

MAKING STUDENTS ACTIVE IN LEVEL B2 SPEAKING SKILLS LESSONS

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Abstract

Practicing speaking tests at level B2 is one of the most challenges for students because of the following reasons: lack of knowledge, difficult topics, time requirement... As a result, all students are unwilling to speak out in front of the classmates so speaking skills lessons are boring. Action research procedures (plan, act, observe, reflect and re-plan) were conducted to find an alternative way to motivate students to be more active in speaking classes. In this action research, the action plan, which is implemented, is using some appropriate speaking activities such as preparation, role play in tasks, and feedback in Pre-While- Post speaking to encourage student's participation. This research was carried out in three classes with 90 third-year major students during 3 months with mentioned results through students' and teachers' questionnaires and observations. Based on the result, positive feedback should be considered in a new plan. The study also recommended the procedure of lesson plan using practice test tasks to help students to qualify speaking skills at level B2 (FCE – University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations).

Keywords: *Motivation, Speaking skills, Role play, Brainstorming, Practice test tasks at Level B2*

I. Rationale

To promote English study and speaking at the early stage of school is very essential since English has been acknowledged as an international official communicative language. Students of many countries in the world are actively natural in speaking and using English as their second language. The Education sector of Vietnam realizes that teaching and learning English are facing tremendous obstacle since graduated students have not yet been able to communicate confidently in their daily, their study and work in the integrated-environment. To fill this gap, innovation in teaching and learning should be concerned mainly on enhancing students' communicative competence. As a result, Vietnamese government issued an important decision, a driving force to reform the learning and teaching of foreign language, focusing on improving foreign language proficiency and methodology, called National Foreign Language 2020 Project.

One of its requirements is that all English major students graduated from colleges must qualify level B2 at CEFR (The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). FCE certificate awarded by University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations has been selected in Nghe An province and other places in Vietnam. To enable students to qualify level B2, FCE textbooks are selected to use for the third year students at Foreign Language Department, Nghe An College of Education where I am assigned to teach

speaking skills to 90 English third year major students of three classes. The speaking syllabus consists of 30 hours in semester 1, one part of the “Complete First Certificate Textbook” is used and 15 hours in second semester are for teaching speaking skills by using one part of “FCE Result Textbook” published by Cambridge University Press.

Practicing speaking tasks at level B2 is one of the most challenges for students because of the following reasons: students lack of knowledge background and language knowledge, difficult and unfamiliar topics in textbook, It is difficult for students to complete speaking tasks in the right time. As a result, all students participate in speaking tasks inactively and they are unwilling to speak out in front of the class. It is found that speaking skills lessons so boring thus I thought that an action research in the classroom should be carried out to solve above problems and additionally to enable students to master speaking proficiency in the near future as required in the National Project.

Action research is the process of systematic collection and analysis of data in order to make changes and improvement or solve problems (Wallace, 1998, p. 1 and Coles & Quirke, 2001, p.14). Action research provides teachers with the opportunity to gain knowledge and skill in research methods and their application and to become more aware of the options and possibilities for change (Beverly, 1993, p. 2).

This study is an action research project to make students active in level B2 speaking skills lessons. Action research procedures (plan, act, observe, reflect and re-plan) was used for finding an alternative way to motivate students to be more active in speaking classes. Brainstorming on mind-maps and pictures was initiated in pre-speaking stage so as to prepare students for the context of the topic, vocabulary, language structures, social and cultural expectations associating with the content. To encourage student’s participation, students were requested to role play as interlocutors and candidates in all parts 1,2,3,4 of FCE speaking test during the speaking stage. This research was carried out in three classes with 90 third-year major students during 3 months. The results of students’ and teachers’ questionnaires and observations were qualitatively and quantitatively analysed.

Based on the result, positive feedback should be considered in a new plan. The study also recommended the procedure of lesson plan using practice test tasks to help students to qualify speaking skills at level B2 (FCE – University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations).

II. Action Research

1. Literature review

Definition of Action research

Action Research (AR) is a ‘disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action. The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the “actor” in improving and/or refining his or her actions’ (Sagor, 2000).

Definition of motivation in L2 learning

It can be seen that different researchers approach motivation definition in different ways. Therefore, this study will follow the definition of motivation proposed by Gardner (1982: 132- 147) that motivation is perceived to be composed of three elements. These include effort, desire and affect. Effort refers to the time spent studying the language and the drive

of the learner. Desire indicates how much the learner wants to become proficient in the language, and affect illustrates the learner's emotional reactions with regard to language study.

