HOW TO ENHANCE ORAL PROFICIENCY IN OUR LEARNERS

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine some adequate oral techniques in English for Specific Purposes situation (ESP) which will develop genuine oral communication in the students of commerce (National institute of commerce, Algiers) .

We believe that this article will be beneficial to teachers of English in that it will provide them with the and appropriate techniques to help the students to develop their speaking skill, as we believe that our learners must be given true opportunities throughout their years of study to enhance the skill of encoding their thoughts in the foreign language.

The investigation was led through two questionnaires (one for the students another for the teachers) in order to build up an expression of the learners needs and specify the objectives of the techniques to be proposed for this population of learners.

The results revealed that the students of commerce are aware of learning English in general, as they have shown that their primary preference / concern is to enhance their ability to communicate orally in English. Consequently, some oral techniques are proposed by the writer to develop the student's ability to communicate in the target language.

Dr. DERRADJI Saleh
Université d' El Taref
(Algérie)

ملخص

يقترح هذا المقال بعض التقنيات الشفهية الخاصة بتعليم اللغة الإنجليزية المختصة والتي من شأنها تمكين طلبة التجارة القيام بمحادثات شفوية سليمة. كما يقدم هذا المقال مجموعة من التقنيات الملائمة التي تساعد الطلبة على تنمية مهاراتهم الشفوية وذلك من خلال فرص التطبيق أثناء فترة التكوين من أجل تعزيز المهارات الخاصة ببناء أفكارهم باللغة الأجنبية. تم استخدام استبيانين (للطلبة وللأساتذة) من أجل التوصل إلى تحديد متطلبات وأهداف التقنيات المقترحة لمجموعة من المتعلمين. لقد بينت النتائج مدى اهتمام طلبة معهد التجارة بتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية وكان انشغالهم الأول هو التواصل الشفهي باللغة الانجليزية .

Introduction

In this paper, we intend to propose and evaluate techniques for initiating and promoting genuine oral communication in the Institute of Commerce, in other words the techniques that will stimulate and facilitate the interpretation of a message, self-expression and collective negotiation. These techniques will be considered in four areas: group work, problem solving, role play and discussion. In discussing these techniques, we will analyze the link between oral communication and the needs of the students of Commerce. These four areas overlap and relate to one another.

-I. The nature of oral communication:
Oral communication is a two process between speaker and listeners and involves the productive kill of speaking and the receptive skill of listening

with understanding. Both speaker and listener have a positive function to perform. The interaction between speaker and listener is a complex process. The speaker has to encode the message he wishes to convey, while the listener has to decode or interpret it. It should be kept in mind that the listeners' interpretation does not necessarily correspond to the speakers' intended meaning.

The message itself, in a normal speech, usually contains a good deal of information that is redundant. At the same time, the listener is helped by the spoken utterance. We should also note that, in contrast to the written language, where sentences are carefully structured and linked together, speech is often characterized by incomplete and sometimes ungrammatical utterances, and by frequent false starts and repetitions.

Second language learners need to understand listening before speaking, and to be able to speak with confidence in order to carry out many of their most basic transactions, such as the transfer of information and the maintenance of social relationships. We can make the distinction between "motors- perspective" skills, which involve perceiving, recalling and articulating the correct order of sounds and structures of the language, an "Interaction-skills" which involve making decisions about communication, i.e. what to say, how and where to say it.

One of the most important constraints under which the language is produced is time pressure which tends to affect communication in at least two main ways. On one hand, speakers use some strategies in order to facilitate production, and on the other hand, they often have to compensate for the difficulties they face while performing. Speakers may facilitate the production of speech simplifying structure connecting sentences by the use of coordinating conjunctions, this is called parataxis; by ellipsis, that is, the omission of parts of a sentence; formulaic expressions: idioms, routines, (conventional ways of presenting information, Widdowson 1983) or by using chunks of language which have been learnt as wholes. Learners usually use compensation features such as self-correction (correction is permitted and indeed necessary); false starts, repetitions, rephrasing and hesitations. In spoken interaction, participants tend to say what they want to say in a way which the listener finds understandable. They may use routines and negotiate skills (the learners negotiate meaning in order to ensure understanding).

Some communication strategies are used: paraphrase, metaphor and the use of vocabulary to vary the degree of precision in communication. Speakers need to know that the control of a conversation may be negotiated through the agenda management, which covers the participants' right to choose the topic and know how to develop it through the business of handling turn taking. The development of the negotiation skills is very important for second language learners, so they should be practised in communicative tasks. Activities which involve spontaneous pairs practice or group work, and simulations or role-play should be focused on, so as to develop fluency in the learners.

