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DEVELOPING LEARNERS' ORAL PROFICIENCY IN VARIOUS COMMUNICATIVE CONTEXTS

Communicating in a foreign language is a real challenge to most Armenian learners. There are two types of learners: those who do not attempt to speak because they are afraid of making mistakes and those who are daring enough to communicate despite plenty of errors. Another challenge is that the speaking skill is largely used in academic and occupational spheres. Consequently, the goal of the teacher is to help the students to master the art of everyday conversation on a par with the technical language. How to develop the speaking skill in both types of learners and for both purposes will be the focus of this paper.

Key words: *speaking, communication, interaction, mistakes, role-plays, simulations, group discussions, debates, problem-solving tasks, presentations*

Speaking a foreign language is perceived as a tough challenge by most Armenian learners. The students fall into two distinct groups according to their intercommunicative skills. Those in the first group do not even attempt to speak because they are afraid of making mistakes while those in the second group are daring enough to communicate despite plenty of grammatical and lexical errors. The verbal skill is used in two different modes: in everyday conversation and the academic and occupational spheres. Thus the instructor's objective is to help students specializing in various fields of knowledge to master the art of conversation on a par with their technical language. How to develop and polish the speaking skill in both types of learners and for both purposes will be the focus of this paper. The paper relies on the empirical observation of the undergraduate students at the faculties of Economics and International Relations, Yerevan State University. Most of the students already have the preliminary knowledge of English equivalent to the levels B1-B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

Inseparable components of interpersonal communication are a speaker, a context and a listener. For an effective communication to take place, it is necessary that the speaker's message relate to the topic or situation; on the other hand, the message must have the power to influence the listener's actions. In fact, the key idea behind communicative competence, including its linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects, is that effective communication can occur beyond the mere production of grammatically correct sentences. It is the ability to adapt the available language resources to each particular social context, i.e. modify the grammatical

and lexical forms to deliver the intended message. In contrast, learners with fine knowledge of the language do not necessarily demonstrate communicative competence and hence fail to get their message across. What foreign language instructors should suggest to their students is that it is perfectly possible to participate in a social interaction effectively if they develop communicative competence and confidence to express themselves in public. And many individuals today interact with each other, negotiate, collaborate and get things done even with limited knowledge of the language.

Communicative approach to speaking

Why is the speaking skill the least appealing of the four language skills? Many learners tend to think that one reason is that oral communication takes place in real time, i.e. the listener will just not wait until the interlocutor constructs his/her speech attempting to choose the right word or apply the correct grammar rules. Another commonly accepted reason is that while speaking one does not have an opportunity to turn to reference books, nor can s/he edit what has already been said.

Meanwhile, oral interaction is more casual and less rule-bound than written discourse. It is supplemented and aided by non-verbal behaviours such as facial expressions, gestures and intonations, which also convey meanings. A few mistakes will not impede conversation, especially as the listener has an opportunity to verify the idea or ask for clarification.

In the past, the instruction of the speaking skill focused on learning conversational formulas and then using them to carry on classroom dialogues. In addition, learners memorized ready-made textbook dialogues illustrating the practical usage of each language function and recited them in order to develop speaking habits. In this case, however, they did not have an opportunity to reflect on their own personalities. Speaking is not only a productive but also an interactive skill. Therefore, today's teaching methods emphasize learners' engaging in actual conversation, i.e. learning by interacting with each other. The so-called *communicative language teaching* enables learners to use the language in various communicative contexts, such as role-plays, information gaps, storytelling, presentations, to name just a few. Although created in the language classroom, these interactive activities resemble real-life interactions, where people work together to reach common goals or influence each other in some ways.

To start with, we shall overview how to encourage learners to participate in oral interaction either if they are unsociable personalities or if they lack confidence for the fear of errors and misunderstanding. One of the first steps is to encourage the students to express themselves verbally no matter what mistakes they may make. It is the responsibility of the instructor to reassure his/her learners that mistakes and misunderstanding can be normal part of conversation regardless of the interlocutors' language proficiency. No language production is flawless. People

make mistakes even in the native language. Motivate the students to view their own mistakes as friends, rather than enemies. In fact, “trial and error” learning is one way we can improve our language skills. This kind of “permissive” approach to speaking can also help to “break the ice”.

However, it is wrong to think we cannot change what has already been said. In the communication process the participants can signal each other if the message is unclear, and so it is perfectly fine for them to correct their own mistakes during the conversation by rephrasing or explaining their ideas. Teach the students to *negotiate for meaning*, i.e. clarify their own understanding and confirm that their interlocutor has understood their meaning. That is what people normally do in a genuine conversation. Given the strategies for clarification and verification, students will gradually gain confidence and fluency in handling various communication situations and make progress.

