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Strategy Instruction and Enhancement of Young Learners' Speaking Skills

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Abstract

Despite the importance of speaking in developing learners' command of language, due to a paucity of research in the domain, little is understood of teachers' systematic strategy instructional practices to improve the quality of their students' utterances. This study sought to address this gap in knowledge through the study of the practices of an experienced teacher in a Singapore primary school and another experienced teacher in an elementary school in Japan. Connecting with and drawing from Rebecca Oxford's work on learning strategies and the development of young children's English language skills, it aims to shed light on the value of metacognitive strategy instruction in raising children's awareness about their own learning processes. It highlights the value of honing students' knowledge and use of strategies for effective communication by actively engaging them in making meaning of the information they have. Teachers' instruction on strategies for speaking significantly eases the cognitive load for learners in formulating utterances and enables them to participate meaningfully in discussions with their teachers and peers.

Keywords: *Strategy Instruction, Young Learners, Speaking*

¹Introduction

Speaking well facilitates language learners' interaction in academic and social settings. A good oral command positions them to do well across various subjects in the curriculum in addition to English, for example, in math and science related subjects as well, since most of the explaining and instruction in class is done via the verbal mode, and it is the main way in which students ask questions and clarify doubts about subject matter (Barnes, 1992). In spite of its importance, observations of teachers' practices indicate limitations and less focus on the teaching of speaking, in part due to the washback effect of examinations (Oliver et al., 2005).

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The focus on other skills over speaking could be due to the fact that the relatively more heavily weighted components, for example writing assessment, could have influenced some preferences for oral instruction by way of repetitive practice drills (Baker, 2014). As a result, learners may not be able to reap the benefits of mastering the language and strategies to be able to speak independently and respond appropriately in interactions. Borg (2006) describes the significance of teacher's cognitions and knowledge as important factors shaping students' successful language learning experiences; however, the domain of speaking remains less understood. This study therefore sought to address this gap in knowledge by examining experienced teachers' strategy instructional practices for speaking and their effect on young students' success in oral English communication.

Research Review

This section begins by reviewing observed teachers' practices and limitations in the teaching of speaking, and highlights gaps in teachers' knowledge and skills as possible factors limiting their capacities for the teaching of speaking. It then moves into strategies, with a focus on metacognitive strategy instruction, or instruction on strategies for planning, monitoring and evaluation of utterances to hone students' skills for speaking.

The teaching of speaking can significantly enhance learners' communicative competence. However, less is understood about the ways in which teachers develop the skills, due to a lack of explicit instruction during English language lessons, an observation seen in many classrooms (Sabnani & Goh, 2022). In fact, much emphasis appears to be on students' preparation for oral tests, for example, in the form of drills and practices (Cohen & Fass, 2001), resulting in less emphasis on guiding students to acquire the strategies to negotiate meaning as confident speakers (Lyster & Saito, 2010).

Teachers' relatively lower prioritisation of speaking over the other language skills has also been observed in some classrooms. Goh's (2009) study of 75 teachers in Singapore found that while teachers acknowledged the importance of speaking well for students' successful interaction, they shared that a large proportion of their instruction involved preparing students for oral tests. The rationale for this was to ensure that students would have adequate mastery of the requirements of their examinations and therefore be able to do well in the school and national assessments. Another finding that surfaced from the examination of teachers' rationalisations was their relatively less developed knowledge for the teaching of speaking, for example, role modelling of accurate speaking was an area which teachers themselves were not so confident of (Cohen & Fass, 2001). The gap in knowledge for teaching speaking could possibly explain the drill and practice approaches adopted by teachers to hone students' skills through repetition to ensure their familiarity with examination-style questions rather than systematically unpacking the content and language for speaking (Roothoof, 2014).

Teachers' less developed pedagogical knowledge for oral instruction was also depicted in Baker's (2014) study of English teachers in Australia. While teachers expressed their intent to address students' motivation issues in learning pronunciation, they explained that the fairly heavy nature of discussion topics could have resulted in students being less keen to participate in speaking activities, in part due to their limitations in pronunciation, and also issues of anxiety in having to speak aloud in class. Despite teachers' appreciation of the value of engaging students in pronunciation lessons, observations revealed that they still opted to involve students

in repetitive practice, which they regarded as an effective method, as opposed to actively incorporating students' authentic experiences in the topics for talk as they prepared students for oral tests for university entrance examinations.