Factors affecting student motivation in L2 learning

There have been some studies on the factors affecting students' motivation in learning a foreign language so far. L2 motivation frameworks refer to some factors such as language level, learner level, learning situation level (Dornyei, 2001) and internal and external factors (Williams and Burnden, 1997). Although researchers have had some different views in this issue, they all have come to an agreement with a list of common factors affecting students' motivation. These factors can be divided into three groups: teacher's factors, students' factors and learning condition factors.

❖ *Students' factors*

The factors are students' intelligence and aptitude, students' personality, learners' age, learning style and learners' belief.

❖ *Teacher's factors*

Teacher plays an important role in students' learning motivation. As a matter of fact, some teacher's factors and appropriate teacher behaviors will increase students to motivate in learning.

Dornyei (2001) pointed out some teacher's factors affecting students' motivation: appropriate teacher behavior, teacher's enthusiasm and a good relationship with the students.

❖ *Teaching and learning condition*

Teaching and learning condition involves classroom atmosphere and physical condition. A pleasant and supportive classroom atmosphere will create motivation; it encourages students to express their opinions and thinking.

Format of FCE Speaking Test by University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations

The Cambridge First speaking test takes 14 minutes. The Speaking test has four parts and is conducted face-to-face, with one or two other candidates and two examiners. Candidates are expected to be able to participate in discussions, express opinions, exchange ideas and reach decisions through negotiation.

Part 1: A conversation between the examiner and each candidate. The examiner will ask the candidate some questions about their lives, focusing on areas such as work, leisure activities and future plans.

Part 2: An individual 'long turn' for each candidate, with a brief response from the second candidate (you are given a pair of photographs to talk about).

Part 3: A two-way conversation between the candidates where you have to decide something.

Part 4: A discussion on topics related to Part 3 (spoken questions).

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a group or individual creativity technique by which efforts are made to find a conclusion for a specific problem by gathering a list of ideas spontaneously contributed by its member(s). The term was popularized by Alex Faickney Osborn in the 1953 book *Applied Imagination*. Osborn claimed that brainstorming was more effective than individuals working alone in generating ideas, although more recent research has questioned this conclusion. Today, the term is used as a catch all for all group ideation sessions.

❖ *Brainstorming on mind-maps*

Brainstorming on mind-maps is a method of visually representing ideas and of aiding the brainstorming "free association" process, a visual method of mapping information to stimulate the generation and analysis of it and a method of accessing intelligence, allowing rapid expansion and exploration of an idea in note form. (Tony Buzan 2011)

❖ *Brainstorming on pictures*

Pictures are a rich source of inspiration for brainstorming. Strange events evoke the biggest variety of responses. Most students will let their imagination roam if the pictures are strange enough. Use pictures from the textbook, magazines or other sources. (Brian Cullen 1998)

Role play

Ladousse, G. P. (1976: 7) indicated that Role play is a communicative technique which develops a student's language, which promotes interaction in the classroom, and which increases motivation. He pointed out that Role play encourages peer learning and sharing the responsibility for learning between teacher and student. He suggested Role play to be perhaps the most flexible technique in the range of communicative techniques, and with suitable and effective role – play exercises, teacher can meet infinite variety of needs.

Role - play is one of the most common types of communicative output activities. In these activities, students must work together to develop a plan, resolve a problem, or complete a task. In case of role- play activities, according to Donn Byrne (2001, p.57), role-play can be grouped into two forms: scripted and unscripted role- play. In details, those types of role-play activities described as follows.

Scripted role- play: This type involves interpreting either the textbook dialogue or reading text in the form of speech. The main function of the text after all is to convey the meaning of language items in a memorably way.

Unscripted role- play: In contrast to scripted role- play, the situations of unscripted role-play do not depend on textbooks. It is known as a free role- play. The students themselves have to decide what language to use and how the conversation should develop. In order to do this activity, good preparation from teacher and students is really necessary.

2. Problem Diagnosis

To identify problems, it was first observed by researcher and then five colleagues were asked to observe the lessons. Observers were requested to focus on how many students use accurate vocabulary and structures, participate actively, are willing to speak out and

complete speaking parts right time. Then, the initial questionnaires were delivered to 90 third - year students to gather their needs in the future, participation, presentation and difficulties in speaking lessons.

