

THE ROLE OF CRITICAL FRIENDS GROUPS ON IMPROVING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' SPEAKING ACCURACY (A CASE STUDY OF ALBAHA UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' AT FACULTY OF SCIENCES AND ARTS-ALMANDAQ)

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ABSTRACT: *This paper investigates the positive effect of critical friends groups on improving university students' speaking accuracy. Different speaking activities are also considered and discussed in this study. In this respect, the control and experimental groups data are documented through speaking activities and observation checklists. Speaking activities pre- and post-tests are administered to the both groups. Twenty participants are assigned as a control group and the same amount as an experimental one. The students' achievement is recorded for further analysis. The recorded data is transcribed and measured through speaking accuracy rubric. An analytic scale is also employed by the researcher himself as an observation checklist in pre- and post-test sessions to assess students' performance. The outcome of the both analyses showed that critical friends groups can improve students' ability in speaking accuracy. Moreover, the comparison between findings of accuracy of the two groups demonstrated students' speaking improvement.*

KEYWORDS: Critical Friends Groups, Speaking Accuracy, University Students.

INTRODUCTION

Speaking as a productive skill, is a big challenge to EFL learners. Many EFL learners cannot accurately use English in conversation or correspondence with others. According to Xiao (2009), EFL learners avoid employing target language and cannot apply it in real communication. Hashim (2006) shows that learning a language flourishes most when learners are in a positive environment and are given opportunities to communicate in authentic situations.

In non-native English speaking environment, it is not possible for non-native speakers of the target language to achieve accurately as the native speakers. Native speakers acquire their first language at an early age naturally in the cultural and linguistic environment they were born or grew up in. In a narrow sense of speaking umbrella, accuracy is not an easy task to be accomplished for EFL students. It needs more practice, patience and awareness. Housen and Kuiken (2009) define accuracy simply as “error-free” speech.

A critical friend is typically a colleague or other educational professional, who is committed to helping an educator or school improvement. A critical friend is someone who is encouraging and supportive, but who also provides honest and frank feedback that may be uncomfortable or difficult to hear. So, a critical friend is someone who agrees to speak truthfully, but fruitfully, about weaknesses, problems, and emotionally charged issues. It is assumed that critical friends groups play an important role in pushing the students' speaking accuracy forward.

Objectives of the Study

The study investigates the role of critical friends groups on improving university students' speaking accuracy. The study also:

- a- introduces the different types of critical friends groups in education environment.
- b- explores the relationship between critical friends groups and the improvement of the students' speaking accuracy.
- c- reflects the students' speaking activities.
- d- evaluates the students' contributions in the speaking sessions.
- e- Measures the students' speaking accuracy improvement.

Significance of the Study

This study is considered to be significant for a number of reason:

- a- It is relatively a new field of research.
- b- It deals with an essential issue.
- c- Speaking accuracy has proved to be a big challenging for EFL learners.
- d- The exploration of the impact of critical friends groups on improving the students' speaking accuracy will broaden our knowledge and unveil mysterious areas in speaking practice.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Subjects

The participants in this study are forty university students who are attending English classes at Almandag faculty of Sciences and Arts-Albaha University. The students' age ranged from 18 to 22. The participants were chosen randomly.

Procedure

At the beginning of the semester, an oral pre-test was administered which focused mainly on speaking accuracy. The oral pre- and post-tests were designed by the researcher himself; the participants were asked some questions, choosing randomly. To document the performance of the students for further analysis and comparison, the entire session was recorded. The observer and the teacher and by the assistance of a native speaker judged the performance of students according to the speaking accuracy rubric.

To fulfill the condition of critical friends groups, the experimental students were allowed to choose their members. During the semester, seven general topics were proposed and introduced to the experimental group as the topics of oral discussion, while the students in the control group do not take part in these speaking activities. The experimental students were supposed to search those topics and gather enough information to have enough background to

participate in speaking activities. The students should be present in all sessions and they had to participate actively in the speaking activities and give feedback and correctness. During the speaking activities, the researcher and the observer made no correction and gave no feedback to the speaker.

At the end of the semester, the post-test was conducted for both the control group and the experimental one. Similar to the pre-test session, the questions were asked orally by the researcher and students' responses were recorded and documented. The results of these two recordings in pre- and post-test were compared. The main purpose of this comparison was to see if students' performance showed any improvement or not.

Instruments

The researcher used the following tools to collect data for this study:

Students' Pre- and post-tests

According to Underhill & Nic (1987), to facilitate the testing of speaking accuracy, it is suggested to focus students' on interesting, meaningful and motivating activities which promote and encourage the use of spoken language in real-authentic situations. It is so because for many students the test situation itself creates considerable anxiety which can badly affect their performance.

