



COMMUNICATIVE ACTIVITIES

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Abstract:

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When planning activities focused on speaking skills practice, it might be recommendable to consider which aspect of language we intend our students to work on as for its communicative purpose. We can distinguish between two main views of language: structural and functional. The attention is paid to grammatical system and it deals with ways in which linguistic items can be combined in order to express the intended meaning.

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INTRODUCTION Functional (Communicative) view of language. A language presents a means of expressing a functional meaning. It is the semantic and communicative dimensions of the language which are accentualized rather than grammatical rules (The communicative view of language). Both aspects of language are linked with each other since "just as a single linguistic form can express a number of functions, so also can a single communicative function be expressed by a number of linguistic forms"

What should not be ignored is the fact that a language also carries social meaning. Familiarity with social meaning of language allows communicators to choose the most appropriate linguistic forms with regard to the social situation, status and relationship among the people involved.

When our students struggle to deal with everyday situations and communicate their basic needs in English, hardly can we expect them to differentiate between formal and informal language. In this case, Littlewood (1981) suggests the compromise of teaching students the forms from a "middle" level of formality, which would fit both conversations with friends as well as with strangers (p. 5).

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS. Before listing the types of communicative activities, it might be useful to ask a question: "What do we wish our students to achieve by means of communicative activities?" or strictly speaking: "What do people have to be able to do with the target language in order to be labelled as competent communicators?"

Littlewood (1981) described four domains of this competence, but only from the point of view of speaker. However, since this thesis is centred on teaching speaking[1], Littlewood's division seems to be sufficient: speakers master the linguistic system to such extent, that they can express the intended meaning without preparation speakers realize that a single function can be expressed throughout several

forms as well as a single form can be interpreted in several ways, and they can manipulate the language accordingly speakers have to acquire skills and strategies enabling them to communicate as effectively as possible in specific situations; they can recognize if they did not succeed in putting the meaning across, and if necessary they can use different language to make their interlocutor understand speakers can choose the appropriate linguistic forms with regard to social situations or they are at least aware of neutral language forms which are generally acceptable and cannot offend[2].

The primary aim of pre-communicative activities is to help students understand the relation between linguistic forms and their meanings. In this type of activities, students are expected to come up with linguistic forms that are acceptable instead of being required to communicate meanings. Pre-communicative activities "aim to equip the learner with some of the skills required for communication, without actually requiring them to perform communicative acts". Littlewood added that the success is measured according to whether the student has managed to produce an acceptable structure rather than whether he expressed the intended meaning[3].

This speaking activity employs both practice of structure as well as communicative function because the present perfect is used as a question, whilst the past declarative can be interpreted as a reply. In other words, this piece of speech can be considered a short and simple conversation. Prompt: Shall we go to the cinema? Response: Oh no, I don't feel like going to the cinema. Prompt: Shall we have a swim? (or What about a swim, then?) Response: Oh no, I don't feel like having a swim[4].

In this speaking task students also practise both structure (gerund) and communicative function (making suggestions and rejecting suggestions). However, still it is a kind of activity that can be done automatically without thinking about what is being



said. If we wish to raise students' consciousness of their answers, it might be helpful to invite students to react to the suggestions in accordance with their likes or dislikes. Another possibility is that students are given cues implying what answer is expected from them. They can for example be given pictures and on the basis of pictures express their preferences. For example:

Prompt: Shall we go to the cinema?

Since it is crucial for students to train interaction skills, not only reactions to prompts, it is strongly advisable to let students work with each other[5]. One of them may be provided with cues and make suggestions accordingly, whilst the other responds to the suggestions in dependence on his/her personal preferences or another set of cues.

Another alternative of speaking activities centred on structure practice is the task when students are involved in a dialogue which is directed by cues, such as: „You meet B in the street“, „Greet B“, „Ask B where he is going“, „Suggest somewhere to go together“, „Reject A's suggestion and make a different suggestion“, etc. This type of communicative activity challenges students to rely on their repertoire since despite having to follow the cues, the choice of particular words and structures is up to them[6].

It is important to bear in mind that these activities put emphasis on meaning rather than on grammatical accuracy or appropriateness of language with regard to particular situations. In other words, students have to be able to convey the intended meaning with whatever language they have at their disposal and it makes no difference if the linguistic structures and grammar are not one hundred percent correct[7].

