

TEACHING SPEAKING SKILLS USING WHOLE BRAIN TEACHING APPROACH

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Abstract

Whole Brain Teaching approach or Power Teaching as introduced by Chris Biffle, Jay Danderfin, and Chris Reksad in 1999 is not only a matter of class management system but also a means to maximize the teaching and learning process. Based on Direct Instruction and Cooperative Learning best practices, this approach takes into account the brain area that responsible for learning and the students' psychological factors in learning such as attitude and motivation in the learning activity. This approach covers seven principles i.e. Five Classroom Rules (the organizer), Scoreboard (the motivator), Class-Yes (the attention-getter), Teach-Okay (Whole Brain activator), Switch (the involver), Hands and Eyes (the focuser), and Mirror (the class-unifier). In EFL classroom, these principles can be incorporated in the teaching of speaking skills since most of the principles of this approach consists of classroom instructions which encourage speaking activity using the target language. Thus, this approach bears the potential to teach English in a fun, engaging and enthusiastic manner yet still retains the aim of learning the language itself.

Key words: *Whole Brain Teaching, approach, speaking skills*

Speaking in English is always a challenge for EFL learners where the target language is mostly used outside of the classroom settings. It is then considered more difficult to do than other skills i.e. listening, reading, and writing for its real-time nature where there is very limited amount of time to think of the appropriate responses. It is also unmanageable to edit and revise what the speaker wish to say as in writing (Bailey, 2003:48). Thus, practice in speaking the target language is pivotal to develop the learners' fluency and accuracy. Nevertheless, the productive nature of the speaking skills which asks the learners to produce the target language might result in anxiety during the learning process. Yet in developing the learners' speaking skills, it is very essential for the learners to *want* to speak the target language or be motivated to do so (Graham, 2007: 60). So, in teaching speaking skills, English teachers need to be creative in motivating the learners and providing as much as exposure and opportunities to practice speaking the language. Motivation is an inseparable variable affecting the way people learn a second language. Kumaravadivelu (2006) states that the degree of motivation that the learners bring to the tasks of language learning is determined by individual, affective and environmental factor. Good and Brophy (in Thanasoulas, 2012) to be specific states that to be motivated to learn, the learners need both ample opportunities to learn and steady encouragement and support of their learning efforts. Because such motivation is unlikely to develop in a chaotic

classroom, it is important that the teacher organize and manage the classroom as an effective learning environment.

In terms of the ideal speaking activity, Graham (2007) summarizes the characteristics of a good speaking activity as it is motivating, has a clear purpose, and an end-goal or outcome; the language is within the learners' capability; the speaking opportunities are maximized; the learners have little scope to revert to the mother tongue; and the activity can be extended to allow the learners to speak more independently and to personalize the language used. It is clear that motivation, purpose, follow up activity, the relevance with the learners' capability, and the opportunity to use practice using the language are the key aspects in designing speaking activity.

An approach called Whole Brain Teaching approach bears the potential to cover these characteristics in teaching speaking skills for its motivating nature, engaging activities that maximize the speaking opportunities and activates the many parts of the brain responsible for the learning process. The following covers the theoretical basis in choosing the approach in which mainly extracted from Biffle's 2010 book of *Whole Brain Teaching For Challenging Kids (and The Rest of Your Class, Too!)*, its relevance to teach speaking skills, and the general procedure of implementing Whole Brain Teaching approach in teaching speaking skills.

Defining Whole Brain Teaching Approach

Whole Brain Teaching approach is first introduced in 1999 by Chris Biffle, Jay Danderfin, and Chris Rekestad. The identical term often referred to Whole Brain Teaching is Power Teaching and it is used as a means to help teachers handle the challenging students in classroom and an attempt to optimize the learning process. It is called Whole Brain Teaching approach since it is developed by taking into account the parts of the brain that works during the learning process such as visual cortex (seeing gestures), motor cortex (making gestures), Broca's area (verbalizing a lesson), Wernicke's area (hearing a lesson), and the limbic system (giving emotional content to a lesson). When these parts of the brain are activated, it will have impact on the deeper and more lasting of learning (Biffle, 2010: 20). It is believed that when a learner's whole brain is involved during learning process, there is not any mental area left for challenging behavior and in turns will help the learner to fully engage and involve in the learning process.

