DEVELOPING COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN EFL SEMINARS

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Abstract. This paper will look at some methods of developing communication skills in EFL seminars. Knowledge of lexical forms plays only a small part in the global communicative process, while mastering pragmatic skills and a sharp situational awareness will enhance students' communicative competence.

Keywords: role-play, simulation, debate, communication skills, communicative competence.

In many situations, the focus of practice in the classroom is on writing and grammar exercises, with little to no speaking and or listening skills development. The grammar translation method sometimes prevails over the communicative approach, despite the fact that the focus needs to be on the practical mastery of speaking, listening, writing and reading skills. Teachers need to have techniques to make their classrooms dynamic language laboratories for the practice and improvement of those skills. These techniques are widely available and understood in the EFL world, though often not in state education systems. Teaching EFL is not always aimed at a specific audience with a talent for and a love of languages, or those who are smart enough and motivated enough to understand that knowing a second language well is a passport to good job prospects.

The process of learning is widely seen as a way to mentally transform representations of the surrounding world. In the 21st century under the pressure of cultural and economic globalization, norms that define social interaction, the cultural practices and values that influence social and educational settings are becoming more and more uncertain. Technology appears to have taken over much of the realm of education worldwide and various new applications and gadgets are becoming more and more popular in course and seminar rooms. On one hand, technological progress is inevitable and should help teachers and students alike in the acquisition of knowledge and skills, while on the other hand, the introduction of computers, tablets and other electronic devices creates challenges in the Romanian seminar rooms. This happens for a number of reasons. Students are sometimes better equipped with technology than the devices available for use at the university; even if they have the means to access a variety of resources, not all students have the same access to them; the process of introducing new technologies is slow and requires funding. Whereas students apply for university in the hope that they will improve their theoretical and practical knowledge in their field of professional interest, the extent to which Romanian universities are prepared to cater for their learning needs remains to be determined.

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Purpose of the study:

This study is a step in the process which aims at detemining how Romanian students perceive their learning environment and how they evaluate the outcomes of the educational process in the seminar rooms. Little research has been done in higher education classrooms so a first step that we propose to undertake is to use some research instruments in order to attempt a sketch at what the university learning environment is like. Both companies and employees have increasingly incorporated the use of technological devices in their professional lives. In order to ensure a smooth transition from the university into the labour market, students should become equipped with the skills in high demand on the market. IT skills are definitely among them. Instruments for use in small classes (up to 30 students) sometimes referred to as 'seminars' (Fraser & Treagust 1986; Fraser, Treagust & Dennis 1986) have been used extensively abroad and perhaps to a lesser extent in Romania.

Classroom environment:

At the end of the first year, students were asked to express their opinions and perceptions of the university learning environment with a focus on the seminars they took in the first year of study. The comments we briefly present here are referring to: power sharing; student interest-motivation; class organization. Power sharing is a sensitive issue especially in higher education. From the point of view of the professors it may imply that they will be willing to embrace the position of a cooperative learner, while from the students' perspective this might mean that they will be willing to assume a greater responsibility for their learning, becoming more proactive and determined to create their own learning strategies and pathways. Students might need to be(come) more willing to share their ideas and collaborate more with their peers in the learning process. As per the partial results interpreted by us, this sensitivity is quite obvious in our studied context, seeing as student perceptions indicate that (some) teachers do not pay attention to what the students are saying, they move around very little and students seldom present their work to the class. This may impact student interest-motivation as well. Many seminars were described as boring and students claim to have few opportunities to express their opinions. These findings are interesting and also seem to imply that there is little attention paid to learning expectations and goals to be achieved during the seminars. At the moment we are collecting data from a student interest survey that we carried out over the past month with volunteer students. We took this step in order to clarify in more depth how the organization of their learning environment, class organization in seminars influences learning outcomes and to what extent learning using modern technologies is a positive factor that enhances the quality of the teaching – learning process in university seminars. This is because we received feedback which brought to light the fact that students do not perceive classroom climate as supportive. By corroborating more findings we hope to identify the exact causes of this problem.

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Communication using modern technologies:

The exchange of information and its application to achieve common professional goals is one of the objectives of education. We tried to establish how students perceive the impact of modern technologies on the way they communicate with their peers, teachers, friends and families. An online questionnaire made available to students was used to explore into more depth students' views on the effects that gadgets may have on social interactions and communication. The responses provided, among others, the following pieces of information: students use the PC, the tablet, the smartphone, and laptop; all respondents stated that they have access to the internet, spending between 3-6 hours online on a daily basis; very few students reported using computers, tablets, and smartphones for educational purposes in the seminars. Here are some sample answers to the question: Are modern technologies useful for communication in the university seminar? Why?

It is easier and faster way to access ... information
Modern technologies are useful in university seminars because students understand better if they can also see the course on their laptop/tablet/etc rather than just follow the teachers as they explain.
Modern technologies are very useful in university seminars because the primary use of these gadgets is the easy transmission of a vast amount of information at a global scale. While in the past for any type of research the local library was the only choice, now the whole world has opened up for us, any kind of information we need, on any subject is just a few clicks away and in a manner which makes it attractive for the audience. On top of that seminars become much more interactive by means of powerpoint presentations, clips and other such materials which will spark the interest of students and also bring them closer to the core of the subject.

