Oral English Proficiency: Factors Affecting the Learners’ Development

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Abstract

To be proficient in language could be the greatest achievement of a language teacher to a learner, but before achieving such goal, understanding the factors affecting the oral proficiency of learners are worthy of attention. This study aimed to investigate the factors affecting the oral English proficiency of the grade 5 pupils of Bontoc Central School. The study used a sequential mixed method. A questionnaire for teachers and Focus Group Discussion were used in identifying the factors affecting the oral proficiency of the pupils. There were 12 teachers who participated in the study. Two speaking activities were used to evaluate the pupils’ oral proficiency to validate the teachers’ observation on the factors affecting the pupils’ proficiency. Thematic analysis was employed in the analysis of the data gathered from the teachers. The result showed that the main factors affecting the oral proficiency of the pupils are motivation, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. Teaching strategies and curriculum are contributory factors. Based on the analysis of data, the contributory factors are sequentially affecting the performance of teachers and pupils. The teaching strategies and curriculum are not carefully planned and properly executed to suit the learners’ needs which resulted to poor performance of the pupils.

Keywords: Oral proficiency, Affective, Cognitive, and Linguistic Factors and Teaching strategies

Introduction

As one of the official languages of the Philippines, the English language is formally taught in the elementary level to the tertiary level in all schools. It is not only taught as a subject, but it is also used as a medium of instruction except in the primary level where mother tongue (MT) is being used. For children, even before they attend school, some are already exposed to the English language, and may even consider it as their first language (L1). However, even though Filipinos are exposed to the English language, learners of the English language may still find difficulty in developing their English language proficiency especially on their oral proficiency. This could affect their performance when they enter the higher levels of learning and even when they apply for jobs. Cabigon (2015) mentioned, in his article in the Philippine Daily Inquirer, that there is a “decline of the quality of English in the Philippines and the growing number of unfilled jobs in various industries that require certain levels of English communication skills.” A similar report by RaffyTima (2018) in the 24 Oras, GMA News that the English proficiency of Filipino students and teachers are lagging according to a survey conducted by the Hopkins International Partners, the official representative to the group called Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). Tima also reported that it is not only the level of English proficiency of college graduates that is lagging but also the teachers. It was pointed out that one of the reasons could be that teachers have been using Filipino as a medium of instruction even in Math and Science subjects. According to Leonen (2018) in his news article in the Inquirer, the results of the two-year study of Hopkins International Partners on the English proficiency of Filipino graduates has called the attention of the senate where in Senate Resolution No. 622, Senator Grace Poe called for an assessment of the present curricula in the elementary and high school due to reports of narrowing advantage of Filipino graduates in the global language.

Since this is the status quo of the English language in Philippine education, it is then necessary to consider the factors affecting the oral English proficiency of the learners as early as they enter elementary level. This level of education is considered to be the formative years of learning. It is then important to identify these factors at this stage as this will provide insights on the problems that learners face in acquiring oral communicative skills in English. This, in turn, will help the teachers make necessary adjustments in their teaching strategies and also on choosing the appropriate activities and teaching materials for their learners. This may also assist the curriculum planners in reviewing the curriculum on what needs to be emphasized to improve the oral proficiency or the language competence of the learners.
Oral proficiency

With studies on language proficiency especially on oral proficiency conducted in the past, the factors that contribute to second language proficiency are still unclear. This is because of the factors that were identified would depend at several levels like that of young learners to adult learners. However, the most important factors affecting oral proficiency across levels as it was identified by a number of studies are vocabulary and grammar (Iwashita, 2010). Other factors such as pronunciation and fluency are also present at higher levels. According to Higgs and Clifford (1982) as cited by Iwashita (2010), these factors may contribute differently to overall language proficiency of the learners at different levels. Hence, different features in oral proficiency may come into play depending on the level which could also suggest different factors in each level. However, emphasis on grammatical accuracy is the principal determining factor for raters at all levels (Iwashita, 2010)

Affective, Cognitive and Linguistic Factors

In speaking, there are many factors that affect the oral proficiency and accuracy of the language learners serving as the main features of oral proficiency. Derakhshan, Khalili, and Besheti (2016) mentioned cognitive, linguistic, and affective factors that affect student’s oral fluency.