The pre- and post-tests were orally and designed by the researcher himself with a real contribution of English teachers in the field. The participants were asked to answer some questions. The questions were about personal information like family, leisure time and hobbies, lifestyle and travelling and general ones like human and society, environmental, educational and professional issues. Both the pre- and the post-tests are the same. The pre-test was administered at the beginning of the semester while the post-test was run by the end of the semester after the treatment had taken place.

Observation Checklist

The checklist consists of four columns. Each column has one of the criterion related to speaking accuracy that describes the performance of the students. The students' performance is classified according to the least native-like to the most-native like. Each sentence was given a value, started from (NI-) for the least native-like, to (✓ +) for the most native like. The observer makes a tick to one of the options that describes the performance of the participants. Finally, values of the chosen options are summed up and the total score, out of twenty, is allocated to each participant. This checklist is used by both the observer and the researcher in pre- and post-test sessions in order to evaluate the students' achievement.

DISCUSSION

Over the past several years, educational communities have switched their focus to highly reflective learning as a means of supporting students and increasing their achievement (Dunne & Honts, 1998). Generally, education organizations move from a "me" culture toward a "we" culture, and accordingly, an obvious focus develops within these organizations' structure. This kind of collaborative leadership is important as the learning communities begin to cover all

stakeholders including: students, teachers, families, and community (Huffman & Jacobson, 2003).

Costa, A & Kallick, B, (1993) define a critical friend as "a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critiques of a person's work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work."

According to Anderson, R.K. & Hudson, J. S. (2002), the term critical friends groups was introduced in 1994 by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, which began supporting a professional development called critical friends groups or professional learning communities, they are groups of educators who meet regularly, engage in structured professional discussions, and work collaboratively to improve their school or teaching skills.

Dufour, R. & Eaker, R. (1998) argue that, the role of a critical friends groups is, generally speaking, based on the recognition that professional improvement can be impeded when people and groups avoid facing hard truths, emotionally difficult subjects, and frank assessments of their own performance.. For these reasons, critical friends groups whether they are colleagues in a university or outside professionals, are believed to play a valuable role in helping educators improve their performance.

According to the National School Reform Faculty (2008), Critical Friends Groups are designed to create a professional learning community, provide a context to understand our work with students, our relationships with peers, and our thoughts, assumptions, and beliefs about teaching and learning, help educators help each other turn theories into practice and standards into actual student learning, and to improve teaching and learning. Critical Friends Groups differ from more traditional professional development approaches. The National School Reform Faculty indicated that Critical Friends Groups participants' thoughts were more beneficial for the following reasons: (1) It is continual, (2) It is focused on their own students' learning, (3) It takes place in a small group of supportive and trusted colleagues within their own school, and (4) Participants have control over their own professional learning needs.

A critical friends group facilitates regular meetings with the colleagues who have agreed to look closely at one another's practice and speaking accuracy performance. The group tries to articulate what constitutes good speaking achievement, calling on both outside sources and their own experience. Members visit each others, give feedback on each other's speaking performance, and gather evidence of what works best for improving speaking accuracy. Some compile portfolios to demonstrate and reflect on that evidence; others meet with groups from different colleges to share insights and dilemmas.

Data analysis

This study was an attempt to examine the impact of critical friends groups on improving university students' speaking accuracy of Saudi EFL learners. After gathering data, the recordings of pre- and post-test sessions were transcribed and reviewed carefully. To measure accuracy, speaking accuracy rubric was employed and the main clauses plus subordinate clauses attached to or embedded in them were counted as T-units. Only those T-units that contained no syntactic, grammatical, lexical, or spelling errors were counted as error-free T-units. The number of error free T-units are divided by the total number of t-units in order to calculate accuracy (Arent, 2003).

Table (1): The distribution of the students' Pre- and post-tests performance

No	Level of language ability	N o.	Pre-test				Post-test			
			Control		Experimental		Control		Experimental	
			Mean	St.d	Mean	St.d	Mean	St.d	Mean	St.d
1-	Pronunciation	20	35.92	6.812	34.70	6.464	36.12	6.925	39.74	6.821
2-	Vocabulary	20	40.78	6.926	41.22	7.114	40.88	7.671	45.32	7.634
3-	Grammar	20	40.06	6.731	43.44	7.898	40.41	7.652	46.61	7.811

Table (1) shows the students' speaking performance in both the pre-and post-test. According to the analytic speech assessment, the performance of the students in experimental group indicates an obvious progress in the post-test comparing to the pre-test. The least score that the students have occurs in pronunciation area. In regard to vocabulary and grammar the students' achievement is almost the same. In the pre-test, pronunciation shows (M=34.70, SD=6.464) but after the treatment the post-test's score raises (M=39.74, SD=6.821), whereas the students' performance in the control groups doesn't show a considerable progress in post-test and remains almost as it is. Vocabulary pre-test reveals (M=41.22, SD=7.114) and after the critical friends groups sessions goes up to (M=45.32, SD=7.634). In regard to grammar, the students' achievement shows (M=43.44, SD=7.898) later on, the students' performance score raises to (M=46.61, SD=7.811).

