THE ACQUISITION OF ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN AN ESP CLASS

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Abstract: The paper focuses on one of the language skills which are traditionally approached in the didactic process of foreign language teaching, namely speaking skills. The context for language acquisition via speaking skills is a Technical English class, in an attempt to highlight the particularities of the language teaching process from the perspective of ESP methodology. The theoretical part of the paper, focusing on specific didactic considerations on oral communication skills, is followed by a more practical approach suggesting possible activities practising speaking skills in a specific ESP class.

Keywords: oral communication, technical communication, methodology, English for specific purposes, language skills.

1. Context: practising speaking skills with engineering students

The present paper is intended to introduce the topic of oral communication in the context of a language class for engineering students. While engineering is traditionally a practical activity with an emphasis on doing rather than talking about what needs to be done, still, one cannot overemphasize the importance of oral communication in engineering activities. It is precisely the implied accuracy and the high degree of practical applicability specific of engineering which make oral communication so important in this field. Unlike more theoretical and abstract domains, where the spoken word can embrace more figurative meanings, in engineering, oral (and written) communication must preserve its profoundly concrete character of exchanging practical information in a correct and comprehensible manner.

The importance of practising oral skills in an ESP class also finds its motivation in a perceived sense of reluctance to speaking in public, explained both by the lack of sufficient practice in the current expression of the academic curriculum and by the students' preference

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of more practical exercises. Moreover, when the language is not the native one, but English, the situation becomes even more complicated due to the difficulties related to linguistic acquisition. However, the specifics of a future engineering career inevitably imply consistent and complex use of speaking skills, including speaking in a foreign language. The globalization of business practices doubled by a reevaluation of the engineering profession's specific features – with greater emphasis laid on communication and intrapersonal skills has naturally led to a reconfiguration of the role of linguistic preparation in a specific EFL class.
In the present study we aim to provide a theoretical background to the concept of oral communication, to present an overview of speaking skills as one of the traditional linguistic skills envisaged during the language acquisition process and to highlight the peculiarities of the practice of speaking skills in a technical academic context.

The role of an engineer in nowadays world has changed dramatically in recent times. The traditional stereotype of the professional working in a factory, surrounded by equipment and / or coordinating working teams is now profoundly affected by the new conditions triggered by technological development. The globalized world in which we live, the fast interchange of business practices and the dissemination of technological advancements at an unprecedented speed have led to a reconfiguration of the skills which a competitive engineer must possess. An engineer's work is now highly depended on his/her ability to stay connected with the latest developments in their field, an ability which is conditioned by proficient communication skills. This is doubled by an increasingly competitive market where the most successful candidates are efficient communicators – both in their native language and in at least another widely spoken one. The ability to speak is now one the top qualities that employers are seeing in their future employees, as a recognition of the importance of good communication skills in a working environment.

The increasingly important role played by oral communication skills as a factor boosting a candidate's chances of finding a good job is acknowledged and explained in scientific research. Kakepoto (2012) uses the terms soft skills, generic skills or employability skills in an analysis and explanation of the importance of oral skills for the engineering profession. Engineers who combine their professional expertise with the ability to express themselves efficiently increase their chances to have good professional results and to develop and maintain good team-working abilities, which is a source of added value for any organization. The idea of 'successful candidate' has changed so much that employers are

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currently looking for good communicators who, through their skills, are likely to boost the profit of the company.

Among the situations requiring communication skills in an engineering profession, the most notable would be the discussion, the oral presentation, the participation in meetings, in negotiations, the instructions, the conversation on the phone and other similar communication media.

Engineering students are also required to make proof of their oral communication skills in a variety of circumstances. Among these, the most relevant are: the oral responses during seminars, courses and laboratory works, oral projects, presentations, participations in students' conferences, oral presentation of reports, of practical activities, oral exams and colloquia, final defenses of their graduation papers. Moreover, one of the most important circumstances when they need to display proficient oral skills and sufficient practice of oral communication is the job interview.

2. Speaking skills: a theoretical approach

Many specialists in linguistics and methodology regard speaking as the main criterion by which a person's knowledge of a language may be measured. Thus, "the claim She knows Italian does not entail the statement She speaks Italian" (Thornbury 2005), in a reflection which emphasizes the highly pragmatic aspect of the speaking skill for a person's linguistic profile. This is even more so in the case of an ESP class, where students' professional needs imply very clearly defined linguistic goals when it comes to the practice of their speaking abilities.

