The use of information-gap activities in improving students' speaking skill: a study on pre-departure trainees at Faculty of International Cooperation and Training, Hanoi University of Industry = Nghiên cứu về việc sử dụng các hoạt động khoảng trống thông tin trong việc cải thiện kỹ năng nói cho sinh viên khóa dự bị tại Khoa đào tạo hợp tác quốc tế - trường Đại học Công nghiệp Hà Nội. M.A. Thesis Linguistics: 60 14 10 / Vũ Lan Hương ; Supervisor : M.A. Phạm Lan Anh

ABSTRACT

Communicative Language Teaching has been applied by many teachers with more attention on teaching spoken language. It requires some teacher’s changes of teaching methods from the traditional ones to more communicative methods. One of strategies used in communicative approach is using information-gap activities to teach speaking. Information-gap tasks have been advocated by a number of second language acquisition researchers as an ideal method for teaching speaking, since they offer students an opportunity for authentic second language interaction in the classroom. It is important to gain the compatibility between students’ preferences for information-gap activities and teachers’ preferred teaching methods. Therefore, this paper aims to explore students’ as well as teachers’ attitudes towards the implementation of information-gap activities. As indicated by findings from this study, teachers and students find information-gap activities effective in increasing students’
participation as well as encouraging them to use English in speaking lessons. By analyzing and comparing the results of students’ and teachers’ response to questionnaire and interview about information-gap activities, the author attempts to shed some light on the effectiveness of these activities and how to best implement them.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1. Rationale

Nowadays, when Vietnam is on the way to regional and global integration, a demand for training students as competent communicators has been made for Vietnamese education in general and foreign language education in particular. A high proficiency of spoken English becomes not only an academic goal but one of the crucial keys to access advanced science and technology. However, there exists one problem that teachers and students of English in Vietnam cope with: the target language is mainly used in the classroom and learners have few opportunities to use English in authentic contexts outside the classroom. This problem sets a challenging task for teachers of English in Vietnam; that is to design communicative activities which can provide students with “real” contexts for negotiating meaning so that they can develop communicative competence. This requires some changes in teaching approach from the traditional one which put emphasis on the production of accurate grammatical sentences
into CLT approach which focuses on developing learners’ communicative competence, i.e. the ability to communicate through language.

In order to determine the effectiveness of classroom activities, a search for teachers and students’ opinions of these activities is necessary because students may undervalue the activities assigned by teachers if there are any differences between their beliefs and teachers’ ones. This may cause students’ inactive participation and gradual loss of motivation to learning.

The above reasons have urged the author to conduct a study to show a picture of students and teacher’s opinions concerning the effectiveness of classroom activities with a focus on information gap tasks.

2. Purposes of the study

The study is to investigate the use of information-gap activities in improving pre-departure trainees’ speaking skill, specifically:

- To investigate the current practice of information-gap activities in speaking lessons at FICT, HaUI
- To explore pre-departure trainees’ attitudes towards the implementation of information-gap activities in speaking lesson
- To explore teachers’ attitudes towards the implementation of information-gap activities in speaking lesson

3. Research questions

a. What are pre-departure trainees’ attitudes towards the implementation of information-gap activities in speaking lessons?

b. What are teachers’ attitudes towards the implementation of information-gap activities in speaking lessons?

c. How effective is the implementation of teaching speaking through information-gap activities to pre-departure trainees at Faculty of International Cooperation and Training?

4. Scope of the study

Learners’ success or failure in learning speaking can be affected by many factors which are closely related. Among these factors, their opinions about what the teacher implements in
speaking lessons need taking into consideration. However, this study only focuses on pre-departure trainees’ opinions about the implementation of information-gap activities in teaching speaking, particularly, their evaluation of the effectiveness of these activities in terms of promoting their participation and encouraging them to use English in speaking lessons.

5. Significance of the study
The study is carried out with the hope to provide teachers of English at FICT – HaUI with a deeper understanding about benefits of using IG activities in teaching speaking skill. In addition, it is hoped that the study will be of great use in helping teachers find an effective way to increase their students’ participation as well as encourage them to use English in speaking lessons.

