

Review research paper

EXPLORING ASPECTS OF INCLUSION TO ENHANCE ORAL PROFICIENCY IN HIGHER EDUCATION EFL CLASSROOMS

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Abstract. *Knowing English in today’s world is no longer an added advantage, but rather a necessity. At a time when globalization is increasingly leading to an interdependence among the world’s economies, cultures and populations, the status of English as a lingua franca on the global stage is inevitably strengthened. As such, there is a growing need to equip EFL learners with essential skills that will enable them to successfully navigate life outside the academic context. Hence, the importance of EFL communicative competence is further highlighted, as it becomes more and more evident that a more inclusive approach is necessary in line with the current global contexts. It is essential that learners receive proper guidance, support and scaffolding to help them improve their oral communicative skills as a vital segment of their communicative proficiency. Thus, we may need to rethink the way in which this is dealt with in the tertiary EFL classroom in terms of how it is presented, taught and evaluated, as higher education is essentially learners’ last step in the academic environment. Furthermore, care ought to be taken so that it is done in a more inclusive fashion to correspond to the new attitudes and expectations of the diverse ‘global village’ we are living in. This paper takes a closer look at various aspects related to inclusion for the purpose of enhancing EFL learners’ oral skills proficiency, addressing the potential need of materials development, and the importance of establishing and promoting clear and objective criteria.*

Key words: *inclusion, scaffolding, reliability, oral proficiency, communicative competence*

1. INTRODUCTION

The term *inclusion* in the context of education refers to individuals having access and equal opportunities to education and learning. As such, *inclusion in education* is defined as taking each individual’s needs into account and enabling everyone to participate and achieve together. The founding premise is that everyone can learn and that each individual has their own unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs (UNESCO). The update of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) clearly acknowledges the importance of quality inclusive education as a right of all citizens (Council of Europe 2018: 23). The aim of education, at any and all levels, is to equip

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individuals for life, and especially life outside the academic context, equipping them with the necessary (life) skills to become productive and contributing members of society. However, as education progresses to higher levels, there is an inevitable evolution from basic skills to more complex ones. By the time the tertiary level of education is reached, learners are expected to be able to confidently navigate through life and successfully deal with a variety of situations they may encounter.

In order to create a positive and beneficial learning environment, since the more comfortable learners feel, the more open and receptive they are to learning, care must be taken to ensure that it is inclusive. This inclusive learning environment consists of a number of factors and elements that are intertwined and complementary for optimal results. Language classrooms, and in this context, (E)FL classrooms as well, are seen as excellent environments for inclusive teaching and learning as they provide diverse settings with learners and instructors from many different backgrounds, offering a plethora of cultural diversity, experiences and traditions. Thus, much like real life, (E)FL classrooms become a melting pot of sorts.

Stadler-Heer (2019) states that the concept of *inclusion* is not new to language classrooms. In fact, related terms, however different in meaning they might be, such as *individualization*, *scaffolding*, *differentiation*, and *integration*, have been present in ELT discourse for some time. While these are usually conceptualized as practical measures taken by a teacher according to a learner's or a group's needs, the notion of inclusion also entails a transformed view of language teaching. It requires replacing conventional conceptualizations of individual differences in the regular classroom with a broader organizational, social or interactive perspective relating to all aspects of schooling, including infrastructure of buildings, financial resources, constructing school communities, and training of personnel. Out of the multitude of meanings stemming from *inclusion*, this paper focuses on aspects of *scaffolding* (Foley 1994) for discussion in enhancing oral proficiency in higher education EFL classrooms.

2. COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCES AND NATIVENESS

First and foremost, learners must be made aware of what characteristics a good speaker possesses and what a good speaker does (Florez 1999: 2). In this context, the enhancement of oral proficiency should lead toward the following, in no particular order: manages discrete elements such as turn-taking, rephrasing, providing feedback or redirecting; produces the sounds, stress patterns, rhythmic structure and intonations of English; uses grammar structures accurately; assesses the characteristics of the target audience, including shared knowledge or shared points of reference, status and power relations; selects vocabulary that is understandable and appropriate; applies strategies to enhance comprehensibility, such as emphasizing key words, rephrasing or checking for listener comprehension; and pays attention to the success of the interaction, adjusting components of speech such as vocabulary, rate of speech, and complexity of grammar structures to maximize listener comprehension and involvement.