In definition, Whole Brain Teaching approach is a set of strategies that combines the best attributes of Direct Instruction and Cooperative Learning to create an engaging classroom environment for students and teachers and it combines both classroom management and sound teaching pedagogy (Macias and Maciasin Biffle, 2010: 179-181). The approach consists of several principles covering spoken and short instructions for the students in the leaning process as well as some rules regarding students' expected behavior in classroom. It covers 7 principles known as the Big Seven applicable to almost any subject and any level. They are The Organizer (five classroom rules), The Motivator (The Scoreboard), The Attention-Getter (*Class-Yes*), The Whole Brain Activator (*Teach-Okay*), The Involver (*Switch*), The Focuser (*Hands and eyes*), and The Class-Unifier (Mirror). The Big Seven in this paper is ordered according to its relevance to the implementation in the classroom settings and explained as follows:

1. The Organizer: Five Classroom Rules

Teaching in a chaotic classroom where there is no rules to follow and there is no consequences of any negative behavior might lead to ineffective learning. Thus, it is necessary for teachers to have their own set of rules to help them manage their students. This Organizer principle is used to create the effective environment for learning to take place. Classroom management is the focus of this principles since it deals with the students' behavior in the classroom.

Though flexible to every teacher's need, the five main classroom rules are 1) Follow direction quickly, 2) Raise your hand for permission to speak, 3) Raise your hand for permission to leave the room, 4) Make smart choices and 5) Keep your dear teacher happy. Follow direction quickly is about maximizing the time allotment. The students have limited time to think of any disruptive ideas when they know exactly what to do and how to do it. Raising hands is about giving chances for every students to speak up their mind. The students need also to learn how to make smart choices regarding their actions and behaviors inside and outside of classroom. By keeping the teacher happy in the fifth principle, it covers the disrespect behaviors of the students when they try to disrupt the learning activity. Implementing these rules in day-to-day basis in the classroom will engage whole brain in hearing, seeing, saying, doing, and feeling the principles resulting in an orderly classroom.

It is important to introduce these rules as soon as possible since it will be used during the whole academic year. The use of gestures in introducing each rules can also help the students to remember them better. The use of posters pasted on the classroom walls which depict the rules is also an option to remind the students of the rules.

2. The Motivator: The Scoreboard

To cover the issue if some of the learners are not following the classroom rules, a scoreboard system is used as the motivator. A scoreboard indicating the students' positive and negative behavior can motivate the students to behave more positively during the learning process. The teacher can use a smiley or a frowny icons for the students' behavior and they can also enlivening the marking routine by saying "*mighty oh yeah*" or a "*mighty groan*". This marking routine makes the students feel a small, positive or negative emotional jolt thus activating the reward circuitry in their brain limbic system (Biffle, 2010:23).

3. The Attention Getter: *Class-Yes*

The prefrontal cortex of the brain controlling decision making, planning and focus of attention is activated during this activity where the teacher use the attention-getter *Class-Yes* (Biffle, 2010: 22). The teacher says "*Class!*" and the students must response it with "*Yes!*" with the same style. Thus, when the teacher says "*Class, Class, Classy, Class!*", the students must respond it with "*Yes, Yes, Yessity, Yes!*". The variations around the volume and the tone of the voice of the teacher and the use of attention-getting gestures can make the activity more fun and motivating for the students. This attention getter prepare the students of the instructions and help them to focus during the learning process.

4. The Whole Brain Activator: *Teach-Okay*

Before applying this principle, the teacher needs to make sure that the students have their own partners. Once done, the teacher gives instructions or mini-lecture of the lesson and uses *Teach-Okay* to instruct the students to teach their pair about what he or she has briefly stated. The teacher says “*Teach!*” and the students respond it with “*Okay*” and they will shift their sitting position to their partners and explain briefly about what the teacher has previously talk about (lessons or instruction). During this activity, five parts of the brain i.e. visual cortex (seeing gestures), motor cortex (making gestures), Broca’s area (verbalizing a lesson), Wernicke’s area (hearing a lesson), and the limbic system (giving emotional content to a lesson) are activated since the students are allowed and even required to use listening and speaking gestures.

The repetitive nature of the activity helps the students to understand and memorize the lesson better. They will continue repeating teaching their partners in turns if the materials have been explained until the teacher use the attention-getter (Biffle, 2010: 23). Additionally, the cooperative learning settings between each pairs of the students help them to be more active and engaged in the session. However, it is essential for the teacher to divide the lessons in chunks to make the students easier in rehearsing the materials.

