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## Information Gap Activities to Enhance Speaking Skills of Elementary Level Students

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### Abstract

Speaking is considered as one of the most essential means of effective communication. Teaching English-speaking skills to elementary level students at university is especially challenging. The most demanding issue for teachers is how to assist students to apply the knowledge learned in the class to real-life situations. The biggest problem with low-level proficiency students is that they lack motivation and confidence when they speak. They are usually very silent and passive. They hesitate to answer any question or take self-initiative when needed to participate in class activities. Second, most students lack the vocabulary. Students are not able to bring their ideas and also comprehend the information well because they have very limited vocabulary and are not able to pronounce the words well.

In many studies, students' speaking competences have been shown to be influenced by their exposure to the target language. Having this in mind, teachers should create and use activities that will be authentic, up-to-date, that will be fun and motivate students, so that they can actively be engaged in the learning process.

One of the speaking activities that promotes communication competences is Information Gap activities. In these activities, students have to use the target vocabulary to share the information. This paper aims at examining the methodological strategies that Information Gap technique provides and its effectiveness to increase speaking competence. The paper will describe the implementation of Information Gap activities to the elementary level students and its impact to the students' speaking performance. The Information Gap techniques are activities that are designed practicing on specific items of language and short sentences. The research results revealed that the use of Information Gap activities helped students improve their speaking skills. After the implementation of these activities, students felt more confident to speak in English; they were enthusiastic in doing the activities; and their motivation for learning and using the language improved.

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## 1. Introduction

Speaking is one of the most commonly used skills for communication. People use it on an everyday basis for exchanging their ideas, news and information. In recent years, English language teaching has focused on teaching the language rather than teaching about the language. The emphasis is not only on linguistic competence of the language learners but also on the development of their communicative ability (Asrobi, Seken, & Suarnajaya, 2013, p. 2). In order to speak the language fluently, students need more opportunities to practice the language and use it communicatively inside and outside the language classroom.

According to Stevick (in Fauziati, 2002, p. 126), speaking refers to the gap between linguistic expertise and teaching methodology. The students tend to measure their success in language learning based on how much they have advanced in their speaking. In order to make the students interested in learning English, especially in acquiring the speaking skill, teachers try to use various teaching techniques in order to suit the students' level of proficiency.

The concept of Information Gap is one of the aspects of communication in classroom. The Information Gap refers to structured output activities. Its concept is based on completing a task by completing missing information, such as conveying a telephone message, expressing an opinion, etc. It sets up practicing on specific items of language. It is more like drills than real communication. According to Penny Ur (1996), the activities on the information-gap principle make students participate actively in the process of learning. This will, in turn, results in increasing students' motivation to learn English much more enthusiastically.

## 2. Literature Review

The Information Gap is an optional approach to language teaching where activities engage students in 'real-world' contexts, using the four skills: reading, listening, speaking and writing. Among various activities in communicative approach, the "Information Gap" seems very beneficial for those who try to practice interaction in their classrooms. It is a type of activity which requires students to use the language to exchange some information and get their meaning across. It takes the students' attention away from the grammatical form and directs it toward meaning. In other words, it makes students accomplish a task through using the language while concentrating on meaning rather than structure of the language, so therefore learners learn by doing. According to Spratt, Mary., Pulverness, Alan., and Williams, Melanie (2005: 35), sometimes students speak more willingly in class when they have a reason for communicating, e.g. to solve a problem or to give other classmates some information they need. The following section includes some definitions presented by some of them. Swan (1985, p. 94) views Information Gap as "a basic concept in contemporary methodology." He argues that: "When one student talks to another, we feel that it is important that new information should be transmitted across the 'gap' between them". To accomplish this task, exercises are created in which half the class are provided with data to which the other half do not have access; those who lack the information then have to find it by using language in an appropriate way. As Penny Ur (1996) states, Information Gap is, "A particularly interesting type of task which is based on the need to understand or transmit information finding out what is in a partner's picture, for example". Larsen-Freeman (2000) claims that; an Information Gap exists when one person in an exchange knows something that the other person doesn't and they complete the task by giving each other a clue or solution to the problem.

Research carried out by Defrioka (2009) confirmed that the implementation of Information Gap activities has improved the students' interaction in speaking class. Student-centered classes included pair work and group work also contributed to advance the result. Many researchers have argued the advantages of applying Information Gap activities in teaching speaking. Another study conducted by Karimi (2010) revealed that the EFL learners' degree of learning was enhanced when they learn new words by the use of information-gap tasks in the classroom. Also, the learners in the experimental group – taught through the use of information-gap tasks – were gradually seen to become less dependent upon teachers' assistance (Watamni & Gholami, 2012). Another research conducted by Jondeya (2011), investigated the effectiveness of using Information Gap on developing speaking skills for eighth graders in Gaza governorate schools. For achieving this aim, she used the experimental approach. The results showed that there were significant differences in the mean scores between the pre- & post-speaking test of the experimental group in each level of speaking skills in favor of post-test.

In his research, Ur (1996) lists the characteristics of a successful speaking activity:

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