

A Study On Peer Conversation for Developing Speaking Skills: Dhaka University Students' Perceptions

Raju Ahmmed¹

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. Twenty five participants (First year to Masters) of English Department, Dhaka University were selected for the research. The data was collected through close ended questionnaire and analyzed through 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 being 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 the 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.

Key words: peer conversation, quantitative research, effective, confident.

1. Introduction

Peer conversation is a real life conversation practice through which students learn to be spontaneous while speaking. Conversing with a partner is also an authentic activity which helps learners to improve their speaking skills. So, having a partner to practice speaking in English enhances language acquisition. Again, peer interaction helps students to have direct conversation which promotes active learning. Moreover, learners need practice to become proficient in the target language and so peer talk is a useful strategy for practicing English speaking.

2. Research Questions

1. How frequently do students use peer conversation to practice speaking in English?
2. To what extent speaking with peers develop students' speaking skills?

¹ Lecturer and Research Assistant, Department of English, The Millennium University, 5 Momenbagh, Rajarbag, Dhaka-1217.
E-mail: rajudueng@gmail.com

3. Significance of the Study

Speaking skills like listening skills are often neglected in the classroom. Language teachers often teach reading and writing skills and ignore teaching 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 ideas, question one another, perceive meaning, clarify their understanding 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 speakers through peer conversation.

4. Literature Review

Cortright, Collins, and Discarlo (2005) showed that peer interaction enhanced student mastery of original course materials and ability to solve novel problems in a physiology course.^[1] Crouch and Mazur (2001) showed that student learning improved more with peer conversation than traditional lectures.^[2] Peer activities can provide opportunities for interaction and negotiation of meaning and more learners can be actively engaged when peer activities are integrated into classroom instructions (Doughty & Pica, 1986).^[3] Edleston (1987) found that oral communication skills were at the head of a list related to job success.^[4] 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).^[5] 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 (Hynds & Rubin, 1990).^[6] Loh (1993) says that peer interaction shows improvement in learning, confidence, self-esteem and leadership; acquisition in group management skills and attainment in presentation skills.^[7] Friendships and relationships (between children) often depend on the ability to express feelings appropriately (Smith 1993).^[8] 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."^[9] Topping (2005) defined peer conversation as the acquisition of knowledge and skills through active helping and supporting among status equals or matched companions.^[10]

So, it is evident from the 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 doing peer conversation practice in a language classroom to engage students in classroom activities and to increase students' confidence and fluency in the target language.

5. Methodology

The study was conducted on twenty five students who are currently studying at Department of English, University of Dhaka. The students were from first year to

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master's class. The participants were selected by simple random sampling. Quantitative method of analysis was used in this study. Data was collected from the respondents by means of questionnaire. All the options in the questionnaire were close ended. Five point Likert scale was used and attitudinal data was collected. The collected data was analyzed through simple percentage analysis. Then the data has been presented in tables, pie charts, and bar graphs for 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 presented and then students' improvement in speaking has been discussed.

6. Limitation of the Study

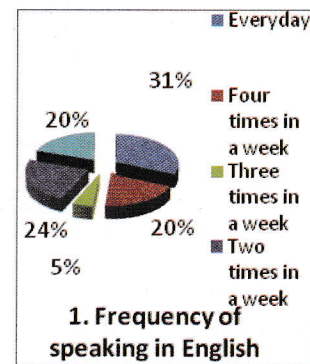
Only students' opinions about peer talk were taken in the present study. The participants were not tested orally to determine how fluent they have been through peer conversation practice. Again, students' improvement over a long period of time was not observed as it is a lengthy process and requires much time and resource.

7. Findings and Discussions

I conducted this research on twenty five students of Department of English, University of Dhaka. The data was collected by means of questionnaire. I did not observe my students while they conversed in English with their classmates or with the teacher in the class because I had time constraints. I only took their opinion about peer conversation in English. I asked my participants whether they are being fluent in speaking and whether they are being confident in their speech. I also asked them if they are being 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 that speaking with their classmates and friends really helps them become very good speakers.

7.1 How frequently do students speak in English?

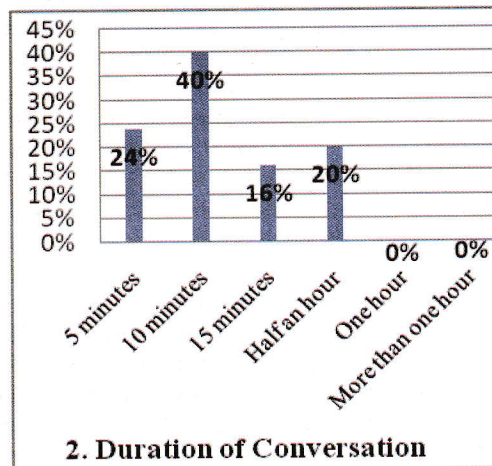
I did not ask my respondents if they speak in English or not because my study was conducted on the students of Department of English and I know they have to speak in English in the class and many of them have to converse in English with their classmates while doing the assignments or discussing the topics done in the class. So, my first question to my participants was about the frequency of speaking that is how many times they practice their English with their peers. Eight participants out of twenty five (that is 31%) said that they converse in English everyday with their classmates. These students continue peer conversation regularly throughout the month. Again, five participants out of twenty five (that is 20%)