Brown and Yule (1983:13) refer to two main types of talk: interactional and transactional. Interactional talk is concerned with maintaining social relationship; assumes shared knowledge between the speaker and the listener, and is primarily listener oriented. A talk that is mainly transactional deals with the conveying of information is message oriented and often involves more specific vocabulary. The message must be spelt out clearly since the speaker assumes that much less information is shared with the listener. According to Brown and Yule (1983), foreign students

104

needing to learn spoken English outside an English speaking environment are likely to acquire it for a transactional purpose for requiring and disseminating information. They maintain that most foreign students need to be able to produce long transactional turns in the foreign language and to acquire the ability to sustain spoken discourse, which they usually have problems achieving, they suggest, as a result of too much classroom concentration on short turns and of focusing on mastering language at sentence level. This can be remedied if the teacher can support and develop the student's ability to use language communicatively over a range of situations and enable the students to use the forms they know creatively and appropriately. For this, Brown and Yule stated that it is helpful if the teacher is aware of communicative stress of the conditions under which the student feels more at ease, or less at ease in speaking. This includes features of context: it is easier for a speaker to talk to one listener than to many, talk to a familiar audience, to a fellow student or peer who knows the same amount of the target language.

II- Oral communication techniques

1. Group work

A group work is a classroom situation where the students function within smaller units (groups). In these small units, an atmosphere conductive to oral exchanges is created, and the possibilities for interpersonal interactions are multiplied. For example, students listen to or read a text of five paragraphs. They are then divided into two groups. Each group selects a paragraph of the text just read or listened to and prepares to answer then questions asked by the other group. Each group has to work collectively to scan a paragraph for detailed comprehension and formulate questions to test the comprehension of the other group. The preliminary work involves oral interaction asking and answering questions paraphrasing some ideas of the paragraph, suggesting questions, agreeing, disagreeing, and proposing modifications. After some minutes preparation the exchange between groups starts. The "confrontation" which follows is genuine because of the information gap created between the two groups: neither group knows the questions which will be asked.

Oral interaction based on a genuine attempt to find a collective solution to a problem is at the basis of group work. Group work is a meaningful activity because the students need to interact with their peers and to develop a range of social and linguistic skills which are of great importance in terms of social relations. For this to happen, students should have some familiarity with the discussion topic prior to the discussion. Ideally, we think they should be exposed to a variety of discussion stimulants, including new vocabulary in context which would have been presented in the form of drills. The primary teacher's role is to stimulate thinking about the topic of discussion in advance. i.e. before group work starts. Therefore, the teacher remains essentially out of the discussion, or at least participates only to the extent that his presence does not destroy the conversational quality of the group. If the teacher feels he must continually correct students' mistakes, he will certainly succeed in destroying the cohesiveness, therefore the conversational quality of the group.

Group work, communicatively contrived presents the following advantages.

i-	The members of a group engage in "authentic negotiation" (Breen, 1997) in an attempt to solve a problem. They do not simply throw words at each other; they interact orally with a purpose.

ii- Spontaneous speech at a comfortable speed is enhanced in a student

and iii- During the oral interaction, there is a continuous process of interpreting and evaluating utterances as well as expressing views.

Group work does not only have advantages; it has also disadvantages, like:

i- it may kill the spirit of self reliance,

and ii- from the student's point of view, the value of help from the colleagues is less than the teacher's.

Group work involving communicative tasks is essential for promoting oral communication because it creates a situation where learners learn with friends and from friends .It favors group seating arrangement. It drastically modifies the role of the teacher and his conduct of the class; however, it should be mentioned that to eliminate the domineering position of a teacher is not to invite chaos.

As a conclusion, we can say that group work is important in that it demands maximum students' participation in an orally purposeful activity.

2- Problem solving

In problem solving, learners are involved in interpreting a task and in developing it through oral expression and negotiation .Problem solving can either be on an individual or collective basis; however the latter, calling for cooperative negotiation, is most rewarding in oral language terms. It can be of two kinds: short term tasks and projects. The former can be completed in the course of one class session (short term) while the latter spans many sessions and more preparatory research.

An example of a short term problem solving activity consists of presenting the students with a text which has been deliberately left unfinished and requiring them to provide an end, a conclusion. Another example is presenting the students with recordings they have to listen to, and ask them to identify the speakers, the place, and the situation, to give a short oral commentary. Students may also be presented with the "for" side of an argument and are asked collectively to constitute the "against" side of it. These short term activities are task-centered and can be achieved within one class session. However, for a project, in groups, students are asked to design and make an oral presentation of, for example various new models of business documents (vouchers, cheques, receipts books, ledgers...) stating the modification from past documents and outlining their advantages, or to search into the problems of national companies, and present their findings to a class. These examples show that a project is more time consuming than a short term task because it requires more information search, information exchange, and information synthesis.

