The Effectiveness of simulated environment in improving Speaking Skills the case of Grade Nine Students at Banbasi General Secondary and Preparatory school

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 Abstract

The purpose of this research was to investigate the effectiveness of the simulated environment in improving Speaking Skills of grade nine Students at Banmbasi General Secondary and preparatory school. A quasi-experimental design was employed to test the hypothesis that state the formation simulated environment in EFL classrooms would enhance students' speaking abilities. The study comprises 60 participants. Two classes were purposefully selected for the study and assigned as control and experimental groups. The participants were given speaking proficiency test as pretests at the beginning of the experiment. The experimental group was taught through a simulated environment; while the control group was treated the same unit in the conventional mode; where the environments were not simulated. After the treatment, the two groups were post tested. The independent sample T-test was employed to find out if the results obtained from the tests was statistically significant or not. Accordingly, the results show that mean scores of students in the experimental group exceeded the control group during their posttest and the difference was statistically significant at (t = 2.46, p<0.05). That is, the mean score of the experimental group in posttest (x= 16.80) surpasses the mean score of the control group (x= 15.45). Based on these results, the alternative hypothesis (**H2**) which was stated as there is statistically significant difference between the mean score of grade students in the experimental and control groups in their speaking skill due to the presence of simulated environment was accepted whilst the null hypothesis rejected. For much pedagogical practice, the results of this study indicated that integrative teaching of language simulations into the EFL classroom would play a vital role in producing positive output. Overall, the results of the tests showed the positive potential about the effectiveness of the simulated environment on the improvements students' speak ability of the target language. As a result, the ministry of education, syllabus designers, local English book writers and ELT are recommended to simulate the language environment based on simulations principle into Ethiopian EFL classrooms of different grade level.

Keywords: - Simulated environment, Effectiveness, Experimental & Controlgroup, speaking skill, pedagogical practice.

Introduction

The frequently increasing need for communication in English has created a vast demand for teaching English around the world.Consequently, a number of people want to improve their command of English and this opportunities leads to many different ways of learning English such as through formal instruction, travels, and study abroad as well as through the media and internet (Richards, 1996). This worldwide demand for English as foreign language in turn created an enormous demand for quality language teaching, language teaching techniques, materials and resources.As a result, language teaching has undergone a number of phases through using different approaches, techniques andmethods.

Although, English has been taught as foreign language in Ethiopia for decadesstarting fromelementary school to tertiary level of education, the students have oftenfaced difficulties to use the target language to communicate,and are unable tonegotiate meanings and they are   not motivated during language class (Beniam,2008). This problem is being manifestednot only in different parts of the world's language institutions but also the case of Ethiopian language classroom. It is reasonablethat a few years ago(starting from 1970's to the present days), language educators in foreign countries have been integrating different language teaching techniques such as; role play, drama, language games, and more recently*simulations*into second or foreign language's curriculumbelieving these techniques would lessen the burdens of language teaching-learning process and produce meaningful communication.

Though the issue of using simulation in educational context has beenattracted many linguists' and languageeducators' attention in different parts of theworld, the study under language simulation would be the first in the Ethiopia context particularly to EFL classroom. Different studiesconducted outside of Ethiopian contexts describe the use of simulation as to improve students' communicative ability.For example, Halleck(2007) in her symposium article suggests that, once students' needshave been identified, the next step for the language teachers is to decide how to address these needs and making learners stakeholders in learning teaching process and suggested language simulations as best therapy for betterresults.

For the fact that understanding what learners need is an essential part of the teaching learning process, the current study wasaimed to find out if simulated environmentexperiences will enable EFL learners to use language in real situation and todevelop their communicative competence in general and speaking skill in particular. Thus, the researcher believes that simulation experiences

aredesired to benefit the participants of the study(9thgrade students) at Banmbasi General Secondary and preparatory school.