Speaking is definitely the most complex skill to be acquired by language learners, although it is among the first in the order of students' exposure to them. What makes the practice of speaking a complex issue is the complexity of factors which go into the accurate production of meaningful acts of speech: one must master pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, register, functions, elements of cohesion and coherence. If we were to give a more formal definition of speaking, a good illustration would be the one suggested by Chaney, according to whom speaking is "the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts" (Chaney, 1998). This definition is relevant when speaking productions are envisaged in an ESP class, where context and symbols are particularly important. The context refers to the students' particular needs, which require an adjustment of both techniques and materials to be used during the teaching process.

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The main challenge faced by a language instructor in an ESP class in terms of speaking skills practice is twofold. On the one hand, the instructor needs to create and maintain students' motivation to exercise their speaking skills. To do that, he/she must create interesting context for the spoken production, which should determine students to become involved. Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation must be the teacher's objective. The extrinsic motivation is obviously achieved by the external factors which make the practice of language skills important, such as the perspective of improving general communication skills, that of a good academic result and, in the long run, the perspective of obtaining a good job. The intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, should be of utmost concern for the teacher insofar as the wise selection of the subjects for the speaking activities should reflect students' personal interests and curiosities, thus enhancing their desire to speak.

The second challenge that the teacher must tackle is that of constant practice. Unless speaking is present in every lesson, it is difficult for students to make progress. Speaking must be part of each class, in an integrated approach combining spoken production with the practice of the other skills. All basic language skills can be combined with speaking and this combination of skills should be a priority in each teacher's didactic approach. The main advantage of this type of lesson in which speaking practice is combined with other traditional skills is that it creates natural language acts in the same way they happen in reality. This helps students conceptualize language in its pragmatic sense and motivates them to rehearse and freely use natural structures of the foreign language.

Dudley-Evans and Johns (1998:96) identified the main objectives of an instructor in a reading class. Among these, many may be achieved by practicing speaking skills. Some of such objectives are: identifying organizational pattern (orally, in group work / pair work / class discussion), understanding relations within a sentence and between sentences (orally, using question-answer techniques), using cohesive and discourse markers (orally, Q-A techniques, group work / pair work / class discussion); predicting, inferring, guessing (oral discussion, group work, / pair work); identifying main ideas, supporting ideas and examples (Q-A techniques, group work / pair work / class discussion); processing and evaluating the information during reading (various oral techniques including presentations, dialogues, pair work, Q-A techniques, group work / class discussion); transferring or using the information after reading (various oral techniques including presentations, dialogues, pair work, Q-A techniques, group work / class discussion). It is the instructor's responsibility to make efficient use of reading skills in combination with supporting oral skill practice.

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Listening, another traditional language skill, is closely linked to speaking. Real speaking acts involve imply spoken productions followed by active listening and a continuous reversal of the roles. The same communication model should be applied in ESP classes. When the main objective of an ESP class is focused on listening skills, students may still practise speaking skills in a series of pre- and after-listening activities: students can predict the content of the listening text, they can guess meaning from miming words and expressions or through other word-guessing games, they can construct semantic webs and explain them orally, they can answer multiple-choice or true/false questions to show comprehension of messages, they can collaborate in jigsaw listening activities (different groups of students listen to different but connected passages and then the groups exchange information in order to complete a technical text), they can continue the listening task with a group / pair work activity debating the situation contained in the listening task or finding possible solutions to problems presented in the speaking materials etc.

The writing skill in an ESP class is different from a general English language class insofar as the objectives of practising writing skills are specific and clearly defined. Integrating speaking skills in an ESP writing class is possibly the hardest task of the instructor, as the types of texts that students must be able to produce are specific: operating instructions, technical reports, manuals, product specifications, web content. Speaking may be used in activities preceding the actual writing, described by Dudley-Evans and Johns (1998:117) as the "thinking stage" in which students identify the rhetorical problem, plan a solution or a series of solutions to the problem and reach an appropriate conclusion. The traditional stages of the "thinking stage": generating ideas, selecting ideas, grouping ideas and ordering ideas can be achieved by implementing oral activities (group work and pair work). Another possible inclusion of speaking in classes where the focus is essentially on writing is by an activity known as dictogloss, in which students can transmit some kind of technical information in an oral form at a normal speed, while the other students make notes. After the speeches, the students attempt to recreate the original information in a given written format.

3. Speaking skills: practical examples

In this chapter, we will suggest three possible activities involving speaking skill together with the practice of other skills or specific language structures. They are all examples of how speaking may be used in relation with specific language purposes such as the acquisition of specialized technical vocabulary or of grammar structures in the context of an

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ESP class. All of the activities below have been practised in real ESP classes for engineering students.

Activity 1: What is it?

Type of activity: speaking

Aim(s):

- to rehearse specific technical vocabulary;
- to rehearse functions of technical objects / processes;
- to increase students' motivation to speak.