Oliver et al.'s (2005) inquiry into the practices of English teachers in 13 secondary schools in Western Australia identified issues with teachers' confidence in carrying out speaking activities as a possible limiter to their teaching. Teachers explained that speaking was not as easy for them to assess as writing, which had already been well established in their syllabus. A number of teachers held the perspective of speaking as language for performance, that is, language used in formal speeches. Lesson observations of their classes saw a greater emphasis on audience presentations and as a result, less time allocated to instruction to improve students' interactional skills. Their primary use of the language and structures of writing to teach speaking was also less ideal, as it may not have fully introduced students to the grammar of speaking and its use in conveying meaning in talk. Rather, it could result in students mainly verbalising the language of writing in their face-to-face interactions, and in turn come across as less natural and not as effective for oral communication.

The dependence on memorisation to increase students' familiarity with set phrases and sentences and the notion that repetition could improve students' ability to make meaning has also been observed in the teaching of listening skills, which are critically important when speaking (e.g., Richards, 2008). Siegel (2013) further laments that the core components of decoding messages and construction of meaning in interactions may be overlooked as a result of oracy tests designed to evaluate students' performance in responding accurately to audio texts and their accompanying questions. To guide learners in applying their knowledge of language and contextualising understanding of messages they have gleaned from listening or in face-to-face interactions, Renandya and Farrell (2011) suggest that they could be taught strategies such as dictation, complemented by provision of input and teacher modelling.

Benati (2020) highlights the value of input, or language that learners hear and read. As learners notice the linguistic features about the oral language, such as the vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation, they connect it with information held in their schemas. With teachers' guidance, they can assimilate the new information and contextualise it in talk. Teachers' modelling raises students' awareness of the distinctive features of language and organisation of ideas to produce utterances that are comprehensible. In this vein, teachers' provision of content and language and strategy instruction can help learners in situating the new information with what they already know and enhance their capacities for speaking.

Speaking strategies are the actions employed by learners to enhance their success with verbal tasks. Strategies are important ways in which learners can manage challenges in learning language, including developing speaking skills (e.g. Oxford, 2011, 2017; Kawai, 2008). Strategy instruction, however, is often neglected in language classrooms (e.g., Chamot & Harris, 2018). Metacognitive strategies are especially important for the development of effective speaking skills: they include planning for speaking, monitoring delivery of the message to ensure that it has been well conveyed, and that it has been received by listeners as it was meant to, as well as evaluating performance in communication. Flavell (1979) suggested that metacognition enables the effective management of thinking and actions. Wenden (1991) further extended this concept to language learning. She suggested that learners' enhanced metacognitive awareness guides them in thinking introspectively of their goals for the tasks

they are engaged in, so as to be able to employ specific actions to achieve their objectives. Griffiths (2018) highlights the value of metacognition in enhancing learners' grasp of their progress, and in the context of speaking, honing metacognition can position them to think carefully about where they are in terms of their oral language proficiency, their targets, and exactly where they hope to progress to. It helps them identify their strengths which they can in turn leverage to enhance communication. On the same note, metacognition sheds light on learners' limitations and can be useful in bringing to attention their gaps in knowledge, to help them to think critically about the actions they will take to bridge the gaps effectively.

Cohen et al.'s (1998) study on the effect of strategy training on 55 university students found that students who received focussed instruction on self-monitoring and evaluation outperformed the comparison group in a number of their speaking tasks. The impact of metacognition for learning has also been observed in very young learners, although in the areas of oracy development, there has been relatively less work. Of the few studies available, one of the more widely cited studies is that of Goh and Taib's (2006) research on developing children's metacognition.. The study on primary school children stressed the value of teachers' instruction in strategy use. Pre and post intervention comparisons revealed improvements in students' performance, largely in task and strategic knowledge. Students better understood the requirements for their oracy task, for example, what they were expected to do before, while and after listening to enhance their comprehension of the audio texts and respond to the question prompts. The study underscored the value of teachers' guidance in helping students to prepare prior to listening to audio recordings, by teaching them strategies for prediction and anticipation of possible vocabulary and activating their prior knowledge to help them focus on the topic area. Teachers' guidance to develop students' metacognition enabled them to accord greater attention to the task. In the area of strategy knowledge, teachers helped learners make visible the strategies that they had adopted in the past and evaluate their relative effectiveness with respect to comprehension, such as the strategies students used that had worked well in understanding the gist and details of tasks, and unpacking the possible reasons for the effectiveness of the strategies deployed. Conversely, students were able to identify strategies that had proven less effective, and reasons for their perceived ineffectiveness. This enhanced appreciation allowed students to remove the ineffective strategies from their repertoires, and in their place, use the strategies they found to be effective in future tasks. They would also be able to use their enhanced knowledge of strategies when interacting with others in authentic exchanges and discussions.