Tomilison and Masuhar (2000) simulation tasks increase attitudinal and motivational issues for the fact that simulation are highly contextualized learning experience and can represent a real world that can be integrated into myriad of educational frameworks. Simulated environment provides authenticity in language learning situation and provides foreign language learners with skill to perform meaningful communicative tasks, especially in nonthreatening situation (Coleman, 1995; Crookall and Arai, 1995: Crookall and Oxford, 1990: Halleck 1990, 1995, 2001). Over the past decades, varieties of teaching methods and approaches have been introduced to EFL classroom hoping that students would learn English more communicatively in order to promote language mastery in different parts of the world and in our context too.However, learners in English classroom are unable to reach at expected proficiency level in using the target language. For example,as the experience of the current researcher concerned, students in grade nine Students at Banbasi General Secondary and preparatory school where English has been taught as a foreign language, As to the research's experience concerned,Students encounterdifferent problems insideclassroomsuch as;   being reluctant to use the target language in real world situation, i.e.poor interaction with their peer, lack of confidence to express their opinion and feel anxious when they were requested to present group/individual/ activities in front of their teachers as well as classmates.

It has been alsoindicated in many studies and workshops that most classroom instructions and activities in Ethiopian context did not still seem to offer significance difference in terms of achieving communicative competence to EFL learner. Most students taught through presentation, practice, production /ppp/ lesson which are supplemented with structured lesson where learners are unable to communicate effectively in English (Tsegaye, 2008).Consequently, changing the existing situation is recommended as solution to the problems. Therefore, it is necessary to look for another language teaching techniques that enable students develop their proficiency in English language teaching. The awareness and experience obtained from seminar discussion on simulation entitled as: "*Wailing: "Tradition or Murder*?"" presented by Dr. Emily Boersma at Bahir Dar university English department and my MA thesis (Entitled: DO Language simulation enhance students' oral skill?) have been playeddispensable role in helping me to focus on the title under the study. In addition the researcher's reading background on previously studied researches about simulation created an opening tohypothesizes language simulations could be best solution to the problem described in the back ground of the study that exist in the actual EFL classroom.

As described by different authors and in different research review, simulations are best described as follows:Crookall and Oxford (1990)simulationsare best way of creating reach communicative environment (representation of reality) where students actively become somearts of real world system and function according to assigned role. According to(Jones, 1982&Stern, 1980) the innate benefit of simulation includes; fulfilling student's needs for realism that is a desire for realistic life be in and outside classroom, increase students and teachers motivation, especially for those in EFL situation who might see English has a differed needs at best. dismantle the normal teacher students relationships that the students take control of their own destiny with the simulation, it help learners to identify and comfort with the target language culture (Oxford and Crookall,1990),reduce anxiety level which is essential to language development(Dulay.M,et al1982) and it allows teacher to monitor the participants' progress unobtrusively. As Lyu, (2006) study's simulation in language learning can be referred to "communications" that are designed to achieve communicative reality. Hence, the current study would answer the following main questions: would the implementation of simulated environmentproduce a positive effect on the speaking skill of grade nine students at Banbasi General Secondary and preparatory school?And"would language simulations encourage the students to speak in English to perform different roles they assigned to in their classroom? Thus, investigating if language simulated environmentin EFL classroom improve students' communicative ability in general and speaking skill in particular was the major concerns of the study.

Based on the above stated problems the*primary objective of the study was* totest the effectiveness of implementing*simulated environment* improving speaking skills of students in *EFL classroom. To identify if*simulated environment*can improve learners' speaking skills.*Therefore, this study examines the experimental comparison between two hypotheses listed as **H0** =there is no statistically significant difference between the mean score of grade 9th students in the experimental and control groups in their speaking skillsbefore intervention, **H1** = there is statistically significant difference between the mean score of grade 9th students in the experimental and control groups in their speaking skillsbefore intervention. **H0**= there is no statistically significant difference between the mean score of grade studentsin the experimental and control groups in their speaking skill due to thepresence of simulated environment. **H2=** there is statistically significant difference between the mean score of grade students in the experimental and control groups in their speaking skill due to the presence of simulated environment.

