Communicative Games: Utilizing Story Cubes to stimulate contextualized conversation

H. Kubra Saygili, S. Esra Saygili, Daniel Brockert,

Abstract

This paper aims to provide a solution for the speaking problem of Turkish students by taking this into consideration ‘Do communicative games help students communicate more effectively?’ Speaking activities have a great impact on teaching English. The reason why most teachers prefer using communicative activities in their classes is that this is closely related to the communicative approach. It is essential and beneficial to involve students in a social context instead of following the same course book every day. Students are able to participate more in the class because the topic is interesting and they are more willing to take part in that process since it contributes to physical activities, creativity, imagination and emotional aspects. The reason why we have chosen communicative activities in classes is the students’ attitudes toward speaking activities. There are 12 students in the class including one student from Syria and another from the Nigeria. The problem is that their proficiency in English is much higher than the rest of the students. Turkish students do not feel motivated enough to participate during the class, hence they feel a little bit shy and do not feel confident enough to express themselves. Occasionally we tried setting up the group activities by including international students in Turkish student groups.
It was designed as a qualitative method. The data was collected through the content analysis by means of rubrics and reflection sheets. With the help of those instruments, the effectiveness of communicative games in promoting the speaking strategies of students in ESP was tested.

In the light of the data analysis, the result and the analysis of the reflection sheets, revealed that participants succeeded in promoting their speaking strategies with the help of the story cubes.

**Key words:** Communicative Activities, Story Cubes, Speaking

**Introduction:**

Speaking in language classrooms is very important for students’ who are studying in English preparatory schools especially in intermediate or upper-intermediate level who know basic grammar rules-structures, vocabulary but are unable to communicate. Speaking difficulties represent the single largest category of problems we have encountered among students we have taught at the beginning of the research. This could be due to several factors; anxiety, feeling shy, lack of motivation, fear of making mistakes, insufficient vocabulary or grammar structure, knowledge in order to communicate or express oneself and so on.

Speaking has been quite challenging for most of the language learners since it is considered as a complex process. We have observed some complexity among our students especially in self-study or pair work activities. There are various complains from students including;

‘How do we express ourselves? ’How do we put what we are learning in class into practice?’ or ‘How to communicate more effectively in classes?’

As far as we have seen students seem to feel stressed when attempting to speak in class. This might be partly because of the reason that they are not well equipped with adequate lexis or correct pronunciation. Another reason might be related to be feeling reluctant to speak in classes. Whenever we try to tell students do a group work projects or presentations we realized that only few of them wants to participate while the others are not willing to speak. There are several reasons for such kind of reluctance. We think that using communicative activities will help students participate
more in class in terms of speaking. By conducting this study, we hope to find out the basic reason why students lack speaking abilities and the certain solutions to this question faced. We also plan to solve their problem of speaking strategies through some communicative games techniques. We want use such games as a tool to promote the speaking strategies of the students.

**Purpose of the Study:**

The purpose of this study is to examine the speaking strategies of students who are studying English in various university departments (not in the University English prep school) and to help increase students’ speaking competence by using communicative games. Having observed the speaking difficulties of students, we plan to utilize those communicative games in departmental classes. We want to use drama/role-play as a tool to help students to increase their speaking skills. We believe that speaking abilities could be best improved by personalizing the use of the language.

In this study, we aim to promote the speaking strategies of students by using the communicative games as an effective tool in the language classes.

**Research Question/ Objectives:**

By analyzing the encountered difficulties of the students in a communicative competence during the teaching weeks, before starting to carry out research this question raised into our mind:

‘Does communicative games help promote the speaking abilities of students in classes?’

Having observed the classes, we will try to perceive whether communicative games have a great role on learners’ oral communication skills.

**Review of the Literature**

Students are expected to use what they have learnt from the beginning and produce great amount of information to be used. Speaking also helps learners to acquire some type certain skills to be used while they use the language in an interactive way. According to Chaturvedi, Yadav, and Bajpai (2011, p.3), there are several soft skills which are required in these circumstances; interpersonal skills, team spirit, social
grace, business etiquette, behavioral traits like attitude, motivation and time management. As it is clearly stated above those soft skills are necessary in order to be able to communicate in English more effectively.

The objective of teaching speaking is to make students have some outcomes, make them more aware of what they are learning and help to interact and communicate more with other people. Fang (2010) stated that “objective of English is to develop students’ ability to use it in an all-round way, especially in listening and speaking so that in their future work and social interactions they will be able to exchange information effectively.” (p.111). It can be easily understood from here that learning how to produce the acquired language or the information is needed for the future actions. Communication as being the final stage of the learning process is accepted by many authors like Fang.