Research questions

This study addresses broad question: How to make students active in speaking lessons? With two specific questions (1) is brainstorming a necessary and useful technique in pre-speaking stage? and (2) how does role play influence on student participation in while-speaking stage?

3. Implementation of plan in the classroom

A plan of action was created to solve problems with 5 EFL teachers and 90 third- year students at the Foreign Language Department, Nghe An College of Education during 3 months. Literature review was done first including inheriting good results from my previous studies on using role play for primary students and the first year major students good and then consulting colleagues about how to solve the problems. Possible solutions are (1) using role play to enhance student participation in while-speaking stage, the unscripted role- play is, used for major third-year students on upper intermediate level in this action research, known as a free role- play that makes students themselves decide what language to use and how the conversation are developed. Therefore, students need to prepare vocabulary and structures by themselves with the intensive supports from their teachers before role - playing. Helping students in their preparation, (2) brainstorming on mind-maps and pictures are selected by researcher.

In pre-speaking stage, the brainstorming on Mind-maps was used in all parts 1,2,3,4. Mind-maps can be created on the board, on papers or apply software. Bellows are some samples of mind-maps:

<p>On the board</p>	<p>On the paper</p>	<p>By applying software</p>

Furthermore, in part 2 students are requested to compare and contrast two photos to answer the question above the photos and in part 3 they discuss a problem solving task based on visual and prompts on a set of pictures with the same topic so brainstorming on pictures is also used for these parts. Pictures of part 2 and part 3 from the textbook were used to elicit student responses by asking questions to clarify foreground and background as well as the similarities and differences of the photos. It is clear that brainstorming on mind-maps and

pictures help students prepare well related vocabulary, language structures and relevant social and cultural expectations as references for completing speaking tasks.

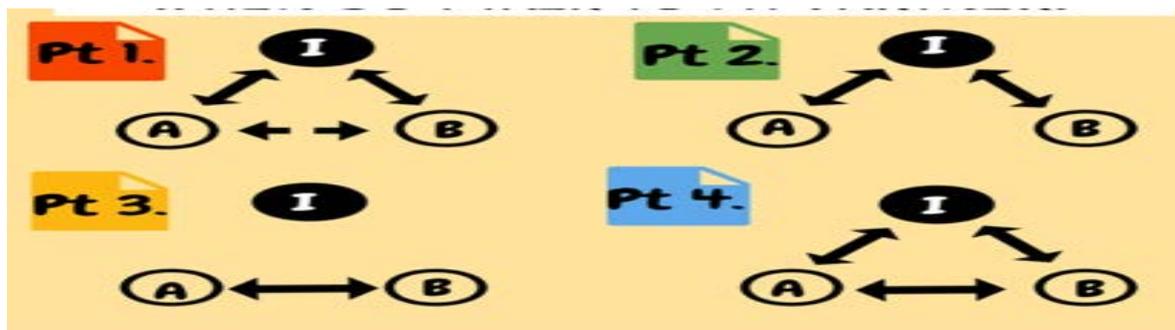
In while-speaking, role play was used in all parts 1,2,3,4 in level B2 speaking skills lessons to enhance student interactions as illustrated below:

Part 1: Students work in groups of three, I stands for interlocutor; A and B are candidates who have 3 minutes to role play by asking and answering the questions of part 1 then change roles. In total, it takes 9 minutes to complete the role-play.

Part 2: Students work in pairs, A plays as an interlocutor; B is a candidate who compares and contrasts two photos of part 2 in 1 minute, then change roles.

Part 3: Students work in pairs, A and B are candidates who role play in 3 minutes to discuss and answer two questions on the pictures of part 3.

Part 4: Students work in groups of three, I will again stands an interlocutor; A and B are candidates who have about 4 minutes to role play by asking and answering questions related to the topic of part 3, then change roles.



4. Data collection

The researcher collected data by interviews, classroom observations and questionnaires for EFL teachers and third-year major students. To gather the problems, initial questionnaires were sent to students and initial observations of teachers were used to identify the problems in speaking skills lessons. Then the follow-up observations and questions were conducted to assess the alternative methods to solve problem in comparison with initial ones. The data was qualitatively and quantitatively analyzed. The teachers' and students' evaluation on the effectiveness of using brainstorming and role play in speaking tasks were then discussed.