Developing communicative competence:

The process of creating a communicative syllabus design involves several stages which start from the learners and remain centred on their needs. Therefore an investigation of the learners' particular needs is necessary according to socio-cultural and stylistic variables (Munby: 1997). In addition, when considering the learning outcomes, the situational and contextual climate should be considered as well, seeing as the climate can become a motivational factor (Silvaș 2013:265).

The information we obtained via the feedack questionnaires clearly indicated a need for a more communicative approach during both courses and seminars, while the use of modern IT devices seems to be a ‚must'. Moreover, students appeared to be interested in improving their English: some of them have a job and are required to communicate with their customers in English therefore they are highly motivated; others would like to get a job that requires at least

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an intermediate level of English; many just love English and think it can be useful in the future while just a few are unaware of the advantages a foreign language can bring.

However, most students still seem to prefer a lot of teacher input as well as individual work from a coursebook as opposed to pair work or group work, which can explain their lack of communicative skills. This also led us to believe that although students are highly familiar with the new technology, they might not have frequently used it during their English classes in highschool.

These aspects alone are a reasoned basis for the subsequent process of syllabus design, material writing and classroom teaching (Hutchinson and Waters: 1987). Therefore, steps have been taken to improve the classroom environment and meet the students' needs and expectations. The teacher could come up with more interesting materials and activities to motivate the learners and show them that learning can be enjoyable. All classrooms should be provided with a video projector with direct access to the internet so showing videos from www.youtube.com, www.esl-lab.com, www.eslpod.com and other internet sites becomes quite appealing; also doing some grammar or vocabulary exercises online with the possibility to have the answers checked by the computer might seem more interesting. Moreover, students can access the sites at home and do the exercises again and again without having to use the rubber to erase the correct answer from the course book. Also, the cassette player for listening exercises can be replaced with computer based exercises from the internet. The listening activities provided on the internet are extremely valuable as they contain various accents (Chinese, Czech, etc.) that students will find very interesting and quite useful since in real life not everybody speaks English with British accent. Some exercices are designed especially for the purpose of teaching so they grade the difficulty level while others provide a rich source of authentic material, extremely useful to get a glimpse of the real world and really boost learners' confidence.

Students' communication strategies certainly need improving. Most students seem to do well in reading but have difficulties in speaking fluently and understanding various accents or speech rates. This gap between their passive and active abilities can be narrowed by means of communicative activities ranging from controlled dialogues to role-plays and simulations. Moreover, students will have to be exposed to various types of accents and normal speech rate. Listening exercises should not be seen as a competition but they should teach students how to listen to get the most of it. Pre-listening activities are welcome as they prepare students for what is to come. They can be in the form of vocabulary exercises, brainstorming activities or discussions.

The learners will work in pairs or in-groups with the teacher in the role of facilitator, monitoring the class and providing support where necessary while the learners are seen as interlocutors, giving as well as taking. They will need to be able to use the language appropriate to a given social context, when addressing certain people in a certain register, either orally or in writing. Although one of the course purposes is to activate students' passive knowledge of English, an integrated-skill approach would surely make the course more attractive. Therefore, the course participants will learn how to use the four-macro skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading,

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Writing) in activities passing from partially controlled to freer ones. Such an approach will help learners gradually become spontaneous and independent.
For specific and predictable situations learners will be taught formulaic language to use in dialogues (both orally and in writing). Mastering routines will give the learners the feeling of achievement and will definitely boost their confidence.

During the freer practice activities more than one skill is used and more than one function is practised. Furthermore, they resemble more real life situations than the partially controlled exercises. For instance, during a role-play learners may be required to assess and compare, to request information, to give advice or to agree/disagree. A step further is the use of simulations or debates. In such situations, learners need to relate to their existing experience. They will take this opportunity to show what they know. It will stimulate them and will help them cope with the unexpected.

Video-watching will be extremely stimulating, since there is more to it than just language: there is facial expression, body language, lots of background information that helps understanding the message. There are authentic materials to be found on the internet, interviews on the streets, documentaries, real-life situations that students can watch, analyse, process and later put to use. There are on-line dictionnaries offering abundant information, various contexts and extensive explanations for word acquisition. It is all there, ready to come to life at a click of a button. This will certainly increase learners' knowledge of specific vocabulary and develop their ability to understand spoken English. This communicative approach made more attractive by means of modern technology will encourage fluency and will eventually get the students to express themselves freely in specific situations.

Hopefully, the use of modern technology will have the expected effect, it will help the learning process by increasing students' motivation and eventually their language competence.

Conclusions:

The findings presented here represent some preliminary results that need to be studied in more depth. There is a widespread consensus on the important role that technology has to play in a shift in pedagogical emphasis. Students now often bring their own devices into the traditional learning environment, creating their personal networks and learning environments. They are closely familiar with how their devices work, using them to connect to, create and organise content. All of the aforementioned emphasize the need to further study this topic in order to make some plausible generalisations on this rather controversial topic: modern technologies might change power dynamics and influence class organization and the entire learning process.

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