For cognitive, Levelt (1989) (as cited in Derakhshan et al., 2016) pointed out that speaking processes in conceptualization, formation, and articulation happen concurrently, and these lead learners to commit mistakes especially face-to-face. Wang (2014) explains that conceptualization deals with information selected to express meaning, whereas in its formulation, the speaker is required to find out the proper words to use appropriately. While in terms of articulation, the speaker is required to produce speech with his or her articulatory organ (Wang, 2014). Because of this, the speaker’s fluency and accuracy are affected as one cannot really separate cognitive from linguistic factors. Relative to conceptualization, formulation and articulation, linguistic factors are concerned with the use of language forms similar to verbal factors which both relate to words and tone of voice looking at what one says and how one says it. Language forms refer to linguistic factors which include features like pronunciation, grammar, and, vocabulary. In this study, cognitive and linguistic factors are inseparable because if speaking is affected by one factor, the other is also mentioned.

Affective factors are emotions influencing learning such as anxiety and self-restriction and thus affecting the learner’s oral proficiency (Derakhshan et al., 2016) and this is also supported in Woodrow’s research (2006) on the relationship between anxiety and oral performance in the target language. The research indicates that students encounter the most stressful situation when being assessed face-to-face by the instructors and also when performing in front of the class. It has been observed that when students are called on to speak without any preparation, they are stressed out in class (Liu, 2006).

There are sources of anxiety for students which can be observed in a classroom setting. These could be the teachers, examinations, classmates, and some classroom activities among others. All these affect the student’s motivation. According to Brown (2007), affective factor plays a central role in learning a second or foreign language. Related to the study of Gorkaltseva et al. (2015), it shows that the learners’ low motivation for verbal interaction resulted to the learners’ lack of pragmatic competence (the ability to use the language appropriately in different circumstances) and linguistic competence (the ability to use the language and all its component parts). However, Cohen (2010) points out that motivation, as a dynamic process, is not stable but is in a continuous change. Since motivation is important in all kinds of learning, this suggests another effort for teachers to always keep their students motivated. Teachers’ projection of enthusiasm increases the students’ motivation.

Teaching Strategies in Speaking

Based on the K to 12 Basic Education Curriculum 2016, its core learning area standard puts emphasis on the learner’s mastery of basic skills in English. This could be reflected when learners communicate orally in appropriately, fluently, and accurately on different social and academic context at their level while carrying out real life tasks. However, like in many language classes, getting the learners to respond or talk in their class is a problem that most teachers face. Such problem affects the progress of the learners toward improving their oral fluency and accuracy requiring teachers to put more effort in their teaching strategies so that learners are able to demonstrate mastery of basic skills in English in the elementary level. Teachers must explicitly teach speaking in language classrooms to challenge learners to use the target language. The use of the target language serves as a dynamic skill involving simultaneous processes requiring the speaker’s knowledge and skills to be activated in real world speaking.
situations (Goh & Burns, 2012). This means that simply giving speaking activities to learners is not the same as learning the knowledge, skills and strategies of speaking.

Based on language studies, there are strategies that teachers use in improving the learners’ language skills. However, teachers must choose which appropriate strategies to use to address the learners’ needs. The common strategies used in language classes are group work, role play, problem-solving and discussion. As one observes, these activities can all be done by groups to promote communication and interaction among the learners. As Kameradi (2011) points out, group work provides opportunities and encourages students to engage in communication. Biggs (2000) and Webb (2010) also observed that group work or peer interaction gives motivational and social benefits as they allow students to improve their communication skills, increase self-awareness and provide them the opportunities for forming relations. However, these activities have to be organized by the teacher because they do not spontaneously serve to make the teaching strategy as a factor to positively affect oral proficiency of the learners.

**Oral Performance Tasks**

There are several oral performances or speaking tasks that can be utilized to improve the learner’s oral fluency. These tasks are also used in assessing oral proficiency especially when improving fluency and accuracy. Though dialogues have advantages in teaching language because of its authenticity, many studies use monologue tasks for assessing the learner’s oral performance. Monologues are easier especially when it comes to creating its rubrics though the activity is time consuming. Rossiter, Manimtim, and Thomson (2010) found the most commonly used activities to promote oral fluency and these are frequently referred to in research and have been shown to enhance fluency.