Functional communication activities are often based on information gaps or problem solving. The activities are categorized to 4 groups according to the role the target language plays in them. In this kind of activities, one person has information which the other person has to discover, usually by asking questions to which the knower responds only with yes or no. The demand of this activity is that the knower's cooperation is limited in order to make the task take longer. This type of tasks may sometimes ask for equipping students with example structures. However, the focus still remains on meanings to be communicated[8].

In this case, the knower's cooperation is not under any limits. This type of communicative activity does not involve only asking and answering questions, but it also leaves space for describing, suggesting, asking for clarification, etc. The students are allowed

to help each other and they have to make use of a wider range of communication skills, such as indicating they take a new piece of information into account, indicating they make sense of their partner's feedback, and being able to rephrase their message if necessary, relying on compensation strategies whenever needed, etc. Sharing and processing information[9].

Except sharing information, students' task is also to discuss it and evaluate it in order to solve a problem. This type of task gives students for example the opportunity to become aware of ways of interrupting or disagreeing with the others without being impolite. In this last group of functional communication activities, students' aim is often to solve a problem or make a decision for which they have to possess the skill to analyse, argue, justify and persuade. The advantage of tasks of this category is that they remind of real-life situations and what is more, they enable students to express their personality by means of foreign language. In this type of activities students still should do their best to communicate the intended meaning, but additionally they should pay attention to the choice of language with regard to particular social situations. Variety of social situations can be brought into English lessons by means of role-plays and simulations[10].

Nevertheless, we should not forget that classroom should undoubtedly be counted as a social environment, too, since teachers and students get repeatedly involved in social interaction with each other. Therefore, I dare to say, we should not deprive our students of the opportunity to practise their social skills in English by dealing with everyday matters in the mother tongue. There is no doubt that sometimes it is more efficient to switch into the mother tongue when we want to explain something. Nonetheless, I believe that using English in lessons as much as possible, even for organizational matters, does not only expose our students to the target language, but it might also have an impact on their attitude to English[11].

Littlewood (1981) supported this idea of mine saying that if we avoid using English as a medium for dealing with matters of the immediate importance and turn to it only in particular tasks, we devalue this foreign language in the eyes of our students'. They will probably view English as something "extra", while the mother tongue will remain the means of discussing really important subjects (p. 45).

Though some situations may be really difficult to handle in English because students may not understand what we are trying to say or they cannot express themselves, we still should do our best to



make most of the potential of social situations in the classroom for students' communication skills development. To make it easier for them, it seems recommendable to get them acquainted with classroom language at the very beginning of the course[12].

Certainly, in English lessons students are sometimes exposed to language they might never use again in the world outside the school, e.g. apologising for not having done homework, but still, English used in class can serve as a model of general principles of the language, knowledge of which can later be applied even under different social circumstances, so that students can use English creatively in many other situations

My bachelor thesis, which also deals with teaching speaking, asks a question: "Is it possible to teach somebody how to speak English?" What I have in mind is whether it is in teachers' power to influence their students' thinking in such a way that one day they are able to produce an understandable language conveying the intended meaning? Or in other words, will our teaching, passing our knowledge to our students, be enough for students to be able to start speaking the target language?

Scrivener (2005) emphasised that "teaching" does not always have to lead to "learning" because learning requires energy and attention from the learner[14]. He added that teachers cannot learn for their students, but what they can do is to create conditions which will enable learning to happen. This aim can be reached for example by giving students opportunities to be active, by avoiding long-winded explanations, by encouraging learners to participate, talk, and interact, etc[13].

However, sometimes teachers unconsciously prevent conditions necessary for learning. This chapter mentions some of teachers' common mistakes relevant to teaching speaking. Sometimes teachers steal their students' opportunity to practise their speaking skills by talking too much themselves. One of the reasons why some teachers tend to talk too much is that they have problems bearing silent moments. However, silent moments do not have to signal that there is something wrong, sometimes students just need time to think and prepare their answers and the teacher should not deny them this need[15].

The author of the article "How to increase Student Talking Time" said that in order to learn English, students need to speak the language. He/she recommended that the ratio of TTT and STT is 30 to 70 %. The author also emphasised that our lessons may be the only opportunity for students to practise

English and therefore we should offer them a chance to make most out of them ("How to increase Student Talking Time", 2012, para. 4 and 5).

