| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Investigating the Learners' Communicative Skills in ESL Classes

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| ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the communicative skills of learners in ESL classes. English conversation plays a crucial role in understanding each other and dealing with different kinds of uncovered problems. This means that not only do the soldiers that I teach need English for communication abroad, but Czech teachers also need English to communicate with them. It is always valuable to have a chat with them and ask questions to make sure our judgement colleagues are native speakers. At my work, I have an opportunity to encounter people from various parts of the world, and I am very interested in the way they use English as their mother tongue. These co-workers have a greater supporting role in our teaching process and were right. Even if they come from America, England, or Australia, and their accents differ, it is just a question of time for teachers and students to adjust to their speech and distinguish differences in pronunciation. Being able to keep a fluent conversation with a native speaker is viewed as the main goal of my students, which underlines the importance of speaking skills from a student´s point of view. Therefore, in my thesis, I decided to concentrate on communicative activities that might be helpful for English teachers and enhance their students´ communicative skills. My thesis is divided into two parts – theoretical and practical. In the theoretical part, I deal with the difference between speaking and conversation and explain its practical use in everyday life. I also aim to highlight the importance of motivation in teaching practice and the techniques and approaches used to enhance students´ desire to speak a foreign language. While dealing with communicative activities, I focused on distinguishing them either as accuracy or fluency activities and provided definitions of these terms. The role of a teacher is also discussed, and useful ideas are suggested to make the speaking lesson as effective as possible. The practical part consists of a set of pre-taught communicative activities described minutely and their evaluation for other teachers who would like to apply them in their speaking lessons.

1. Introduction

At present, speaking a foreign language represents one of the essential requirements of today´s society. Besides other skills and knowledge, it is considered one of the most influencing factors while applying for a job or sustaining in a particular work position under the condition of advancing the language level. Based on my work experience, I can confirm that knowing a foreign language is a necessity for everyone in general, mainly for my students - soldiers. These people have relationships and take measures to solve various situations. The main reason is that they are required to reach a sufficient level in a foreign language in order to accomplish military assignments in missions abroad. Teaching foreign languages, mainly English, for these military purposes is provided by the Defense Language Institute in Vyškov, where I have been working as an English teacher for almost three years. My principal goal is to provide the soldiers with as efficient English lessons as possible because it will be them who will have to deal with international choosing this topic for my bachelor thesis was realizing how important speaking is in everyday situations.

No matter where we are, either in the Czech Republic or in a foreign country, English conversation plays a crucial role in understanding each other and dealing with different kinds of uncovered problems. This means that not only the soldiers that I

teach need English for communication abroad, but Czech teachers also need English to communicate with their colleagues, who are native speakers. At my work, I have an opportunity to encounter people from various parts of the world, and I am very interested in the way they use English as their mother tongue. These co-workers have a greater supporting role in our teaching process, and it is always valuable to chat with them and ask questions to make sure our judgement is right. Even if they come from America, England, or Australia, and their accents differ, it is just a question of time for teachers and students to adjust to their speech and distinguish differences in pronunciation.

As I mentioned above, giving speeches or presentations is not what we concentrate on in our lessons. Even though these are crucial prerequisites for later conversational practice, teachers tend to focus on communicative activities as the main goal of speaking lessons. I have no objection to this, but it is essential to mention the importance of presentations for military English learners working for the Ministry of Defense and the consequences of the lack of speaking skills while giving military presentations abroad. For this reason, it is very important for teachers to think through the purpose of speaking and communicative activities being prepared for lessons and also the target group of learners.

Mentions that being able to speak reasonably correct and even fluent English is one thing, but being able to engage in ongoing, interactive, mentally satisfying conversation is another. Conversation is such a natural part of our lives that many people are not conscious of what happens within it. However, conversation follows certain rules that should be obeyed in order for participants to feel relaxed and satisfied with it. Adds that the main purpose of conversation is the exchange of information among people. While communicating, our students may find themselves in different social situations playing various social roles, and the main task for language teachers is to prepare them for the real situations in which they might participate. This also includes leading students to develop the ability to initiate and sustain conversation whenever it occurs.

2. Literature Review
Every speaking lesson should be based on communicative activities that fulfill two important language learning needs. They encourage the learners to acquire language knowledge and prepare them for real-life language use. Achieving the outcome requires the participants to interact, which means not only speaking with a person but also listening to what he or she is saying and reacting to it.