In both short term and project tasks, situations are created which are conductive to interacting orally and collaborating in order to accomplish the task. The situational language use is centered on a problem. To create such a situation, the selection of activities should not be haphazardly done. It should take into consideration the level of the learners, the scope they provide for oral language use, their relevance to the

students, their profession and the language skills to be practised. Problem solving is an appropriate device for developing oral proficiency because:

i-   students are fully involved, and there is an immediate pay off in completing the task, the pay off being a motivating factor;

ii- self expression is enhanced through exposés (projects), joint efforts to find situations to problems and the general discussion during and after each presentation;

iii-   students are put in a dependency situation where they have to communicate orally with group members during the search for exchange of relevant information on the subject;

and   iv- during the oral presentation of findings, student colleagues interrupt with questions, comments, and points of observation, thereby creating a truly oral communicative scene, void of the recitational aspect of pattern drills.

Nevertheless, the problem solving technique has its limitations.
i-   The teacher, not conversant with all the variables will need a subject specialist to assess the technical content;

and   ii- in group tasks, it is difficult to efficiently supervise various activities or projects at the same time.

As a final word about problem solving, we would say that problem solving is innovative in that it is the search for the unknown. The unpredictability of the outcome fosters curiosity in learners, and the oral interactive atmosphere created helps in developing oral proficiency.

3- Role Play

 Revell (1979) sees role play as:
> "*an individual's spontaneous behavior reacting*
> *to others in a hypothetical situation.*"

This implies that a role play participant puts a fictitious identity in an imagined situation to present the views of a person without necessarily sharing them; For example, suppose that "x" applied for a position of a salesman and has been called up for an interview before a selection board. If this interview scene is acted in the classroom, it would constitute a role play activity.

Mugglestone (1977) states that each learner in role playing comes under the   four following categories:
i- that of acting out a role he has performed in his L1 and that he will need to perform in English, for example being a guest or host at a party;

ii- that of acting out a role that he has performed in his L1 but which he is unlikely to perform in English, for example being a husband or a wife;

iii- that of acting out a role he has not performed in his L1 but that he will need to perform in English, for example being a student, or about to become a post-graduate at a British university, and needing to participate in tutorials and seminars;

and   iv- that of acting out a role he has not performed in his L1 and which he is unlikely to perform in English, for example, being a policeman.

Role play is a good technique to develop interaction in foreign language classes. It has become a standard technique to develop interaction in foreign language classes. It has become a standard technique in teacher and management training. It represents a shift of emphasis to more realistic conversation and communication. The activity ranges from telling a story to acting out a situation where participants have to improvise and create. Role play encourages interaction among the learners as they relate to each other through their new identified roles.

Robinson (1981) suggests that role play may take many forms, but in essence, it is an improvisation where the participants build up their own characters, talk, movements, situation, structures, themes and messages. Those who are not taking role (the rest of the class and the teacher) can intervene to find out what is going on and give help, either with the role, or with the language they can replace, or join the role players from time to time.

From the oral communication point of view, role play presents several advantages:

i-   as a direct interactive method, role play encourages and promotes spontaneous oral exchanges between participants. There is an active participation on the part of the students: they contribute to interact with the other participants instead of reciting already memorized stretches. Indeed, as Dickson (1981) puts it:

> "*Learners say what they want to say and*
> *not what someone has told them to say;*"

ii- during the communicative transaction, both the learner's language fluency and knowledge of syntax are tested, although the emphasis is more on the former;

iii- the interaction involves, almost exclusively, the learners alone-the teacher is there to maintain a non intrusive role-this means an increase in individual student's speaking time;

iv- role players learn the interactive skills of arguing, informing, persuading, complaining, discussing, compromising...;

and v-   role play is a challenging activity: being a dynamic technique, it deals with constantly changing situations as each participant "shifts into" the discussion to add a new element.

This technique, does not contain only positive points; it also has some disadvantages.

i-   A persistently inarticulate and shy student who does not play his role/part appropriately destroys the whole framework, as there is not much interreliance.

and ii- the teacher is not there to serve as a guideline or example, but he can occasionally be one of the players.

Opting for role play means reexaming and perhaps revising one's style of teaching. The pedagogical implications of role play are not different from those of the other techniques already mentioned. It however suffices to recall that these considerations center around class organization.

4- Discussion

A discussion is a strategy for developing oral expression. For example, after the presentation of a short exposé, the class can resort to commenting on the subject, with learners expressing their view. The aim of a discussion therefore is to give and take opinion, to argue and share points of view. It is thus a learning experience which in itself helps in promoting the use of oral expression in a genuinely interactive situation.