Fluency activities are conscious-raising tasks, rehearsal or repetition tasks, use of formulaic sequences, use of discourse markers, communicative free production activities, and oral retelling of a picture-based narrative or picture-narrative activity. Such activities can also be used to assess language accuracy of the pupils.

Conscious-raising tasks encourage learners to discover grammar rules for themselves. As Ellis (1997) defines it, it is an activity where learners are given with L2 data in some form and perform some operation on or with it. This allows learners to understand some linguistic property or properties of the target language.

Rehearsal or repetition tasks require pedagogic process at which opportunities for planning might be manipulated (Ellis, 2005). Learners are allowed to plan the language or content that they will use during the task or they can even rehearse their performance task. However, task repetition changes the speaker’s role each time the task is repeated. Changing the speaker role preserves the task’s integrity since learners are required to create original meaningful ideas each time the task set is performed (Lambert, Kormos, & Minn, 2017).

Woods (2006) describes formulaic sequences as fixed combinations of words that have a range of functions and uses in speech production and communication. Use of formulaic sequences in speaking activities facilitate fluency in speech by making pauses shorter and less frequent, and allowing longer runs of speech between pauses.

Discourse markers - words or phrases like okay, right, anyway or to begin with are signposts in speaking and writing used to connect, organize and manage what the speaker says or writes or how he expresses his attitude.

Free-production tasks are traditionally the most common speaking activity in ESL classes. De Jong and Perfetti (2011) and Segalowits and Freed (2004) used monologue speaking tasks to measure L2 performance. The only difference between these studies is the approach on the measure of L2 performance. In De Jong, linguistic knowledge skills were measured without isolating performance on similar L1 tasks as compared to Segalowits and Freed where they measured aspects of L2 cognitive skills that are unrelated to performance in L1.

Free-talking sessions in assessing oral fluency were also used in the study of Gorkaltseva, Gozhin, and Nagel (2015). There were three free-talking sessions that were administered. The first session focused on topics of interests of the students like hobbies, movies, sports, events, and activities. The second session focused on language problems which allowed the students to express their need to learn more. Last session focused on pop-music related discussions in the classroom. These sessions were all monologue tasks.

The use of pictures is popular in language teaching. Activities using pictures can easily be modified depending on the objectives and topics. An example of this is the picture-narrative task. This activity does not only improve the learner’s oral fluency but also his/her accuracy. In this way, language teachers can also easily identify which domain in language teaching can they focus on like fluency, grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and so
on depending on the performance of the learners after the speaking tasks are given. This activity helps learners generate and develop ideas for speaking. A set of pictures are given to learners who are given few minutes to prepare for their own stories.

The activities mentioned above can be used as monologue activities, but they can also be modified for communicative activities allowing the learners’ use the target language frequently in classroom settings. Other communicative activities include information gap, a jigsaw puzzle, games, problem-solving, and Role-playing. Hedge (2008) also supports the idea that activities that can assist better speaking skills are free discussion and role-playing. Oradee (2012) also adds that these activities do not only develop speaking skills but also create interaction in the language classroom.

Based on the K-12 English Curriculum Guide, to improve the oral language of the pupils, the common suggested activities from Grades 1 to 4 are sharing past experiences, expressing thoughts and feelings, retelling stories, sequencing events, narrating, among others which require free-talk and narration. Since these are the common activities that pupils are used to, this study also uses free-talk activity using elicitation technique and picture-narrative tasks in assessing the oral proficiency of the pupils.

Methodology

This research used a sequential mixed method. As classified and defined by Teddlie and Tashakkori (2003), sequential mixed method is a type of research which involves the collection of quantitative and qualitative data in a single study. The data were collected sequentially and were integrated in a two- stage process of the research. This method was appropriately used since the quantitative and qualitative data were collected; the results were integrated and were used to further explain and interpret the findings from the quantitative phase.