6. Methods of the study
A survey is done by delivering a questionnaire to 30 teachers of English and another questionnaire to 200 pre-departure trainees at FICT – HaUI who are being taught speaking skills under the process-based approach. Furthermore, interviews with pre-departure trainees and teachers and a class observation are also carried out to investigate how information-gap activities are implemented in speaking lessons at FICT – HaUI and the trainees’ participation. All the collected information and data are analyzed and discussed.

7. Design of the study
The thesis consists of four chapters as follows:

Chapter 1 provides a general introduction, including the background for the research topic and its aim, significance, scope, research questions and the design of the thesis.

Chapter 2 is an attempt to review some theoretical background for the study. The two underlying theories: communicative approach and cooperative learning which are the background for information-gap activities to occur are discussed. In addition, the teaching of speaking and an overview of information-gap activities are also presented.

Chapter 3 presents the methodology underlying the study, including the background information of the context where the study is conducted, the subjects, the instruments used to collect data, and the procedures of data collection. Besides, the teaching and learning English at FICT – HaUI is described. Furthermore, a detailed description of data analysis is presented.
Chapter 4 is the conclusion of the study. Some explanations, interpretations of the findings of the study and some pedagogical implications are given in this chapter. In addition, some possible suggestions for further research are also discussed.

CHAPTER II - LITERATURE REVIEW

2.3. Information-gap activities

2.3.1. Definitions of information-gap

Authors have many ways to define an IG activity. However, most of them entered into an agreement that in an IG activity, one person has certain information that the other doesn’t and they must be shared with others in order to fulfill a task.

2.3.2. Kinds of information-gap activities

There are some ways to classify kinds of IG activities and each author has the reason for their classification.

IG activities in the view of Littlewood (1992) are considered as functional communicative activities which consist of two kinds: *sharing information with restricted cooperation* and *sharing information with unrestricted cooperation*.

Norman, Lewis and Hedequist (1986) point out that there are two kinds of IG activities: *puzzle form* and *personal questionnaire*.
Ur (1981) in the book “Discussions that work” offers many kinds of IG activities such as: *finding things in common, detecting differences, putting in order*, etc.

Among these ways of classification, I agree most with Ellis (1999) when he classifies IG activities as *one-way and two-way*.

2.3.3. Roles of teachers and students in information-gap activities

2.3.3.1. Roles of teachers

In the information-gap activities, the teacher performs some particular roles. Firstly, he/she works as a “facilitator” with some specific duties such as to provide students with linguistic forms or skills that they need, to organize the classroom activities, to correct the linguistic errors made by students and to give help if necessary. Secondly, the teacher plays a role of a co-communicator and takes part in students’ activities. Lastly, during the activities, the teacher keeps students under observation to find out good and bad points of students to plan future activities.

2.3.3.2. Roles of students

- Learners often engage in role play or dramatization to adjust their use of the target language to different social contexts.
- Learners’ needs, styles and aims are focused on or accounted for.
- Learners are given some control; their creativity and innovation are encouraged.

2.3.4. Benefits of using information-gap activities in teaching speaking skill

- Increasing students’ motivation for speaking
- Ensuring equal students’ participation
- Developing both accuracy and fluency of students
- Improving students’ ability of negotiating meaning

CHAPTER III: THE STUDY
This chapter elaborates the setting of the study, the informants involved in the study and different methods of data collection including the aims of each method. The data collected from the survey questionnaires, the interview and class observation were analyzed in details.

CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

4.1. Findings

(i) Pre-departure trainees’ attitudes towards the implementation of IG activities in speaking lesson

The results of the study reveal that pre-departure trainees often have opportunities to take part in IG activities in speaking lessons. In general, kinds of IG activities are liked by trainees, especially games and exchanging personal information, whereas completing a grid is considered to be boring. While half of trainees feel that these activities create motivation for them in their learning and 35% think this ability to create motivation is reasonable, there is only 17% are not satisfied with these. Up to 71.5% of trainees believe that the learning atmosphere when conducting IG activities is really stimulating. What motivates them, according to the results, is teachers’ pre-teaching some vocabularies, the interesting topic, and teachers’ in-time help.