2.1 Types of Communicative activités
Communicative activities are dealt with in a large number of methodology books, and their classification is distinguished according to each author´s point of view. However, all of them mention the same or similar communicative tasks but in different extent. Supported by a sufficient amount of literature, I created the following categorization of prevailing communicative activities.

2.2 Information gap activités:
Information gap activities are described by Thornbury (2008, 80-84), who claims that in these kinds of tasks, there is a knowledge gap among learners, and it can be bridged by using the language. So, in order to obtain the information, the interactants have to communicate. Littlewood (1994, 22-26) labels these activities as functional communication activities. He emphasizes sharing information among learners and processing it. The most common information gap activity is spotting the differences in the pictures, exchanging personal information, guessing games, and also creating a story based on flashcards shown to the students in random order for a few seconds and one flashcard per group only. This makes the students cooperate and communicate with each other to find the information they lack.

3. Discussions
Discussions are a commonly used activity in a speaking lesson. A topic is introduced to the students via a reading or a listening passage, and then they are asked to discuss a related topic in order to come up with a solution or a response. Celce-Murcia (2001, 106) mentions that students need to be reminded that each person within a group should have a specific responsibility in the discussion – either keeping time, taking notes, or reporting the results made by the group members.

3.1 Role Plays
A widely spread and one of the best communicative activities is role play, which trains the students in the classroom to deal with unpredictable real-life conversations in an English-speaking environment. Ladousse (1987, 6) points out the special reasons for using role play in the lessons. It puts students in situations in which they are required to use and develop language necessary for social relationships and helps them build up their social skills. Using role play is useful, especially when teaching shy students who have difficulty participating in conversations about themselves. Through this activity, they are put into various roles and no longer feel that their own personality is implicated. Role play is an essential communicative technique that develops fluency, promotes interaction in the classroom, and increases motivation.

3.2 Simulations
Simulation is a kind of role play, but the emphasis is put on creating the atmosphere of the real world. Students pretend they are part of a simulated environment and take part either as themselves or are given a role and pretend to be someone else. To achieve a suitable simulated environment, the classroom is usually rearranged and, where possible, converted into a required place according to the situation.

3.3 Guessing games
Guessing games can be used as free activities for revising vocabulary or as an interesting way to give quite controlled practice. Although they are called "games," they provide intensive language practice, especially in asking questions, so they should not be regarded as an extra activity. Students are fond of these guessing tasks mainly because they enjoy themselves without realizing they also practice and improve their speaking skills.

3.4 Importance of pair work and group work
Pair work and group work present ways of organizing the class while teaching speaking. The teacher´s responsibility is to choose a suitable communicative activity depending on what is going to be practiced – either fluency or accuracy – and organize the students into pairs or groups. In some activities, such as role plays and guessing games, pair work is essential. On the other hand, discussions and debates require group work and enable the students to express their opinions on a given topic within the group. After that, the spokesman of each group notifies the rest of the class about the conclusion they have reached. This may lead to a discussion among groups, and if the topic is amusing, the speaking lesson will seem to be enjoyable for both students and the teacher.

3.5 Advantages of pair and group work
There are many reasons for pair and group work to be used in the lessons. First of all, they provide the students with a lot more practice than working as a whole class. Students also feel more comfortable speaking to one or two people rather than the whole class and the teacher. Moreover, speaking to just a few people is closer to real-life situations. Pair and group work allows each student to work at the pace of his or her small group or pair. The teacher is no longer considered the only source of information, but the students learn from each other. This creates opportunities for learners´ knowledge to be shared. In order to be successful, learners need to become accustomed to using English without the teacher´s permanent support. Therefore, working in pairs or groups helps them to build up their independence and confidence for further conversations.

The advantages of pair and group work can be noticeable not only from the learner´s but also from the teacher's point of view. It provides the teacher with more time to work with weaker students and encourages them, by participating in a role play or discussion, to communicate. Teachers can also benefit from the great availableness of different communicative activities being offered in bookshops and on the internet nowadays. The variety of materials for pair or group work speaking practice is praised by most of them, and their use has proved to be very efficient for improving speaking skills.

