

AN EVALUATION OF SPEAKING SKILLS IN PRACTICAL ENGLISH HANDBOOK1

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ABSTRACT

This article evaluates speaking skills activities in "Practical English Handbook1" by Mundala. This material was designed, certified and recommended by Higher Education Minister for the enhancement of English in the 1st years in Higher Education in DRC since 2011. The author used qualitative content analysis and has found a routine of activities likely to help learners to speak. He suggests the revision or adaptation of this course book by incorporating many other activities like group discussion, debate, role-play, simulations, brainstorming, storytelling or reproducing, interviews etc.

Keywords: *Speaking, coursebook, activities, traditional, communicative*

RESUME

Cet article évalue les activités destinées à développer la capacité de parler dans "Practical English Handbook1" écrit par Mundala. Ce manuel a été conçu, certifié et recommandé par le Ministre de l'Enseignement Supérieur et Universitaire pour l'amélioration de l'anglais en premiers graduats à l'Enseignement supérieur et universitaire en RDC depuis 2011. L'auteur utilise la méthode d'analyse du contenu et a constaté qu'il n'y a presque pas d'activités pour aider les apprenants à développer le parler. L'auteur propose qu'il soit révisé ou adapté en insérant les activités adéquates tel que dicter, résumer, reproduire, écouter, resumer, simulations, etc.

Mots-clés : *Expression orale, manuel de cours, activités, traditionnel, communicatif.*

1. INTRODUCTION

English teaching as a professional activity is more and more gaining ground in the world. Taking into account the state of English as one of the world Lingua Franca, the Democratic Republic of Congo (henceforth DRC) is one of the countries where the government has decided to generalize English learning as an enhancement of the program since 2011 for all the university students from the first year undergraduate up to doctoral level. This new program

enhancement was recognized by the Higher Education circular note n°1503/MINESU/CAB.MIN /LM/GM/2011 (Mashako, 2011).

However, it must be acknowledged with Sheldon (1988) Abdi and Mohammadi (2014) that as soon as a newly conceived curriculum is launched by the government, a number of competitive publishers in a liberal market society would involve professional instructional material writers to design or develop new textbooks which are in line with that new curriculum. In DRC, Practical English Handbook1 (henceforth PEH1) is the first English teaching material of its kind to be designed, certified and recommended by the Minister of Higher Education for the implementation of the ESP teaching program in all the first years undergraduate in their fields (Mundala 2011). The professed goals assigned to this handbook are to help learners to listen, speak, write, read and get acquainted with literature and documentation in their fields of studies (Mundala op cit).

However, English textbooks have a central role in English as a foreign language classroom. They are used as the reference or guide for what students have to learn on one side and what students and teachers need as support for their teaching or learning process providing materials on the other side. As such, they are the most important media in the teaching process.

Next, there are many factors determining whether a textbook is good or not. Generally, it is a textbook that fits the curriculum, teacher, and students which is recognized a good textbook.

Speaking in a second or foreign language has often been observed as the most difficult of the four skills. People frequently avoid speaking because they are self-conscious about appropriately pronouncing the words and are too shy to practice. At this point, they have been defeated by their fear and reluctance to speak up in the first place. Even so, the speaking materials in a textbook should include the standard and fundamental competencies, indicators, and learning objectives that must be met. One of the most common problems with this textbook is a lack of good and varied speaking materials. Therefore, I want to conduct a research under the title " An evaluation of speaking skills in PEH1" an analysis based on adapted Criteria from Cunningsworth (1995) textbook evaluation to know the appropriateness of the speaking materials in this coursebook . It is always necessary to carry out an evaluation to know the quality of a textbook as it is seen as an activity of value judgements on the parts of textbooks which tends to be based on a number of factors including learners and teachers expectations, contents, skills methodological preferences, the perceived needs of the learners, syllabus requirements, and personal preferences.

Given the many advantages related to the textbooks use as they are recognised in Mumtaz (2020), Banyongi (2018), CunningsworhsAftab (2011), Abdi and Mohammadi (2014) and mainly as they are concerned with the implementation of language new program, the problem at stake in this paper is to see to which extent the PEH1's content can help teachers/learners in matching one of its professed objectives that is, speaking for some possible suggestions

2. CUNNINGSWORTH'S THEORY

A textbook has to bear out all of the criteria of good textbook. Therefore, selecting a textbook is done to know a good textbook. Talking of this issue Cunningsworth (1995) indicates that selecting a textbook includes matching the material against the context in which it is going to be used and he suggests 6 criteria of evaluation:

2.1. Aims and approaches

Aims is an aspect of in-depth evaluation to see the appropriateness of the aims of the textbook with the teaching program and the teaching-learning situation, and whether the textbook suits the teaching-learning situation Cunningsworth (1995). In this context, I try to see wether the aim of the 2011 curriculum aligns with the objectives of the textbook as far as speaking skills activities are concerned.

