HSR (LONDON),
HOUGHTON STREET REVIEW JOURNAL
ISSN: 2058-5519|Impact factor-15.9
http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF INFORMATION GAP ACTIVITIES IN PROMOTING YOUNG LEARNERS' COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

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Abstract. Current trends in language teaching emphasize learner-centered methodologies designed to accommodate the unique needs, interests, and capabilities of students. Accordingly, the implementation of various instructional activities is increasingly recognized as an effective approach, particularly in the education of young language learners. Due to their natural curiosity, creativity, and preference for play, children respond positively to interactive and engaging learning environments. This article emphasizes the significance and advantages of incorporating information gap activities into ESL speaking instruction. Such activities enhance young learners' communicative abilities, increase their motivation to learn and use the language in authentic situations, and foster the development of pair-work and collaborative skills.

Key words: speaking, communicative skills, information gap activities, interactive, social and contextualized process, communicative competence, motivation, real-life situation, authentic activity, meaning-focused activity, pair-work, collaborative skills.

INTRODUCTION.

Speaking is widely recognized as one of the most essential skills in English language learning, as this process requires speakers to make decisions about why, how and when to communicate depending on the cultural and social context, in addition, speaking is recognized as an interactive, social and contextualized process that serves a number of functions, based on real-life situations that demands communication. Therefore, at the lessons of foreign languages in order to teach speaking and encourage children to use the target language in their life, as well as, to develop their communicative skills, competency and culture, teachers should know how to use some speaking strategies, which help to enhance language learners' communicative skills, how to form their interest and motivation to study the language and how to create an English classroom environment where learners have real-life communication, authentic activities and meaningful tasks that promote oral language. Therefore, the main objective of teaching speaking is to develop learners' communicative competence. Language learners should be able to express themselves clearly and effectively by making the best use of their existing level of proficiency. They should also strive to minimize misunderstandings caused by inaccurate pronunciation, grammatical errors, or limited vocabulary while adhering to the social and cultural norms appropriate to different communicative contexts.

According to methodologists Burns and Joyce, speaking is an active process of negotiating meaning and of using social knowledge of the situation, the topic and the other speakers. Further, Nunan has defined speaking as an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving, and processing information received orally and Penny Ur states that the classroom activities that develop the ability of learners to express their ideas through speech should be considered an important component of a language course. Taking into account these studies the main goal of teaching foreign languages has become to improve language learners' speaking skills and communicative competency using different effective innovative, interactive methods and techniques in order to have language learners speak proficiently and independently in various situations. And,

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studies have shown that one of the most effective interactive methods that promotes young language learners' communication competences is Information Gap activities, which help to increase learners' motivation to learn English and use the language in real life situations.

The Information Gap activity is one of the most useful activities in a learner-centered class, where one person has certain information that must be shared with others in order to solve a problem, gather information or make a decision. These types of activities are extremely effective in a L2 classroom. They give every student the opportunity to speak in the target language for an extended period of time and students naturally produce more speech than they would normally do.

So, the aim of this activity is to exchange information and share ideas between two students, because this activity is mostly done in pairs, with each student having a part of the information. The two students will be asking each other questions to which they don't know the answer. Moreover, while talking in pairs learners will not be embarrassed and share their ideas easily, and they will talk more willingly to solve a problem of the task, or give the needed information to the classmates.

MATERIALS AND METHODS.

The theoretical foundations of information gap activities can be traced to communicative language teaching, which emerged in the 1970s as a response to traditional grammar-based approaches. According to Hymes, communicative competence involves not only grammatical knowledge but also the ability to use language appropriately in social contexts. Building on this concept, Canale and Swain identified grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competences as essential components of effective communication. Information gap activities support the development of these competences by requiring learners to exchange information, negotiate meaning, and interact purposefully.

