

**EFFECT OF FREE DISCUSSION STRATEGY ON JSS II STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE IN
SPEAKING SKILL IN GWER-WEST LGA, BENUE STATE**

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Abstract

The study investigated effect of free discussion strategy on JSS II students' performance in speaking skill in Gwer-West Local Government Area, Benue State. Two research questions guided the study while two hypotheses were formulated to test the research questions. The study employed single quasi experimental research design. The target population of 3,000 JSS II students for 2021/2022 academic session in Gwer - West Local Government Area of Benue State was selected for the study. The sample consisted of 60 students in one intact class from one school. Purposive and random sampling technique using balloting method involving a pick from a hat method was adopted. The instrument and the instructional tools used for data collection in the study were: Speaking Performance Test (SPT) and lesson plans. Mean and standard deviation was used to answer the research questions while t-test was used to test the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed that free discussion strategy has significant effect on students' speaking skill. There was also significant difference between male and female students' speaking skill. The study recommended among others that teachers of English Language should adopt free discussion strategy to teach students speaking skills.

Key words: speaking, free discussion, gender, speaking skill, performance

Introduction

Speaking is considered as a major language skill to be mastered by students in terms of communication. This is because the ability to speak a language fluently is an indication of mastering of that language since speech is the most basic means of human communication. However, learning to acquire speaking competency is a herculean task for learners of English Language. This means that, students mostly find it difficult to speak fluently in English language. A few students might want to express their ideas in English but they do not know how to speak so they use their body language and speak with lot of pauses (Murcia, 2014).

Lia (2015) views speaking as an act of giving oral expression to thoughts, opinions and feelings in terms of talk or conversation. Dyah (2017) states that speaking is an activity involving two or more people in which listeners and speakers have to react to what they hear and make their contributions at a speed of a high level. Besides, other scholars view speaking as a multi-sensory activity which involves paralinguistic features such as eye-contact, facial expression, body language, tempo, pauses, voice quality changes, and pitch variation which affect conversational flow (Thornbury & Slade, 2015) cited in Sari (2019). This means that speaking encompasses transfer of thoughts and feelings into words and uncovering mental constructs, processes and operations.

Speaking is very effective in learning a language. Richard (2002) in Rahayu (2015) states that the ability to understand a language is measured by the result in speaking skill. This means that someone achieves success in learning after acquiring good speaking skills. Although language learners recognize the importance of oral practice to achieve communicative and linguistic competence. The reactions arising from language competence often cause students to avoid oral participation or remain passive when they are asked to express their ideas or opinions in a language class (Mendez & Fabela, 2014). Sari (2019) maintains that it is essential for learners of language to master speaking skills because it is a process of constructing meaning which covers almost all components of language. Thus, through speaking a learner can express his/her ideas, minds, and thoughts freely and spontaneously. According to Dian (2018) speaking aids learners develop their vocabulary and grammar skills and then better their writing skills. Speaking is vital even outside the classroom. This entails that speakers of language have more opportunities to find jobs in different organizations and companies. Baker and Westrup (2003) posit that learners who speak English Language very well can have greater chance for better education and good jobs. The ability to speak fluently and efficiently can add immense value to an individual's personality. It can also provide the speaker with many merits such as the ability to inform, develop contacts with others, persuade and direct, provide view point on various matters, stand out from the rest, career enhancement, the fulfilment of needs, personal satisfaction and proper and adequate adjustment according to the environmental demands (Borah, 2020).

However, students have some challenges of developing speaking skill. According to Juhana (2012), students do not like speaking because of fear of mistake, shyness, lack of confidence and lack of motivation. It is envisaged that some other obstacles that affect the learning of speaking skill include: fear of criticism, worry about making mistakes, inferiority complex and fear of intimidation by a few learners' dominance in the cause of learning. On the other hand, some learners are constantly faced with the challenge of mother tongue interference. In addition, in appropriate use of teaching methods affects students' speaking skill (Sa'ad & Usman, 2014).

In order to improve students' speaking skill, Menggo, Seken and Ratminingsih (2013) maintain that motivation is a key factor which influences the rate and success in speaking second language. Besides, Sa'ad and Usman (2014) advocate for free discussion, prepared talks, questionnaires, simulation and role play, debate, game strategy, acting script and communication games as strategies that can be used by English Language Teachers to improve students' speaking skill.