In terms of teachers’ performance during the activity, it can be said that most of teachers, in general, work well in the class. However, the findings of the questionnaire and the interview with trainees indicate that there still exist some problems of teachers’ practices that are out of trainees’ expectations. Firstly, although trainees always want their teacher go round and help them during the activity if necessary, some teachers only stay at their seat and ask for their participation. This may lead to the fact that trainees do not keep taking in the activity. Secondly, when correcting mistakes, trainees do not want their teacher jump in whenever they make mistake, which make them discouraged. Moreover, trainees desire to listen to both the praise and criticism, not the criticism only when they are given feedback from teachers.

(ii) Teachers’ attitudes towards the implementation of IG activities in speaking lesson

The data of the questionnaire stress that almost all of teachers use IG activities with the major aim of motivating trainees to speak English in class and ensuring their equal participation.
Following this aim, they always try to choose suitable activities for their trainees, in which trainees’ language level is the most important criteria, followed by lesson’s topic and objectives.

The findings of the survey also show that when conducting IG activities, in order to involve trainees in the activity, many teachers go round to check trainees’ performance and keep them on right track. They also help inhibited trainees by giving them some clues. The direct interview with teachers indicates their opinion that checking trainees to ensure their going on right track can avoid any misunderstanding so that trainees can fulfill their tasks in right way.

In order to encourage trainees to use English in class, teachers believe that pre-teaching some vocabularies is necessary. In addition, choosing an interesting topic of acceptable language level is another way to motivate them.

According the data collected from the survey, teachers also have some difficulties during the implementation of IG activities. These include involving all trainees in the activity, encouraging them to use English in class, selecting suitable activities and organizing the class. Possible explanations to these difficulties might be the large size of classes and trainees’ mixed ability in a class.

(iii) The effectiveness of IG activities in teaching speaking

The findings of the questionnaire reveal that the majority of trainees and teachers consider IG activities effective in speaking lessons. As for trainees, IG activities are suitable for their language proficiency, so they can use English to communicate with their partner to accomplish the tasks given by teachers. The classroom observation shows that during the activity, trainees use acceptable language which is comprehensible to their partner; however, they use their mother tongue if they receive unclear information and want to clarify it or react to what they receive. In terms of trainees’ participation, they are motivated to participate actively when the teachers give them an interesting topic or games. These things are factors which help to encourage trainees to use English to communicate with their partner.

According to both teachers and trainees, IG activities provide equal opportunities for trainees. In addition, based on what is observed in the classroom, the researcher also finds out that
during IG activities, there is an increase in trainees’ talking time when they are required to work in pairs. They have more opportunities to communicate with their partner rather than working in groups of 4 or 5 students. However, the quality of the talking time in all tasks is not the same. When trainees are concerned about the product, they only focus on the final result; therefore, they do not pay attention to the use of English to fulfill the task. In contrast, when their concern is about the process of learning, there is an increase in using English to communicate.

4.2. Discussion

Due to the limited time, the researcher only observed two classes; therefore, the results gained from the classroom observation cannot generalize to other classes in the faculty.

During the classroom observation, the researcher recognized that trainees have difficulty using English to ask for clarification and confirmation from their partner as well as repair communication. At that time, they used Vietnamese instead. The obvious reason for that problem lies in the fact that the teachers did not provide trainees with strategies for successful speaking such as expressing opinions or ideas and how to ask for clarification and confirmation in order to encourage L2 meaning negotiation in group contexts.

In addition, the observation demonstrates that when trainees do the IG activities, they just give and elicit the information from their partner without having any expansion on and reaction to what they receive. That is the reason why “the amount of communication is minimal”. (Hutchinson and Klepac, 1982, p. 135, cited in Basturkmen, 1994)

To maximize trainees’ amount of communication in class, apart from the role of a facilitator, teachers should also act as co-communicator and takes part in trainees’ activities to give them some models of how to expand and react to the information they elicit from their partner.

4.3. Implications

This section will provide some pedagogical implication from the findings of the study.