Interestingly enough, EFL classrooms at the tertiary level of education are in an excellent position to pave the way to a smoother transition from an academic to a real-life context for their learners, as they can focus more on further improving and expanding learners' skills rather than on helping them acquire them, as it is expected that learners have already achieved

this at the lower levels of education, namely, at the primary and/or secondary level. Thus, at this stage, EFL learners have achieved the necessary *linguistic skills* (understanding and using appropriate vocabulary, various linguistic conventions, such as grammar, punctuation and spelling, as well as syntactic conventions, as in proper sentence structure), and can focus more on honing their *discourse skills* (understanding and employing patterns of organization and a variety of discourse markers to achieve smooth transitions and logical and consistent flow of ideas and train of thought), *strategic skills* (planning for effective communication by being able to make modifications and adjustments bearing in mind the target audience and the overall purpose, being fluent and achieving coherence and cohesion of thoughts and ideas, and being able to overcome various language gaps, all of which are connected to discourse skills), and especially their *sociolinguistic skills* (awareness of the social rules of language, such as tone and level of formality (register), various non-verbal behaviors, as well as cultural knowledge as illustrated in the appropriate use of idioms and other cultural references), all of which fall under the category of *communication skills* (Widdowson 1978).

It goes without saying that knowing English as a foreign language nowadays is no longer seen as an advantage but, rather, as an essential skill, like possessing literacy and numeracy skills. From early school years until later in life, learning and using English either in teaching scenarios or in everyday situations have become usual global citizen's activities (Dincă & Chitez 2021). In this context, it is not enough to just comprehend the language considered to be a global lingua franca, but also to be able to utilize it in practical, everyday situations. This is why it is of such great significance that the heart of higher education EFL classrooms should be aimed toward inclusion of the three communicative language competences: linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic. In addition, as Nešić and Hamidović note (2022: 482), though “language knowledge” and “language use” are similar phenomena, they should be understood differently, as knowing, i.e. understanding a language, does not imply the ability of using that language in certain situations and contexts, we must always be aware that improving oral proficiency will undoubtedly go hand in hand with improving learners' linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic skills.

Communicative competence for EFL learners need not be intertwined with the concept of ‘nativeness’ in phonological control, i.e. an unreal benchmark of speaking and sounding like ‘a native speaker’. In fact, one of the changes to the 2001 publication of the CEFR refers specifically to this term, as it has become controversial since the CEFR was first published. It should be emphasized that the top level in the CEFR scheme, C2, has no relation whatsoever with what is sometimes referred to as the performance of an idealized ‘native speaker’ or a ‘well-educated native speaker’. Level C2, while it has been termed “Mastery”, is not intended to imply native-speaker or near native-speaker competence, but rather to characterize the degree of precision, appropriateness and ease with the language which typifies the speech of those who have been highly successful learners. It could be extended to include the more developed intercultural competence above that level which is achieved by many language professionals (Council of Europe 2018: 37). Therefore, EFL teachers should make it clear to students that expectations for communicative competence are not based on ‘a native speaker’, and scaffold accordingly.

3. FEEDBACK

Speaking skills are considered to be one of the most important in achieving communicative competence due to the fact that they facilitate and enable communication at different levels and in different contexts, such as presentations, negotiations, debates, interviews and discussions, among others (Nation & Newton 2009). However, they, together with writing skills, are notoriously challenging to evaluate, as their assessment is seen to be quite objective and not very clear cut, unlike the assessment of grammar, listening or reading skills, for example. As such, it is of great importance that learners are provided with clear and objective criteria, which will ultimately help not only them, but also those doing the evaluation and providing the feedback.