Free discussion strategy involves grouping of students into small groups for effective deliberation on a topic, a problem or an issue. It is a thinking together process in which students talk freely to the teacher. It is a student-centred method since students participate actively. The role of the teacher is that of a moderator. There is flow of information from teacher to students and from student to students. The teacher does not allow individuals to dominate the discussion (Yusuf, 2012). Amal and Rawda (2021) add that free discussion strategy embolden critical thinking and excellent preparation for speaking, which partially

examine the ability to explain and rationalize ideas and opinions in English Language. Most importantly, discussion activities give sufficient opportunity for students to produce language and it can be a great way of making fun for students. Thus, the application of free discussion strategy increases students' motivation and interest which enhances students' speaking skill. Teachers who involve free discussion activities in their lessons can support and maintain students' concentration. Therefore, speaking up in front of the class helps students to practice their public speaking skills smoothly and courageously. This enhances confidence in speaking and improve fluency. Killen (1996) cited in Putri (2016) points out that free discussion strategy is an appropriate strategy in the area of teaching speaking. This entails that the use of free discussion strategy maintains students' interest than a passive, teacher-centered learning method; it therefore secures active involvement in learning which motivates students, particularly when they see that others value their contributions and respect their points of view. This turn up to affect the development of speaking skill in learners positively.

Furthermore, the research carried out by Menggo, Seken and Ratminingsih (2013) affirmed that there was significant difference in speaking ability between students who were taught by using free discussion strategy and those taught by using the conventional technique. This shows that free discussion strategy improves students' speaking skill. Putri (2016) also affirmed that free discussion strategy has significant effect on the eleventh grade students' speaking ability. This means that the application of free discussion strategy when teaching speaking skill would greatly improve students' speaking skill.

Gender in common usage refers to the sexual distribution between male and female, while the social scientists however refer to the term as a social construction rather than a biological phenomenon (Leonard, Benjamin & Sagary, 2011). Ado (2015) noted that girls outperform boys in speaking. There is a lot of variability and dispersion. In students' performance, there exists terms such as "bright student", "average student" and "dull student". The variability cannot be attributed to a single factor, but it is the outcome of number of factors such as intelligence, study habits, self-concept, creativity, aptitude, interests, socio-economic factors and gender. Thus, gender of the students also plays an influencing factor on students' academic performance (Ado, 2015). According to Wentzel (2001) cited in Ado (2015) the most widely reported findings in the area of language suggest that girls tend to do better than boys in speaking and that boys tend to excel greatly in Mathematics. Conversely, the findings of Ariyo (2006) disagreed with the earlier study that there is significant gender difference in speaking in favor of boys. Olupide (2012) and Kola and Taiwo (2013) found in their various studies that there is no significant difference between male and female performance in speaking. Inorder to find out the difference that exist between male and female speaking performance and also improve speaking skill in students, the researchers are prompted to find out the effect of free discussion strategy on JSS II students' performance in speaking in Gwer-West Local Government Area of Benue State.

Problem Statement

Speaking is very effective in learning a language. This means, learners achieve huge success in learning after acquiring good skills in speaking. Thus, the goal of English language learning is to communicate effectively. By implication, it will be useless for language learners to lack the ability to speak the language at the end of their study. As one of English language skills to learn, speaking stands as an important aspect of English to be learned. The genesis of teaching speaking is at the elementary level of education. Instead of getting more students who are able to speak fluently and confidently in English Language the outcome seems to be inadequate and unsatisfied. For instance, it can be inferred that from a hundred of students, only a few are able to speak fluently in English Language. This has called for a general public concern in Benue State, and Nigeria at large that majority of students lack speaking skill and thus cannot sustain conversation in English. Many students in secondary schools are shy and prefer to remain quiet in class because they are unable to express themselves properly in spoken English. Learners who lack speaking skill often speak slowly, take long time to compose utterances, do not participate actively in conversation, their spoken English do not sound natural, have poor grammar and pronunciation.