Students in the above studies demonstrated gains in performance after instruction on metacognitive learning strategies. Their success was attributed to their capacities to think critically about what their oracy tasks entailed and reflect on the effort and resources to be expended to achieve them. They looked introspectively to understand their own personal factors to identify their possible limitations. These active efforts, reflecting metacognitive awareness of their person knowledge, helped them identify and attend to issues which might otherwise have hampered their performance. Their appreciation of strategies saw them engaged in planning before embarking on the assigned tasks, managing their delivery and finally reflecting on their overall progress. These deliberate actions to ensure that meaning was clearly delivered strongly affirm the value of metacognition for learning.

While the studies show how the teaching of learning strategies can enhance students' metacognition, they depict the practices of some teachers and may not reflect the larger contexts for the teaching of speaking. In fact, the focus on speaking instruction tends to be largely on assessment practices, with students familiarised in the requirements of tests (Baker, 2014). The teaching of speaking has been, in large part, noted to take the form of pronunciation drills or small group activities where students participate in classroom activities with little or even possibly an absence of instruction on strategies and how they could be effectively employed. Speaking practices are often positioned as pre-activities for writing, for example, in generating and organising content and preparing drafts of written work and revising these drafts. Another observation is the focus on the final prepared speech, with relatively less attention to unpacking the different parts in the process of learning to articulate ideas and step-by-step thinking in preparing to speak. Much emphasis is placed on the delivery of the final presentation, and oftentimes the grading of these presentations makes up a significant portion of the assessment.

A balanced approach with attention to the various stages involved in the idea generation process as well as the preparation and conveying of messages can aid students in learning about their speaking tasks more systematically. Teachers play an important role in providing guidance to raise the quality of speaking. Engaging students in contemplating on their learning helps them to take stock of their personal factors and think critically about how these could be managed as they present their ideas, for example, by unpacking demands and considering how they can tap their favourable experiences with speaking to leverage strategies to use on the new task. This oversight enables them to mindfully concentrate on their intended messages and can assist with the selection and implementation of effective communication strategies (e.g., Goh & Burns, 2012; Sabnani & Goh, 2020, 2022)

The Study

This study aimed to investigate how teachers can provide strategy instruction to enhance young learners' speaking skills. In this section I cover the research framework used in this qualitative study. I explain the manner and mode of primary data collection from the two classrooms in Singapore and Japan and provide information on the teaching contexts and the target groups of English language learners. Details are also provided about analysis procedures.

Research Framework

Goh and Burns' (2012) teaching speaking framework underscores the key dimensions of metacognitive knowledge and strategy use as important components in the development of speaking skills. Metacognitive knowledge encompasses person, task and strategy knowledge. Person knowledge involves understanding of the unique individual factors of each speaker, bringing to the fore the possible limitations which may negatively affect communication. It allows learners to strategically manage the issues to improve their speaking quality. Task knowledge requires learners to scrutinise the requirements of the activity and accordingly apply their strategy knowledge or understanding of the relevant effort and resources to achieve the targets set for the assigned tasks.

Strategy use involves learners enacting a range of ways to manage their speaking, by planning, monitoring and evaluating their progress, for example, thinking about content in the

ideation stage, and careful attention to the articulation of ideas for them to be well received by listeners. Helping students to examine task requirements and connect this with their own personal factors for speaking assists them in thinking analytically about their areas of strength as well as possible weaknesses. This process is important in improving their understanding of their limitations, which teachers can then provide guidance on to help them attend to the identified areas, for example by addressing learners' specific challenges with respect to speaking.

Participants and Setting

This paper explores how two experienced teachers - one in a Singapore primary school and the other in an elementary school in Japan - raised their learners' metacognition through the instruction of strategies to improve their competence. There were 30 students aged 7 in Ms Yuki's class in Japan and 40 students in Nadia's Primary 5 class in Singapore (pseudonyms have been used). The teachers each had more than 10 years of experience teaching English to young learners and were recommended by their principals and school leaders for the study. The Singapore school students are bilingual learners (whose home languages are Mandarin, Malay and Tamil), and the students in Japan are learning English as a foreign language. Their home language is Japanese.

