

Investigating the Role of Self-Talk Practice in Developing Spontaneous Speaking Confidence Among Foundation Students at a Private University in Sri Lanka

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Abstract—Successful spontaneous conversation is an essential skill for an ESL learner. Spontaneous conversations become difficult as they involve instant thinking and processing. This study investigates whether self-talk would be an efficient strategy to improve the confidence level in spontaneous conversations in ESL learners. The study was done among a group of students from SLIIT City Uni, semester 1 February intake batch. A Mixed method was used in a pre-test/post-test design for data collection, namely pre-test and post-test. A self-talk intervention was implemented over a period of seven days between these interview sessions. The findings indicated a significant improvement in ESL Learners' confidence levels during spontaneous conversations following the implementation of the self-talk strategy. In this study, the qualitative analysis complemented the quantitative findings, and several important recommendations were proposed based on the integrated results.

Keywords— Confidence in speaking, Rubric-based assessment, Self-talk strategy, Spontaneous conversation.

I. INTRODUCTION

According to [1], speaking is the art of using words aloud to connect thoughts through live conversations. Speaking is the ability to convey feelings and thoughts to another person, and to speak, an individual has to create sounds using various parts of their body [2]. Over the years, numerous languages have been developed around the world. While other languages are important in this world, English has become one of the most essential languages to communicate with each other due to

being spoken by millions of people around the world

[3]. This makes it difficult for people from non-native English-speaking countries to express their thoughts. A significant number of students need to study English as their second language just because it is in the curriculum [4]. When it comes to expressing thoughts, it has been revealed that the ability to speak spontaneously without prior preparation can be essential for daily human interactions [5]. However, spontaneous conversations will open a set of challenges that demand quick thinking and adaptability [5]. This makes it more challenging for ESL learners as they must express themselves orally in a foreign language spontaneously [6].

The two main cognitive factors that tend to increase communication anxiety and speaking anxiety are the negative evaluation of the audience and expectations of poor performance [7]. This acts as a psycholinguistic barrier for ESL learners, which affects their oral proficiency [7]. As a solution, many researchers have turned their attention towards various methods to improve English speaking, one of them is the self-talk strategy.

Self-talk is a strategy in which individuals express their ideas in their own way; it is their inner voice [8]. Self-talk is not just limited to speaking in the first person with "I"; it can also be directed at oneself using the second-person pronoun "You" [9]. Cognitive theorists emphasize that there is a strong link between what people say to themselves and what they do [7]. Self-talk enables learners to verbalize their inner thoughts freely, without external constraints, thereby creating a psychologically safe environment. [10]. This would eventually increase their confidence in speaking as well. While prior research has examined the role of self-talk strategy in speaking ability [11] and reducing speaking anxiety [7], there is a research gap for using self-talk strategy to improve confidence in

spontaneous conversations.

While previous studies were focussed on public speaking and general English fluency, this study specifically investigate whether self-talk strategy would boost ESL Learner's confidence in spontaneous conversations. This area remains underexplored, which creates a clear research gap that this study aims to fill. This gap is significant, as spontaneous speaking is a key skill in real-world communication but often overlooked in ESL training. This distinction is crucial as spontaneous conversations triggers anxiety in most ESL learners. Addressing this area not only fills the research gap but also offers a practical strategy to improve confidence in these situations. If this strategy is proven to be successful, it would be a unique approach for a problem faced by many ESL learners.

Aims of the Study:

- To examine whether self-talk can improve ESL learners' confidence in spontaneous conversations.
- To observe spontaneous speaking confidence as a dependent outcome influenced by observable performance factors such as pronunciation, vocabulary use, fluency, task completion, and expressive delivery.
- To analyze the effectiveness of a short-term self-talk training program.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-talk (ST) has been used in various studies to discover whether it would be an effective strategy to improve speaking skills.

A. Reference [7] focused on Saudi EFL university students and the results of using self-talk technique to reduce public speaking anxiety. It has been found that there is a significant negative correlation between self-reinforcement (a type of ST) and anxiety levels.