3.6 Slight disadvantages of pair and group work
However efficient and useful pair and group work is, it may sometimes cause little problems while practicing speaking. According to Doff (1989, 141), noise is one of the obstacles teachers have to overcome during lessons. Usually, the students themselves are not disturbed by the noise; it is more noticeable when the teacher observes pairs or groups. However, the noise created by pair and group work demonstrates learners´ engagement in a speaking task and gives the teacher visual evidence of students´ involvement. Considering this, the success in working in pairs or groups depends mainly on the students´ and the teacher's approach.

Another fact Doff (1989, 141) mentions is the difficulty of controlling the whole class during a communicative activity. To stop the activity from getting out of control, it is important to give the students clear instructions, define the speaking task clearly, and set up a routine so that students accept the idea of working in pairs or groups and know exactly what to do.

3.7 The role of a teacher in communicative activities
The teacher is a facilitator of students´ learning, and as such, he has many roles to fulfill. Freeman (1986, 131) describes him as a manager of classroom activities. In this role, one of his major responsibilities is to set up activities that promote communication. During the communicative activities, he acts as a consultant, answering students´ questions, offering advice, and providing necessary language items. One of the most important roles is to make sure that students know what they are supposed to practice and check if they do it effectively. These roles are called a conductor and a monitor. Although there are a great number of various activities that may be used in speaking lessons, their use would be confusing and pointless if they were not logically organized. Being a good organizer should be an ability possessed by every skillful teacher. Considering the facts mentioned above, we can conclude that the teacher´s personality in a learning process is very important not only while participating in the activity but also

while monitoring the students. The teacher´s less dominant role in communicative activities offers the students the opportunity to be involved in conversation and improve their speaking skills to be able to cope with real-life situations.

4. My teaching Experience

As I already mentioned in the introduction, I have been working for the Military Language Institute in Vyškov, and my responsibility is to prepare our students – mainly military staff – for passing the military exams called Stanag. There are three different levels of students: pre-intermediate, intermediate, and upper intermediate. Although the goal of our language institute is the same as that of other educational organizations that provide language tuition, the learning system is completely different. To be more specific – being a class teacher does not necessarily mean spending most of the time in a particular class, but the teachers rotate in different classes, which means that their schedules are supposed to differ from week to week. Even though this procedure may be perceived as a disadvantage by many teachers, I find it very effective not only from the students but also from the teachers´ point of view. The advantages lie in having the opportunity for students to listen to various teachers´ accents and also experience different approaches to teaching. Teachers can also benefit from this procedure – being able to teach at diverse levels provides them with the advantage of miscellaneous work and enables them to avoid the routine typical of schools. Moreover, the number of students in each class is very convenient since there are no more than ten students and, as many teachers would probably agree, teaching in such a class is more efficient and enjoyable, and success in passing the exam is more foreseeable than in a class of fifteen or more students.

Even though I have experience with teaching all the levels mentioned, I decided to deal mainly with the intermediate level in the practical part of my thesis and focus on communicative activities that I have already practiced with my students. My aim is to describe the activities and evaluate their advantages and disadvantages, and this way, help the majority of teachers who are desperate to search for any communicative activities to encourage speaking and conversation in the class.

Communication Activities and their Evaluation
Told you so!
Level: intermediate, upper intermediate
Type of activity: information search role play (pair work)
Objective: to encourage fluent speaking - giving advice and opinions

The teacher is supposed to copy one „now "and one „one year later "role card for each student and a questionnaire per pair of students.

First, the teacher gives out the „now "role cards and asks the students to imagine they all work in the same place. It is a coffee break, and they all bring various bits of gossip. Students are asked to offer opinions to each other on what people should or should not do about their problems.

Then, the teacher seats the students in pairs and gives them a questionnaire to fill in together. They are supposed to discuss the problems, find solutions, and make predictions about what will probably happen. When they have finished, each student is given the appropriate „one year later "card and goes around with a „told you so "attitude, commenting on what people should have done. The aim of this activity is to discover how many of the students´ predictions were correct.