5. Data analysis

Initial student questionnaires and observations

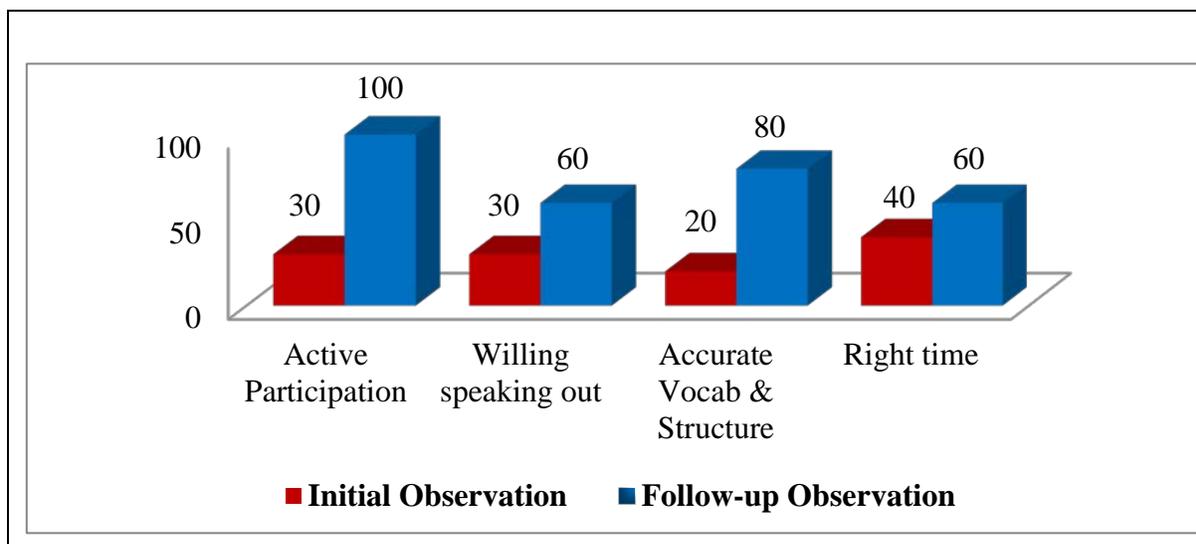
The result of student questionnaires indicates that more than two third of students will take part in FCE examination to get level B2 certificate when graduating. 42% and 34% of students informed that the contents of speaking lessons are difficult and quite difficult respectively. 10% and 22% of students is active and quite active in participating in speaking respectively. It is quite similar to statement of teachers that 68 % of students are inactive participation. 81% students revealed unwilling to speak out in front of class quite similar to the confirmation of teachers that only 30% students are willing to present. Both

teachers and students informed difficulties with equal percentage such as: lack of vocabulary and structures (60-72%), lack of knowledge background (77%), time exceeding (70-89%).

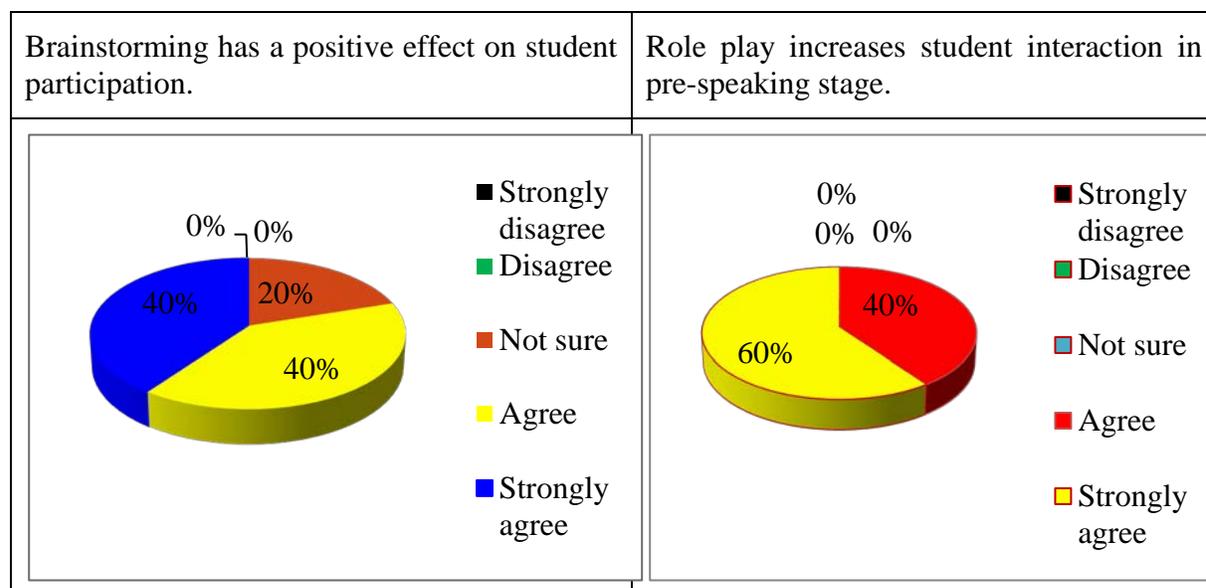
Basing on data collection from initial questionnaires and observation, the problem was identified that most of topics are difficult, students lack vocabulary and structures applying in the discussion and it is difficult for them to complete their task on time. As a result, most of students participate in speaking activities inactively and unwillingly to speak out.