It is envisaged that the teaching methods most often used by English Language teachers in the teaching and learning of speaking is considered as one of the factors that hinders acquisition, competence, confidence and performance in speaking skill. However, some teachers use teaching methods that do not

enhance motivation to speak in class (Sa'ad & Usman, 2014). Merisuo (2012) attributed students' poor performance in speaking skill to anxiety. This means that sometimes extreme anxiety may lead to despondence and a sense of failure in learners. This in turn has negative effect on the oral performance of English speakers.

The aforementioned factors affect students' performance in speaking skill. Consequently, most of the students hardly speak frequently in the class while some remain silence during the whole class activity. This study therefore sought to find out whether free discussion strategy could positively affect the teaching and learning of speaking skill.

Research Question

1. What is the effect of free discussion strategy on students' speaking skill?
2. What is the difference between male and female students' speaking skill?

Hypotheses

1. Free discussion strategy has no significant effect on students' speaking skill.
2. There is no significant difference between male and female students' speaking skills.

Research Method

The researchers adopted single group quasi experimental design for the study. This research design according to Emaikwu (2012) involves three steps, namely a pre-test measuring the dependent variable to be administered; the experimental treatment is applied to the respondents; and a post- test measuring the dependent variables is administered to the respondents. This research design has no control group. This is because inclusion of a control group could have led to researchers' bias and environmental variation as external variables that could have interfered with variables under study. The interactive nature of free discussion strategy has informed the choice of using this research design. The population of the study was made up of 3,000 JSS II students across 32 secondary schools for 2021/2022 academic session in Gwer-West LGA Benue State. The study adopted purposive and random sampling technique using balloting method involving a pick from a hat method in the sampled schools for the study. Two schools were randomly selected from 32 secondary schools. A simple random sampling technique using balloting method involving picking from a hat was used in selecting the 60 sampled students. 60 "Yes" was written on pieces of paper and the remaining pieces of paper had "No" written on them. These pieces of papers were squeezed and put in a large container. After shaking the papers in the container, the sampled students for the study were allowed to come out one by one to pick up one piece of paper from the container. Those that picked yes were used for the study. The choice of JSS II was informed because students in Naka town could speak Tiv language frequently owing to the fact that the major language spoken is Tiv. This entails that JSS II students in the sampled area might have little exposure to English and also have limited avenues to speak or express themselves fluently in English Language.

The researchers used Speaking Performance Test (SPT) as instrument and lesson plans as instructional tools for data collection in the study. The Speaking Performance Test (SPT) had four questions. The students were instructed to answer only one question. 50 marks were allocated to each question. The pre-test was administered thereafter treatment was offered using lessons plans as instructional tools. The post-test was administered after treatment schedule which lasted for three weeks. The test was carried out on individual student. As they speak, the researchers recorded each student's answer on a question and at the end, the researchers interacted and discussed with students to ascertain their speaking performance.

Speaking Performance Test (SPT) and lesson plans were submitted to one expert in Mathematics and Science Department and one expert in the Arts and Social Sciences Education Department, Faculty of Education, Benue State University, Makurdi to ascertain the appropriateness of research design, statistical tools for data analysis, content, construct and face validity and also scrutinize the nature of questions to elicit data from the sampled respondents. The experts found the instrument and instructional tools satisfactorily for the study. The researchers administered Speaking Performance Test (SPT) as pre-test on respondents. Thereafter, the free discussion strategy was used in teaching students speaking skill. A post-test was administered after treatment. The scores were recorded and coded accordingly for data analysis. Mean and

standard deviation was used to answer the research questions while t-test was used to test the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. According to Emaikwu (2012) mean and standard deviation is suitable to the study because it is the most reliable measure to central tendency.

Results

The data obtained were presented, analyzed and interpreted in line with the research questions and hypotheses as follows:

Research question 1: What is the effect of free discussion strategy on students’ speaking skill?

Table 1: Mean and standard deviation of the effect of free discussion strategy on students’ speaking skill.

Group	N	Mean	SD	Mean Difference
Pretest	25	17.40	7.38	8.00
Post-Test	25	25.40	9.46	

Data in Table 1 shows the difference in the effect of free discussion strategy on JSS II students’ speaking skill. The data reveals that students’ mean speaking skill in the pre-test was 17.40 with standard deviation of 7.38 while students had 25.40 in the post-test with standard deviation of 9.46. The difference in students’ speaking skill in the pre-test and post-test when exposed to free discussion strategy is 8.00 in favour of post exposure to free discussion strategy. This means that students improved in their speaking skill when exposed to free discussion strategy.