5. The Involver: *Switch*

Switch is an instruction for students to switch partners in explaining the more difficult materials during *Teach-Okay* session. The teacher say “*Switch*” when the students doing *Teach-Okay* session and the students automatically switch their roles in rehearsing the lesson and listening to their partner. The listeners activates part of the brain called Wernicke and the speakers activates their Broca. Each responsible for hearing and verbalizing a lesson (Biffle, 2010: 24). *Switch* is especially powerful for English learners where they need a lot of time to practice acquiring new language, most comfortably in the privacy of conversations with a friend (Biffle, 2010: 82). The students have the opportunity to train their listening and speaking skills during this process.

6. The Focuser: *Hands and Eyes*

When the teacher wants to make an important point at the learning activity, after getting the students’ attention, he/she says “*hands and eyes*” while making a gesture of bringing his or her hands together and asks the students to say the same words and to do the same gesture. The students prefrontal cortex as aforementioned above takes control of brain activity focusing the visual cortex and the auditory cortex on the teacher’s lesson (Biffle, 2010:24). It is important to check upon the students’ comprehension of the tasks using this principle particularly when the students has completed the *Teach-Okay* and *Switch* sessions.

7. The Class-Unifier: *Mirror*

Teacher uses *Mirror* activity in which the students mimic the teacher’s gesture while explaining a lesson or giving instructions. It is a class-unifier since all of the students are required to follow the teacher’s gestures. The gestures used are

casual (hand motions you naturally use when speaking), graphic (gestures that tell a story or describe a process), memory (gestures that are unique for each core concept or state standard) (Biffle, 2010:82). By mimicking the teacher's gesture, the students are activating their mirror neurons when people learn by mirroring gestures and activity of others.

The attention given to both students' behavior and classroom discourse embedded in the seven principles is expected to help students to learn more effectively during the learning process. It has the benefits not only for the teacher but also for the students. The benefits in using Whole Brain Teaching approach for teachers are the positive behavior reinforcement, memory retention, and students' engagement (Biffle, 2010: 181). Teacher motivates the students by having a scoreboard to check upon the application of the five classroom rules and memory retention is managed through repetition in *Teach-Okay* and *Switch* sessions. Students' engagement can be acquired when the teacher uses *Class-Yes*, *Hands and eyes*, and mirror sessions. On students' behalf, there are three main reasons they can benefit from Whole Brain Teaching i.e. motivation, student-centered learning, and application of learning (Biffle, 2010: 185). Students are motivated since they have more empowering role in the classroom in which they teach their fellow classmates. Palasigue (2009) conducted a research on Whole Brain Teaching Strategies to create a more engaged learning environment in which in line with the above benefits. His research shows that the students have become more engaged in every lesson on a day to day basis and the accountability that was given to them through the "*Teach-Okay*" session are able to motivate them to learn enthusiastically.

As stated above, that the *Switch* principle of Whole Brain Teaching is powerful for language learners in developing their listening and speaking skills, therefore the writer embeds some principles of this approach in the teaching of English speaking skills.

Speaking Skills in Whole Brain Teaching Approach

EFL learners are taught interpersonal and transactional conversations such as expressing gratitude, responding to an invitation, asking, offering and giving something, etc. in their speaking class. The teaching of speaking of these materials can be taught in a more engaging and energetic style by incorporating the Big Seven of Whole Brain Teaching approach. The learners can be trained both to listen to and speak in the target language since as stated above, the areas of the brain responsible for the speech (Broca area) and auditory function (Wernicke) are activated during the sessions. Students are not only learn English by the use of English instructions but also by the opportunity to do a kind of micro-lecture where they internalize their understanding by sharing it with their partners particularly in *Teach-Okay* and *Switch sessions*. This way, the use of target language is encouraged since the students must rehearse them also in the target language.

Nevertheless, to limit the use of first language during the process, the students' level of proficiency and the complexity of the lessons need to be taken into consideration when giving the micro-lecture or instructions. The use of comprehensible input is necessary in giving the materials in the form of brief explanation that the students can digest and rehearse with their partners in *Teach-Okay* and *Switch sessions*.