B. Reference [11] conducted a study on Indonesian high-school students to discover whether the self-talk technique is useful in improving students' speaking skills. Their experiment showed that learners who practiced positive self-talk displayed increased fluency and reduced nervousness during speaking tasks.

While previous studies were focused on public speaking and general English fluency, little to no focus has been placed on its impact on speakers' confidence level in spontaneous conversations. This gap is significant since spontaneous speaking skills are crucial for real-world communication but often overlooked in ESL training. This study aims to address that gap.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Data Collection and Research Procedure

This study was conducted in a group of 15 students in SLIIT City Uni February Intake, Foundation Semester 1 batch. This group was pre-tested and post-tested. As the name implies, these students' abilities were measured

through an open-ended and semi-structured interview process, which allowed more flexibility in gathering information about their confidence level in speaking as well as their opinion about self-talk. The post-test was conducted before the 7-day story/scenario-based training period. After the training period, the post-test interview was conducted, and it was done to observe the change in participants' improvement in confidence level in spontaneous conversations.

B. Quantitative and Qualitative Data

This study followed a mixed approach of using both quantitative data and qualitative data. To gather quantitative data, the Rubric framework implemented in Ismailia's research [12] was used and was customized to measure hand gestures and facial expressions that align with finding the confidence level of the individual. These data were measured on various criteria such as pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and expressive delivery. The qualitative data was gathered through a semi-structured interview conducted to explore participants' opinions regarding their confidence level in spontaneous conversations.

C. Instrument (Rubric Method) (Ismailia, 2021)

The Rubric method used in Ismailia's research [12] was used to measure pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and task proficiency in the study. Each rubric criterion was scored on the scale of 50-100. This method was modified to gather information about the expressive delivery of the participants by adding a separate section to measure the expression level through eye contact, hand gestures, and body language. In this study six rubric criteria were used as independent variables to contribute to obtaining the confidence level which is treated as a dependent variable. This Rubric assessment is used to measure the overall self-perceived confidence level through all the criteria.

D. Tool (SPSS)

In this study, IBM SPSS statistical software was used to analyze the collected data [13]. Measures such as mean, media, and mode were used to analyse the changes that happened during the pre-test and the post-test. These measures were used across all the scales of the Rubric method, which are pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar & accuracy, fluency, task completion, and expressive delivery for a clear comparison before and after the training period.

E. Training Method

For the scenario/story-based training process, participants were given a card that contained a simple story/scenario related to an imaginary storyline. They were asked to imagine the scenario, add some of their own story, and record an audio of themselves talking about that

scenario/story for 5 minutes. These scenarios/stories were designed to encourage more imagination. This process was carried out for 7 days by changing stories/scenarios each day.

F. Participants

A total of 28 students were gathered from SLIIT City Uni February Intake, Foundation Semester 1 batch. For this study, Foundation students were selected because they are in an early stage of academic language development and frequently need to engage in activities that challenge their English-speaking skills, making them an ideal group to observe the immediate change. Beginner students frequently have speaking issues such as anxiousness and lack of self-confidence [14]. To maintain the relevancy of this study, only students who are learning English as their Second Language were included from the total of 28 students in the batch. Based on the exclusion criteria, the final group consisted of 15 students.

The interviews were done in a relaxed atmosphere where students could express their thoughts freely. Prior to participation, learners were informed about the study procedure, and their volunteer consent was taken, and they were told that the interview process would be recorded and quoted in data analysis.

IV. RESULTS AND EVALUATION

A. Quantitative Data

The participants' pre-test and post-test interviews were video recorded and were analyzed with the help of the modified Rubric method of Ismaila's research [12]. This statistical analysis provides a numerical range between 50-100 based on their proficiency level in each of the sections. The mean, median, and mode of those data were calculated with the IBM SPSS statistical software.