Participants

This research was conducted in Bontoc Central School (BCS), Bontoc, Mountain Province. There were 12 teachers who participated in the focus group discussion (FGD) and answered the questionnaire. All teachers have a bachelor’s degree with 6-15 years of teaching experience. The elementary classroom teachers were chosen as respondents because they spend most of their time with their pupils. They know the strengths and weaknesses of their learners especially when it comes to their academic performance; and they have a first-hand experience of their learners’ behaviors and attitudes. In the learners’ oral language performance, they have a better understanding of their learners’ ability.

With a total of 35 pupils as participants in the speaking tasks, seven pupils from each section were randomly selected from the five sections of the grade 5 level in BCS.

Material

The primary tools used in this study were teacher questionnaire to inquire about the teachers’ observations on their pupils’ speaking ability and interview guide for the FGD. Class proceedings from observation were carried giving the researcher the chance to observe the pupils’ oral abilities during class discussion and their interaction among their classmates. Oral proficiency assessment tool as a secondary tool was also employed. The tool is based on the performance standard of the K12 Curriculum Guide 2016. This further helped the researcher validate the observations of the respondents as well. The results were integrated and were used to further explain and interpret the findings from the teacher questionnaire.

Procedure

Before the gathering of data, content validation of the teacher questionnaire, interview guide, and oral proficiency assessment tool were accomplished by six experts in language education. After the tools were validated and approved, the researcher wrote a letter of request addressed to the school principal of the target population to conduct the study.

The researcher met with the teachers and explained the purpose and the procedures of the study which they all had agreed. The questionnaire was distributed to the elementary teachers and was collected immediately. While the result from the teacher questionnaire was being collated and analysed, the researcher conducted the speaking activities. Free-talk activity was conducted first followed by the picture-narrative task with one week interval. Both speaking activities were done in class. These activities allowed the speakers to use the target language creatively at
the same time reflected their ability to communicate their thoughts effectively. Two raters evaluated the speaking activities.

After the all the data were analysed, the researcher returned to Bontoc Central School and met with the respondents to present the initial findings gathered from the speaking performances of the pupils and from the questionnaire. This was the agreement of the researcher, the participants, and the school head. This gave the researcher the chance to ask further questions and clarifications during the FGD regarding the factors affecting their pupils’ speaking ability.

**Design**

Thematic analysis was employed in the analysis of the data gathered from the teacher’s questionnaire and FGD. The results from the two speaking activities were used to validate the teachers’ observation. The factors affecting the oral English proficiency of the pupils were categorized according to affective, cognitive and linguistic factors, teaching strategies, and curriculum.

**Results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Factors affecting the oral proficiency of the pupils</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. (Affective factor) Pupils’ behavior in the classroom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Bored</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Anxious</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Motivated</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Cognitive factor and linguistic factor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Poor vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Shyness</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Mother tongue</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Inhibition</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Strategies that teachers use in their English class</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Group work</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Role-play</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Problem solving</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Discussion</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Activities used by teachers in improving oral English proficiency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. narrating</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Sequencing events</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. retelling of a picture-based narrative or picture-narrative activity</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. rehearsal or repetition tasks</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. use of formulaic sequences</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. communicative free production activities or free talking sessions oral</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g. conscious-raising tasks</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h. use of discourse markers</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Factors Affecting the Level of Oral Proficiency in English

Affective Factor

Emotions are so powerful that they reflect the person’s mental and emotional state. These can be observed through the person’s gestures, facial expressions and speech. As it was mentioned in the earlier part of this study, affective factors are concerned with the learner’s emotions before, during or after any speaking activity. This means that language learners must be emotionally prepared since this can affect their learning. Affective factors such as anxiety, self-restriction (Derakhshan et al., 2016), and motivation (Brown, 2007) influence the learner’s oral proficiency. The motivated behavior of the students results from the consequences of similar previous behavior. Like in the behaviorist theory, Skinner believes that positive reinforcement is an important component in learning, so students who receive positive reinforcement are likely to develop self-motivation.

