Student-centered class included pair work and group work also contributed to improve outcomes. Some experts have discussed the advantages of applying information gaps activities in teaching speaking. Hess (2001) confirmed that information gap activities can provide a comprehensive feedback from the learners, such as a wide diversity of opinions, references, and values, many different experiences and styles of learning. Then, he also adds that information gap activities can foster a learner-autonomous learning style. Another study conducted by Karimi (2010) revealed that the EFL learners' degree of learning increases when they learn new words by the use of information-gap tasks in the classroom. Also the learners in the experimental group – taught through the use of information-gap tasks – were gradually seen to become less dependent upon teacher's assistance. So, the findings of this research recommended giving students opportunities to develop strategies for interpreting and comprehending language as it is actually used by native speakers. Another research conducted by Jondeya (2011), investigated the effectiveness of using information gap on developing speaking skills for eight graders in Gaza governorate schools. For achieving this aim, she adopted the experimental approach. The results proved that there were statistically significant differences in the mean scores between the pre and post speaking test of the experimental group in each level of speaking skills in favor of the posttest. The results also indicated that there were statistically significant differences in the mean scores of each level of speaking skills in the post test for the experimental group compared with the control group.

In comparing the present study with previous studies, the results of findings proved that using information gap activities as a method to improve students' speaking ability had a significant impact on improving students' speaking proficiency. As a result after applying information gap activities in speaking class for seventeen meetings, it can be concluded that: 1. Information gap activities can better improve the students' interaction with the teacher and other students.

2. Information gap activities can maximize students' opportunities to speak during the English lesson and provide the potential benefits of student-student interaction.

3. Information gap activities encourage students' practice opportunities of the target language receptivity in the lessons as a result of presenting various tasks.

5.1 Implications

First, implementing tasks which require students to struggle for pooling out their peers' information creates a sense of involvement in the students. In other words, these kinds of tasks do not expect students to sit passively in their seats listening to their teacher without any active participation in the process of learning. On the contrary, they expect students to respond actively to the learning process going on in the classroom.

Second, motivation, which is the anxiety of almost all teachers, can be increased to a great extent through using these tasks. When the students' sense of curiosity is activated to know what pieces of information their peers have, they will be motivated to speak with each other through using the language in order to get those

pieces of information. This will consequently result in a great increase of their motivation to learn the language more efficiently.

Third, as was mentioned earlier the information-gap tasks can be carried out with small groups. The atmosphere of the classroom in which students work in groups to complete a task is much more desirable than those which do not have this characteristic. In other words, the students' anxiety could be reduced to a great extent if the classroom is divided into small groups. This kind of classroom can also create a sense of competition among the students, which will increase their desire to learn the language much more enthusiastically.

Fourth, when the students are engaged in an activity which they could do successfully, with little interference from their teacher, their self-confidence would increase to a great extent.

Fifth, practicing communicative activities in the English classrooms makes students develop their communicative competence. They give the students the ability to communicate through English. In other words, if the students are given enough opportunity in the classroom to communicate in English in order to complete some tasks which resemble real-life situations, they will develop the ability to make themselves understood.

6. Conclusion

Many scholars and specialists in language teaching believe that effective learning of a language takes place when the learners are actively involved in the process of learning. They also claim that learners should be able to use language to communicate with one another. It is not satisfactory only to know a certain number of grammar rules and vocabulary of the target language. Rather, in order to be able to get their meaning across, language learners should be communicatively competent.

To achieve this goal many techniques have been innovated by the scholars to be manipulated by the students in the classroom. These techniques make students practice the language communicatively in the classroom which will result in students' being communicatively competent. On the other hand, they require students to be actively involved in the activities going on in the classroom. This will in turn result in students' increasing motivation to learn the language.

One of the sample activities which has the above characteristics and is actually assigned to communicative language teaching is information gap. It is an activity which resembles real life situations and requires students to pool out information from their peers. In other words, it makes those students who do not have any information on a particular subject or a particular situation obtain it from those students who know it.

In so doing, the students should begin communicating with each other in order to exchange the information. If these tasks are presented appropriately and carefully in the classroom, the students will acquire a good command of communicating in English. This is what the present study aimed to make out. That is, this study was conducted to find out whether the students' speaking abilities will increase if some information gap tasks are implemented in the English classrooms.

To find an appropriate answer to the above question, the researcher implemented some information-gap tasks in an English classroom which served as the experimental group. Then he compared the results of the pre-test which was administered to both experiment and control group. The results revealed that the experimental group performed much better than the control group. So it was concluded that implementing information gap tasks in Libyan English classroom does affect positively the students' speaking abilities; and the students who are exposed to these tasks will be able to communicate in English much more efficiently than those who are not.

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Appendix A: A pretest and post-test for both experimental group and control group

1. Tell me about yourself-----------
   What is your name? -----------
   How old are you? -----------
   What do you do? -----------
   Where are you from? -----------
   Where do you leave? -----------
   What do you like? -----------
   Do you have any pets? -----------
   What are your favorite possessions? -----------

2. Now let's talk about your family-----------
   How many brothers and sisters you have got? -----------
   How many cousins you have got? -----------
   How old is your youngest relative? -----------
   Who is your favorite relative? ----------

3. Now let's talk about your day, have a look at this picture-----
   When do you usually get up in the morning? -----------
   What time do you go to school every day? -----------
   When do you have lunch? -----------
   How do you usually get home? -----------
   Do you do your homework? -----------
   What time do you usually go to bed? -----------

Appendix B: Information gap task adopted from Pair-work and Group-work Book

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