2.2. Design and organization

For Cunningsworth, (1995) design and organization are likewise concerned with the in-depth evaluation and consists to see the appropriateness of organization to the teacher and students, how clear the layout is, how the materials are provided in the textbook and how they can allow them to complete the work needed to meet syllabus requirements.

2.3. Language content

In evaluating the language content, the researcher is concerned with the language that is contained in the textbook. This language content can then be compared with the students need to learn, in order to evaluate the suitability of the material.

2.4. Topic

The criterion of topic seeks to answer the questions of whether there is sufficient material of genuine interest to learners, whether there is enough variety and range of topic, whether the topic will help expand students awareness and enrich their experience, whether the topics are sophisticated enough in content, yet within the learners' language level, whether the

students will be able to relate to the social and cultural context presented in the textbook.

2.5. Methodology

The criterion about methodology seeks to answer the questions of how approaches to language learning are taken by the textbook and whether it is appropriate to the learning/teaching situation, what level of active learner involvement can be expected and whether this matches the students learning styles and expectations, what techniques are used for presenting/practicing new language items and whether they are suitable for the learners, how the skills are taught, how communicative abilities are developed, whether the material includes any study skills and learning strategies.

2.6. SpeakingSkill

Skill is like the others an aspect of the in-depth evaluation to see whether the appropriateness of the skills in the textbook covers the course aims and syllabus requirements and particularly in this paper it consists to see whether the speaking materials are well-designed to equip learners for real-life interactions. Naturally, speaking practice takes place through the various oral presentations and practice of new language items like in dialogue work, roleplay, debate, discussion, summarizing, reproducing, reporting, paraphrasing, narration, description, information gap...

Talking about kinds of evaluation, Byrd quoted in Celce (2001) categorises textbook evaluation as a complex process performed in different ways. This process can be regarded as teacher or researcher -own decision process, (a centralized process), and a more decentralized approach. Here, the researchers or the teachers select textbooks based on their own judgements. This is done by collecting as much information from the textbook. In contrast, the decentralized approach to textbook evaluation is done by the government via the Ministry of Education.

According to Cunningsworth (1995), materials evaluation is a complex matter, for there are many variables that impact the success or failure of coursebooks when they are in use. So, in evaluating teaching materials, it is essential to limit the number of aspects used, the number of question asked or statement given, to manageable proportion. The present paper draws on a teacher or researcher- decision process. That is why, I skim-read PEH1 using a checklist that I have adapted from Cunningsworth (1995) to see how speaking materials are here in . This, given that there is no universal set of criteria that could be used for every coursebook evaluation Antal (2020).

3. SPEAKING

Speaking is carrying a message from the speaker's mind to the listener. As an active use of language, speaking can be used to express meaning of the speaker's intention. Put otherwise, speaking is an ability to produce sounds or sentences that express ideas, feelings or emotions. Therefore it is the device to communicate organized and developed ideas for the listener, building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts. As such, speaking can be viewed as an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing receiving and processing information (Brown, 1994; Burns & Joyce, 1997). Thus, it is one of the main purposes and a tool of language learning/teaching in that it is an ability to transfer some ideas to other people clearly and correctly. Simply put speaking is producing a speech that can be a monologue or dialogue. Fulcher (2003:23) sees speaking as "Verbal use of language and its purpose is to communicate with others". In conclusion, following are elements that are to be considered for speaking to take place: a speaker and or not the listener, feelings, ideas or message to transfer.

3.1. Aspects of Speaking

Speaking is an important language skill for both language learning and teaching. According to Tuan and Mai (2015:18) cited in Bohari (2019:3) there are many factors affecting learners' speaking in or out of the classroom as follows: (1) topical knowledge; (2) motivation to speak; (3), listener's feedback during speaking activities; (4) confidence; (5) pressure to perform well and (6) time for preparation. Given the above factors, learners are required to develop a number of skills for an effective speaking ability such as pronunciation, structure, vocabulary, content, and fluency. To these, accuracy must be added. Again, Brown (2004) cites vocabulary, grammar, fluency, comprehension, enunciation as important to be considered for one to speak.