It is anticipated that, this research would be beneficial in many ways. First, theoretically the finding of the research could be useful for readers in English language profession and it will

provide additional input to the existing studies about techniques of improving students speaking skill. Moreover, the findings of this study are hoped be used by English teachers in the school as effort to improve students speaking ability and are supposed to provide language instructors with valuable information about the importance of simulation in improving students' communicative ability. The findings can also give insights for EFLmaterial developers about the importance of including simulations into EFL text books and classroom through all educational levels.

In addition, since there is no previous experimental study carried out in the simulation context particularly in Ethiopia, the present investigation seeks to fills gap in the literature regarding measuring the effect of the language simulation experimentally. Furthermore, it is hoped that the study may inspire other researchers to conduct further empirical studies on how to effectively implement language simulation in EFL context both at higher institutions and secondary schools found in different parts of the country. This study will be ground or benchmark for the researchers who are interested in simulations. More to the point, it may help foreign language learners develop their ability to speak the target language more fluently and meaningfully.

Methodology of the study

The main objective of this study was to find out if using simulated environment in this particular group(grade nine Students at Banbasi General Secondary and preparatory school)can bring improvements on students' speaking skills. In order to achieve the objectives and draw a comprehensive conclusion, aquasi-experimental design(which is usuallyemployed in natural setting) was used.Thus,quantitative data analyzing methods was employed to describe the results of pre and post test administered on the target groups.

The participants of the study were Grade 9 students enrolled 2009 Ecat Banmbasi General Secondary and preparatory school.There were80 students in grade 9 in two different sections enrolled during the academic year. The two intact classes (section "A "and "B") were taken andrandomly assigned into experimental and controlled groups through writing an odd and even numbers as lottery method. Thus, no individual randomization was done; each group was left intact in their own class.

The marking and scoring of both the pre and posttests of the speaking skills was done through the three people (researcher and two English teachers from the school) based on the marking criteria taken from Matthews and Marino (1990) and the pre-test was completed before the treatment and the purpose is to measure the respondent's speaking skills in English language. It was

achieved through an oral test that all of the respondent undergo with the researcher during the English class. The marks are divided into four parts; marks in the range of 1 to 3 (weak), marks in the range of 4 to 7 (satisfactory), marks in the range of 8 to 11 (good) and marks in the range of 12 to 15 (excellent).

The mean score of the examinee was taken as a final score. The time taken for the speaking pretest was 2 to 4 minutes for each of the participants. Likewise at the end of the experiment, the posttest of the speaking proficiency was administered to both groups with intention of measuring the effect of the language simulation on speaking skill of students in the experimental group (who were treated through simulated environment) against the group without treatment. Thus, process of administering and marking a posttest was similar to the process used in the pretests.

As far as experimental research is concerned, checking reliability and validity of the instrument was mandatory.Therefore, all items oral interview questions of this speaking test were reviewed and commented English Language professionals of Assosa Universityand English language teachers of the school, so asevaluate the test items based on suitability of the tasks to the students' abilities, grammar problems, accuracy,the clarity of the instructions, the feasibility of test items, the suitability of the fixed time and test organization. Accordingly, they all commented the questions and testified their appropriateness to the participants of the study. As the reliability of the speaking tests was concerned,the test was pilot tested on 20 students of Englishlanguage classes, taken from two groups of 10 studentswho were enrolled 2009 EC at Assosa secondary school located about 30 km away from the current study .The test retest method was employed, in the pilot study.After an interval of three weeks, the same questions were retested on the same students and the score showed similar results. For further investigation of the test's internal consistency, Cronbach's Alpha was applied to the data from the pilot study and the value of Alpha reached 0 .76 which show quite high consistency.

Moreover, inter rater or inter scorer reliability was used. For the reason that all of the questions in the speaking interviews were subjective and requires more than one word responses,scoring subjective tests through scorer/rater reliability would guarantee the reliability of the test (Gay and Airasian, 2000 cited in Biniam, 2008).