The most important thing is to make the students to be able to use the language in a meaningful context that is to say, as mentioned above by Fang (2010), instructors or language teachers need to help students use the language when needed not only outside the class but in their social life as well.

As Oradee (2012) stated, “English teaching and learning have the goal of focusing students so that they are able use English for communication” (p.553). It is clearly pointed that speaking is the most important skill since it is the key element for communication.

In his argument about the ‘English as a communication tool’ Fang, (2010) emphasizes that while developing or increasing learners speaking abilities, learners simultaneously develop their listening skills and also gain confidence during the process of communication (p.112). According to his statement, it can be understood that in order to increase the speaking skills, learner should have a good listening skill. These two terms are integrated with each other since they both mean the same thing.

As has been mentioned by Blake and Thompson, (2010) “for leaners to successfully communicate in the L2, they need not only the understanding of grammatical rules, but also the knowledge of how the L2 is used by native speakers in different contexts” (p.89).
In other words for learners to communicative effectively in English, they don’t need to know the enough vocabulary and grammatical structures only, but also an adequate level of listening skills.

According to Blake and Thompson, (2010) by indicating or creating variety of social contexts to learner, curriculum of the programme should be mainly focused on speaking goals that will allow them to improve their speaking skills to communicate in different situations. This perspective represents the communication as tool or an instrument to be used not only in class but in different aspects of the life that is to say in daily life (p.89).

Martinez and Uso (2008) define that “activity formats such as face to face tandem learning, making up questions to a native speaker or role playing, among others may develop speaking skills with a particular emphasis”(p.164). In this sense it is important to know that there are several types of activities which may increase the level of learners’ speaking skills. Therefore, meaning learning takes place with those types of activities.

Oradee, (2012) stated that speaking skills can be developed through communicative activities which include an information gap, a jigsaw puzzle, games, problem solving and role playing (p.553). Author also restates to support his idea that free discussion and role-playing activities can assist better with speaking skills of the learners. We can imply from the author sentence that there are various ways of improving or promoting the learners’ speaking skills. Trying communicative games in class plays a crucial role in order to make students participate in a more communicative context. As the author Dr. L. Athiemoolam cited from Landy (1982:6) improvisation as an:

- unscripted, unrehearsed, spontaneous set of actions in response to minimal directions from a leader, usually including statements of whom one is, where one is and what one is doing there. The focus is thus on identifying with characters, enacting roles and entering into inner experience of imagination and fantasy.

As Landy (1982) clearly points out above improvisation gives students chance to use their own imagination that is to say act out their own characters that they have
created in their mind. He supports the idea of unrehearsed actions since he believes that it will more beneficial for students to be ready at any time instead of reading scripts from the ready written forms.

1.1 Communicative Games:
Communicative games play an important role in learning since it involves both learning and fun feature. Teachers need take the student’s level, interest and background while designing such activities or games in their classes. Teachers need to meet the individual needs of their students by taking the gender issues into consideration. Some teachers, however, find it quite challenging to keep their students interested and enthusiastic about making them participate in language classes. There are a lot of strategies and activities that teachers should be aware of in order to help deal student engagement.

Suzan and Elizabeth (2013) claims that “Successful language teaching utilizes methods designed to engage students in communicative activities based on their backgrounds, opinions, and other personal characteristics” (p.24).

They also stated that “that these activities are a fundamental addition to any classroom where students will profit from nurturing interpersonal tolerance among groups who have a history of conflict—that is, in every classroom around the world” (p.31).

It can be understood above that those activities will not only enable students to use what they have learnt in class but also use them outside of the classroom in their daily life.

According to Richard (1976) communication has been accepted as an essential result of language teaching, however it has been neglected somehow. It is really important that teaching comprehensively for communicative competence to cater to a large extent to develop communicative skills (p.1). Since communication is the key of learning language it should not be neglected by language teachers. Richard also tries to clarify the subject by raising some questions. A logical extension of the argument would suggest that if communication is the aim, then it should be the major element
in the process. The question could be put: Are we teaching language (for communication)? or Are we teaching communication (via language)? (p.4)

There are quite a few teachers who mostly teach traditional methods and do not want to be confronted with novel ideas and innovations. However moving forward and trying new things are useful both for students and teachers.