Procedure: one student goes in front of the class and faces his/her colleagues. The instructor writes on the board a word / phrase that he/she wants students to remember and rehearse. The student asks his/her colleagues only YES/NO questions until he finds out the word written on the board by the teacher. Possible words in an electrical engineering class: insulator, renewable energy, solar energy, power station, voltage, ammeter, differential, programming language, circuit breaker, fuse, torque, transistor etc. As a variation, students in the class may give hints until the selected student guesses the word (E.g.: "It's a material". "It does not allow electric current to flow". "Is it an insulator?" "Yes, it is").

Activity 2: Re-create the scheme!

Type of activity: speaking, describing visuals

Aim(s):

- to practise giving / understanding instructions;
- to use technical vocabulary in context;
- to describing visuals, to use Q/A techniques in a situational context in order to check understanding;
- to re-create a technical description following oral input.

Procedure: The students are grouped in pairs. Student A has a handout containing the schematic representation of the process of energy production from coal. The representation can be seen in figure 1 below. Student A describes the content of the image as clearly as possible to student B, who tries to re-create the image based on the oral description which he hears. After student B finishes, the two students compare the original representation with the re-created one and correct possible differences.

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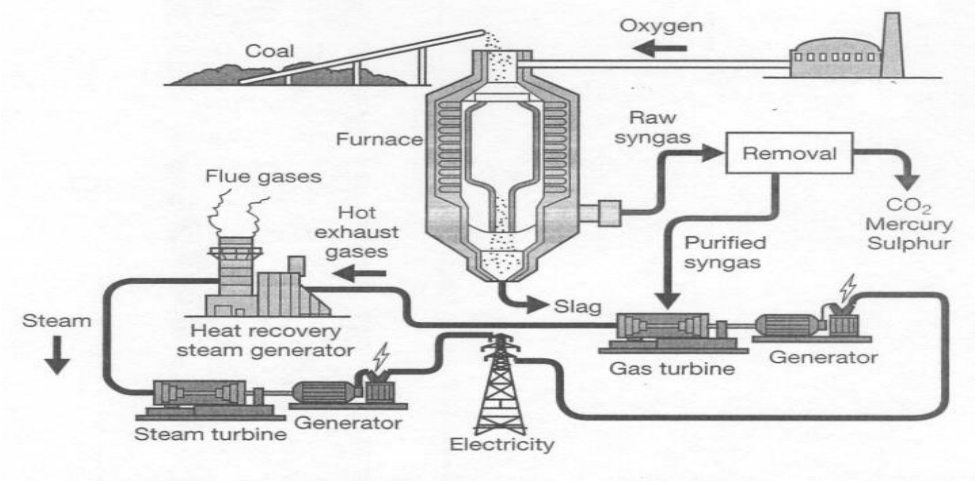


Fig.1 Producing energy from coal (Source: Improve your IELTS Writing Skills)

Activity 3: True or false?

Type of activity: speaking, writing

Aim(s):

- to use accurate language hypothesizing with regard to a variety of technical issues;
- to express and sustain opinion, to explain points of view and bring counterarguments;
- to practise expressing modality: present and past possibility and impossibility: may, may have, can't, can't have.

Procedure: The instructor either writes on the board or projects on a screen a list of controversial beliefs related to technology. Students are given some time to read the list and decide whether they consider the statements are true or false. They must also give arguments pro or against each statement and be prepared to defend their opinion in group / class discussion.

Possible examples of statements:

1. Fully draining the battery on your smartphone or laptop helps condition it.
2. Placing a magnet near a computer can erase data.
3. Password-protected wi-fi is safe.
4. Cellphones can cause cancer.
5. Laptops on your laps can make you sterile.
6. A camera with more megapixels is better.
7. Closing smartphone applications saves you power.
8. The government can track your cellphone even when it's off.
9. In 2014, over 300 hours of video were uploaded to Youtube every minute.

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10. Every two days we create as much information as we did from the beginning of time until 2003.

According to the class level, the instructor may decide to remind useful language used to express opinions, sustain arguments and give counter-arguments. Although the main objective is to get students to speak about technological aspects with which they are familiarized, after encouraging all students to express and defend opinions, it would be useful to provide them with the scientific truth, because engineering students appreciate certain facts.

Conclusions

Developing speaking skills in an ESP class is one of the most important tasks faced by the language instructors, due to the importance of fluent and accurate spoken production both as a professional goal and in the context of the general language acquisition process. The language instructor's role is that of creating and maintaining motivation by a careful selection of speaking topics and by integrating speaking skills in a wide variety of activities. The combination of oral activities with other aspects of language (e.g. the other skills) will ensure students' consistent exposure to speaking situations, which may be a guarantee of their future professional success.

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