Learning is more or less a trial-and-error process, which means that errors are an inevitable and beneficial part and need to be accepted as such by both parties equally. However, what is also vital is how they are dealt with, again, by both participants in the learning and teaching process, which is what ultimately determines how successful the end results will be.

Evaluating learners' oral proficiency can, indeed, be a challenging task without proper preparation, as this is where a number of other factors need to be taken into consideration, such as how a certain speaking task will firstly be taught, bearing in mind the variety of teaching methods and strategies, how it will be evaluated, how the feedback will be carried out, who will be involved in the actual evaluation and/or feedback, and what the expected outcomes will be, in the direction of a benchmark. It is of great significance how the learners will receive feedback concerning the various speaking tasks they have carried out, as this will ultimately determine whether, and to what extent, the learning outcomes will be successful.

One segment that may be worth looking at in more detail is the actual word choice for this phase of the learning process – whether we will use assessment, evaluation, feedback, review, or error correction. This is not as light a decision to make as it first appears to be since some of these words carry a negative connotation and are more anxiety-inducing than others, which are more learner-friendly and in line with the positive learning environment we wish to create. In addition, and in line with remaining true to creating a truly inclusive learning environment, we may also consider the fact that formal assessment may be a greater challenge to some learners than to others. Thus, it is worth considering other means that may be used as a replacement, or even adjustments that may be made to existing materials so that they are adapted to best fit the learners' needs, such as creating shorter tests with fewer items, or even doing away with tests altogether, circumstances permitting.

It goes without saying that the feedback stage, the most learner-friendly term in our opinion, is crucial for encouraging and consolidating learning. The occurrence of errors is a completely natural occurrence in (E)FL acquisition, and dealing with them in a timely and constructive manner is an important aspect of FL teaching, since proper feedback is essential to avoid fossilization; the permanent incorporation of incorrect linguistic forms leads to poor linguistic skills, and ultimately to poor communicative competence.

Corrective feedback through explicit correction, recasts, clarification requests, metalinguistic feedback, and elicitation or repetition each have a place in the EFL classroom. Lightbown & Spada (2021: 156-157) state that scaffolding takes place as the instructor's questions represent mediational tools within the dialogue between the instructor and the learners; in fact, questions should be examined within the framework of scaffolded interaction and with reference to the instructor's goals in a particular lesson or interaction.

Furthermore, feedback may be provided not just by the instructors but also by the learners themselves, in the form of peer-feedback, or even self-feedback, all of which are beneficial from several aspects, and not just in the classroom, but in real-life contexts as well. In this way they tie in neatly to learners not just being made aware of errors they have made and learning from them, but also having the opportunity to acquire life skills that will be useful to them outside the academic context. Self-feedback can take many forms, the most beneficial being phrased in positive self-appraisal comments, which will ultimately help learners become more self-critical and allow them to assume responsibility.

In line with enhancing oral proficiency, what we cannot emphasize enough is that oral competence is improved with communication, and, as such, it is essential that instructors provide a safe and comfortable environment for this, to free EFL learners of their inhibitions. The feedback stage is crucial and it is especially important that it is carried out in as non-threatening a fashion as possible, since willingness to communicate (WTC) in (E)FL classrooms is viewed both as a personality trait and a situational construct (Jelínková et al. 2023). In their work, MacIntyre and Charos (1996: 17) suggest that “the intention or willingness to engage in L2 communication is determined by a combination of the student’s perception of his or her second language proficiency, the opportunity to use the language, and a lack of apprehension about speaking.”

4. CLEAR CRITERIA AND RELIABILITY OF THE SPEAKING EXAM

Advances in technology have allowed numerous work and/or study opportunities, which were previously unheard of, or, at least, were not accessible to many. Nowadays, a great number of learners work and study at the same time, and even manage to do both remotely. This is another factor that needs to be taken into consideration in line with the evaluation phase in the learning process, as numerous options have become possible with the possibility of online and hybrid learning. With novelties in the EFL classroom, new trends in teaching and presenting the material call for new ways in which learners can be evaluated on their oral proficiency.