The second step is to create near-authentic contexts for learners. This means the teacher should use L1 as little as possible in class. Use of the target language should be encouraged at all times to “nourish” the students’ mind and arouse an authentic feel for the language sounds, intonations, structures, phrases. Interaction invariably involves both production and comprehension. Hence, although speaking itself is a productive language skill, receptive skills (listening and reading) can be successfully exercised to improve oral production. Reading helps to increase vocabulary and acquire linguistic competence, an intrinsic awareness of what is right or wrong. In turn, by listening to naturally-spoken English, learners pick up essential communication, comprehension and verbal skills, as well as a number of situational clues that assist in grasping the message.

For instance, one effective way to achieve both fluency and accuracy in speaking is to listen to dialogues based on real-life situations and then practise reading these dialogues out loud in pairs. Students act them out, play their parts trying to convey meanings not only by words but also through emotions. When they feel their character deeply, the language used to portray it becomes an intrinsic part of them. Today, rather than having students memorize ready-made dialogues with a predetermined ending, we also engage them in real conversations or collaborative discussions about familiar topics with a more proficient and confident peer. In this process they may want to produce spontaneous ideas. In a small class, the instructor has an opportunity to get engaged as an interlocutor too; thus, s/he can prompt the learners’ speech act by “supplementing” or “completing” their ideas as it occurs in a natural conversation, where even native speakers may run out of words. Moreover, as part of real-life conversation, the teacher can reword the learners’ incorrect words or grammatical structures, using expressions like “You mean...”, “I wonder how...”, “So you want to...” and others as appropriate to each particular situation. In this way the instructor has an opportunity to refine students’ oral production without the formal “correction of mistakes”. The conversation flows naturally, with the interlocutors taking turns. The teacher participating in

such an interaction urges the student by “filling in the gaps” and, simultaneously, adding his/her own share of ideas to keep up the dialogue. It is also a constructive idea to allow students taking the first steps in speaking to play it safe by sticking to simple and familiar grammatical structures and vocabulary.

As compared with timid speakers, enthusiastic ones communicate fluently ignoring rules of grammar, pronunciation and insufficiency of lexical resource. How should mistakes be approached at this stage? Although many students do want to be corrected, there still exists the risk that they will lose their motivation because of overzealous correction. The above described strategy of the teacher participating in the interaction and “echoing” the speaker has proved effective in this case too. In addition, we have come up with another unobtrusive method. What we suggest is to merely signal the mistake to the speakers by showing them a yellow card (or of any other colour as previously agreed) and let them address their own mistakes. However, this method can only be used if the students are making careless mistakes – ones that have been addressed or corrected again and again. Still another method practised by most instructors is to make notes of the serious and repetitive errors to discuss later, thus avoiding the interruption of the speech act.

Getting back to creating near-authentic atmosphere during the lesson, it should be emphasized that, in order to assimilate classroom speaking activities to the real-life contexts, it is vital to practise both interactional and transactional speeches. The former type implies communication for social purposes (such as establishing relationship, getting to know each other, etc.) and is more spontaneous and unpredictable than the latter, which aims at getting things done, like in the fixed context of calling a taxi /Nunan 2003: 56/.

In a non-English-speaking country like Armenia, EFL learners have limited scope for practising their speaking skill outside the classroom. Thus, real conversations about everyday topics make up this deficiency by replicating the appropriate language settings: for ordering coffee, shopping, making an appointment, holding or attending an interview, asking for directions, getting more information, explaining how to do things, and many others. As students become actively engaged in conversation, more phrases and formulas that foster the communication process should be added: phrases to show interest, describe a process, express opinions, signal agreement and make suggestions. As students progress, the spontaneous talks will pass into more complex communication activities that establish realistic social contexts for sharing and debating ideas. The most constructive and dynamic of these are simulations and role-plays, group discussions and debates, problem-solving tasks and collaborative conversations, individual and group presentations and speeches. All of them are valuable aids to language learning and teaching. Further, we shall present some practical methods for performing these activities. Admittedly, the preparation may be time-consuming and laborious, but it is worth the efforts.

Interactive activities

Among interactive activities, the students' favourites are **simulations** and **role-plays**. A whole situation is simulated and dramatized in the classroom, and the participants assume different predetermined roles, which urge them to get as involved in the interaction as possible and contribute to the success of the whole undertaking. The situations resemble real-world situations and invite the participation of the entire class.