Echo

Frequent repeating of what our students say may have negative impact on two things. Firstly, the more time we spend echoing our students' statements, the less time is there for students to practise their speaking skills. Secondly, if students can rely on us repeating everything, then they have no reason to concentrate on what their classmates say, which will hardly improve classroom interaction[16]. What is more, activities in which students have to listen to each other represent a priceless opportunity for listening skills practice. Someone may object that students cannot learn much listening to their classmates, who probably make mistakes, but we should not forget that most people our students will ever encounter will probably not be native speakers and their English will not be perfect either. Therefore, classroom is a great environment for practice of interaction with imperfect speakers, which reminds of real life situations that our students should be prepared for from our lessons[17].

Being desperate to move to another stage of the lesson, teachers sometimes tend to complete students' sentences. There is no need to say that as a result teachers may sometimes complete the sentences in a totally different way from what their learners were intending to communicate. There is nothing wrong with helping students if they get stuck and cannot finish their speech. Students can be helped, but at the same time they should not be deprived of their choice of words and ideas.

It is not surprising that setting tasks far above students' level of English will probably not meet much success. Not only will students probably be unable to accomplish them, but difficult tasks may also be very demotivating[18].

However, very easy tasks are not a good choice either. Teachers should put their trust in their students and believe they can do more than they realize. What seems to be a reasonable compromise is challenging tasks in which students may be helped by the teacher to certain extent. Teachers who help a lot, though with good intentions, may actually prevent learning. Knowing they can always count on their teacher's guidance, help, and control, students can hardly become self-reliant. In other words, learning usually happens when students are forced to work on their own. One of the things we as teachers can do for them is to put trust in their skills and knowledge. The opposite of teachers who intervene when students are



working on a task are teachers who show no interest in how their students are handling tasks. They do not listen to what students say and they do not do any monitoring either. But just because over-intervention can stand in the way of learning does not mean that teachers should not give their students any feedback[19].

To conclude this chapter, since the master thesis focuses on teaching speaking, what we as teachers should keep in mind is that we should always be aware of ratio of student talking time and teacher talking time in our lessons. We should not forget that it is our students who need to practise their speaking skills, not us, and therefore we should give them as many opportunities as possible to use the target language and not waste time talking too much ourselves. Furthermore, we should not intervene if it is not necessary and we also should not hold our students back from progress by entrusting them with tasks under their level[20].

The author of the article "Teenagers: Speaking: Why teenagers avoid using English" mentioned several possible causes: "students feel silly speaking a language in which they know they are making mistakes it is artificial to communicate with their classmates in a foreign language when they want to say something important to each other, they do so spontaneously in their mother tongue they do not have the English to express the concepts that the teacher wants them to express they do not understand the point of speaking English all the time in class it's very tiring to concentrate on producing a foreign language especially when your level is low the topic/activity that they are supposed to be talking about in English is boring, so they talk about something else in their mother tongue speaking English is difficult speaking English is not fun".

Every student and every class is unique and therefore different. My research focuses on one of the obstacles standing in the way of the students' bigger participation in speaking tasks. The specific problem will be dealt with in the practical part. Nevertheless, I consider it crucial that the thesis should inform of some ways of encouraging teenagers to speak more English without being centred on one specific problem, which is the aim of the following chapter[21].

According to humanistic approach, it might be recommendable to decide on an amount of time and specific part of lesson when students can use their mother tongue. They can use it in order to share their opinions on a topic they feel strongly about or to tell a joke for which they lack the English vocabulary, etc. It is necessary to emphasise that time for using mother

tongue must be limited, for example 5 minutes at the beginning or end of the lesson. The principle of this idea is that the limitation of time when the mother-tongue is allowed should help to maintain as much English as possible for the rest of the lesson

Students may be asked to make posters portraying "false friends", words similar in both mother tongue and the target language, which, however, differ in meaning, or words they often want to use, but cannot remember in English ("Teenagers: Speaking: Why teenagers avoid using English", n.d., Wall posters).

