

Peer Conversation for Developing Speaking Skills: Perceptions from Students of a Public University

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine whether peer conversation in English improves speaking skills. The study also aims at finding how frequently students practice speaking in English with their peers. The data was collected from fifty participants (second year to Masters students) from an English Department at a public university. The data was collected through a close-ended questionnaire and analyzed through a quantitative research method. The collected data reveals that conversing with peers is a very effective way of improving speaking skills. The study also reveals that students who practice English conversation regularly are able to develop their speaking skills day by day. Besides, peer interaction is also helping them to be confident and to feel at ease while speaking in a public place or facing a viva voce. The study also shows that students are learning to choose the best words and express their feelings and attitudes more clearly through peer conversation.

Keywords: peer conversation, improve, quantitative, effective, confident

Speaking is an essential skill that students must have in their academic and professional life. If students have good knowledge about their discipline but they cannot express that knowledge comfortably and fluently, all of their learning goes in vain. Unfortunately, this happens in most of the cases in Bangladesh. Students mostly concentrate on reading and writing skills, and are less motivated to speak because of shyness and the fear of making mistakes in public. In addition, language teachers often do not emphasize the development of students' oral skills. As a result, conversation practice always remains a neglected skill. To overcome this shortcoming, speaking with peers (friends, classmates, etc.) can be a very effective strategy as students often conduct such conversations mostly in Bengali. All they have to do is try to speak with their partners in English. This study aims to evaluate whether peer talk improves fluency and proficiency, whether it enhances language acquisition and promotes active learning in English. Researchers over the years contributed to establish peer talk as a technique to develop speaking but they did not consider the perceptions of the learners about peer talk. This study will cover this research gap.

Research Questions

- a. Does peer conversation help students acquire fluency and comfort in speaking?
- b. To what extent are students being benefitted by peer conversation practice?

Significance of the Study

Speaking skills, like listening skills, are often neglected in the classroom. Language teachers often teach reading and writing skills but ignore speaking skills. As a result, students may know grammar well but may not improve their speaking. In this situation, peer conversation is a good practice for developing speaking skills. Students can discuss new ideas, question one another,

perceive meanings, clarify their understandings, and make their ideas comprehensible to their partners. Their understanding grows as they talk with their partners. They can learn to be conversant in English. They can also develop fluency, clarity, and thus can be very effective and good speakers through peer conversation.

Literature Review

Previously, many authors have contributed to the research of peer conversation practice for developing speaking skills through their scholarly writing. In a study conducted by Ronald N. Cortright, Heidi L. Collins and Stephen E. DiCarlo (2005), it was found that peer interaction enhanced students' mastery of original course materials and the ability to solve novel problems in a physiology course. Although it is a physiology course, the peer talk strategy may show the same results in English language classes. So, conversing with peers is a good way to involve learners in the classroom and help them comprehend course contents. Similarly, C.H. Crouch and E. Mazur (2001) showed that student learning improved more with peer conversation than traditional lectures. In traditional lectures, teachers speak most of the time and the students remain mostly silent whereas in Crouch and Mazur's study (2001), it was noticed that students' learning enhanced as they themselves were involved in discussing the subject topics.

Similar findings are observed in the study by C. Doughty and T. Pica (1986). They found that peer activities provided opportunities for interaction and negotiation of meaning and more learners were actively engaged when peer activities were integrated into classroom instructions. The important point is that students' involvement in classroom activities increased due to using the peer conversation strategy. Apart from academic life, peer talk also leads to success in professional life. For instance, Edleston (1987) found that oral communication skills were at the head of a list related to job success. That is why Hynds and Rubin (1990) suggested that students must learn to talk to themselves, hold conversations, interviews, small group discussions, talk to teachers, parents, peers, and members of the community. They must learn how to change their talk for the appropriate situation and audience. Again, H. Loh (1993) observed that peer interaction showed improvement in learning, confidence, self-esteem, and leadership as well as an acquisition of group management and presentation skills. So, peer talk not only leads to language acquisition but also facilitates other social skills like self-respect, leadership, and making of new friends. In fact, friendships and relationships (between children) often depend on the ability to express feelings appropriately (Smith, 1993). Peer talk helps to express feelings more comfortably. Staab (1992) states, "I believe that oral language is important not only as a vital communication tool that empowers us in our daily lives but also as a valuable way to learn."