Role-playing is an aspect of simulation. It helps to bring the language to life and to give the learners some experience of its use as a means of communication. In a role-play participants follow a thoroughly prepared script – a specific plot and given vocabulary. However, they do not have to be restricted to the initial plot and vocabulary. In fact, role-playing may encourage initiative and creativity as long as the “unexpected” utterances do not impede other players' understanding or prevent the latter from responding adequately.

One of the teaching methodologies we apply is the “decision dramas” by the expert in the field B. Radin /Radin, 2000/. The topic, usually a controversial one, the corresponding vocabulary and background information about the topic are introduced to the class. Depending on the level of the students, this can be done beforehand or at the very lesson the role-play is planned for. Then the students choose the roles themselves. As a case in point, in a General English class there can be one main character – the decision maker, and several supporting characters, such as family, friends, teachers, advisors, employers, who give advice. Each participant must realize the consequences of his/her advice. At the same time, it is vital that students adapt their register to their respective roles. In this way, they can also “practise the socio-linguistic aspects of language use” /Radin, 2000/.

After all participants have performed their part by giving one or more pieces of advice, the decision-maker is invited to leave the classroom and make up his mind. In the meantime, the rest of the class can discuss what decision they expect and why. Then the main character announces his decision and gives the reasons for his choice. Throughout the game, the teacher should guide the communicative process, for example, help to find appropriate words. Grammatical mistakes should only be corrected and discussed after the role-play.

There is now a large body of varied supplementary readers at different levels of difficulty that can be source of role-playing material. A skillful instructor only has to match the problem situation accurately to the needs of his/her group.

The related activity, **simulation**, is more advanced. Here, the scenario is constructed spontaneously based on the learners' own creativity, viewpoints and vocabulary; how the situation will develop depends on their choice of how to act and what to say, what decisions to make and which solutions to discard.

Simulations have proved particularly effective for ESP classes. Many adults will be learning the language for occupational purposes, and in some occupations it

is used in fairly specific settings. In commerce, for instance, we have several salesman-customer situations of planning and promotion in which various people have to negotiate; in politics there are election campaigns and candidate-voters situations; in diplomacy there are summits, talks between delegates, and so on. Acting out the professional situations presuppose some awareness with the profession itself, and the role-playing may in certain circumstances be a way of getting more familiar with it as well as with the language, the two being woven together.

As a case in point, simulation of business case analyses is ideal for a Business English class. Case studies occur in any genuine business setting. Participants study a real business problem, evaluate the initial situation, brainstorm, discuss and debate the merits of each proposed solution, and make decisions. In this way, economics students also demonstrate their basic familiarity with their major and their intuitive awareness of its specifics.

Two other useful activities to enhance the speaking skill are **group discussions** and **debates**. They are also great for taking some of the pressure off the teacher and for allowing learners to develop their confidence.

Group discussions range between brainstorming, exchanging opinions, problem-solving and other activities, where participants deliberate in groups of 4-6 on a topic of general interest and then share their ideas with the class. The following technique will help to incline the students in favour of the activity and ensure its success. First, the students are divided into groups and then brainstorm ideas on the topic of their choice (each group has a different topic). The “secretary” of each group jots down the ideas. After 5 minutes of brainstorming group members have another 10 minutes to discuss these ideas. Thus, given some time to formulate their thoughts and opinions in English, they get relaxed and unimpeded in their speaking attempts. Each group is now considered to be an expert in the particular topic. The elected spokesman from each group then reports the group’s collective thoughts to the class, after which classmates ask questions to elicit more reasons and details from the members of the respective team. To prevent some students from dominating and others from tacit consent, the teacher should encourage every participant to answer at least three questions.

A simpler alternative to small group discussions is pair-work, where the students in each pair interview one another on a topic of their choice. Collaborative conversations, too, allow scope for each student to have discussions with diverse partners about topics and short readings (funny stories are most popular). A complicated option is the discussion of case studies (for students of Business English), which we shall touch upon later.

At the upper-intermediate and advanced levels, university students at the above-mentioned faculties also enjoy a more challenging activity than discussions. **Debating** is a thought-provoking game through which participants not only learn to exchange views but also polish their ability to analyze controversial topics, express

agreement or disagreement, contest others' opinions (which are often prevailing or popular) and stand their ground. Certainly, it is easier to express views on one side of the subject (either the advantages or disadvantages). Therefore, it is rational to divide the class into two teams based on their true preferences. Some advanced students may, however, prefer to take a bigger challenge and assume speaking in favour of the opposite belief, regardless of their true feelings. After the teams have prepared their arguments, they will choose a representative (or a leader), who will be the first to present the respective team's position on the issue in question.