In this study, the affective factor, motivation is highlighted in this study. As Brown (2007) has pointed out, motivation plays a central role in learning a second or foreign language. It also shows the teachers’ observation of their pupils’ behavior in the classroom.

In this study, the teachers were asked how they find their pupils’ behavior inside the classroom which included other subject areas. The result showed that six of the teachers found their pupils motivated, four found their pupils bored and two observed that their pupils were anxious. As mentioned earlier, motivation is a dynamic process (Cohen, 2010); teachers may have found their pupils to be motivated in other areas but not in speaking English. One reason could be is that learners do not get the chance to use the target language or if they do, they do it in front of the class which they may consider it as a stressful situation. Because of this, they may get de-motivated and lose interest in learning. This could also be caused by the pupils’ attitude toward themselves.

Gines et al. (2004) pointed out that when the student has positive feelings toward the teachers or the subject, the students are more likely to do the required work. This work itself will acquire a positive value.

When asked if their students were motivated to speak English, five teachers agreed that their pupils were motivated, and when asked on how they motivate their pupils, they answered that it was through modeling. Another was by giving simple words that their pupils could easily understand. Modeling in language teaching has a great
impact on the learner’s performance. Bandura (1961) as cited in Gines et al. (2004) explained that people tend to imitate one another and exhibit behavior they had observed around them. This kind of modeling occurs in connection with all sorts of behavior including language usage. Gines et al. (2004) further explain that students imitate what they see and hear in the classroom, and they are influenced by how the teacher (the model) responds to them. However, six teachers said that their pupils were not motivated to speak English. They explained that their pupils lack interest, vocabulary skills and training. They also added that they did not enforce speaking the English language to the pupils.

The teachers’ observation of their pupils’ lack of motivation to speak was considered to be one factor that affects the pupils’ oral proficiency. Like in many studies, motivation correlates with proficiency. Cheng and Dornyei (2007) observe that motivation acts as an engine that generates learning and boosting students to move forward to help them overcome the difficulties they encounter in learning a language. This was also observed by Gorkaltseva et al. (2015) and Derakhshan et al. (2016) in their study where low motivation affected the learners’ pragmatic and linguistic competence. This meant that learners lack grammatical knowledge and the ability to use appropriate language on different speaking situations. Vocabulary and training are considered to be linguistic and cognitive factors respectively (Levelt, 1989 as cited in Derakhshan et al., 2016; Saunders & O’Brien, 2006; Al Hosni, 2014). In this study, lack of vocabulary and training clearly has caused the pupils’ inhibitions in sharing their stories.

Though all the teachers agreed that they encourage their pupils to speak, it revealed that their encouragement may not be enough to keep their pupils to express themselves through speaking as reflected in one of their previous answers that they do not enforce speaking.

**Cognitive and Linguistic Factors**

Cognitive encompasses conceptualization, formation, and articulation (Levelt, 1989 as cited in Derakhshan et al., 2016). As a speaking process, all these happen concurrently which makes learners commit mistakes in the correct use of language forms especially in face-to-face communication. The respondents admitted that their pupils have difficulty in speaking especially in the English language. Based on the common answers from the teachers, as gleaned in Table 1, the main factors affecting the pupils’ speaking difficulty were vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. Second were shyness and the use of mother tongue; the least is inhibition. This observation also coincides with the pupils’ oral performance as shown in Table 2. The level of the overall oral speaking performance of the pupils is described to be early intermediate in activity 1 and 2 with a mean of 2.1 and 2.5 respectively. From the oral performance of the pupils, they clearly have difficulty in vocabulary since they were groping for words. The pupils were observed to have a fair control of basic syntactic patterns with some important ungrammatical patterns and errors. From the rater’s evaluation, the oral proficiency level of the grade 5 pupils is equated to that of what is expected from the grade 2 pupils which is based from the description of the performance standard of the K12 curriculum guide.

Like in many studies, the common problems for second language learners were the linguistic factors such as vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. When learners have poor vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar, they may likely lose their confidence which explains why they are shy and choose to be silent. Specifically, the teachers agreed that their pupils lack vocabulary. Increasing the vocabulary knowledge of the pupils was sometimes neglected as one teacher explained,

"We give written activities which are easier to check and implement but the oral is neglected." In addition, these questions only focus on what, where and when. The pupils did not have the chance to practice a new word they hear or read.