Hedge (2000) says that speaking in the classroom makes learners capable of coping with their lack of language knowledge; for example, students speaking slowly, repeating, or clarifying their ideas while talking together is regarded as negotiation of meaning (discussion to reach agreement) which aimed at making the output more comprehensible. Harmer (2001) argued that discussion with peers can be seen as the most useful and interesting form of oral practice in the classroom since it offers opportunities for students to exchange their opinions, talk

about their experiences, and express their views to develop their communicative ability when using the target language. Working with peer partners is widely reported within education, often to improve specific classroom skills. For example, Buzbee (2005) says that, in collaborative classrooms, peer coaching maximizes the natural learning environment for staff and pupils. Besides, Topping (2005) defined peer conversation as the acquisition of knowledge and skills through active helping and supporting among equals or matched companions. Small group interaction with peers offers several benefits for English language learners: repetition of key words and phrases; functional, context relevant-speech; rich feedback; and reduced student anxiety (Hill & Flynn, 2006, p. 56). Interaction makes the learners able to test their communicative success through exchanging information with the teacher or among the students themselves (as stated in Lyster, 2007, pp. 102-103). Learner-Learner interaction can occur either in groups or in pairs called peer interaction for the sake of giving students opportunities to speak and practice speaking skills in the classroom in order to receive feedback in the target language through correcting each other's errors or asking questions to each other when working in groups (Mackey, 2007, p. 30).

So, it is evident from past studies that peer conversation helps promote language learning. Students can learn to express themselves more appropriately and understand others when they speak. Besides, the previous studies also emphasize on practicing peer conversation in a language classroom in order to engage students in classroom activities and increase students' confidence and fluency in the target language.

Methodology

The study was conducted on fifty students who are currently studying at the Department of English in a public university in Dhaka. The students were from the second year to Masters class. The participants were selected by convenience sampling. Students who were available and willing to take part in the research were invited. The analysis was done using the quantitative method. The data was collected from the respondents by means of a close-ended questionnaire. A five-point Likert scale was used and attitudinal data was collected. The collected data was analyzed through simple percentage analysis. The research design for the study is co-relational. The relation between peer talk and improvement of speaking skills is analyzed. First, the frequency of peer conversation is analyzed and then students' improvement in speaking has been discussed.

Limitations of the Study

Only students' opinions about peer talk were taken in the present study. The participants were not tested orally to determine how fluent they have become through peer conversation practice. Again, students' improvement over a long period of time was not observed as it is a lengthy process and requires much time and resources. The researcher also did not observe the students while they conversed in English with their classmates or with the teacher in the classroom due to time constraints

Findings and Discussions

The researcher conducted the study on fifty students of the Department of English at a public university. The data was collected by means of a questionnaire. The study began with asking the participants whether they were fluent in speaking English and whether they were confident in their speech. They were also asked if they were able to express their feelings and choose appropriate words in English through peer conversation. The majority of the participants showed a positive attitude to peer conversation and supported the hypothesis that speaking with their classmates and friends really helps them become better speakers.

The findings are presented below:

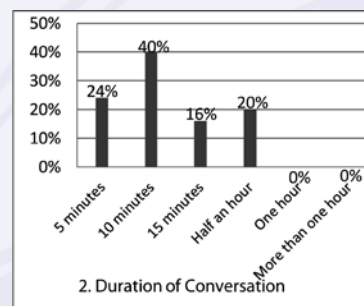
How frequently do students speak in English?

Respondents were not asked if they spoke English as the study was conducted on students of the Department of English and they are required to speak in English in the class. Many of them have to converse in English with their classmates while doing assignments or discussing the topics covered in class. So, the survey began with asking the participants about the frequency of speaking; that is, how many times in a week they practiced their English with their peers. 16 participants out of fifty (32%) said that they converse in English every day with their classmates. These students continue peer conversations regularly throughout the month. Again, 10 participants (20%) said that they speak four times in a week and so they practice English conversation sixteen times in a month. These students speak in English very often. Besides, 2 participants (4%) said that they speak three times in a week and so twelve times in a month. On the other hand, 12 participants (24%) said that they converse in English only two times a week or eight times a month. These students practiced speaking only sometimes. The rest 10 students (20%) said that they practice peer conversations once in week. These participants speak English very rarely. So, from the response of the students, it is seen that the majority of the students practice peer conversation in English.



How long do students continue peer conversation?

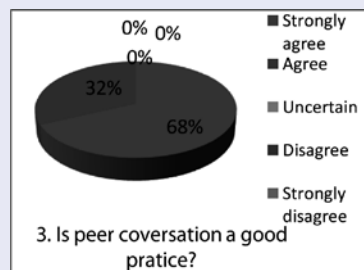
Next, the researcher wanted to know the duration of the participants' conversation in English. 12 participants (24%) said that they continue the conversation for five minutes and 20 participants (40%) said they speak for ten minutes. Again, 8 respondents (16%) said that they talk for fifteen minutes and the rest 10 respondents (20%) said that they practice their speaking for half an hour. It is noticeable that none of the participants converses in English for one hour or more. The maximum duration of the students' conversation is thirty minutes and their number is low: 20% (10 students out of 50). The collected data shows that 24% students continue their conversation for five minutes,



which is a very short time for developing one's speaking skills. However, students who practice for ten minutes (40%) and fifteen minutes (16%) can gradually improve their speaking skills. Again, conversing for half an hour is very good practice but the number of participants is only ten, that is just 20% of the total students.

