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Some Peculiarities of Developing Student Speaking Skills

Many students equate being able to speak a language as knowing the language and therefore view learning the language as learning how to speak the language. Thus, if students do not learn how to speak or do not get any opportunity to speak in the language classroom, they may soon get de-motivated and lose interest in learning. On the other hand, if the right activities are taught in the right way, speaking in class can be a lot of fun, raising general learner motivation and making the English language classroom a fun and dynamic place to be. In this article we will try to analyze the process of developing student speaking skills. To achieve this aim, we will examine the ways of increasing speaking in class, developing group discussion skills and consider the strategies to develop student speaking skills.

To begin with, it is necessary to point out that the goal of teaching speaking skills is communicative efficiency. Learners should be able to make themselves understood, using their current proficiency to the fullest. They should try to avoid confusion in the message due to faulty pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary, and to observe the social and cultural rules that apply in each communication situation [1]. To help students develop communicative efficiency in speaking, instructors can use a balanced activities approach that combines *language input*, *structured output*, and *communicative output*.

Language input comes in the form of teacher talk, listening activities, reading passages, and the language heard and read outside of class. It gives learners the material they need to begin producing language themselves.

Structured output focuses on correct form. In structured output, students may have options for responses, but all of the options require them to use the specific form or structure that the teacher has just introduced. Structured output is designed to make learners comfortable producing specific language items recently introduced, sometimes in combination with previously learned items. Instructors often use

structured output exercises as a transition between the presentation stage and the practice stage of a lesson plan. Textbook exercises also often make good structured output practice activities.

In *communicative output*, the learners' main purpose is to complete a task, such as obtaining information, developing a travel plan, or creating a video. To complete the task, they may use the language that the instructor has just presented, but they also may draw on any other vocabulary, grammar, and communication strategies that they know. In communicative output activities, the criterion of success is whether the learner gets the message across. Accuracy is not a consideration unless the lack of it interferes with the message. In everyday communication, spoken exchanges take place because there is some sort of information gap between the participants. Communicative output activities involve a similar real information gap. In order to complete the task, students must reduce or eliminate the information gap. In these activities, language is a tool, not an end in itself. In a balanced activities approach, the teacher uses a variety of activities from these different categories of input and output. Learners at all proficiency levels, including beginners, benefit from this variety; it is more motivating, and it is also more likely to result in effective language learning [1].

It is a matter of common knowledge that the Communicative Approach to language learning stresses the need for meaningful communication, emphasizing that if students have a genuine reason or motivation to talk, then they will learn to use the language more effectively [2]. This article looks at how the notion of a gap between speakers can be used to provide a reason for communication. Finding ways to create gaps between students, gaps which need closing, creates speaking opportunities and prompts the creation of new activities. In this context, gap may be taken to mean difference. If there are two students, A and B, and if A has some information which B does not, and possibly vice versa, then there is a difference or gap between the two students. A task which requires B to find out the information that A has (i.e. a task which closes the gap) will provide a reason for communication. The types of gaps may be as follows:

- The information gap. This is the classic gap exploited by the Communicative Approach. Student A has some information, perhaps concerning the prices of food. Student B needs to know these prices, and so asks A questions to find the information. The information gap is ideally suited to pair and small group work and usually relies upon pre-prepared information cards.

- The experience gap. All students in classes have had different experiences in their lives - so this is immediately a gap. In some classes this gap is very marked. The experience gap is easily exploited in questionnaires - particularly those that aim to practise past forms.

- The opinion gap. Most people have differing opinions, feelings and reactions to situations, events and propositions. Finding out about someone's feelings and opinions is all about closing the gap between people. The increase in personalized activities that is evident in many textbooks is testament to the value of this gap.

- The knowledge gap. Students know different things about the world. This gap can be exploited in brainstorming and general knowledge style quizzes.

Exploiting the experience or opinion gap is a good way to lead in to a topic. For example, if the topic area is jobs, students can tell each other about the jobs the members of their family have. Or, students can rank jobs according to certain criteria (would like to do, usefulness to society) and then compare their decisions with other students. Such exercises usually do not require any materials and need not last a long time. The intention is to create plenty of opportunities for meaningful communication and to develop a familiarity with speaking amongst the students. By keeping the notion of a gap between students in mind, it is easy to come up with speaking activities that promote meaningful communication. These activities often require very little preparation but can increase the total amount of student talking time in any lesson [2].

It should be noted that developing group discussion skills is useful for everyday life as we regularly find ourselves having discussions amongst friends, family and colleagues. These may vary from very informal chats about day-to-day

things, to more serious topics, for example a discussion about a recent news story or a problem that needs to be solved. Additionally, group discussions are increasingly being used in the job market during interviews and selection procedures. These can take a variety of formats, but the key skills remain very similar. Moreover, group discussions offer an opportunity for extended speaking and listening practice by all of the contributors. Group discussion practice and skill development is therefore useful for all students [3].

There are a variety of different types of discussions that occur naturally and which can be recreated in the classroom. These include discussions where the participants have to:

- Make decisions (e.g. decide who to invite to a party and where to seat them);
- Give and / or share their opinions on a given topic (e.g. discuss the advantages and disadvantages of different candidates in terms of pay and potential performance);
- Create something (e.g. plan and make a poster as a medium for feedback on a language course);
- Solve a problem (e.g. discussing the situations behind a series of logic problems).