In Bohari's (2019) ideas, speaking is complex and requires the simultaneous use of different ability which often develops at different roles and so; is generally recognized in analysis of speech processes that are pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Murcia (2002) on her part, mentions features that interact to make speaking a challenging task for foreign language learners. She offers the following explanations: firstly, fluent speech contains reduced forms, such as contractions, vowel reduction, and elision, so that learners who do not get sufficient practice with reduced speech retain their rather formal-sounding full forms. Secondly, slang and idioms are often used in speech; without facility in using these ubiquitous features of spoken language, learners are apt to sound bookish. Thirdly, learners must also acquire the stress, rhythm, and intonation of English which seem a complicated task for many.

3.2. Functions of Speaking

According to Brown and Yule (1994) cited in Nurbaya, Salam and Arifin (2015) there are three functions of speaking which they explain as follows:

Speaking as Interaction

Speaking as interaction refers to the communication which serves a primarily social function. When people meet, they exchange greetings, engage in small speaking and chit chat, recount recent experiences because they wish to be friendly and establish a comfortable zone of interaction with others.

Speaking as Performance

Speaking as performance tends to be in form of monologue rather than dialogue, often follow a recognizable format and it is closer to written language than conversational language.

Speaking as Transaction

Speaking as transaction refers to situation where the focus is on the message about which it is said or achieved in order to make people be understood clearly and accurately. Her

3.3. Difficulties in Speaking

To speak means to interact with others. This activity involves two or more people in which are hearers and speakers (Johnson and Morrow, 1981:70) cited in Sukatri (2016). As such, speaking is not an easy activity to carry out. According to Brown (2001) cited by Sukatri (2016) once more, there are some factors that may make speaking difficult. Sukari mentions firstly that there is Clustering which refers to fluency in speech making speaking difficult, because a fluent speech is a phrasal and not word by word. Secondly he talks of redundancy which tells about the opportunity of the speaker to provide the clearer meaning. The third is about reduced forms that students should learn about in order to make their speaking better. The next factor is performance variables. For Sukatri (Op.cit) students can show their performance of hesitations, pauses, backtracking and correction, such as the use of filters like uh, hm, a, and, okay, as we know while teacher are likely to give the students "time" to pause and then continue their performance. The other factors are stress, rhythm and intonation, English having its own stress, rhythm, and intonation that belong to the pronunciation aspects which differs from other languages. Those are important in English because different stress, rhythm and intonation convey different meaning and are thus important to give the message clearly. Finally, the last factor is interaction which needs the creativity of conversational negotiation.

4. COURSEBOOK

A coursebook is generally a book including some materials of certain subjects used by students in the learning process in the classroom. To cite Ur (2012:183) "The term 'Coursebook' is used to mean a textbook of which the teacher and, usually each student has a copy, and which is in principle to be followed systematically as a basis for a language course". As a formal manual of instruction designed to be used both by teachers and students, it is required to go with a specific course having a purely educational purpose while a book may have different purposes. On the other side, a handbook is viewed as a book skilled of being conveniently carried as a ready reference for a course. For Tomlinson (2003), a language textbook is seen extensively as a tool that provides the core materials for a language-learning course. Likewise (Buhendwa, 2016) clarifies that "A textbook is a teaching document or a set of documents and related objects used by the teacher for successfully carrying out teaching or learning subsequent to specific objectives as stated by the curriculum". It follows that a textbook is the chief reserve to deliver the material outline that is designed in the curriculum and then acting as the main teaching aid. As such, it is an important contract between the teacher and the learners since it contains what the teacher thinks of learners and what learners expect of the teacher. As a flashlight, it allows the learners to enter and deepen the field with a clear understanding as they have already got the basics. Rewording Sheldon (1988: 237), the heart of ELT programs is professed through coursebooks. Therefore, the coursebook aims at providing as much as possible in one book and is designed so that it could serve as the only book which the learners necessarily use during a course, including work on grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, functions and the skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking as well as exercises. In conclusion, the terms coursebook, handbook and textbook are all synonyms and have been understood as a book used to teach a particular subject, especially in schools and colleges. Used as synonyms, they are therefore used interchangeably.