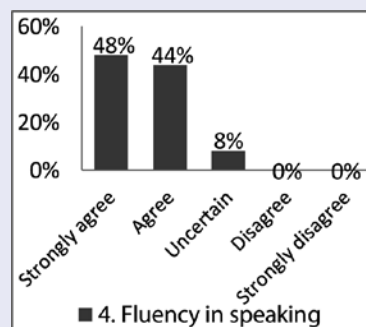
Is peer conversation a good practice for developing speaking skills?

Participants were asked their opinions about peer conversation and whether they thought peer conversation is a good practice for developing speaking skills. 34 participants out of fifty (68%) said that they strongly agree and 16 participants (32%) said that they simply agree that peer conversation is a good strategy for improving speaking skills. None of the participants responded negatively to the question of whether peer conversation is a good way to practice speaking. So, it is clear from the analyzed data that peer conversation improves students' speaking skills.



Are students becoming fluent in speaking?

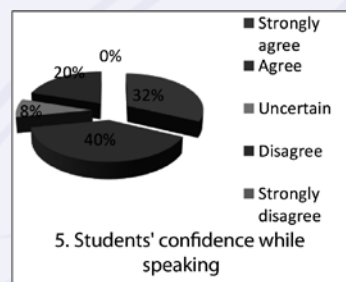
The researcher wanted to know whether peer conversation is making students fluent in English. However, there was no scope to observe them for a long time and so they were only asked what they thought of their fluency. 24 respondents out of 50 (48%) said that they strongly agreed and 22 respondents (44%) said that they simply agreed that they were growing more fluent in speaking by conversing in English with their peers. However, 4 respondents (8%) were uncertain about their development of fluency in English. They could not determine their present state of fluency by themselves.



However, none of the participants denied their improvement in fluency as nobody disagreed with this statement. It is evident from the found data that 46 respondents out of 50 (92%), or the majority, are positive about being fluent in speaking through peer conversation.

Are students confident while speaking in a public place?

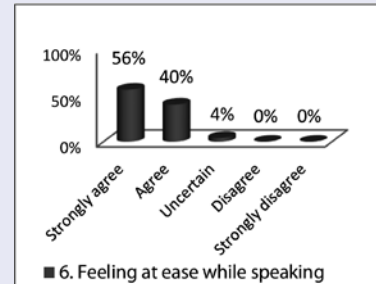
Practicing speaking usually makes learners confident about speaking in a public forum. So, to understand the confidence level of the study participants, the researcher asked them what they thought about how helpful peer conversations are in gaining the confidence to speak. 16 respondents out of 50 (32%) strongly agreed that through peer conversation they have grown confident about speaking in a public place. 20 respondents (40%) simply agreed about the rise in their confidence level. However, 4 respondents (8%) were uncertain about being confident. They do not know whether their confidence level is increasing or remaining the same. On the other hand, 10 participants (20%) disagreed that their confidence increased while speaking in a public place. Altogether, 72% students (36 participants out of 50)



either simply agreed or strongly agreed about being confident in speaking in English through peer conversation. This implies that peer conversation helps language learners feel confident about speaking outside the classroom.

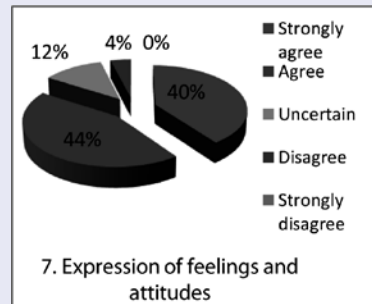
Does peer conversation help students feel at ease while speaking in the viva voce?

After understanding the confidence level of the students, the researcher wanted to know whether peer conversation helps students speak more comfortably in the *viva voce* exams. Not having access to the viva board, the researcher simply asked the participants about this. 28 respondents out of 50 (56%) strongly agreed that peer conversation in English helped them speak at ease when they faced the *viva voce* board. Again, 20 respondents (40%) simply agreed about feeling at ease. On the other hand, 2 respondents (4%) were uncertain about whether peer conversation helped them in the *viva voce*. In short, 96% participants (48 students out of 50) felt benefitted as a result of peer conversation and they could speak comfortably in their oral exam.