I personally really like the idea of posters with frequently-used words, which students just cannot remember. In my research, lack of active vocabulary proved to be one of the biggest obstacles standing in the way of the students' spoken fluency. Therefore, a poster that could always remind them of words related to a certain topic or certain sentence structures might be really helpful.

Films or soap operas translation

Students may be given a task to choose a film or soap opera and translate a part of it into English. Later, they can be invited to act a scene out in front of their classmates ("Teenagers: Speaking: Why teenagers avoid using English", n.d., Soap operas).

Students are divided into groups of three people. One person speaks the students' mother tongue, another person speaks the target language and the third person is an interpreter mediating communication between the other two who are involved in an interview. It can be for example an interview of a famous person ("Teenagers: Speaking: Why teenagers avoid using English", n.d., Interpreters).

Though I am not really fond of using the mother tongue in English lessons, I believe this activity can contribute to development of students' skills and knowledge. In my opinion, this activity may help some students brush up particular phrases since they can associate them to equivalents in their mother tongue.

In the chapter analysing changes teenagers undergo, we learnt how sensitive teenagers are to what their peers think about them, how self-conscious they are and how much they are afraid of making mistakes or embarrassing themselves in front of others. Though this fact can also result in teenagers' unwillingness to speak English, there seems to be a solution to this situation - masks. Masks present something students can hide behind. They can be for example given stickers with names of famous people. Their task is to approach following tasks from the position of a particular famous person, e.g. they participate in a discussion in their role, they speak in a



different voice, etc. ("Teenagers: Speaking: How to encourage teenagers to use English", n.d., Famous people).

To conclude it, masks are likely to help students get rid of their fear and shyness since when it comes to speaking activities, it is not themselves, their personalities, opinions, etc.; they become someone else.

Sometimes students switch into their mother tongue because they just forget they should be using English. Therefore, it seems to be worth reminding them of the necessity to use only the target language. That can be done in funny ways ("Teenagers: Speaking: How to encourage teenagers to use English", n.d., Reminders).

For example, the first student who is heard speaking English is given a card. Then when the student hears someone else speaking English, he/she gives the card to the other person.

As outlined several times above, the teacher and his/her performance in front of the class is not the only factor influencing what students really learn. One of the factors that have an impact on students' learning is the atmosphere in the classroom. The atmosphere does not depend only on the relationship between the teacher and his/her students, but also on the attitudes students have developed to each other. In other words, "a successful group dynamics is a vital element in the teaching/learning process".

CONCLUSION. The members of the group are able to compromise. They have a sense of direction as a group and are able to define their goals in group, as well as individual, terms. Group members are not cliquey or territorial but interact happily with all members of the group. Members of the group listen to each other, and take turns.

Group members are interested in each other and feel they have something in common. The group is self-reliant and has a sense of responsibility. It is able to overcome problems and difficulties without recourse to the teacher.

The group is tolerant of all its members; members feel secure and accepted.

Members co-operate in the performing of tasks and are able to work together productively. This stage is considered to be most uncomfortable for the members of the group since everybody "fights" for his/her position, influence and authority among the others. This phase can reflect negatively on the students' approach to their teacher since this is a period of "testing" how much and what the teacher can stand.

This stage goes hand in hand with conflicts and division of roles.

The positive result of the arguments that usually take place in the second stage is that the members of group now understand each other better, can appreciate each other's skills and experience, encourage each other, listen to each other, etc. Furthermore, the task and responsibilities related to it become clearer.

The internal structure is established and the group tries to figure out what kind of behaviour is accepted and what should be rejected. What is more, the group's identity is questioned in this phase. Give students the opportunity to express their opinions on what they like in their classroom and what needs improvement. This can be done by means of a classroom discussion or by means of anonymous letters put into a classroom opinion box. The students should be reminded that every question they ask is good.

Make posters with signs such as: "Do your best" or "Respect others" and post them on the classroom walls. These reminders are likely to help create those feelings in your students, especially when they see them often.

Seating arrangement may also have a positive impact on the development of relationships within a class. Do not be afraid to group students together for a particular task or let them sit in a circle when you want them to discuss something. By changing the seating arrangement from time to time, you enable students to get to know better their classmates, to whom they might not have had chance to talk much yet.

Do not ignore when students make negative comments about themselves and do not let anyone insult anyone else. Always remind your students of the importance of respecting each other.

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