Stephen (2012) mentions that “re-service teachers around the world face a unique challenge: bridging the gap between traditional teaching focused on grammar translation and receptive skills, and communicative teaching aimed at well-rounded communication skills” (p.14)

What is mentioned above is closely related to teachers being accustomed to the innovative teaching strategies so as to make their students actively participant in a more interactive way by using the communicative language teaching methods effectively. However there are still teacher who struggle with these distinction and prefer using traditional methods in their classes.

Harmer (1982) define that “The term ‘communicative’ has been used to cover a wide variety of approaches and methodological procedures. But it cannot account for both drills on the one hand and genuinely communicative activities on the other” (p. 164).

However the term communicative may be regarded for different definitions in terms of approaches and methodological procedures, it is almost impossible to consider it as exercises and activities.

Using games in language classes is another crucial and new phenomenon since it has different multiple functional purposes for the language learners. It is quite obvious that students are more likely to participate in class when they are having fun and the topic is interesting, attractive for them. It can be said that involving the students in such games so as to help them interact is fun feature of motivation.

Rixon (1979) argues that language games are enjoying a new prominence it seems worthwhile to take closer look at what makes them work. Is there any feature of the design of a game that will make it more likely that learners start using the language in more meaningful way,
(p. 104). As it can be clearly understood from the author’s statement, games are becoming trendy and favored however we need to determine the possible reasons of what makes them work in language classes.

**Methodology:**
Having worked in Hasan Kalyoncu University as an English Language Lecturer, we had 12 pre-intermediate students from different departments. We planned to use ‘three dimensional story cubes’ which were designed to increase the both motivation and the desire of the students on speaking. There were three boxes and each box consist of 9 cubes/dice include different pictures on each side of the dice. We divided the class in 8 or 9 groups depending of the number of the students in class. After dividing them into groups, students started throwing the dice one by one. Each student said a sentence related to the side of the dice which was shown. Then we told them to make stories or write a script to be acted out in the classroom later on.

When the student said a sentence, next student threw the dice and made a sentence which had been relevant to the previous sentence that his classmate had just said. This process continued in this manner for weeks. Students were required to keep the script they had written for use in further processes.

With these three dimensional story cubes, the aim is to make all the students involve in the learning process as everyone in the group is supposed to say or write sentence for their further script. We believe that this will help students to practice all the skills they have learnt like grammar, writing and most importantly speaking in ESP classes.

**Data Collection Tool/ Analysis:**
As a data collection tool, we planned to use Self Reflection Sheets in order to make students evaluate themselves and make them more aware of what they were producing in terms of speaking in classes.

We want to make students aware of what they are doing, or make them see their strengths and weaknesses during the speaking/act-out process. Therefore, we plan to implement both Reflection Sheets for self-evaluation and taking part in a group for students.
As a data collection analysis, we conducted a study which involved content analysis. While conducting the study we tried to see and analyze whether communicative games helped learners to improve or promote their speaking strategies in classes. We implemented the both Self Reflection sheets first in order to see the effect of communicative games that is to say the outcomes of the games in terms of speaking. After three weeks we used the Reflection Sheet: Taking part in a group so as to see the difference. We did not work with the different groups like experimental and control. We planned to work only with one group.

We try to measure and compare the change resulting from efficient implementation of communication games in classes. At the end of our study we plan to compare and measure change with data in order the find out whether communicative games had an impact on promoting the speaking strategies in classes.

After making the students create stories by using the story cubes with the targeted grammatical structures with the other group members, we implemented the Self Reflection Sheet to each and every group members.

**Findings and Discussion**

This chapter aims to present the analysis and the discussion of the data as follows:

1. The analysis and the discussion of the data obtained by Self-reflection Sheet, Self-reflection Sheet: Taking Part in a group.

2. The analysis and the discussion of the data obtained by Self-reflection Sheet, Self-reflection Sheet: Taking Part in a group.

**1.1 The Analysis of the Reflection Sheets given First week**

**Student 3:**

**Self-Evaluation**

*My speaking ability was not very good today because I did not want to speak in class*
I want to communicative with my classmates without hesitation

I often made grammar mistakes today.

I plan to take more part in group work activities.

Self-Reflection Sheet: Taking part in a group

What are the things you enjoyed about your role in the group?

My classmates corrected me a lot when I made mistake, I observed my friends while they were speaking. I felt more confident than usual.

What is something you want to do differently next time?

I want to fix my pronunciation. Get more help from my classmates who are better than me.

Student 7:

Self-Evaluation

My speaking ability was bad today because I felt nervous before I speak.

I want to speak fluent English

I often made pronunciation mistakes today.

I plan to speak more.

Self-Reflection Sheet: Taking part in a group

What are the things you enjoyed about your role in the group?