There are a number of different sub-skills which students will need to be able to successfully and effectively participate in a group discussion. Students need to develop the ability to:

1. Analyze. This skill can be developed by giving students the topic individually and asking them to brainstorm or mind-map all of the possible sub-topics they could speak about. The students can then swap their notes and assess or analyze the relevance of each of the sub-topics their partner has included. Together, the students then draw up a fresh list or mind-map and discuss how the sub-topics might be linked together, along with examples or reasons for any arguments they might have.

2. Persuade. This skill comes in useful when students need to make decisions on how to do something (e.g. which candidate should get a job). A fun activity to develop this skill is to give groups of students this topic and ask them to decide on the profile of the perfect candidate, creating a list of 7 adjectives. The students are then re-grouped and asked to persuade the other members of the group that their selection is the best while compiling a second, negotiated list. The group members who retain the most from their original lists are the winners.

3. Control emotions. This can be practised by giving the students a fairly controversial topic, such as 'Friends are more important than family' and asking the students to decide whether they agree, disagree or have no opinion, making notes on their main arguments to support their viewpoint. Divide the students into groups ensuring that there is a mix of views within each group. Explain that for this discussion, the aim is to keep their voices low and try to control their emotions as far as possible. Monitor and give feedback on these areas.

4. Support. One of the most important things for this skill is for students to learn when it is and is not appropriate to interrupt and how to do it. Very often students will talk over each other in an effort to get their point across and forget to listen.

5. Use functional language. Depending on the types of group discussions that you plan to do with your class, it is useful to draw up a list of useful functional language for the students to refer to. This could include phrases for functions such as 'Giving reasons', 'Giving your opinion', 'Agreeing and disagreeing', etc. You can either make up the list yourself and distribute it or get the students to do this. For each group discussion, you can then refer them to the appropriate section of the list and give them a few moments to consider the language before beginning the discussion [3].

As we have seen, group discussions can take a variety of formats and are useful for all types of students. They can be done in preparation for job interviews or as extended speaking practice simply to increase fluency. It is important to consider the different sub-skills that are involved in participating in a group discussion and ensure

that you do activities that address each of these. Additionally, structuring and varying the way that feedback is given will help the students to identify areas for improvement. Students often think that the ability to speak a language is the product of language learning, but speaking is also a crucial part of the language learning process. Effective instructors teach students speaking strategies - using minimal responses, recognizing scripts, and using language to talk about language - they can use to help themselves expand their knowledge of the language and their confidence in using it. The instructor helps students learn to speak so that the students can use speaking to learn [4].

Let us consider these speaking strategies:

1. Using minimal responses

Language learners who lack confidence in their ability to participate successfully in oral interaction often listen in silence while others do the talking. One way to encourage such learners to begin to participate is to help them build up a stock of minimal responses that they can use in different types of exchanges. Such responses can be especially useful for beginners. Minimal responses are predictable, often idiomatic phrases that conversation participants use to indicate understanding, agreement, doubt, and other responses to what another speaker is saying. Having a stock of such responses enables a learner to focus on what the other participant is saying, without having to simultaneously plan a response.

2. Recognizing scripts

Some communication situations are associated with a predictable set of spoken exchanges - a script. Greetings, apologies, compliments, invitations, and other functions that are influenced by social and cultural norms often follow patterns or scripts. So do the transactional exchanges involved in activities such as obtaining information and making a purchase. In these scripts, the relationship between a speaker's turn and the one that follows it can often be anticipated. Instructors can help students develop speaking ability by making them aware of the scripts for different situations so that they can predict what they will hear and what they will need to say

in response. Through interactive activities, instructors can give students practice in managing and varying the language that different scripts contain.

3. Using language to talk about language

Language learners are often too embarrassed or shy to say anything when they do not understand another speaker or when they realize that a conversation partner has not understood them. Instructors can help students overcome this reticence by assuring them that misunderstanding and the need for clarification can occur in any type of interaction, whatever the participants' language skill levels. Instructors can also give students strategies and phrases to use for clarification and comprehension check. By encouraging students to use clarification phrases in class when misunderstanding occurs and by responding positively when they do, instructors can create an authentic practice environment within the classroom itself. As they develop control of various clarification strategies, students will gain confidence in their ability to manage the various communication situations that they may encounter outside the classroom [4].

In conclusion it is necessary to emphasize that traditional classroom speaking practice often takes the form of drills in which one person asks a question and another gives an answer. The question and the answer are structured and predictable, and often there is only one correct, predetermined answer. The purpose of asking and answering the question is to demonstrate the ability to ask and answer the question. In contrast, the purpose of real communication is to accomplish a task, such as conveying a telephone message, obtaining information, or expressing an opinion. In real communication, participants must manage uncertainty about what the other person will say. Authentic communication involves an information gap; each participant has information that the other does not have. In addition, to achieve their purpose, participants may have to clarify their meaning or ask for confirmation of their own understanding. To create classroom speaking activities that will develop communicative competence, instructors need to incorporate a purpose and an information gap and allow for multiple forms of expression.

References:

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