The rationale behind a discussion is that when learners are presented with a relevant problematic situation as open-ended as possible, they interact orally in a collective effort to resolve the task. In a discussion, not only the ability to speak is fostered, but also the ability to listen and understand, to answer appropriately and intervene efficiently. A discussion class is intended to provide an open forum for learners to air their views orally about certain issues, to learn from others, to inform and be informed on certain matters of topical interest, professional, educational, social and otherwise.

We have to keep in mind that topics for discussion are not selected at random.

Some of the guidelines for selection include:

i-   relevance to the professional/educational and age group needs;

ii- specifying the educational level of the students and the level of expert

knowledge   required for students to feel comfortable with the topic;

and iii- the variety of sources of input materials, newspapers, radio, video-recording, or simply a text short enough to enable learners to concentrate on discussion.

The advantages of discussion are not different from those of the other techniques already discussed, but the following are worthy of a special note.

i-   Participants are engaged in interpreting utterances and responding appropriately on the spur of the moment;

ii- The learners initiate their own language and put it to communicative use without having to repeat pre-rehearsed stretches;

iii- There is a give and take of information to an extent that a great deal of information is available on the subject at the end of the session;

and iv- There is a scope for further communicative use of a discussion session as when a group leader is asked during a "report back" session to recapitulate the main trends of arguments that emerged, or give a summary of the proceedings of the last discussion class, or when a taped debate/ discussion is played back in a different class for listening commentary.

Discussion, nonetheless presents some disadvantages.

i- The technicality of some topics preferred by the students may be a handicap to the teacher, although some specialists can be invited to participate in such discussion.

and ii- There may be a tendency to "talk away" the time, with nothing effective added to the student's knowledge. In some discussion, there is a great difficulty in avoiding "yes/ no" and "I don't know" responses likely to close down the discussion. This disadvantage can be overcome by not considering discussion as time filler but as a session to be planned, with the students prepared in

advance. For debates, points for and against could first be done individually as a homework, and one of the students can act as a chairperson.

As a final word, it could be mentioned that discussion should lead to something else like oral reporting, essay writing, summary writing; it develops not only speaking fluency, but also its "associates": listening, comprehending, interpreting utterances, responding appropriately.

Conclusion

In this paper, four major techniques (group work, problem solving, role play and discussion) for developing oral proficiency have been appraised. Although their coverage is wide and interrelated, only their applicability in the language classroom has been considered. These techniques help in the mastery of the spoken language, be it the ability to present an impromptu talk, to converse, to discuss, to verbally reproduce the substance of a story heard or read. The applicability of these techniques together with the availability of appropriate teaching materials, the collaboration of colleagues, the attitude of the learners, term examinations and other constraints determine the possibility for adoption of these techniques as teaching methods in the Algerian situation.

Through the analysis of a teachers' questionnaire and a students' questionnaire, we noticed that the needs of the students of commerce vary in general, but the large majority, i.e. more than 60 percent expect, from the English course, to make them able to communicate in English orally, expressing a strong wish to have their lectures delivered only in English. For this reason we highlight the urgent need for an adequate E.S.P programme which will foster in our learners the ability to use English appropriately and naturally during their period of study and even during their job careers. The teachers' questionnaire has shown that there is a strong need to train teachers to teach E.S.P and set habits of working in collaboration with subject teachers so as to meet real needs of the students.

In order to motivate students to develop their oral skills, we believe that: Teachers can find and adopt more and more interesting, genuine and adequate methods of teaching the spoken language; they can try to apply these in the classroom, advocating authenticity of materials, relevance of situations in which speaking is an appropriate activity, cultural sensitivity, and other factors; they can make the learning environment as conducive to expression and language acquisition as possible. But the fact remains that our students are motivated mainly by the exams they have to pass and the marks, and their entire educational experience confirms that this attitude is the 'correct' one. Having identified the tests as the driving force behind learning for our students, there are good arguments for adjusting those tests to be more communicative and to incorporate evaluation of oral abilities

References

- Breen, M.P et al (1997), *Communicative Materials Design: Some Basic Principles* in practical papers in English Language Education vol 2 university of Lancaster.

- Brown, G. and Yule. G (1983), *Teaching the spoken Language.* C.U.P

- Dickson, L (1981), Have *you got Mr Bum the problems and solutions in the use of Games. Role play and Simulations* In ELT Journal vol xxxv N°4. July 1981.

- Mugglestone. P (1977), *Role Play E.L.T Documents.: Games, Simulations and Role playing.* London British council .English teaching information centre.

- Nunan. (1989), *Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom.* C.U.P.

- Revel, J (1979) Teaching *Techniques for Communicative English.* Macmilan.

- Robinson, P.C (1980), E.S.P/ The Current Position. Pergamon. (1981), Role playing and Class Particpations.E.L.T. Journal Vol 35, N° 4, July 81.

- Widdowson, H.G. (1983), *The Teaching of English through Science.* in J. Dakin, B. Tiffen.