Procedures

The data came from classroom observations of the teachers' English lessons, as part of two separate larger studies examining teachers' practices for developing learners' oral English competence – with one study based on teachers in Singapore and the other in Japan. Notes were taken of the teachers' utterances, together with the author's post-lesson reflections on the teaching and learning practices in their classrooms.

Ethics approval was obtained for teachers' involvement in the two studies and for the author to observe their lessons as a non-participant, sitting at the back of their respective classrooms. Teachers' informed consent was sought after they had been briefed on the intent and significance of the study. They were advised of their right to withdraw at any time, and if those chose to continue participating in the study, their participation would be confidential and anonymous.

Content analysis was carried out to identify categories derived from the data. The researcher's notes and transcripts from classroom observations were read through carefully and key themes identified. The data analysis process was iterative, and several rounds of close reading were carried out to identify themes until no more new themes emerged.

The dependability of the study was enhanced through participant checking for the data collection with the teacher in Singapore, as well as the teacher in Japan. The teachers were requested to check the observations and interpretations during the post lesson observation interviews the author had had with them to ensure that the observations had been accurately recorded and to confirm the interpretations presented.

Results

Ms Yuki's Grade 1 English Lesson in a School in Japan

Here is a short excerpt from Yuki's Grade 1 English lesson on vocabulary:

Yuki plays an audio-visual recording for the class, which is projected on a big screen in front of the room. The lesson is on words describing size and shapes of classroom objects. The words are contextualised in sentences describing the items in the class, in school and at home, and presented in a catchy tune. She gives pupils instructions to listen to the vocabulary words once through as the audio clip plays. She then replays the recording and pauses at appropriate junctures to explain each word, the sentences used to illustrate the meanings of the words, and she gives more examples in sentences of her own.

The children listen to the words and the accompanying tunes in which the sentences are presented. They repeat the words in the recording, and point at the correct pictures on the screen describing the size and shapes of the objects identified.

Yuki models the structure and language for speaking. She points to a small sized box on the screen and asks the class:

Is it a small box?

She models the response:

Yes, it is. It's small.

She uses gestures to illustrate to the class what is meant by the word small, by moving her two hands close together, to indicate that she is holding a small box. She goes through other examples, inviting different students to respond using the above structure. For example:

Yuki: *Is it a (adjective describing shape/size) item?*

Students: *Yes it is. It's a (adjective describing shape/size) item.*

Or

Yuki: *Is it is a (incorrect adjective describing shape/size) item?*

Student: *No, it's not. It's a (correct adjective describing shape/size) item.*

Yuki then goes to the back of the class and where a range of objects of different shapes and sizes have been neatly arranged. She goes to each item and picks it up. She then shows it to the students and asks them about its size and shape. The students raise their hands quickly and participate enthusiastically in responding to her questions. She uses the same question and response structure to check their understanding - describing the shapes correctly and asking for confirmation, and also describing the shapes incorrectly and eliciting the correct responses from students.

Ms Nadia's Primary 4 English Lesson in a School in Singapore

Here is a short excerpt from Nadia's Primary 5 English lesson on vocabulary:

Nadia begins her vocabulary lesson by revising with the class the words taught in the last lesson. She does so by way of a game. Student volunteers are invited to come to the front of the class to "click" the correct meaning for the vocabulary words presented on the slide projected on the big screen. The list of words includes words like *helpless* and *hapless*. She explains the difference between the two words. She similarly does so for a list of other commonly confused words.

She tells students that similar to how she has just conducted the game in class, she would like to invite students to work in groups to design their own vocabulary games. She explains

the rationale and objectives: students are to work in small groups with their friends to come up with a vocabulary game for their other classmates to guess. They are to carry out research, to present the words and their meanings in a manner that would be easy for their peers to understand and commit to memory. For their efforts, each group will earn 10 points for themselves to be added to the overall class points for participation, conduct and good performance, for consideration of rewards at the end of the school term.

Nadia models for students an example of a game they can carry out in the upcoming lessons. She first asks them to open their English notebooks, turn to a new page, and write down the date. She tells them to write down the new word of the day: *abate*. She explains to them that it means to become less strong. She gives them an example of how the word could be used in a sentence:

The storm has abated - what a relief!

She then checks understanding by asking the class,

this means the storm has become less....?

The students' responses indicate that the storm has lessened and is not as strong as before.