IG activities have an important place in the language classroom. They stimulate learners to manipulate their foreign-language skills and linguistic knowledge to the full in order to close the gap. IG activities are also user-friendly for the teacher to recycle previously taught information. Some will take more time to implement, but it is an investment well worth the
effort. And a well-planned lesson is always necessary to contribute to the effectiveness of IG activities. Teachers should consider the following main issues in their lesson plans when deciding to choose any IG activity:

*Purpose:* the purpose of the activity needs identifying so as to assure that it suits the objectives of the lesson.

*Organization:* Who is in control - the class or the teacher? Once teachers develop the necessary classroom management skills, they can effectively implement IG activities.

*Length of Lesson:* The element of time must be considered to ensure the progress of the lesson

*Ability level:* Consider the ability of the class, homogeneous or heterogeneous groupings, and adaptations such as a backup plan when students cannot do the activity as planned.

*Materials and procedures:* What is needed for the lesson and the way teachers present IG activities included in the lesson plan will help them practice well in class.

*What?* What is the context for your IG activity?

*How?* Through which new points will the main skills be introduced?

In order to make IG activities effective, apart from a good lesson plan, teachers should take into consideration the following things:

- When the task is assigned, instructions and a specific role or task for each student should be described and stated simply and clearly. In addition, instructions should not be too long to avoid confusion for students as well as decrease TTT and increase STT.

- The result of the study shows that most of teachers group students according to their proximate positions because it’s time-saving. However, where possible, break the class into groups according to students’ ability level. In this way teacher can assign suitable tasks to each group, creating more language opportunities in such group and producing a secure, anxiety-reducing climate for learning. In addition, due to students’ low level of English, teachers should encourage students in any achievement they make and make them believe that they can succeed with learning as long as they try their best.

- According to the data from the questionnaire, teacher’s scaffolding, i.e. the teacher helps with necessary language for the activity, is the factor that keeps students motivated to use English in class. Therefore, teachers should provide beforehand the vocabulary, the structure
or pattern that students need to carry out the task. In addition, students should be provided with some useful strategies for expressing opinions or ideas and asking for clarification and confirmation. When they know these strategies, not only L2 meaning negotiation in group contexts is encouraged, but students’ confidence to communicate in the target language is also built. Students should also be taught more about strategic competence such as how to initiate, terminate, maintain, repair and redirect communication as well as the appropriate language to use in certain situations. When students have fewer problems with language, they are more likely to take active roles in the class. Moreover, interesting topics of acceptable language level are suggested to motivate students to use more English in class.

- When students are working in groups or pairs, teachers should circulate around classroom to ensure that students are on the right track and see whether they need your help. Staying at their seat and ask for students’ participation, teachers cannot involve all students into the activity as well as control students’ use of English.
- Teachers should give corrective feedback on students’ performance at the end of the task in order to avoid making students discouraged. As the research result indicates, students sometimes receive too much criticism for their speaking task, which makes them desperate. Therefore, teachers should also balance positive and negative responses.

Finally, IG activities themselves cannot work effectively. Also it takes time and effort of teachers as well as students for stable effectiveness to take place.

4.4. Limitations of the study
Although the study is carefully and clearly designed and based on reliable data, it has the following major limitations:
First, the study only considers the implementation of IG activities in one particular pedagogical situation – the pre-departure speaking class.
Second, there are many other communicative activities which can help students to improve their speaking skill; however, the study only focused on IG activities as an effective tool to improve students’ speaking skill.
Third, the suggestions made in the study focus on English teachers only. There are no suggestions on other aspects as changes in the University disciplines, improvement of the textbook and so on.

4.5. Suggestions for further researches
Using communicative activities in teaching speaking still remains a wide area to study. Further research should have a deeper insight into the exploitation of other communicative activities to develop speaking skill. As for exploiting IG activities in teaching and learning speaking skill, I would suggest that research on developing a collection of IG activities for particular course books would contribute to deal with the shortage of applicable materials for teachers. Besides, studies on teachers’ difficulties in selecting and adapting IG activities or criteria to choose suitable activities would be worth considering.