Based on the results,

- Pronunciation: Significant increase from Pre-Test (72%) to Post-Test (83%), indicating a (+11%) increase.
- Vocabulary: Increase from pre-test (76.5%) to post-test (85.4%), showing an increase of (+8.9%).
- Grammar & Accuracy: Improvement from pre-test (70.4%) to post-test (72.0%), increase of (+1.6%)
- Task Completion: Increase of pre-test (68.7%) to post-test (80.9%), indicating (12.2%) increase.
- Expressive delivery: from pre-test (65.4%) to post-test (72.8%), showing a significant increase of (+7.4%)
- Fluency followed a different pattern (pre-test: 69.8%, post-test: 68.3%) making the total average difference of pre-test: 70.47% and post-test: 77.07% being +6.6%.

Spontaneous speaking confidence is treated as a dependent

variable inferred from six performance criteria.

B. Qualitative Data

Data of the Semi-structured interview were gathered, transcribed, and analyzed carefully. Based on the questions and answers, several categories were established. A detailed qualitative analysis can be seen in the following:

I. Challenges faced in spontaneous conversations

When the participants were asked questions regarding the challenges they faced during spontaneous conversations, they had a variety of different answers.

- Difficulty in quick thinking and responses forming
Out of them, one of the most common challenges was when speaking spontaneously, they find quick thinking and responding as a significant challenge. Participant No.3 responded that "I normally pause a lot, sometimes I don't know how to continue the sentence" and Participant No.11 responded that "When I started to speak my mind goes blank and it take some time ideas to come to mind".
- Challenges in maintaining grammatical accuracy while speaking.
While others had a hard time stating something grammatically correctly. Participant No.14 said that "I have an idea in my mind, but when I try to convert that to words, most of the time it's grammatically incorrect" and No.13 stated that "when I speak up my grammar is not good".
- Struggles with vocabulary
Another concern that the participants raised is regarding vocabulary. As No.2 said, "I know a decent amount of words in English, but when I try to speak quickly, I can't complete my sentence because I don't know that specific word to complete it" and No. 8 described that, "I can't fill in the sentences because sometimes I don't know the relevant suitable word".

II. Psychological and Social Barriers

- Nervousness due to fear of judgment.
Many participants highlighted that when they encounter spontaneous conversations, they become anxious because of others' judgement. According to participant No.7, "Normally when I encounter some foreigner or someone who speaks in English, my heart rate increases in those instant conversations because what would they think of me if I mess up?". While No. 9 stated that "I sometimes start stuttering when I think about what others would think of me".

III. Will self-talk prepare you for spontaneous conversations?

- Helps in organizing thoughts and structuring sentences.

Most of the participants reported that self-talk helped them to practice organizing their thoughts and boost their confidence. As participant No.15 said,

“When I practice in my head, it just feels like I’m preparing myself for a real conversation which didn’t actually happen”. Also, according to participant No. 6, “I sometimes talk to my self about some random conversations, and I think it helps me to have a good organization of sentences”.

- Improves pronunciation and vocabulary recall through practice.

Another interesting fact the participants said is that self-talk helps them with pronunciation and vocabulary as well. Participant No.10 said, “When I self-talk, mostly words will flow into the mind, which actually helps a lot in real conversations as well” and No.13 confirmed it by “Actually, I think I have improved my vocabulary a lot through this self-talk thing”

V. CONCLUSION

This study investigates whether self-talk would be an effective strategy in improving the confidence in spontaneous conversation of ESL learners. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses show that there is a correlation between improving confidence in spontaneous conversations and self-talk training. The quantitative results showed that self-talk training has a positive impact on the participants’ confidence level with regard to the measures taken in six criteria. Qualitative results show that there are some challenges regarding spontaneous conversations, but with the help of the self-talk strategy, learners have seen significant improvements. This study reflects that self-talk would be an effective strategy to improve confidence in spontaneous conversations in ESL learners based on the findings.

The study shows a positive impact of self-talk in improving confidence in spontaneous conversations. It is recommended to use this strategy to improve ESL learners confidence level and speaking skills in spontaneous conversations. Future studies could consider how other factors such as age, gender, and proficiency level in English would affect these findings.

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