The principles of Whole Brain Teaching that are embedded in the learning activities to teach speaking do not systematically determine the learning steps. The seven principles can be incorporated in the learning activity individually or elaborated with other principles. The five classroom rules and the scoreboard are a must in the teaching process and served as the aspects in managing the students' overall behaviors while the rest of the principles i.e. *Class-Yes*, *Teach-Okay*, *Switch*, *Hands and Eyes*, and *Mirror* are used to enhance the learning process. The following section provides insight on using the principles of Whole Brain Teaching in teaching speaking skills.

Teaching Procedure

The general procedure of teaching Speaking skills using Whole Brain Teaching approach which incorporates the seven principles are as follows:

1. Pre-Activity

The teacher reviews the principles of Whole Brain Teaching i.e. Five Classroom Rules, Scoreboard, *Class-Yes*, *Teach-Okay*, *Switch*, *Hands and Eyes*, and *Mirror*. It is possible to focus on main principles first such as *Class-Yes*, *Teach-Okay*, and *Switch* in regards to the time allotment. The teacher then trains students on using the principles before moving on to the next stage. The materials for the *Teach-Okay* sessions can be in the form of the materials they are going to learn and how they are going to learn the materials. The teacher groups the students in pairs.

2. Main-Activity

- The students observe language model showing the expressions being learned (e.g. Apologizing and the responses). Teacher uses *Class-Yes* to get students attention to observe the model (in videos or pictures).
- The students ask about the things they do not understand from the video to their friends and the teacher by applying the five classrooms rules of follow direction quickly and raise your hand for permission to speak.
- The students practicing using the expressions being learned according to the model with their partners.
- The students are given more samples of the expressions being learned (e.g. Apologizing and the responses) so that they can analyze and identify the expressions used. Teacher uses *Class-Yes* and *Hands and Eyes* to gain students' attention on concluding the materials briefly and *Teach-Okay* and *Switch* to asks students to repeat his or her brief explanation to their partners.
- The students are asked to complete cloze dialogs related to the expressions being learned (e.g. Apologizing and the responses) and memorize them. The teacher uses *Class-Yes* and *Mirror* in this stage to give students instruction on using gestures in the next stage.
- The teacher check upon the students' answers of the cloze dialogues and then the students do a role play of the dialogues they have answered. The teacher applies *Class-Yes*, *Teach-Okay*, and *Switch*. The students use gestures in doing the role play activity.

- The students create two dialogues using the expressions they have learned (e.g. Apologizing and the responses) in particular situations and role playing them. The teacher uses *Class-Yes* and *Teach-Okay* in this activity.

3. Post-Activity

Teacher and students make conclusions about the lessons using *Class-Yes* and *Teach-Okay*. The scoreboard of overall students' behavior during the lesson can be given to motivate the students.

As we can see that the Whole Brain Teaching approach in the teaching procedure are mostly in the form of classroom discourse and suggestive to be used in junior high school level. However, the power within these classroom languages is capable to activate the students' brain area responsible for learning thus enhancing their learning process. The instruction helps the students to focus on tasks at hands and functions as comprehension checks to see whether the students understand the instruction and the lesson. The speaking skills in particular are trained through many *Teach-Okay* and *Switch* sessions to allow the students to practice not only the expressions they are learning but also how they learn the lesson. Also, the students' who finds it difficult to speak the target language are given the materials to talk about and since it is conducted in a pair-setting, this will help to overcome their anxiety during the speaking activity. Additionally, the gesture, tone and volume in which the teacher uses when addressing the instructions can help to enliven the classroom atmosphere and in the end will motivate the students to learn more enthusiastically.

Conclusion

Whole Brain Teaching approach in which taken from the best practice of Direct Instruction and Cooperative Learning is practical to be used in language learning focusing not only on the classroom management but also in helping the students learn the language. Particularly in memory retention, the repetition in the *Teach-Okay* and *Switch* sessions activates many parts of the brain responsible for lasting learning. The big seven principles of Whole Brain Teaching can be embedded in the teaching of English speaking skills by choosing and adjusting the appropriate principles based on the complexities of the lesson and the students' English proficiency. The lively and orderly classroom is expected from the application of this approach. Unfortunately, research on this subject particularly in Indonesian context is still a rarity despite its great potential. Hence, research on this approach and its relevance to English teaching is highly recommended.

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