said that they speak four times in a week and so they practice English conversation for sixteen times in a month. These students speak in English very often. Besides, one participant out of 25 (that is 5%) said that he speaks three times in a week and so twelve times in a month. On the other hand, six participants out of 25 (that is 24%) told that they converse in English two times in a week and so eight times in a month. These 24% students practice their speaking sometimes. The rest five students (that is 20%) told that they practice peer conversation once in a week. These participants speak in English very rarely. The graph shows that the majority of the students practice peer conversation in English.

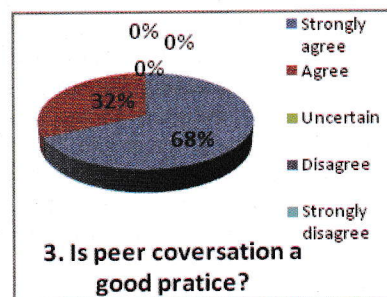
7.2 How long do students continue peer conversation?

After knowing the frequency of speaking, I wanted to understand how long my participants continue their speaking in English. So, my second question to my participants was how long they continue their conversation. Six participants out of 25 (that is 24%) said that they continue peer conversation for five minutes and ten participants out of 25 (that is 40%) told that they continue their conversation for ten minutes. Again, four respondents out of 25 (that is 16%) told that they continue their conversation for fifteen minutes and the rest five respondents (that is 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 than one hour. The maximum duration of the students' conversation is thirty minutes and their number is 20% (5 students out of 25). The graph shows that 24% students (6 students out of 25) 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 a very good practice and the number of participants is only 20%.



7.3 Is peer conversation a good practice for developing speaking skills?

I asked my participants what they think about peer conversation and wanted to know whether they think peer conversation is a good practice for developing speaking skills or not. Seventeen participants out of 25 (that is 68%) said that they strongly agree and eight participants out of 25 (that is 32%) said that they simply agree about the statement that peer conversation is a good strategy of improving speaking skills.

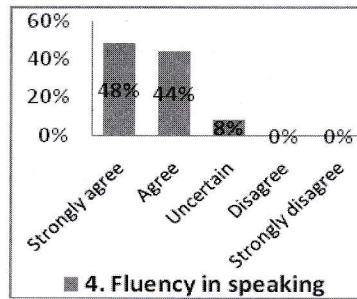


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None of the participants disagrees about the opinion that peer conversation is a good practice of speaking. So, it is clear that peer conversation improves students' speaking skills.

7.4 Are the students being fluent in speaking?

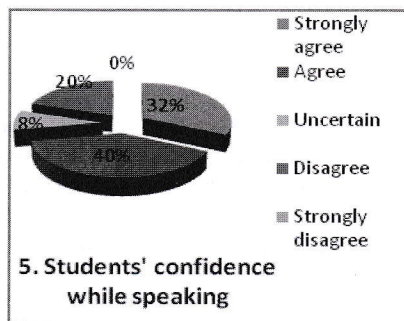
I wanted to know whether peer conversation is making students fluent in English speaking. However, I did not have a scope to observe them for a long time and so I asked them what they think about their fluency; whether they are being fluent or not. Twelve respondents out of 25 (that is 48%) told that they strongly agree and eleven respondents out of 25 (that is 44%) said that they simply agree about the statement that they are being fluent in speaking by conversing in English with their peers. However, two respondents out of 25 (that is 8%)



were uncertain about their development of fluency in English. They could not determine their present state of fluency by themselves. Besides, none of the participants denies their improvement in fluency. It is clear from the graph that 23 respondents out of 25 (that is 92 %) either simply agree or strongly agree about being fluent in speaking through peer conversation. So, the majority of the students opine that they think they are being fluent in speaking through peer conversation.

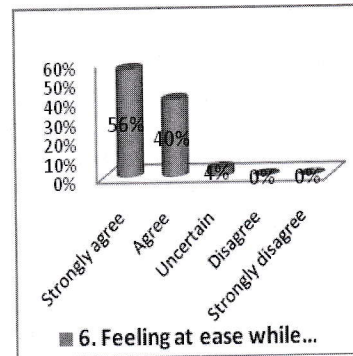
7.5 Are the students being confident while speaking in a public place?

Practicing speaking makes learners confident while they speak in a public place. I wanted to understand the confidence level of my participants and so asked them if their confidence is increasing or remaining the same. Eight respondents out of 25 (that is 32%) strongly agree that through peer conversation they are being confident while speaking in a public place. Again, 10 respondents out of 25 (that is 40%) simply agree about their improvement of confidence. However, two respondents out of 25 (that is 8%) are uncertain about being confident. They do not know whether their confidence level is increasing or remaining the same. On the other hand, five participants out of 25 (that is 20%) disagree about their being confident while speaking in a public place. From the graph it can be assumed that 72% students (18 participants out of 25) either simply agree or strongly agree about being confident in speaking English through peer conversation. So, this means that peer conversation helps language learners to feel confident while speaking.