Treatment

The independent variable used in this study consisted of two conditions: an experimental condition where the students practiced speaking through simulated environment and a control

condition where the students practiced speaking according to the normal methods. Both groups had the same number of hours of instruction, which was five times weekly, forty-two minutes each. For the experimental *simulated environment* was shaped based on language simulation model (classroom situation that can represent real life) that allows the group to interact in a learner-centered class (see Appendix B). At the beginning, extra materials were given to the students in experimental group to help them develop awareness about simulations in general and how a simulation runs. At the beginning of the class, the teacher's main role was introduced, facilitating and monitoring while the students carry out their tasks in simulated environment, but later the all responsibilities are given to the students and the researcher acted as an eye witness of the environments (EG&CG).

Results and Discussion

Analysis of the pretest (which was given to identify the targeted groups' general speaking proficiency) and the posttest (administered to measure the development of students' speaking skill after implementing the action) were presented and discussed in detail. Thus, the data obtained from tests (pre andposttest) was analyzed quantitatively through T-test to measure the mean difference between the two tests.

In this experimental study, two tentative explanations (Hypothesis)were stated:"**Ho =**there is no statistically significant difference between the mean score of grade 9th students in the experimental and control groups in their speaking skills before intervention,

H1 = there is no statistically significant difference between the mean score of grade 9th students in the experimental and control groups in their speaking skills before intervention.

Ho = there is no statistically significant difference between the mean score of grade students in the experimental and control groups in their speaking skills due to the presence of simulated environment.

H2 = there is statistically significant difference between the mean score of grade students in the experimental and control groups in their speaking skills due to the presence of simulated environment.

Accordingly, the T-test was computed to decide whether the difference between the pre and posttest scores of the two groups was statically significant or not due to the presence of language simulation. The alternative hypothesis (**H2)** there is statistically significant difference between the mean score of grade students in the experimental and control groups in their speaking skills due to the presence of simulated environments, was accepted. Whereas the null hypothesis **H0 =** there is no statistically significant difference between the mean score of grade 9th students in the

experimental and control groups in their speaking skills before intervention was rejected for the fact that the resultsconfirmed no significant difference among the groups as indicated in the table below.

Statistical Analysis of the EG'sand CG'sPre-Post Tests.

Table1Comparison of speaking pretest and posttests' results using independent-samples t-test Statistics of the two groups

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pretest	Experimental	20	15.20	2.067	-0.084	38	0.934
	Control	20	15.25	1.682			
Posttest	Experimental	20	16.80	1.735	2.463	38	0.018
	Control	20	15.45	1.731			

An independent sample t-test was examined to know whether there is statistically significant mean difference between experimental and control groups of pre-andposttest resultsor not. The resultsin the above table shows that themean difference between the experimental and control groups of speaking pretestisnot statistically significantat t= -0.084, p > 0.05.Whereas, the resultsinposttest indicates that there is statistically significant mean difference between the experimental and control groups which t = 2.46, p < 0.05.Moreover, as can beseen from Table 1 above, there exist no significant differences in mean score the two groupsin their pretests of speaking that is 15.20 and15.25for experimental and control groups respectively. In contrast, there is a greater difference among the mean score of the two groups in their posttest that isx= 16.80 and 15.45 for experimental and control group respectively.

Based on the statistic evidence indicated in the above tables,it is possible to conclude that the English instruction delivered through simulated environment was reason for the improvements gained on 9th grade students'speaking skills ofexperimental group.The results point us to build up insight about the practical effect of language simulation experience as avital tool language learningandcapitalizing learner's oral interaction.Simulation is an extremely powerful means of helping students to learn certain foreign or second language skills (Jones, 1987). He further states that participants in simulated environment classroom naturally communicate in order to fulfill their role or solve the problem in simulationsand their need to communicate is intrinsic in the situations they are exposed to.

The findings of this study as illustrated in the above tables imply that, the inclusion of language simulations into English classrooms had offered opportunities for grade9 students in experimental group to improve their speaking ability after receiving treatment. This result, confirms the ideas suggested by Crookall and Oxford (1990) that simulation is a perfect classroom tool that offers ample opportunities for learners to communicate in the target language.