Lastly, **class presentations** and **speeches** can be performed individually or in groups of 2-4, depending on the topic and the participants' preferences. For a class presentation, each student or group chooses a topic of interest (general or professional), analyzes it carefully as a home assignment, plans and outlines a speech. In a group presentation, the participants elaborate a scenario outlining the part of each member in their common presentation. In the IT age students are equipped with such audio-visual aids as laptop computers, as well as Power Point and Prezi presentation software programs, which not only allow them to prepare interesting reports and facilitate comprehension, but also motivate the class. In addition, this software programs simplify the performance of timid learners by giving them prompts as to what to speak about. As each group or an individual finish the speech, the entire class is involved in questioning the speakers. As in previous tasks, everyone is encouraged to ask a question. It has to be admitted that group work, be it discussion, presentation or competition, appeals strongly even to the most vulnerable and lazy learners. In a group, they feel safe, relaxed and responsible, and the desire to contribute to the common goal urges them to take risks and eventually overcome their fears and lack of confidence.

For the future political scientists, diplomats and sociologists the ability of speaking in public – at conferences, during negotiations or political campaigns, on TV, etc. – is crucial. Thus class presentations and speeches serve the double role: to improve the speaking skill, on the one hand, and teach presentation techniques and rhetoric, on the other.

Communication activities have proved to be enjoyable and successful at different age and proficiency levels. Most importantly, participants get so motivated and absorbed in the playful atmosphere that they cease to think of these activities as of classroom exercise. Thus the speaking skills are more acquired by them than learnt.

Depending on the level of the group, all the above-mentioned tasks can be teacher-aided (guided) at first, i.e. each participant has different instructions, printed on different slips of paper so that the players cannot see each other's instructions. In this way, they have information which is different from that of their interlocutor's, just as in most real communication outside the classroom. Later on the students learn to work independently (free conversations).

Finally, it should be mentioned that interactive textbooks also provide learners with different instructions as to what to do or say; however, the obvious drawback the teacher faces when working with the textbook activities is the unavailability of roles for all participants.

Conclusion

As a final point, the ability to speak is not only the desirable end and the major goal of learning a foreign language. It is also a crucial part of the language learning process. The teacher should encourage the students to use every chance to speak the target language – both in the classroom and outside it. In the 21st century they have an abundance of resources: from English-language books, magazines, movies and TV shows to people from other countries whom they meet in social networks. As a famous proverb has it, practice makes perfect.

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Գ. ՀՈՎՀԱՆՆԻՍՅԱՆ, Ա. ՊԵՏՐՈՍՅԱՆ – Բանավոր խոսքի կատարելագործում տարբեր կոմունիկատիվ իրավիճակներում. – Օտար լեզվով հաղորդակցվելը հաճախ համարվում է դժվար առաջադրանք: Կա սովորողների երկու խումբ. նրանք, ովքեր վախենալով սխալներից չեն փորձում անգամ խոսել, մյուսները հաղորդակցվում են առանց վախի՝ չնայած բազմաթիվ սխալների: Այդուհանդերձ, հաղորդակցվելու հմտությունը անհրաժեշտ է ամենօրյա խոսքում, գիտական և մասնագիտական ոլորտներում: Դասավանդողի նպատակն է օգնել ուսանողներին յուրացնել և կատարելագործել շփվելու ունակությունը և մասնագիտական նպատակներով լեզուն օգտագործելու հմտությունը հավասարապես: Տվյալ հոդվածում քննարկվում են հաղորդակցվելու հմտությունների զարգացման մեթոդները, որոնք կնպաստեն նշված նպատակների իրականացմանը:

Բանալի բառեր. հաղորդակցում, շփում, փոխգործողություն, սխալ, դերախաղ, սիմուլյացիա, խմբակային քննարկում, բանավեճ, խնդրի լուծում, խնդրո առարկայի ներկայացում

Г. ОВАНЕСЯН, А. ПЕТРОСЯН – Совершенствование навыков устной речи в различных коммуникативных ситуациях. – Обучение говорению на иностранном языке часто считается трудной задачей. Существуют два типа обучаемых: одни, боясь ошибок, даже не пытаются говорить, другие общаются смело, несмотря на многочисленные ошибки. Умение говорить используется как в каждодневных беседах, так и в научной и профессиональной сферах. Таким образом, целью преподавателя является помочь студентам, специализирующимся в различных областях знания, освоить и усовершенствовать искусство общения наравне с умением использовать язык в профессиональных целях. В данной статье рассматриваются способы развития умение говорения в обоих типах обучаемых для достижения данных целей.

Ключевые слова: говорение, общение, взаимодействие, ошибка, ролевая игра, симуляция, групповое обсуждение, дискуссия, решение проблем, презентация