Teacher Interview and Observation

This graph shows the comparison between initial observation and follow-up observation.



Two questions about the effectiveness of using brainstorming and role play were applied to teachers and students.



6. Reflection

After carrying out plan of action for eight weeks, colleagues were re-invited to observe speaking lessons. They were surprised with positive changes in the lessons with more exciting.

The results of follow-up observation were compared with initial ones: Student's active participation much increases from 30% up to 100%. More students are willing to speak out from 30% up to 60%. Up to 80% of students use accurate vocabulary and language structures to complete speaking tasks in comparison to 20% as initial result. Students complete speaking parts on time increasing from 40% to 60%.

An investigation on teachers' and students' opinions about the effectiveness of using brainstorming and role play in teaching speaking skills was conducted with two main questions focusing on (1) "Brainstorming has a positive effect on student participation", 80% teachers and students agree and strongly agree; only 20% answered they are not sure but no one disagrees. (2) "Role play increases student interaction in pre-speaking stage", all of teachers and students answered that they agree and strongly agree.

Basing on the above results, it can be concluded that the action research is successful because students are now more active in speaking skills lessons.

Effectiveness of using brainstorming on mind-maps and pictures in pre-speaking stage

Brainstorming is an activity used to generate ideas in groups. The purpose is to generate as many ideas as possible within a specified time-period. Brainstorming activates students' prior knowledge of the topic and provides a link between new and existing knowledge.

Brainstorming is a very useful activity and can be easily introduced into language classes, helps students to become better learners. In addition, it is exciting activity which students enjoy and well worth trying out in their own classes.

Brainstorming has a strong positive effect on the atmosphere of the classroom and behavior of the students. Students get involved in the brainstorming immediately in the selection of language used in the speaking task.

Students are provided a context, related vocabulary and language structures which support the comprehension and production in the subsequent speaking task thus students are better oriented to the topic and better motivated to fill the gaps in their knowledge. Students obtain sense of competence and feel more confident in making intelligent guesses.

In conclusion, brainstorming is an effective technique to help students prepare well in pre-speaking stage.

Effectiveness of using role play in while-speaking stage

Role play creates comfortable, cooperative, and purposeful classroom atmosphere. In role play activity, students are required to work with one another to complete the tasks with visual prompts to perform in the classroom in English. In this case, role-play forces students to concentrate and talk in class actively.

Role play increases student's talk and motivate lower level learners to participate in the class. Students are encouraged peer learning and changing their roles in context so both

high and lower level learners participate in role play activities.

Role play enhances student's interests, involvement and confidence. Students will feel confident and be more willing to speak out in class without feeling stressful, helps students get into real communication activities of class. By applying role play activity, students are more active to use and improve their speaking skills.

Role play is use to enable students to practice the interaction with others in certain roles and to afford them opportunities to experience other reactions that they have taken.

Students feel funny, cheerful and comfortable in role-plays so they enjoy learning more and participate in the lesson more actively which promotes motivation and student – student interaction in the classroom.

The pivotal result from this action research is that students had positive attitudes on learning and speaking English. They were eager and enthusiastic to find more opportunities to speak and role play. As a result, when students enjoy learning and expressing or participating in the activities, there is evidence that their linguistic competence increases. And when students' communicative competence increases, their confidence in language learning, especially speaking, increases as well.