4.1. Types of coursebooks

Coursebooks are classified according to whether they are traditional or learner-centred and communicative or teacher-centred. However, Grant (1990) recognizes that it is not always possible to place a coursebook within either of these categories. Here are explanations about these typologies:

4.1.1. *Traditional versus communicative coursebooks.*

The term traditional is not used to describe the date when a coursebook was published, but rather a type of coursebook; therefore, traditional textbooks might be still published today. According to (Grant, 1990) and Antal (2020) traditional coursebooks are regarded as those which try to get learners to learn

the language as a system. They mention the followings as depicting traditional coursebooks:

- They stress the forms, or patterns, of language (the grammar) more than the communicative functions of language;
- They focus on reading and writing activities;
- They use a great deal of L1 (speaker's first language);
- They emphasise the importance of accuracy;
- They focus rather narrowly on the syllabus and examinations

Yet, traditional coursebooks might be easy to use by teachers and learners together, but the result of using them is that on completion of the studies learners know the grammar (the system) of a language, but they cannot talk (use) it. By contrast, communicative coursebooks try to construct opportunities for the students to use the language in the classroom, as a sort of halfway house before using it in real life Grant (1987). Here are the features they all should have in common according to Grant (1987):

- Emphasis on the communicative functions of language;
- Reflection of students' desires;
- Importance on four language skills and good balance among them;
- Reflection of the authentic language of everyday life;
- Encouraging working in groups or pairs;
- Emphasis on fluency and not only on accuracy

According to Grant (1987) some of the communicative tasks that can be contained in such a coursebook and that can help learners to use the language they learn in real life are namely listening to authentic language (like recording of an airport announcement, phone call), implementing information-gap drills (giving learners a purpose for communication), reading a text in order to find a particular information, that is reading for a purpose and expressing themselves in writing in a real situation (e.g. writing a postcard or completing an application form). But then again, Grant (1987:15) admits that even some non-communicative activities might be useful as well if they suit the learners' learning styles - or teachers' teaching styles. These activities, recommended by Grant (1987:15) are dictations, grammatical explanations, accuracy exercises such as blank-filling and sentence completion. In conclusion to decide whether a coursebook is traditional or communicative, Grant supplies a quick test which is comprised of four easy steps:

Primarily, the language used in the coursebook is examined. If the dialogues used in the coursebook seem artificial and unnatural, then it is probably a traditional one. On the other hand, if the dialogues are real-life examples of communication, then the coursebook is communicative. Again, if the content of language exercises and activities presented in the coursebook are likely to

be fall in real life as well, it is a communicative coursebook. Next, the test examines if the activities highlight accuracy rather than fluency. In case most of the activities are firmly controlled by the teacher so that the learners do not make any mistakes, then it is a traditional coursebook. On the contrary, when the coursebook provides enough fluency practice, making learners talk to each other in pairs or groups and expressing what they really want to say, there is a risk of their making mistakes, however, communicative coursebooks accept this risk. Finally, the test focuses on the question of whether the coursebook underlines study or practice. A coursebook which spends much time studying particular language forms without providing enough practice in real-life situations is not communicative.

4.1.2. Learner-centred versus teacher-centred coursebook

A learner-centred coursebook is the one which involves learners with interactive learning activities with automated marking. This type of teaching material encourages students to learn anywhere and at anytime. By contrast teacher-centred coursebook is the one which engages teachers almost in talking (excessively) while students continue to listen and remain silent. The students' focus is completely on the teacher, whereas in learner-centred coursebook, both learner and teacher have equal attention.

5. PEH1 OVERVIEW

A Practical Handbook¹ is the first Reference English Pedagogical Support that has been designed, certified and recommended by the Higher Education Ministry of the Democratic Republic of Congo to teach English to first year undergraduate students in all the fields. This was according to Mundala (2011:5) "To support the decision to adopt English as the second language for Higher Education besides French, in order to allow the Congolese graduates to participate in the globalisation process and be competitive on the labor market". The handbook has been structured in four parts each of which is divided into sessions for a total of 25 sessions, in addition to bibliography and appendices. The first part is about basic English grammar, the second concerns the origin and importance of English, the third deals with English for general and fourth is social purposes and English for specific purposes. The objectives assigned to this handbook are to help learners develop listening, speaking, reading and writing abilities, and to get them acquainted with English literature and documentation of psychology, Education and related areas. According to Mundala (2011:5) this hand book can be adapted to any field of study in DRC Higher Education Public and Private Institutions. In the following sections we are going to see whether or not these assigned objectives align with the content of this teaching/learning material or not in terms speaking skills.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Speaking activities arouse appropriate, accurate, fluent and authentic language. For this purpose, they have to vary in a coursebook. After critically scrutiny and in the light of theories about a good course book and speaking skills, this PEH1 tends to be defective as far as speaking skills are concerned. However, after the analysis it has been found that in its four parts and twenty five sessions all the speaking activities require learners to be restricted rather than free in producing the language. This makes the coursebook rather traditional than communicative and therefore can not enhance learners' communicative competence. Overall, the coursebook is providing controlled suitable practices for speaking that are not adequate to generate their own output. The only oral activities likely to train learners to speak here, are dialogues and oral answers on reading related to the texts. These are found in the texts 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and dialogues 14, 15. Yet those activities, may boost the knowledge of the students but can fail to help them in handling and producing language of their own. Such activities have constrained the students in their responses and are likely to create limited responses. Students are not free to generate new ideas accurately and fluently. Furthermore they are not exposed to the real context where they can communicate with the help of these phrases.