Working in a group was more fun than being alone. We shared our ideas. I felt happy

What is something you want to do differently next time?

I want to speak faster.

Student 9:

Self-Evaluation
My speaking ability was not very well today because I afraid of making mistakes

I want to express myself freely.

I often made pronunciation mistakes today.

I plan to focus the activity more.

Self-Reflection Sheet: Taking part in a group

What are the things you enjoyed about your role in the group?

I enjoyed being with a group because everybody was active in class.

What is something you want to do differently next time?

I want to speak good English.

1.2 The Analysis of the Reflection Sheet: Taking part in a group given last week

Student 3:

Self-Reflection Sheet: Taking part in a group

What are the things you enjoyed about your role in the group?

I enjoyed the story cubes because, I did not felt bored in the class and it helped me a lot while I was speaking with my friends. I learnt a lot of new vocabulary from the story games.

What is something you want to do differently next time?

I want to practice what I have learnt with my classmates.

Student 7:

Self-Reflection Sheet: Taking part in a group

What are the things you enjoyed about your role in the group?

I enjoyed the lesson because I realized that I was able to speak in a class. My negative concerns were gone. I felt more relaxed and happy thanks to story cubes.
Now I am not afraid of making mistakes. Even though I make mistake. I do not care because everyone does.

What is something you want to do differently next time?

I want to use the strategies I learnt in class in a different context.

Student 9:

Self-Reflection Sheet: Taking part in a group

What are the things you enjoyed about your role in the group?

I have observed all my friends and they had the similar problems with me like anxiety. These games (story cubes) were fun and interesting. One student in my group was better than other members of the group. Therefore he helped us. I want to speak more in class. I am self-confident.

What is something you want to do differently next time?

I want to speak with International students.

The data obtained from students for the first week indicates that students have some certain kind of problems about speaking. At the beginning of the study participants were afraid that they would not be able to improve or promote their speaking skills through this tool since they had not experienced such learning tool before, however later on they have realized that story cubes had enabled learners to gain deep speaking strategies. But after three weeks, applying Story Cubes to students has been found to be highly prominent for the improvement and promoting of the speaking strategies of students.

Based on the data analysed in this study, reader can conclude that story cubes had a great and effective impact on students in terms of their speaking abilities. Drawings from the findings analysis of the study, it could be concluded that story cubes can be considered as a perfect tool so as to promote speaking skill and strategies of student.

Conclusion
At the end of our study we realized that most of the students managed to participate with other group members in class activities. They mentioned on their Self Reflection Sheets that they love the story cubes and that the story cubes allowed them to express themselves in a more free way since it made learning fun.

We believe that these story cubes had tremendous effect on students’ development of communicative skills. As it is known very well, students are more likely to forget what they study in grammar lessons, therefore we managed to retain their knowledge and help them implement it in their daily life as well.

This study shows that students were aware of they were doing in class and they were active participants, hence, we do know that designing such motivational interactive activities helped them to have higher expectations and positive attitude toward language learning.

APPENDICES

STORY CUBES
# Self Evaluation

## Orientation:
Write the unit number, lesson (A, B, C, D), topic, and grammar objective.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Lesson</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Grammar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

## New Vocabulary
Write down some examples of words from this unit.

## Understanding My Learning
Circle the option that best describes your understanding in this lesson.

1. I can understand the instructions for activities in the textbook.  
   1 2 3 4 5

2. I can understand the teacher's instructions (in English).  
   1 2 3 4 5

3. I can understand the grammar for this lesson.  
   1 2 3 4 5

4. I can use the grammar in the activities.  
   1 2 3 4 5

5. I can understand the listening for this lesson.  
   1 2 3 4 5

6. I can understand the reading(s) for this lesson.  
   1 2 3 4 5

7. I can remember at least 5 new words from this unit.  
   1 2 3 4 5

8. I can do the writing tasks in the unit.  
   1 2 3 4 5

9. I used English often today.  
   1 2 3 4 5

10. I can understand the conversation strategy.  
    1 2 3 4 5

11. I used the strategy today.  
    1 2 3 4 5

12. I asked many questions today.  
    1 2 3 4 5

## Reflection
Fill in the following sentences about yourself:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My ______________ability was very good today.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(E.g., My speaking ability was very good today.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want to ___________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(I want to improve my listening to instructions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I often made this mistake today...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(I often made a mistake with spelling, 'actually' today)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I plan to...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(I plan to do the workbook activities this weekend).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

# SELF REFLECTION: TAKING PART IN A GROUP

ED 136 605, 76(3) Retrieved from Online Website

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