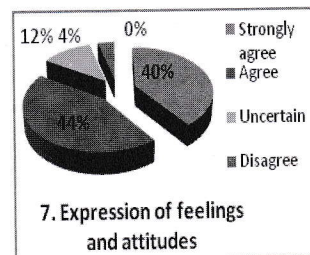
7.6 Does peer conversation help students feel at ease while speaking in the viva board?

After understanding the confidence level of the students, I wanted to know whether peer conversation helps students to speak comfortably in the viva voice. I did not have access to the viva board and so I simply asked my participants whether peer conversation provides any help in the viva voice. 14 respondents out of 25 (that is 56%) strongly agree that peer conversation in English helps them speak at ease when they face the viva voce. Again, 10 respondents out of 25 (that is 40%) simply agree about feeling at ease. On the other hand, one of the 25 respondents (that is 4%) is uncertain about whether peer conversation helps him to speak at ease in the viva board or not. The graph implies that 96% (24 participants out of 25) are being benefitted through peer conversation and they are being able to speak comfortably in the viva board.



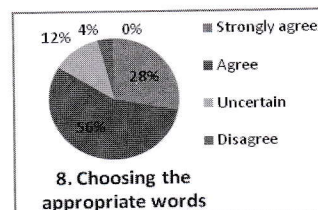
7.7 Can students express their feelings and attitudes clearly?

Students can easily express their feelings, emotions, opinions and attitudes through their mother tongue. I wanted to know if my participants can express their feelings in the same way in English as they do in Bengali. 10 respondents out of 25 (that is 40%) strongly agree that they can express their opinions, attitudes and feelings through practicing English with their peers. Again 11 participants out of 25 (that is 44%) simply agree about the clear expression of opinions and feelings. On the other hand, 3 participants out of 25 (that is 12%) are uncertain and one participant (that is 4%) disagrees about his improvement in expressing attitudes and feelings through peer conversation. The graph indicates that 84% (21 participants out of 25) are being able to express their opinions and feelings clearly through peer conversation.



7.8 Can students choose the appropriate words through peer conversation?

Regular practice in speaking enables the learners to choose the most appropriate words when they are engaged in speaking. I asked my participants whether they can choose appropriate words when they speak. 56% participants (14 participants out of 25) agree that peer conversation helps them to choose appropriate



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words. Again, 28% participants (7 participants out of 25) strongly agree about choosing the correct words in conversation. However, 12% participants (3 participants out of 25) are uncertain and 4% (one out of 25) participants disagree about the opinion that peer conversation is helpful in choosing appropriate words. The graph indicates that 84% participants (21 out of 25 participants) are being able to choose appropriate words when speaking with their peers. So, I can conclude that peer conversation is a good practice for learning English.

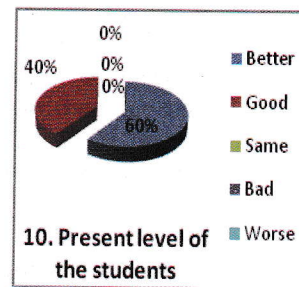
7.9 Are the students' speaking skills improving?

The best way to measure students' speaking skills is to let them speak on any topic and assess their speaking by listening their accent, pronunciation and choice of words. However, I did not use this method because I knew that most of my participants will feel shy to speak in front of me and this may make their speaking unnatural. The second option was observing my participants' conversation for several months which I could not do because of time constraints. So, I simply asked my participants what they think about their speaking skills; whether their speaking skills are increasing or remaining the same as before. 13 participants out of 25 (that is 52%) strongly agree and 12 participants out of 25 (that is 48%) simply agree about their improvement of speaking skills day by day. It is noticeable that 100% students (25 participants out of 25) agree that they are developing their speaking skills through peer conversations and none of the students denies this improvement.

Opinions	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree	52%
Agree	48%
Uncertain	0
Disagree	0
Strongly disagree	0

7.10 What is the participants' present level in speaking?

To determine students present level in speaking is a little bit difficult task. I did not assess my participants' speaking but told them to assess themselves in the scale of 'better, good, same, bad and worse'. 15 respondents out of 25 (that is 60%) say that their present level in speaking is better in comparison to their past level. Again, 10 respondents out of 25 (that is 40%) say that their present level is good. It is important that 100% participants (25 participants out of 25) say that their overall speaking skills are improving through peer conversation.



8. Recommendation

Language teachers should be encouraged to employ peer conversation activities in a language class room. Students should be instructed to initiate peer conversation and group discussion in the class. Besides, students who want to practice their English outside their classroom can converse with their peers and can become very good speakers.

9. Conclusion

Peer conversation in English is an effective way of enhancing language learning. Students learn to participate effectively in collaborative discussions and exchange their ideas. They learn to be fluent and confident in speaking. They can choose appropriate words and express their opinions and feelings clearly. Thus, their speaking skills improve continually.

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