The findings of this study also collaborate with Al Hosni’s study (2014). Her findings reveal the main speaking difficulties encountered by students, and these are linguistic difficulties, mother tongue, and inhibition. She also adds the teaching strategies used by teachers whose focus is on teaching the form of language like grammar rules and vocabulary items. Another study suggests that many ESL classes lack focused instruction on the development of oral skills (Rossiter et al., 2010).

To find out more on the reasons why these linguistic factors were the common problems of the pupils’ speaking difficulty, the teachers were asked about their perception of their pupils’ level of oral proficiency. Six teachers described their pupils’ level of proficiency as early intermediate; four teachers described the pupils’ level as
beginning, and two described it as intermediate. The respondents admitted that none from their pupils have the advance level or at least the early advance level which should be expected from a grade 5 pupil.

During the classroom observation, the teachers used the teacher-dominated approach. This could hinder the pupils’ progress in speaking. The pupils were simply asked the yes and no questions. This does not expose the pupils to the target language. From studies like that of Alam and Uddin (2013); Rizaz and Mullick’s (2016) among many others from their findings, students were not given enough chance to use the language inside the classroom pointing this out to the teacher-dominated approach. Because of this, teacher to student and student to student interaction were missing. This could be the reason why teachers had observed that their pupils did not have the motivation to speak in English. Also, because the approach is focused on lecture type or teacher-talk, teachers found grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure to be difficult when teaching to their pupils.

**Teaching Strategies**

Speaking, as a dynamic skill involves simultaneous processes which requires the speaker’s knowledge and skills to be activated in real-time (Goh & Burns, 2012). This requires teachers to choose appropriate teaching strategies in teaching speaking, so learners may enjoy the speaking activities and not look at it as something that would embarrass them in front of their peers.

By choosing the appropriate strategies and activities for the learners, teacher-student interaction is observed inside the classroom. The teachers were asked to identify at least three strategies and activities that they usually give their students as reflected in table 1. From the suggested strategies, eight teachers usually use group work activities, five teachers use role-play and discussion, and two teachers use problem solving. On the common activities that teachers use in class as shown in table 1, narrating, sequencing events, and picture-narrative activity are what most teachers usually use to improve their pupils’ speaking ability. Rehearsal or repetition tasks, use of formulaic sequence, free talking sessions, and conscious-raising tasks were only used by few teachers. The respondents did not identify other speaking activities apart from the activities identified in questionnaire. Considering the answers of the teachers on which activities they use most of the time and their observation of their of their pupil’s motivation and oral proficiency, it showed a different result. Group work and role play must improve the pupil’s motivation and peer interaction as what other studies had shown (Kameradi, 2011; Biggs, 2000; Webb, 2010), but from the results of this study, the pupils did not seem to be motivated enough and to perform better. Because of this finding, one can conclude that it would still be on the strategy of the teacher that leads to the question of how these activities were conducted in the classroom.

As Goh and Burns (2012) point out, simply giving activities to learners is not the same as learning the knowledge, skills and strategies of speaking. Activities that were mentioned above could be integrated to have a meaningful outcome. As what Kameradi (2011) found in her study, her findings indicated that group work and role play provide opportunities for students to engage in communication. Giving more chance to learners to talk inside the classroom improves the learners’ speaking ability. In Oradee’s study (2012), using activities such as discussion, problem-solving, and role-playing, she found out that the learners’ oral performance significantly improved. Choosing the right activities and teaching these activities the right way could make the speaking activity be more fun for the learners and increase their motivation.

In the FGD, since teachers’ responses in the questionnaire indicate activities that often use group and other interactive activities, they were asked what could still be missing why the pupils’ oral performance reflected that they were not able to meet the standard of the K-12 curriculum. One participant admitted that teachers tend to choose easier topics which do not challenge the pupils. Another reason was the prepared activity materials where pupils were just instructed to shade or write their answers. This becomes an obstacle in learning speaking on the part of the pupils as Derakhshan, Khalili, and Besheti (2016) explain because teachers do not seem to take into account the pupils’ interest and needs. Furthermore, there could be contradiction between class materials and the topics, so teachers do not facilitate real practice in speaking.