Nadia replies:

yes, it has become less strong than before.

She then invites individual students to share with the class what they understand by the word *abate* and how they would explain it in their own words. She reiterates the instructions and strategies that could be enlisted in the teaching and learning of new vocabulary words: first, explain the meaning of the word clearly, next, illustrate how it can be used in a sentence, and finally, check for understanding by inviting listeners' responses to ascertain that they have comprehended the meaning of the word.

She gives students a few more sentences to describe the use of the word in other contexts, for example, in describing the abatement of a crowd's fury, and the abatement of pollution in a city. She asks students to copy the sentences down in their notebook, in addition to the other sentences shared by their peers. After that, she asks students to think for a few moments, and share with their partners another example using the word correctly. She tells them they have 30 seconds for the task, and walks around listening to the discussions, to check that students are on task. She gets a few students to share their contributions, acknowledging everyone's input and gently recasting those that could be improved.

Discussion

Teachers' Actions to Enhance Students' Metacognitive Knowledge and Strategy Use

Yuki made substantial efforts to create a warm and welcoming environment in her English class to promote talk. For example, she knew that her students enjoyed learning in a fun way, such as responding in chorus and using gestures to support their responses and in this connection, she strove to design lessons that could enable them to display their strengths in this area. She leveraged their positive views towards audio-visual learning. Enlisting multiple modes in lesson delivery, she was able to successfully engage students at different levels – in listening to the rhythm and pace of speaking, in viewing the visuals and connecting pictures with the descriptions of the new words taught, using text to deepen their appreciation of letter-sound associations for spelling and pronunciation, and finally, using movement by requesting

students to demonstrate their understanding of the new vocabulary on shapes and sizes by way of role play.

She gave students instructions to listen and view the audio-visual clip to ensure they had a good overview of the task requirements. Additionally, she paused the clip at relevant points to explain the vocabulary and used them appropriately in sentences to illustrate their meaning. She went a step further by inviting students to offer their own examples using the new words. This provided for excellent oral practice in a controlled environment. Very importantly, her actions to scaffold students in practicing speaking created contexts for peer learning and sharing. Students were able to listen to one another's inputs and build their ideas from each other's suggestions. To this end, they effectively availed themselves of interthinking (Littleton & Mercer, 2013), by which they added value to peer's inputs to strengthen the overall quality of class contributions.

To guide students in managing their utterances, Yuki provided them with the language and structures for speaking by presenting to them the ways of asking and responding to the questions to demonstrate their understanding of the vocabulary items. She also taught them to monitor their messages by looking at their listeners and checking the latter's responses, both verbal and non-verbal, to ascertain if their messages had been well understood and conveyed clearly enough. For example, if speakers responded incorrectly to questions about the objects' shapes or sizes, how did their listeners responses indicate to them their errors? Close observation of their own speaking, as well as listeners' responses was helpful in monitoring students' overall progress and helping them to quickly address possible issues in communication.

Nadia too took time to learn about her students, and she knew that they enjoyed playing computer games in their free time. She actively sought to link instruction with their interests, and in this vein, designed vocabulary games and quizzes to engage them in learning new words. She created a comfortable space in the classroom to encourage participation, by helping students connect her game-based instruction with their own prior favourable experiences playing computer games with their family and friends. Getting students to recall experiences where they were not stressed about speaking certainly helped to position them to receive information about the new and fairly complex words, and to prepare for the speaking task. Learning vocabulary might otherwise have been an onerous task, especially since most of the students' home languages were Mandarin, Malay and Tamil, and speaking in standard English could possibly have been challenging.

To deepen students' appreciation of the task, Nadia explained clearly the instructions: students were to listen carefully to the meaning of the word and hear how it could be used appropriately in sentences. Having listened to her modelling of the explanation and context, they were to then come up with their own sentences using the word correctly in a similar manner. Understanding her learners' possible limitations, Nadia leveraged the merits of pair and small group discussions by asking students to work with their peers to think of other examples depicting the meaning of the new word, and share it with the class. Students were able to work cooperatively to tap each other's strengths, and accordingly address possible gaps in knowledge as they came up with the sample utterances.