However, what has remained unchanged is the need for clear and objective criteria of the speaking exam, indispensable on one hand, yet considered to be the trickiest to carry out, on the other, since the said criteria can be potentially open for different interpretations and subjectivity. As such, it is not only helpful, but it is also absolutely necessary that learners are kept informed beforehand as to how their oral proficiency will be evaluated. For this reason, there are numerous rubrics that may be used or adapted, which, in line with the CEFR descriptors, facilitate greater objectivity.

The internationally-recognized speaking band descriptors are essentially a set of assessment criteria used to evaluate learners’ speaking performance. There are four main categories across nine bands. The former consists of (i) fluency/coherence; (ii) lexical resource; (iii) grammatical range/accuracy; and (iv) pronunciation, while the latter carries the following meanings: 9 (expert user); 8 (very good user); 7 (good user); 6 (competent user); 5 (modest user); 4 (limited user); 3 (extremely limited user); 2 (intermittent user); 1 (non user); and 0 (made no attempt). Depending on the situation and other corresponding factors, these may be adjusted to fit the given context (academic freedom), at the same time allowing learners to feel comfortable concerning the objectivity of their oral proficiency evaluation.

Reliability concerns the extent to which speaking exam results are stable, consistent and free from errors of measurement. It is a general principle that in any exam situation one needs to maximize reliability to produce the most useful results for learners taking the exam, within the existing practical and local constraints. As such, the emphasis of the Speaking section in the IELTS exam, for example, is on measuring learners' communication skills in the language in everyday situations, rather than on formal knowledge of grammar, vocabulary or other elements of the language itself. This orientation is captured through the term *communicative effectiveness*, which refers to learners' ability to talk at length on a range of topics displaying primarily functional and discourse skills alongside lexicogrammatical accuracy and comprehensibility of speech (pronunciation). This shows why speaking exam reliability is one of the most controversial areas of band standardization due to its difficulty to achieve total objectivity (Cambridge English Language Assessment 2016: 27).

For the purpose of inclusion in enhancing oral proficiency, higher education EFL instructors may follow the IELTS speaking exam format in their local contexts, yet they need to be aware of both the benefits and the potential drawbacks. The speaking exam is characterized by an unscripted and relatively unstructured format: the interviewers are generally provided with guidelines that suggest topics and general questioning focus, however specific questions are neither pre-formulated nor identical for each candidate as the interaction is intended to unfold in a natural conversational manner. Some consider the unpredictability and dynamic nature of the interaction to be a valid measure of conversational communicative competence because communication outside the academic context indeed unfolds in an unscripted and non-planned manner. However, it has also long been argued that this unpredictability may compromise test reliability, as the question that arises is whether a learner can be sure that they will get the same band for the speaking exam regardless of the instructor.

Fulcher & Davidson (2007: 263) use the term *topic-priming* to refer to supportive, scaffolding behavior as an attempt by the instructor to make the upcoming speaking exam questions understandable. However, as the strategy was found to be used by some instructors more than others, it is argued that such variation could lead to unfairness in assessment as those learners who are provided with this sort of scaffolding are likely to produce a better performance than those who are not given the benefit of assistance. In addition, there is the dilemma whether tokens by the instructor, such as 'mhm' and 'yeah', can be taken as feedback or turn-eliciting prompts. This leads to questioning the reliability of the speaking exam as learners do not get equal opportunities, hence inclusion is shown to be lacking in this respect. One possible suggestion for inclusion may be that instructors stick closely to a script and neither replace nor omit even a word, just as it is done with the Cambridge B2 First and C1 Advanced Speaking exams. Although the naturalistic interaction might not be so authentic, at least the reliability of the exam could be improved, since the instructors of the same higher education institution have the same starting point and do not use scaffolding or any other strategies to support learners.

5. MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT

Materials development refers to the study and practice of developing materials for the teaching of language, including principles and processes of designing, implementing, and evaluating materials (Tomlinson 2012). One of the main ways in which learners can attain the ability to speak effectively is the use of materials, and, according to Allwright (1990),

they should teach students to learn, they should be resource books for ideas and activities for instruction/learning, and they should give teachers rationales for what they do.

In line with our aim to approach the enhancing of EFL learners' oral proficiency, we will inevitably find ourselves facing the need to make certain adaptations to existing materials, both teaching-wise and assessment-wise, and even develop authentic materials, if the need arises. Hand in hand with the greater professionalization of the ELT community, there has been a tendency for higher education EFL instructors to explore corpus-based and task-based approaches, drawing on research insights about spoken interaction, independently of published materials and/or to engage in their own materials development for the aim of inclusion of all learners, thus still retaining a strong focus on prompts for discussions, role plays, and tasks to generate real-life interaction (Hughes 2011: 72).

As such, changes will be needed both in terms of how the material is presented, and in terms of how it is tested. Another advantage to all the various technological advances taking place is that we now have new and quite unlimited choices in these two areas, namely teaching and testing. We can use all the technological novelties that have made their way into our lives, as well as all the options that opened up during Covid times, and make them work in our favor. We no longer need to rely solely on coursebooks for teaching, or on pen-and-paper tests for evaluating; we can substitute them with new and innovative ways, which are more in tune with the times and better fit the learners' needs.

Thus, teaching can be carried out in a hybrid fashion, or even fully online, and learners will be able to access the materials from the comfort of their homes. They can be asked to do research during class, in real-time, and present it or even discuss it, rather than having to do it as a homework assignment. This will enable learners to take a more active role in their learning, which will undoubtedly have more beneficial results; learners will assume responsibility for something that will ultimately help them in a real-life context.

Enhancing learners' oral proficiency allows for flexibility in terms of the approaches, techniques and materials that may be used, adapted and even developed, all with the aim to make them as inclusive as possible as regards the different learners' needs and learning styles. Whereas it is more challenging to assess oral proficiency, it makes up in the range of available resources, especially at the tertiary level of education, where the learners are cognitively developed and preparing for the next stage in their life. As long as care is taken to take all these factors into consideration, and learners are offered stimulating and thought-provoking activities, adjusted to their level so as to avoid boredom and/or frustration, success is inevitable. Furthermore, as tertiary-level (EFL) learners are at the stage where they will soon be entering the real-life environment, it would be very useful to introduce them to the benefits, and possible drawbacks, various technological novelties may have, such as the relatively recent developments in artificial intelligence (AI), including ChatGPT. These may even be used as support, useful to all the participants in the learning and teaching process.

6. CONCLUSION

It goes without saying that the concept of inclusion is essential in facilitating successful learning outcomes, and nowhere is this more evident than at the tertiary level of education, where learners have reached the final stage of their formal learning. The higher education EFL classroom affords us excellent opportunities to make maximum use of inclusion in attaining

the best results possible, especially in terms of improving EFL learners' oral proficiency, bearing in mind all the segments we have at our disposal, from materials development to feedback, and everything else in between.

As noted previously, an inclusive approach to education encompasses taking individuals' needs into account, and involving all learners to participate and, as such, to achieve together. This underlines the need to make adjustments and tweaks to any and all segments in the learning and teaching process to ensure a safe and comfortable environment for all participants in the said process, at the same time ensuring objectivity and reliability in one of the most challenging segments for this, namely, oral proficiency.

In fact, at present, in this era of such numerous and rapid advances in communication, oral proficiency, or speaking competence, is seen by EFL learners as the most important segment to acquire, while, at the same time, the trickiest to objectively evaluate. As evaluation and feedback are crucial for improvement, it is vital that we find a way to incorporate all these points to ensure that EFL learners are successfully achieving their learning outcomes and are going out in the real-world fully prepared. This can be done by implementing a number of strategies, which will undoubtedly need to be adapted in different contexts, yet they are, nevertheless, present as a solid foundation.

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