**Curriculum and other DepEd requirements**

The K-12 curriculum was implemented in the School Year 2011-2012. One of the ultimate goals of the curriculum is for learners to achieve communicative competence. To achieve this, context-based and spiral progression learning are applied in all subjects (Department of Education, 2016). In language learning, MT, English,
and Filipino are taught as subjects starting from grade 1, and the focus is on oral fluency. MT is included as a subject in this curriculum since this is based on the theory that learners learn best through their MT. However, during the FGD, the teachers argued that this does not reflect in the academic performance of the pupils. The teachers described that when pupils were asked to explain a concept even with the use of MT, the pupils still have difficulty in communicating their thoughts much more with the use of English. The grade 3 and 4 teachers emphasized that this is because the grade 1 pupils had a weak foundation, especially on vocabulary building.

On improving the pupils’ fluency and accuracy, one teacher cited an example where he compared the Basic Education Curriculum (BEC), the old curriculum, to the K-12 curriculum. He expounded on the sequence of teaching language skills in both curriculums. In BEC, the pupils were taught reading in the first quarter in grade 1 while in the K-12, reading was taught in the third and fourth quarter in grade 1. Because of this, his pupils have difficulty in reading. He also observed that the reading performance of his pupils who were under the BEC was better compared to his pupils in the K-12. He added that the reading performance of the pupils reflected the pupils’ oral performance. Non-fluent readers have difficulty in expressing their thoughts in the English language.

Another factor that the teachers had cited is the learning aids. Since the K-12 implementation, all teaching and learning materials were revised. Because of this, most schools, especially in the rural areas lack teaching materials for selected subjects like MT. The teachers gave an example like the available MT teaching and learning materials were based from other regions of the country. In grade 1 to 3, the teaching materials for other subjects were already translated in mother tongue such as Ilocano, Filipino, Cebuano and others, but there were no materials written in Cordilleran languages. This became a challenge especially for Grade 1 to 3 teachers since they were required to use mother tongue for instruction.

The teachers also commented on the subjects required in grade 1 to 3 stating that there were many subjects pupils need to learn as compared to BEC. With many subjects, there is lack of time so there is no focus. Another teacher further explained that, ‘The subjects are like a little of everything, so we sometimes neglect the needs of our pupils just so we could finish what is required in that week.’

Other than the implementation of the K-12 Curriculum, there are also other programs and requirements from DepEd that teachers need to comply. An example of this was the DepEd Order No. 73.s. 2012 commonly known to teachers as mass promotion. One teacher expounded that there were many drawbacks of this order affecting the pupils and teachers. In this order, pupils who failed in a subject were expected to work on these deficiencies. In the elementary level, a pupil who failed to attend most of the class is expected to have make up in all of the subjects over the summer. Another teacher also emphasized the importance of Individual Performance Commitment Review Form (IPCRF) over this order. IPCRF is based on the Civil Service Commission Memorandum Circular No. 6, S. 2012. In DepEd, IPCRF reflects what the teacher has done for the school year, and this is also the basis for incentives. He said that other teachers do not have any choice but to manipulate the grades of the pupils so that the teacher’s performance will not be affected as the performance ratings of a teacher are affected by retention based on this order.

Based from the FGD, with these new changes in the Philippine educational system, teachers are burdened with paper works and other requirements which affect their function in instruction.

Conclusion

The main factors affecting the pupils’ oral proficiency development in the English language are motivation, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. On motivation, lack of interest, lack of vocabulary skills and training are the factors that demotivate the pupils in learning English. The teaching strategies and curriculum are also contributory factors that affect the pupils’ oral proficiency development. On teaching strategies, teachers do not facilitate real practice in speaking since appropriate strategies and activities are not carefully planned which resulted to contradiction between class materials and the topics. The current curriculum also requires teachers too many paper works which led to a less focus to their function in instruction. Pupils’ mastery of subjects is not met because of the additional subjects in the primary level.
References