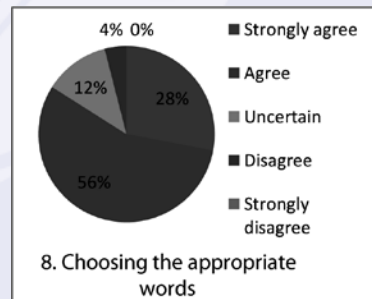
Can students express their feelings and attitudes clearly?

Students can easily express their feelings, emotions, opinions, and attitudes through their mother tongue. The researcher, however, wanted to know if the participants could express their feelings in English in the same way as in Bengali. 20 respondents out of 50 (40%) strongly agreed that they can express their opinions, attitudes, and feelings through practicing English with their peers. 22 participants (44%) simply agreed about the clear expression of opinions and feelings. On the other hand, 6 participants (12%) were uncertain and two participants (4%) disagreed, saying that they were not able to express their attitudes and feelings through peer conversation. Overall, 84% (40% + 44%) were able to express their opinions and feelings clearly through peer conversation.



Can students choose the appropriate words through peer conversation?

Regular practice in speaking enables learners to choose the most appropriate words when they are engaged in speaking. Participants were asked whether they could choose appropriate words when they spoke. 56% of the participants (28 participants) agreed that peer conversation helps them choose appropriate words while 28% participants (14 participants) strongly agreed about choosing the correct words in conversation. However, 12% participants (6 students) were uncertain and 4% participants (2 students) disagreed about the opinion that peer conversation is helpful



for choosing appropriate words. The data reveals that the majority of the participants (84%) are able to choose appropriate words when speaking with their peers. So it can be concluded that peer conversation is a good strategy to learn English.

Are the students' speaking skills improving?

Opinions	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree	26 participants	52%
Agree	12 participants	48%
Uncertain	0 participants	0%
Disagree	0 participants	0%
Strongly disagree	0 participants	0%

The best way to measure students' speaking skills is to let them speak on any topic and assess their speaking by listening to their accent, pronunciation, and diction. However, the researcher chose not to use this method because most of the participants would feel shy to speak in front of someone they were unfamiliar with and this would make their speaking unnatural. The second option was to observe the students' conversation for several months which was not possible due to time constraints. So participants were simply asked what they thought about their speaking skills; whether their speaking skills were increasing from peer conversations or remained the same. 26 participants out of 50 (52%) strongly agreed and 24 participants (48%) simply agreed about their improvement of speaking skills. It is noticeable that 100% students (50 participants out of 50) agreed that they were developing their speaking skills through peer conversations and none of the students denied this improvement.

What is the participants' present level of speaking?

To determine students' present level of speaking is a little difficult. Participants were asked to assess themselves on speaking with options as "better, good, same, bad, and worse." 30 respondents out of 50 (60%) reported that their present level of speaking is better in comparison to their past. 20 respondents (40%) said that their present level is good. It is important to note that 100% participants (50 participants out of 50) said that their overall speaking skills are improving through peer conversation.

Recommendation

As peer conversation practice leads to students' fluency, language teachers should be encouraged to employ peer conversation activities in a language classroom. Students should be instructed to initiate peer conversations and group discussions in the class. In addition, students who want to practice their English skills outside their classroom should be encouraged to converse with their peers and thus become fluent speakers of the language.

Conclusion

Peer conversations in English is an effective way of enhancing language learning. Students learn to participate effectively in collaborative discussions and exchange ideas. They learn to

be fluent and confident in speaking. They can choose appropriate words and express their opinions and feelings clearly. Thus, students who practice peer conversation improve their speaking skills continuously.

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Appendix 1 (Questionnaire)

This questionnaire is prepared for the students who converse in English with their peers to develop their speaking skills. Please tick the answers that you think are correct.

1. I speak in English with my friends and classmates

Everyday	Four times a week	Three times a week	Two times a week	Once a week
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2. I continue my peer conversation for

Five minutes	Ten minutes	Fifteen minutes	Half an hour	One hour	More than one hour
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3. I think peer conversation is good practice for developing speaking skills.

Agree	Strongly agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly disagree
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4. I have become fluent by conversing with my peers.

Agree	Strongly agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly disagree
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5. I have become confident about speaking in a public place.

Agree	Strongly agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly disagree
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6. Peer conversation helps me to feel at ease when I am speaking in the viva voce.

Agree	Strongly agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly disagree
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7. By speaking with peers I can express my feelings and attitudes more clearly.

Agree	Strongly agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly disagree
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8. Peer conversation helps me to choose the appropriate words.

Agree	Strongly agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly disagree
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9. My speaking skills are improving day by day through peer conversation.

Agree	Strongly agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly disagree
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10. In comparison to my past level, my present level is-

Better	Good	Same	Bad	Worse
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Thank you very much for your participation.