III. Recommendations

Brainstorming is an ideal preparation process as it takes little time, can be explained easily and used with any chosen topics. There are many types of brainstorming such as: simple word lists, list based on a principle, finding alternatives for a blank in a sentence, on a picture, using a song, mind-maps, changing one word in a sentence each time, prediction and group storytelling. Therefore, teachers should choose suitable types of brainstorming for the lessons respectively.

The study recommends the procedure of lesson plan using practice test tasks to help students to qualify speaking skills at level B2 (FCE – University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations). These are some samples that teachers should use brainstorming on mind-maps and pictures in pre-speaking stage by applying MindMaple software and role play in while-speaking stage in PowerPoint lesson plan of textbook “FCE result by Paul A Davies & Tim Falla, Oxford University Press”

Sample 1: Unit 5: Real or Fake? Speaking – Part 1

Part 1

1. Read questions a-f below and in pairs brainstorm some ideas and words you might use to answer them.
 - a. What's your ideal holiday destination and why?
 - b. Are you a fan of new technology? Why/Why not?
 - c. Do you enjoy eating out? (Why/Why not?)
 - d. Do you judge people by the way dress?
 - e. Tell me about something that went wrong for you recently.
 - f. What are your earliest memories?

Pre-speaking:

- Arouse the students' interest through visuals, a short lead-in talk etc to try to relate the topics to the students' own interest and experience.
- Teacher uses mind- map by applying MindMaple software to elicit students and prepare them for structures, vocabulary and social knowledge. Teachers should leave them on the screen/board for reference.



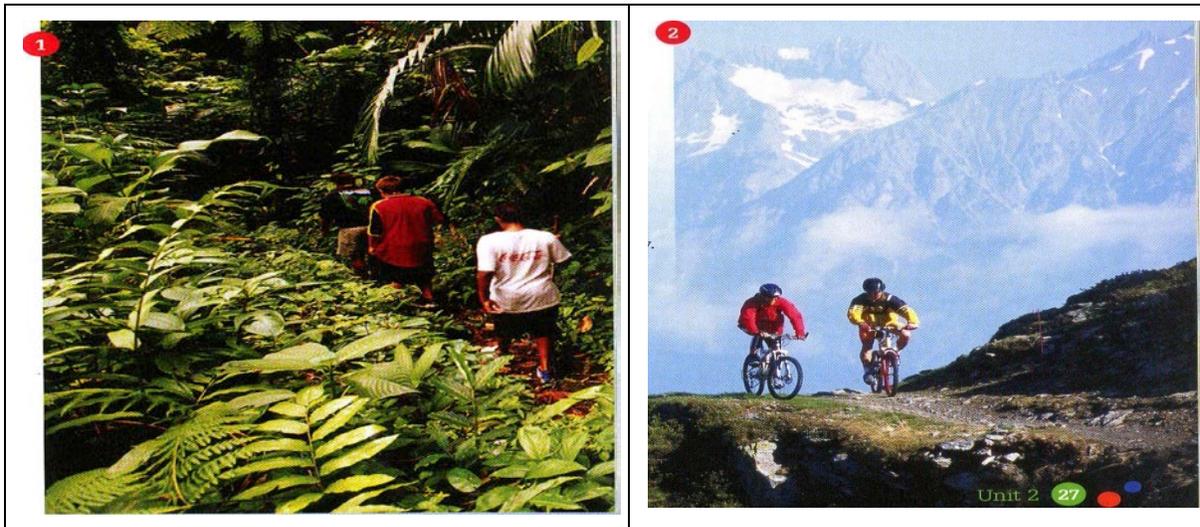
- Set up the activity so that the students know the purpose of the activity and what they are to do and how long they need to complete. This gives clear instructions and checks if they have been understood.

While-speaking: Students work in groups of three, One student is an interlocutor who asks all questions in part 1; A and B are candidates who have 3 minutes to role play then change roles. In total, it takes 9 minutes to complete the role-play.

- Monitor the activity: Should not interrupt except to provide help and encouragement if necessary; try to keep a low profile. Watch the pace – should not let the activity drag on and remember to leave time for feedback. Ask students to complete their turn on time.
- Should ask students to present in front of the class in group of three as they role play from close to open groups.
- Should evaluate the activity and the students' performance in order to provide feedback later but should not jump in with instant corrections.