Table (2) pre- and post checklist observation

Items	consistency		usually		sometimes		rarely	
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
consistency Pearson Correlation	1	1	.945*	.903*	.923*	.732	-.778-	-.722-
Sig. (2-tailed)			.015	.036	.025	.160	.121	.169
usually Pearson Correlation	.945*	.903*	1	1	.924*	.881*	-.899*	-.678-
Sig. (2-tailed)	.015	.036			.025	.048	.038	.209
sometimes Pearson Correlation	.923*	.732	.924*	.881*	1	1	-.703-	-.423-
Sig. (2-tailed)	.025	.160	.025	.048			.186	.478
rarely Pearson Correlation	-.778-	-.722-	-.899*	-.678-	-.703-	-.423-	1	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	.121	.169	.038	.209	.186	.478		
N	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table (2) shows the improvement that has taken place during the speaking sessions. Another measure which was under the focus of this study was speech checklist of the observer. The same procedure was followed to compare the performance of students before and after the treatment sessions. The results showed that there was a significant difference in students' speech accuracy in experimental group, while students in control group did not show any significant improvement. The magnitude of the difference was large. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). The experimental group students' show an obvious improvement in creating a simple repeating patterns while their performance in creating patterns with two changing attributes and translating patterns was moderate to some extent.

RESULTS

One the results of accuracy improvement of the participants in the current study, is providing the learners with planning time. The topics of the issues which were introduced to learners for their speaking session were the same topics upon which the questions of pre- and post-test were constructed. Thus, participants of the study had enough planning time before post-test session. Ellis (2009) and Ahmadian and Tavakoli(2011) claimed that practice and planning can be hypothesized to help accuracy and fluency development because they assist language learners to enhance their access to their based knowledge and even.

Another point that can improve accuracy and fluency of participants of this study is background knowledge. The topics assigned for the learners in their speaking sessions were everyday topics, and the participants had the opportunity to search around those topics. Shabani (2013) stated that topic familiarity and background knowledge about a particular topic provide learners with the necessary information to facilitate speaking task and results in more accuracy and fluency of speaking.

It should be noted that, both groups in this research studied the same course book. In the control group, the learners did not have extra speaking sessions. Students in experimental group were active in the class session during the treatment. They could talk to each other, do role-plays, learn many things regarding the speaking ability from their mates, and exchange critical feedback. One reason for the significant improvement of students in experimental group can be more lively and focused participation in speaking activities. Students in experimental group had more opportunity to use language. Two different ways of speaking improvement assessment gave a similar result in this study which confirmed students' speaking improvement by focusing on speaking tasks.

Generally, the students enjoyed the speaking sessions and accepted the feedback and corrections from their mates happily because they were allowed to choose their mates themselves. The speaking sessions were held in friendly atmosphere. The students show a noticeable improvement in speaking accuracy.

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Appendix (A)**Speaking Accuracy Rubric**

F/ C	Levels of Language Ability	Excell ent	Goo d	Fair	Poo r
	Accuracy				
1-	Pronunciation				
a-	Accurate pronunciation, intonation and stress patterns throughout the speaking situation.				
b-	Occasional pronunciation, intonation and stress errors but generally comprehensive.				
c-	Many pronunciation, intonation and stress errors. Hard to understand.				
d-	Pronunciation, intonation and stress problems make speech virtually unintelligible.				
2-	Vocabulary				
a-	Recognize, define and produce words appropriately throughout the oral production.				
b-	Minor words recognition, definition and production problems. Vocabulary generally appropriate.				
c-	Words recognition, definition and production usually inaccurate. Occasional correct words.				
d-	Recognition, definition and production errors make conversation virtually impossible.				
3-	Grammar				
a-	Accuracy on internal structure and combination of words.				
b-	Generally accurate internal structure of words and word-order. Occasional errors.				
c-	Virtually incorrect internal structure and combination of words.				

Appendix (B)**Patterning Speaking Accuracy Observation Checklist**

Student	Creates A simple Repeating pattern	Extends Pattern	Explains Rule	Creates A pattern with two Changing attributes	Translates pattern
1st					
2nd					
3rd					
4th					
5th					
6th					
7th					
8th					
9th					
10th					
11th					
12th					
13th					
14th					
15th					
16th					
17th					
18th					
19th					
20th					

(✓ +) consistently, with a high degree of accuracy.

(✓) usually, with considerable accuracy.

(✓ -) sometimes, with some accuracy.

(NI-) rarely, with limited accuracy.