The interaction hypothesis proposed by Long provides an important theoretical basis for the use of information gap activities. Long argues that language acquisition is facilitated through interaction, particularly when learners negotiate meaning to overcome communication difficulties. Similarly, Swain's output hypothesis suggests that learners improve their language proficiency when they are encouraged to produce language and express their ideas. Information gap tasks create opportunities for meaningful output by motivating learners to ask questions, clarify information, and provide feedback. Moreover, Brown states that information gap activities have two characteristics:

~the first one is that information gap focuses on the information and not to language forms;

~the second, information gap prioritize the communicative interaction in order to reach the objective.

So, information gap activities practice real communication and the goal of these activities is to discover certain information, whether about the other person or related to a specific activity. While using these activities, pupils have to exchange information by asking and answering, and only by communicating successfully, they can get the information to complete the task. To fulfill the task, learners have to interact, to create questions and share information.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS.

Information gap activities can make the teaching learning situation more interesting, as they are hold between students, not a teacher and students. It means, the teacher is only facilitator, not controller and teacher can show how to do the activity as a modeling, so that learners can follow the instruction and do the task. The students are not just sitting and listening to the teacher's explanation, but they can interact with their friends, enhance their confidence. The teacher just explains the task, gives necessary vocabulary and instruction. Then, students are asked to fulfill the task by themselves. Each learner should take part in the process, because the task cannot be accomplished without everyone's participation. Many information gap activities are highly motivational because of the

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nature of the various tasks. The most effective task is problem solving. Teacher should know the level of the students in order to choose suitable level of difficulty task. If the task is given beforehand, then any level can be acceptable. Information gap activities allow students to use linguistic forms and functions in practice. Students will have to remember all grammar materials and learnt vocabulary to communicate with their classmates during the lesson. The best part is that they're very flexible and can be adapted for virtually any topic or lesson, just like the majority of ESL activities. For example, you can easily use an information gap activity as a way to review and practice new vocabulary, parts of speech and topic-based dialogues. There are several ways of implementing information gap activities in teaching languages and can be used with language learners in order to improve their speaking skills:

~Spot the difference activity - Learners work in pairs. Each of them is given a set of two very similar pictures (Picture A and B) with only a few differences. They cannot see each other´s picture, thus they take turns in describing their pictures and asking questions and together they try to find all differences.

~Guess the card - Learners work with partners. One pupil holds a card so that their partner cannot see. The partner must ask "yes/no questions" to determine what is on the card. Often teachers structure this activity to fit with the theme of a particular unit.

So, information gap activities can be used in any level to promote speaking tasks as they provide optimization of time for learners to speak in class. Using information gap activities contribute to language learning in several ways:

1. Motivation: they make learning enjoyable and increase students' interest in the lesson.
2. Interaction: They encourage communication and collaboration among learners.
3. Confidence building: A relaxed environment reduces fear of making mistakes.
4. Language practice: they provide repeated exposure to vocabulary and structures.

Through these activities learners can practice speaking in realistic situations, as well as develop social skills such as cooperation, turn-taking, and negotiation, which are essential for effective communication.

CONCLUSION.

Overall, it can be said that implementation of information gap activities in teaching English helps move the learners from working in a more structured environment into a more communicative environment, as they are hopefully using lots of the target language, and in the process discovering where they have gaps, in addition, as an essential part of the learning process they:

~enable them to practice the target language in meaningful context;
~improve their different skills needed for the language acquisition process;
~offer a variety of experiences and improves four main language skills;
~promote a learner-centered classroom;
~increase intrinsic motivation;
~enhance peer-to-peer collaboration;
~help to consolidate the vocabulary and grammar rules of the previous lessons.

In conclusion, from my teaching experience, I can state that whatever the children's age, it is important to provide frameworks for speaking activities, which encourage them to use English for real purposes, and we can confirm that implementation of information gap activities are beneficial, if only while designing information gap activities, language learners' needs, age and level of social, cognitive and emotional development need to be taken into account by the teachers.

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