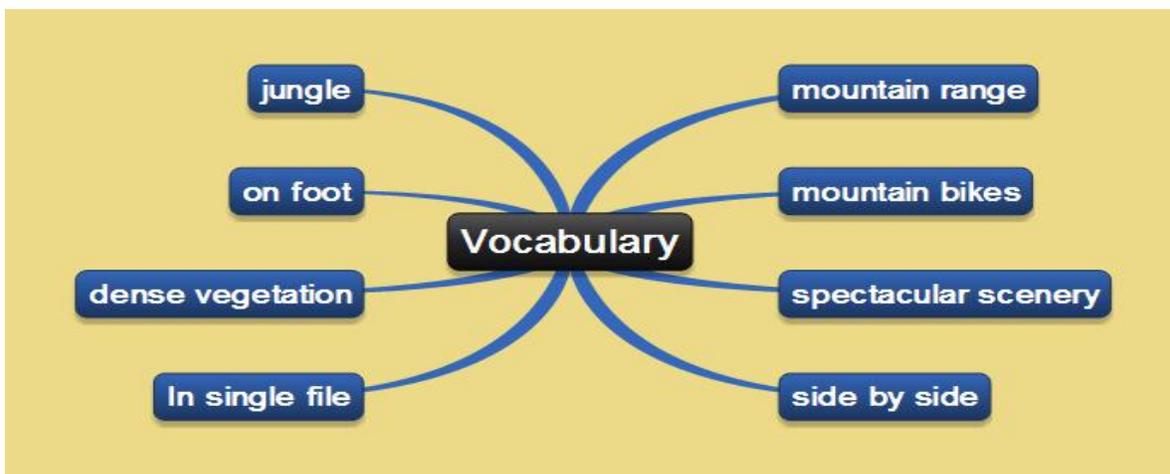
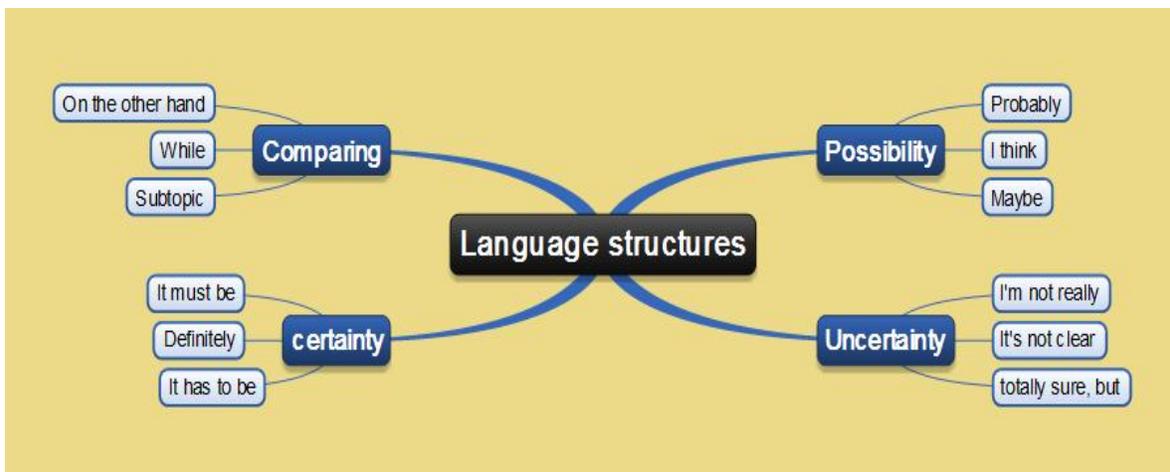
Post-speaking: Provide positive feedback

Sample 2: Unit 2: Wild- Speaking Part 2



Pre-speaking:

Teacher uses brainstorming on mind-maps to elicit students on structures and vocabulary.



Teacher uses brainstorming on pictures. Teacher gives clues by questioning about the pictures to make students understand the content of the photos.

1. *What is this a picture of?*
2. *What are the main similarities and differences between two pictures?*
3. *What are the two or three most important things in the pictures?*
4. *Why you think the people chose each particular type of holiday?*
5. *Which holiday activity is more challenging, and why?*
6. *Which holiday would you enjoy more, and why?*

While-speaking: Students role play in pairs: A is an interlocutor and B is a candidate, then change roles. Candidate compares and contrasts photos 1 and 2 to answer the question “Which holiday would people enjoy more and why?” in one minute.

Post-speaking: Provide positive feedback

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