7. SUGGESTIONS

In view of the results above, I offer all the parties involved in the use of PEH1 with the following suggestions intended to remedy or improve the efficacy and efficiency that could be proposed. They are expected to be appreciated for each of them. They are the coursebook itself, teachers, course books writers or designers, English study program as policy makers and the Minister of Higher Education

➤ **About the coursebook**

After having assessed this coursebook and found the possible zones of faintness, I suggest the following as far as this coursebook is concerned, to meet the students' proficiency and reach the speaking objective as consigned to the course and for its possible adaptation therefore, make students be interested in it. It is worth recalling that students learn better when they are exposed to appropriate materials likely to enhance their interest and understanding, training and internalization. To enhance this course book, I suggest the following with Lathif (2015):

Adapting the course book that is, changing existing materials that will consist of rewriting, restructuring or reorganizing the activities like exiting items deemed inappropriate, irrelevant, unfertile; reorder and combine activities and importantly by revising the course book and incorporating

activities such as group discussion, debate, role-play, information, simulations, brainstorming, storytelling or reproducing, interviews, picture describing or narrating, song, game, oral composition etc. With these learners would be provided with natural and authentic environment to practice speaking easily and therefore develop their speaking competence. This will be beneficial in making the classroom teaching more interactive, smooth and cohesive.

➤ **About English teachers or lecturers**

I think the teachers or lecturers would be more vigilant in selecting coursebooks that will be taught to students. Some coursebooks are not in agreement with the curriculum or with the syllabus of learning. The Higher Education Minister should associate language teaching experts for any other course book designing or evaluation. This would be seen beneficial because experts possess sufficient knowledge in grammar functions, language components and teaching for they are skilled in these domains and are supposed to know learners' needs and how to go about in designing materials for learning.

➤ **Coursebooks writers and publishers**

Apart from the fact the the coursebook writers or designers must be an English language expert, they should also understand the nature of the curriculum which will be underlying guidelines providing the designers with language skills, content and values to be taught. That is they should guarantee that goals and objectives of curriculum are enclosed. Next, s/he should be able to have a good understanding of the target learners, educational, linguistic, psychological and socio-cultural aspects. They would likewise be aware that the design process of a textbook is shaped by the understanding of the nature of curriculum to be followed and follows a cyclical steps which requires them to be critical and reflective practitioner

Realizing the fact that there are many criteria of a good coursebook, course writers and publishers should pay more attention to this aspect. That is, they should understand that not all the teachers can evaluate textbooks they use in their classroom for this process is quite challenging to conduct. As well, it should be raised that not all teachers understand how to adapt and modify aspects containing weaknesses on textbooks.

➤ **Minister of Higher Education**

As the one who standardizes the policy of the textbooks use in the country and as the findings of this study have shown weaknesses found in PEH1. It would be compulsory of this Minister to give a clear understanding about criteria of a good textbook to textbooks writers and publishers. This, I hope,

will help improve the quality of published coursebooks since they have the same perspectives with PEH1 in accordance to such criteria.

8. CONCLUSIONS

Coursebook plays a dominant role in teaching English language. The analysis of PEH1 reveals that this course book contains just two types of activities that are dialogues and reading comprehension answers. These make speaking skill static all along the course book. Such kinds of activities are not likely to create interactive skills between learners so as to help them acquire the ability to produce a language of their own and speak at will. That is why this article pleads for the adaptation of this coursebook by incorporating many other kinds of activities as suggested above given that strategies cannot be comprehensive to be used with a variety of learners who will themselves be affected by features such as context, cognitive styles, and proficiency levels.

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