Though, the methods and instruments of data collection, designs and contexts of research areas vary from the current study, some preceding studies conducted on the roles of language simulations in improving speaking skill in foreign contexts by (Tran, 2003, Nguyen, 2006 and Hayden, 2007) had also found that using language simulations in EFL context is an answer instrumentfor improving EFL students' improving their speaking skills.Studies by (Peck, 1971), (Twelker andLayden, 1972)were the first lead way to the field language simulations and investigating the theories about simulation in general andutilization of simulation in EFL/ESL teachersclassroom.some findings on issue of using simulation in educational context conducted by (Brozik, 2000; Smythe; 2002 Kamimura and Tjie's, 2002; andHessler et al.'s 2002) have also found similarresults that language simulations produce positive outcome on communication skills in generaland teaching speaking skill in particular. This suggestion is directly related with Lyu, andLevitin (2006) ideas that ideal communicative classroom requires a friendly environment, which provides rich and meaningful exposure to the foreign language, and reason and opportunity to use it.

Thus, the presence of the simulated conditions in the experimental classroom of the current study lead us to take for granted language simulations are reasons for the improvement displayed on the results of students' speaking test during the posttest. Halleck, G, et al (2002) findings give us an idea about how the integrations of a semester-long simulation into a composition classendow with positive outcome in students' intellectual thinking and writing. Moreover, a paper by Lyu (2006)which was entitled as "Simulation and Second/ Foreign Language learning: Improving communication skills through simulations" has witnessed the practical effects of language simulations in improving communication skills.In this research many useful suggestions were shown on how simulations can be used in EFL class of basic level, intermediate level and advanced level which was also implicitly indicated as the significance of the current study.

In general, as it is indicated/recorded data during the pretest both group scores almost the same levels of speaking proficiency. However, during post test, control group students demonstrated insignificant improvement in their speaking achievement in comparison to the in experimental

group. Descriptively, 32% of the control group achieved weak result because of the minimal use of sentence structure and many grammatical errors. They were also very poor in pronunciation, lack of fluency and show no interest and enthusiasm towards the language. **50%** of the respondents achieved satisfactory marks because they use adequate use of language with some of grammatical errors, fair fluent with frequent pauses and respond to the questions given by the teacher with satisfactory mannerism. Meanwhile, 12.5% of the respondents' attained good result due to the correct sentence structures being used, clear articulation and word stress and also fluent speech with occasional pauses. Another 5% of the respondents attained excellent marks because they were able to use excellent sentence structures, accurate use of grammatical structures and fluent in their communication. The highest percentage of the control group result in the post test is satisfactory while the lowest percentage is excellent. In conclusion, majority of the participant of the control groups attained satisfactory result in the post test because they did not have good speaking skills and lack of knowledge in English communication.

However,after the intervention, clear demarcation has been seen that students in experimental group displayed radical changes in their speechscore during the post test.75% of the EGgroup' attained good result due to the correct sentence structures being used, clear articulation and word stress and also fluent speech with occasional pauses. Another 15% of the participants attained excellent marks because they were able to use excellent sentence structures, accurate use of grammatical structures and fluent in their communication. 10% of the respondents achieved weak result because of the minimal use of sentence structure and many grammatical errors. They also very poor in pronunciation, lack of fluency and show no interest and enthusiasm towards the test. Meanwhile, **5%** of the respondents achieved satisfactory marks because they use adequate use of language with some of grammatical errors, fair fluent with frequent pauses and respond to the questions given by the teacher with satisfactory mannerism.The highest percentage of the groupundertreatmentresult in the post-test is good and excellent while the lowest percentage is satisfactory. In conclusion, majority of the respondents attained good and excellent result in the pos-test due to the correct sentence structures being used, clear articulation and word stress and also fluent speech with occasional pauses and excellent marks because they were able to use excellent sentence structures, accurate use of grammatical structures and fluent in their communication. Ludivic (2007) support language simulation as important classroom tactic in improving learners' language skills andthe power and practical application of language simulation in enhancing students' critical thinking and writing skills.