To guide students on management of their speaking, Nadia specifically created contexts in which students could plan and organise their ideas before sharing with the class. For example,

she began with explaining the meaning of the word and possible situations in which it could be used to describe something lessening. This gave students sufficient information to build their own ideas on; for example, some students offered the explanation of wind abating, building on the given example of a storm abating. In this connection, she helped them monitor their learning by drawing their attention to the different grammatical forms - past, present and continuous tenses featuring the root word *abate*. The instructions were helpful in guiding students to think deeply about their speaking accuracy so as to ensure that meaning had been well conveyed to their listeners. She facilitated evaluation of their progress by requesting classmates to give feedback on each other's speaking, and at her level she gently corrected utterances that were less clear and explained to students how they could improve their utterances for greater clarity.

There were some similarities, and also differences in the two teachers' practices in developing students' speaking. Both Yuki and Nadia had strong knowledge of the nuanced processes in speaking and this in turn informed their teaching of strategies to help students attend to possible challenges in face-to face exchanges, where there was very much less time for them to think of responses.

Yuki provided a clear structure for speaking which she modelled and repeated with some variation. This helped learners to understand the structures and vocabulary they could use in describing the objects in class. Her skillful use of language allowed her to include some alternative utterances to engage students in practicing speaking. She employed multiple formats – whole class talk, small group, as well as peer-to peer tasks to involve students in listening to and articulating the words to convey their ideas effectively. Her efforts to vary the form of the questions and answers while incorporating the new vocabulary helped learners to use the sentences shared and incorporate them in their own speech. This significantly alleviated the onerous tasks in having to first come up with the relevant content, and then bring it together coherently in the structures for speaking.

In a similar vein, Nadia provided students with the language and structures for speaking. She introduced students to new vocabulary words, and enlisted some variation in structure to explain the meaning of the words. She also included different examples to illustrate how the words could be used appropriately. This modelling of language served as a guide for students and in fact, a number of the utterances that the students shared were closely mapped against Nadia's given example. She facilitated evaluation at multiple levels – for example, peer-to-peer and small group levels, where students commented on each other's speaking, as well as from her level, where she went around the class listening carefully to the discussions and gently recast utterances that were less accurate.

While both teachers provided students with the language and strategies for speaking, the level of their speaking tasks differed, in alignment with the different ages and levels of proficiency of their respective target groups. For example, Yuki led the class on the manner of answering questions and responding, and required students to repeat after her to improve their familiarity with language structures and pronunciation through situated practice. The repetitive nature of the tasks helped build students' confidence as they learnt and mastered the speaking genre, such that they were able to respond fairly independently after a period for scaffolding. In Nadia's case, she offered students examples and requested them to develop the ideas shared to generate their own content for speaking. She guided them to bring to the fore their existing knowledge of language and connect it with the new information she had just imparted to hone

their utterances. The results were similarly positive - students were able to leverage the scaffolding provided and extend the learning to improve their content and articulation to communicate their ideas effectively.

The results from these two small-scale studies have been positive and suggest how strategy instruction could improve speaking performance. However, more primary data collection and classroom studies are needed to deepen our understanding of how language learners can be scaffolded during English lessons to enhance their speaking skills.

Implications for Teaching Practice

The study offers several implications for the teaching and learning of speaking. The directed instruction of speaking strategies by teachers can significantly improve students' knowledge of how these could be effectively leveraged to improve communication. The benefits of strategy instruction and their use in planning, monitoring and evaluating their learning are in alignment with Gunning and Oxford's (2014) findings on enhanced strategy awareness from their study of Six Graders' speaking development. The study highlights the value of teachers' guidance on the different strategies to manage their knowledge of language and articulation of ideas. This scaffolding can be helpful in the planning of content before speaking, monitoring reception of the messages by their listeners, and evaluation of their progress at multiple levels – their own reflections, peer feedback as well as teachers' comments.

Ma and Oxford (2014) discuss the value of critical reflection of learning and its positive impact on English language mastery. The first author described how keeping a diary of her learning journey guided her in managing her motivation and apprehension of speaking in English, which was not her first language. The diary entries identified her learning styles and helped her successfully navigate the new contexts of negotiating interactions by attending to her limitations and leveraging her strengths for effective communication with her peers and teachers.

In this study, both the teachers from Singapore and Japan leveraged their understanding of learners to guide them on the appropriate strategies to use to build their confidence for speaking and participating in class discussions. They demonstrated a very strong knowledge of their students by taking the time to get to know each and every one of them and their backgrounds.