My evaluation of this activity:

I found this activity very effective because my objective was reached – I managed to encourage all the students to communicate with each other and share information, opinions, and advice. The topic could not have been chosen better since gossiping is part of everyday communication, especially in a working environment. I deal with adult learners who are quite „experienced "in this area, and speaking about different people´s problems and their solutions seems to be quite a common issue nowadays. Although this activity is slightly demanding on students´ understanding of the instructions, the teacher´s clear explanation would prevent possible misunderstanding. Teachers should never neglect to give clear instructions and demonstrate the task since these are essential for a successful communicative task. This activity is student-centered, so the teacher´s role is mainly to observe the whole class and have conversations. Even though I made many mistakes while circulating among students, I managed not to interrupt their enthusiastic conversation. Instead of interruption, which would have discouraged their motivation, I decided to take notes and write down the most common mistakes. As I have already noticed in my class, immediate error correction while listening to students´ conversations had no positive effect since the students were plunged into talking and did not pay attention to the teacher´s comments. The error correction was different while the students were working in pairs. I was walking around listening to the pairs and tried to alert the students every time I heard a mistake, and we made corrections together. This time, my role has

changed; instead of constantly observing without error correction, I concentrated on making students aware of their own mistakes. Due to working in pairs, they paid attention to clarifying mistakes.

After finishing the communicative activity, I wrote down all the mistakes I gathered from students on the board, and we discussed them with the whole class. All the students were taking notes about corrections very carefully, and after that, we practiced these in sentences. What is very important is reviewing the problematic structure again and again, keeping in mind that practice makes perfect. For that reason, at the beginning of each lesson, if possible, I focus on revising the items I have done with students in previous communicative activities to prevent the recurrence of mistakes that have already been explained.

My aim in this activity was to motivate the students to identify with a person on a given card and lead conversations with other colleagues about people´s problems. Students explained these problems, tried to find solutions, and made predictions about what was going to happen in a year's time. This fluency communicative activity induced my students to practice fluent speaking and also helped develop their imagination while giving advice and making predictions.

4.1 Debate on a given topic
Level: upper intermediate
Type of activity: a debate (groupwork)
Objective: to get the students involved in a debate on a given topic and practice exchanging opinions and supporting arguments for and against

Students form into groups: the first group supports the idea, and the second group gives reasons against it. Then, the teacher introduces the topic, which is the subject of debate – euthanasia, capital punishment, state or private education, etc. - and allows the students some time to think about it and make notes as a group, preparing arguments to „beat "the second group. When they are ready to start, the teacher pretends to be a moderator of a TV show and welcomes both teams to a discussion on a given topic. When the debate is over, the moderator thanks all of the presenters for their interesting remarks. A very important rule is that students are allowed to advocate only the opinion given to them by the teacher, even if their real thoughts are completely different.

4.2 My evaluation of this activity:
I must admit that this activity belongs to my favorite ones, and I practice it with my students whenever the time allows me to do so. The beginning of this activity is slightly embarrassing for everyone in the class because the students do not dare to be the first to express their opinions and are shy. However, once the activity has started and students manage to „fit in their roles, "the debate is developed into a lively discussion, and instead of being shy, students compete to have a word in it. The teacher has a fantastic role in this activity since he or she only observes a lively discussion and is entertained by the students´ excitement about it. I would recommend the teachers interested in this communicative activity reorganize the classroom, if possible, and arrange it as a TV studio with chairs for guests participating in a debate. To increase excitement, I would ask the students to vote for a moderator to be responsible for the smooth performance. In my personal experience, it is sometimes a very tough job, especially while trying to calm down some of the brisk guests.

Error correction is utterly undesirable in this case due to the kind of communicative activity. The debate is a precise example of an activity where the teacher is not expected to correct mistakes while the activity is in progress. His role is either to observe the show or to participate in it (as a moderator or one of the guests.). To fulfil the task does not mean for the students to speak correctly all the time but to lead a fluent, understandable, and reasonable discussion about a particular matter. On the one hand, no one is forced to speak, which may sound„ safe "for shy students, but on the other hand, any member of one group can be challenged by the other group to express his or her opinion. In this case, the student cannot remain silent but has to reveal his or her ideas. Therefore, the students are induced to be alert and listen to what is going on in a debate.

4.3 Life swap:
Level: intermediate
Type of activity: exchanging information (whole class)
Objective: to practice fluent talking about dissimilar lifestyles and habits

The teacher gives out the picture cards to the students and asks them to imagine they are the person pictured on the card. Sometimes, people are allowed to think about their lives, daily routines, work, family, etc. Then, the students are told to imagine that they are fed up with their lifestyle and would like to change it. Some time is provided to think about what they dislike and are really looking for in life. After that, the students are asked to go around the class and explain their problems to the others until they find someone with whom they would like to swap their lifestyle. The aim of this activity is to find a person willing to swap his lifestyle with someone else.