Research Question 2: What is the difference between male and female students’ speaking skill after exposure to free discussion strategy.

Table 2: Mean and standard deviation of the difference between male and female students’ speaking skills after exposure to free discussion strategy.

Group	N	Mean	SD	Mean Difference
Male	8	30.63	11.78	7.69
Female	17	22.94	7.30	

Data in Table 2 shows the difference between male and female students’ speaking skill after exposure to discussion strategy. The data reveals that male students had mean scores of 30.63 with standard deviation of 11.78, while female students had a mean scores of 22.94 with standard deviation of 7.30. This means that male and female students’ speaking skill were improved after exposure to free discussion strategy. However, the disparity in students’ speaking skill in terms of gender was 7.69 in favour of male students. This suggests that there are some gender gaps in students’ speaking skill when exposed to free discussion strategy.

Hypothesis 1: Free discussion strategy has no significant effect on students’ speaking skill.

Table 3: T-test of difference in students’ speaking skill when exposed to free discussion strategy.

Group	N	Mean	SD	Df	t.value	P	Remark
Before Exposure	25	17.40	7.38	24	6.928	0.000	Significant
After Exposure	25	25.40	9.46				

Data in Table 3 reveals a summary of the t-test difference in students’ speaking skill when exposed to free discussion strategy. The table reveals that $t = 6.928$, $P = 0.000 < 0.05$. hence, the null hypothesis was rejected. This means that free discussion strategy has significant effect on students’ speaking skill.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference between male and female students’ speaking skill.

Table 4: T-test of difference between male and female students' speaking skill after exposure to free discussion strategy

Group	N	Mean	SD	Df	t.value	P	Remark
Male	8	30.63	11.78	24	12.290	0.000	Significant
Female	17	22.94	7.30				

Data in Table 4 shows a summary of the difference between male and female students' speaking skill after exposure to free discussion strategy. The table reveals that $t = 12.290$, $p = 0.00 < 0.05$. hence, the null hypothesis was rejected. This implies that there is significant difference between male and female students' speaking skill.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study revealed that free discussion strategy has significant effect on students' speaking skill. The implication is that free discussion strategy is effective in improving students' performance in speaking skill. This finding corroborate with the findings of Putri (2016) who found that there is significant effect of free discussion strategy to improving students' speaking ability. Amal and Rawda (2021) in their findings concur that free discussion strategy can enable students to raise their level of motivation, confidence and fluency, and thus improve their speaking skill. The present study is in line with the study of Menggo, Seken and Ratminingsih (2013) who found that there is a difference in the speaking ability between students who are taught by using free discussion strategy and those taught by using conventional strategy.

The findings also revealed that there is significant difference between male and female students' speaking skill. This study agrees with Ariyo (2006) who found a significant gender difference in speaking in favour of boys. In contrast Ado (2015) found that girls outperformed boys in speaking. Similarly, according to Wentzel (2001) cited in Ado (2015) the most widely reported finding in the area of language suggest that girls tend to do better than boys in speaking and that boys tend to excel in Mathematics. This means that the present study disagrees with the findings of Wentzel (2001) cited in Ado (2015) and Ado (2015) hence male student outperformed female students in the present study.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study showed that free discussion strategy is an effective teaching strategy that can improve students' speaking skill. This means it has the potency of improving students' performance in speaking skill. Besides, there exists a significant difference on male and female students' speaking skill when exposed to free discussion strategy. The study therefore recommended among others that:

- (i) Faculty of Education and College of Education should expose English Language teachers in training to free discussion strategy for effective teaching of speaking skill.
- (ii) English Language teachers in Gwer-West LGA of Benue State should be encouraged to constantly use free discussion strategy in teaching speaking skill.
- (iii) Benue State Government in conjunction with Ministry of Education should organize seminars and workshops regularly to teach English Language teachers on how to use free discussion strategy as well as other strategies in teaching students speaking skill.

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