To enhance rapport building with students in the English language classroom, teachers' knowledge of the specific home languages spoken by each child and their difficulties with respect to communication can help them in creating conducive environments for students to engage in speaking. In this vein, teachers can make connections between students' favourable experiences and interests and incorporate this in their design of fun classroom lessons, as suggested by Oliver and Bogachenko (2019). Encouraging students to tap their prior knowledge of content and incorporate the language structures taught enhances their grasp by helping them make connections with what they already know and how they could tap their existing knowledge. This is similar to Yuki's use of questioning for her Grade 1 learners, and Nadia's design of game-based lessons for her Primary 4 students.

Oxford (1990, 2003) highlights the value of metacognitive strategies for developing speaking. These include planning, monitoring and evaluating strategies to guide learners in bringing together ideas, conveying meaning effectively, and evaluating overall progress. Metacognitive strategies can also provide emotional support by relieving anxiety (e.g., Oxford,

2021). To assist learners in negotiating the difficulties of speaking, teachers could support them further by providing them with the content and the language for speaking. This alleviates the heavy demands speaking typically places on students, and allows them to use the information and participate in interactions right away, instead of having to spend more time in coming up with new content. In the case of these two classroom contexts studied, both groups of learners benefited significantly from the ideas and language shared by teachers on organising and delivering what they wanted to say. O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) investigations on high school students' speaking abilities similarly underscore the value of metacognitive strategy instruction. Their examination of three groups of students learning English as a foreign language found the group that had been taught metacognitive strategies outperformed the other two groups in terms of delivery, accuracy, pronunciation and orientation of ideas (where one group was taught only cognitive and social-affective strategies, and the other (control) group which was not taught any strategies).

Suggestions for Ongoing Research

Some researchers suggest that metacognitive strategies are particularly effectively used by advanced learners (e.g., Leaver et al., 2005), especially due to their fairly developed understanding of discourse, as well as their enhanced capacities to think critically about their grasp of language. However, other work with a focus on the teaching of speaking to primary school students (e.g., Sabnani & Goh, 2020) illustrates that young children also have had success with learning metacognitive strategies to enhance their oracy skills.

Future research would benefit from more studies on the development of learners' metacognitive strategy knowledge to extend the work and explore further how children can be helped to heighten their metacognitive awareness. In particular, a focus on teachers' strategy instruction of skills can throw light on the heightening of young learners' capacities for planning, monitoring and evaluating their communication, an area that relatively less is currently known about. More studies in this realm, for example, observations of teachers in their intact classrooms with their learners over a prolonged period of time, or case studies with teachers and students in different English language learning contexts could illuminate how children could be guided to actively think about the knowledge they have for speaking and listening as well as their possible limitations and the effect of improving their metacognition to become effective communicators.

Finally, the field could benefit from further inquiry into the design of tasks specifically for young children's speaking development. This information is helpful in guiding teachers to tailor instruction for a range of learners in the classroom, to help them unpack the requirements of tasks, manage their limitations and leverage their strengths in conveying meaning. The findings will indeed be a valuable addition to teacher development and expertise building to enhance instructional practices.

Conclusion

The two teachers' efforts reported here helped to address students' apprehensions with respect to speaking, such as anxiety in responding in class discussions, speaking aloud in a large room, or even volunteering responses in small group chats. Having created a conducive environment in class, they provided students with the necessary language and systematically unpacked the

processes involved in speaking to raise students' awareness. This is an important finding, as the affective domain of speaking is often overlooked in instruction (e.g., Oxford, 2021). The teachers' concerted efforts in bringing to the fore students' positive feelings and good outcomes with speaking in the past had enabled them to have a sense of calm so that learners were more inclined to participate in the activities. The teachers' strong knowledge of the learners, together with the thoughtfully designed nature of the tasks, was helpful in encouraging participation.

The systematic instruction by teachers on planning, monitoring and evaluating talk quality made visible to students the otherwise hidden process in speaking. They systematically taught students strategies to manage their utterances to develop their oracy skills. For example, teachers' actions to help the learners recall previous positive experiences, and connecting instruction with students' interests to encourage participation in no small way alleviated students' fears and helped to build their confidence. The support by way of input provided by the teachers allowed students to use the language and structures right way and participate in discussions without having to be weighed down by the heavy demands in coming up with content on their own. Teachers' modelling also served to activate learners' schemas by linking the new information imparted with prior knowledge already in students' long-term memory. In this manner, students were not learning the vocabulary items in isolation. Rather, they were making concerted efforts to connect it with what they already knew in order to be able to speak independently when teacher support was withdrawn.

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