4.4 My evaluation of this activity:

This activity is an excellent preparation for the speaking part of the Satang exam because its main purpose is to talk about a person´s lifestyle - habits, daily routine, family, friends, etc. Even though the students are given picture cards and talk about different lifestyles, it encourages them to think and use a variety of vocabulary that is vital for everyday communication. Learning new vocabulary items connected with different lifestyles might be a great advantage in the real world while meeting people of various professions and customs. To make the students more enthusiastic about this activity, I would recommend using photos of world-famous celebrities instead of pictures of ordinary people. This may sound irrelevant; however, talking about celebrities´ lifestyles and scandals would definitely be more enjoyable, and it would lead to the involvement of all students. Even if some students have difficulties with speaking, the photos of celebrities could enable them to express themselves more easily due to the knowledge they already have about these personalities.

From a grammatical point of view, this activity enables a great deal of grammar practice, e.g., present, past, and future tense. Furthermore, it might be used while teaching comparative and superlative forms of adjectives and adverbs. While looking at the photo and describing their lifestyle, the students are encouraged to talk not only about the current situation in their lives but also about their past and challenges for the future. In addition to this, they may compare the advantages and disadvantages of various professions, lifestyles, and habits. At the end of this activity, the teacher may announce the competition and let the students vote on the most and the least tempting lifestyle.

4.5 Crossed lines:

Level: intermediate
Type of activity: information search (whole class)
Objective: to practice asking for information

The teacher is supposed to copy enough task sheets for half the class and information sheets for the rest of the class. Then, he or she places the chairs around the room in pairs back to back and asks the students to sit on them, holding different sheets. The aim of this activity is for students to use task sheets to complete their tasks in order. That means they have to phone the stationary students behind them, beginning the conversation with: „Hallo, is that the Gaumont Theatre?" If they get the right number, their reply will be: „Yes, can I help you ?" and they should ask for the information they need and write it down on the task sheet. If they get the wrong number, the reply: No, sorry. I am afraid you have got the wrong number. This is the station. "They should apologize and move on to another pair of chairs. Students are instructed to complete the tasks in order, so they are not allowed to make two consecutive phone calls from the same place.

4.6 My evaluation of this activity:

Being able to communicate face to face is undoubtedly perceived as a crucial form of conversation. However, living in a busy society requires the ability to make phone calls, considering all the rules essential for a successful and polite conversation. This activity enables the students to try out various situations while seeking information about entertainment, transport, health care, etc. They have the opportunity to call the dentist pretending they suffer from toothache and make an appointment, or call the railway station to find out the timetable, or call the theatre to book tickets for the performance, etc.

5. Conclusion

In my paper, I tried to deal with speaking as one of four basic skills and highlight its importance in everyday situations. My aim was to distinguish speaking and conversation since these terms are commonly used but often get mixed up. I pointed out that conversation plays a crucial role in our lives, and without it, we would not be able to exchange information and share our knowledge.

I also dealt with motivation as an essential factor for language learners and classified its types – extrinsic and intrinsic, with an emphasis on the teacher´s personality, which influences the students´ willingness to participate actively in the learning process. I mentioned native speakers as a great source for our teaching practice and described the ways they may encourage the students to carry on studying a foreign language. To feel confident while learning to speak a foreign language, the students are supposed to be put in a „safe environment. " This prevents them from embarrassment or anxiety when they are asked to express themselves. I tried to explain this term and suggested possible ways to decrease students´ concerns about speaking. Due to students´ different personalities and also abilities to speak a foreign language, I dealt with pair work and group work as ways of organizing the class. I mentioned the advantages of this kind of work, especially reducing tension in class, creating a pleasant atmosphere, and building up students´ independence and confidence. Pair work was evaluated as more useful since it is closer to real-life situations, and dealing with them is the main aim that the students are looking for. Another area I focused on was communicative activities and their categorization: information gap activities, discussions, role plays, simulations, and guessing games. I characterized them and evaluated the interaction they offer to prepare students for real-life language use. In connection with them, I dealt with the accuracy

and fluency of the terms and explained the importance of distinguishing them due to the teacher´s objective within the lesson. I introduced different techniques for correcting mistakes in either accuracy or fluency communicative activities and also described the roles of a teacher and the requirements that he or she has to fulfil to manage the roles successfully.

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