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Conclusions

Students' speaking achievement in the present study was measured by employing speaking achievement test. The statistically significant difference between the meanscoresof pretest andposttest in thespeaking skill ofexperimental groups revealed that students who received treatment benefited from *simulated environment.*Statistical analysis indicated that therewas statistically significant difference between the mean scores of speaking skill oftheexperimental and control groups duringposttest. These findings indicate that*simulated environment* play a crucial role in helping learners to communicate well and improving their speaking skills. First and foremost, simulation is confirmed to be an interesting and effective speaking activity which provides useful help for students' to develop their speaking skills (Jones, 1987).

Theresultsof the testsleads to drawconclusion that*simulated environment*is the cornerstone for teaching English as foreign languagegeneral and speaking skill in particular.Even though creating*simulated environment* in language classes is somewhat challengingbecause it requires more time to prepare than other activities, it is certainly worth doing it; becauseit would not take more time if the text book will re-designed based on simulations model.With teachers understanding of *simulated environment*and proper preparation, there is no doubtsimulations arehelpful tools to improve students' communication skills more broadly and speaking skill specifically.Thus, the uses of simulations as a pedagogical learning and teaching tool in the classroom havegreater sense of pleasing and satisfaction in taking part situation that are new, realisticand fun in nature.Generally speaking, this research paper has acquired some major discoveries in the practice of using *simulated environment* in teaching English language classroom in general and speaking skill in particular for   students at Grade Nine Students at Banmbasi General Secondary and preparatory school Consequently, it could be concluded that language simulations are effective techniques for the enhancement of speaking abilities of the target groups.

Recommendations

Since the implications of the findings were believed to create extensive opportunities for learners to have active experience in simulated (real life) situations, which is of paramount importance in the enhancement of their speaking abilities andempoweringtheir ability to convey comprehensible meaning with the target language, the following points were suggested as recommendations based on the overall findings and issues discussed during the study.

As indicated in discussion and results part of the study,*simulated environment in* language classroom was founded to be better way of enhancing learners speaking skills and lets the students a reasonable degree of responsibility over their own learning andthe teacher to work as a facilitator of the process of teaching learning in or outside the classroom situations.Therefore, Educational policy-makers and syllabus designers should consider the applicability of language simulationsat different grade levels of English classroom in the Ethiopian context.For example,simulation experience, by Halleck et al s' (2002) that the integrations of a semester-long simulation of an academic conference into a composition class for international graduate students at Oklahoma State University and endow with positive outcome in students' intellectual thinking and writing can be adapted into Ethiopian EFL context.

Following this, if learners are in need of improving their speaking, they need to be provided a great deal of opportunities to communicate with others in simulated environment that can resemble real lifelike simulations.However, simulations cannot be just thrown at learners, with learners being expected to create communication right away. Therefore, learners especially those whose proficiency level is below the high-intermediate level, need to be provided enough input like descriptions of new vocabulary items, structures of some grammatical element necessary for the task designed in simulation classroom and other material that make the class environment realistic before the activity so that they can be ready for the activity and produce meaningful communications.Thus, the implementation of language simulationshould betaken into consideration by contemporarypedagogiesand EFLteachers.

As aresult, local ELT textbook writers should work along communicative lines and should incorporate language simulation as cornerstone of classroom techniques. So as to realize its effectiveness, EFL teachers shouldbe givenin-service training in applying simulations model into the real classroom. More specifically English teachers at grade Nine Students at Banmbasi General Secondary and preparatory school should look for ways to facilitate the adaption of simulationmodel into their English classroom to boost students' opportunities to speak English fluently and accurately.Manyempirical researches are needed at any educational institutions found in different parts the country (Ethiopia) to further our understanding of the constructive effects of language simulations on both receptive and productive skills. Moreover, further investigation is needed to find ways to facilitate the adaption of the simulation mode to EFL classroom of Ethiopian context and thereby enhance students' opportunities to speak English fluently and accurately. First and for most, a variety of simulations for a variety of levels should be designed and piloted.

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