DEVELOPING ORAL SKILLS IN ESP CLASSES: FROM CONTROLLED ACTIVITIES TO FREE COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

The present paper contains a theoretical illustration of the main characteristics of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) with regard to its treatment of speaking skills and implicitly of students' communicative abilities. Given the fact that students' communicative competence in a work-related context is the ultimate goal of ESP, it is important to define the theoretical background which leads to the appropriate choice of methodological tools and practical activities to be implemented for the successful acquisition of speaking skills. Starting from controlled writing activities to guided writing until the highest objective of free communication activities, it is the teacher's role to design suitable, well-adjusted speaking tasks which should motivate students to communicate efficiently.

Keywords: ESP, teaching methodology, communicative competence, oral skills, language teaching objectives.

The nature of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) presupposes a general objective derived from that of the field of activity in which students function / are going to function upon course completion. This general objective is students' ability to perform adequately in a specific professional surrounding from a linguistic perspective. This involves not only a good knowledge of technical vocabulary, but also the development of fluent communication skills which will enable students to be adequately conversant in a wide range of professional communicative situations.

ESP is seen by language specialists as "an approach, not as a product" (Hutchinson and Waters 1987: 19), while Day and Krzanowski argue that "ESP involves teaching and learning specific skills and language needed by particular learners for a particular purpose" (2011:5).

Given these premises, the language instructor's duty is to adjust both course syllabus and the treatment of the input material in such a way that students may have an abundance of opportunity to practise language in a communicative way. The "communication environment" (Raman and Sharma 2015: 3) is significant in this respect, as it is the specific feature of the specialized discourse which dictates the instructor's choice of methods and his/her choices of syllabus themes. Also, as Finocchiaro and Brumfit state, "communicative competence is the desired goal" of any language learning class, including the ESP context with its individualizing features (1983:72).

Speaking ability is generally regarded as the measure of knowing a language, both in terms of general language and when referring to ESP competence. Thus, as Thornbury (2005: iv) said "the claim S*he knows Italian* does not entail the statement *She speaks Italian*", knowing the vocabulary and the grammar of a language does not imply speaking abilities. These skills, which are the major objective of modern English language teaching (ELT) methodologies, are part of more complex skills generally defined as communicative

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competences. While this communicative competence is based on speaking skills (in its general and most common assumption, without any attempt to undermine the importance of written communication), the development of communicative competence in EFL / ESP students is a more complex task which the language instructor must take on.

There is definitely a lot more to speaking than the ability to form grammatically correct sentences and pronounce them. Moreover, speaking is interactive and requires the ability to co-operate in the management of speaking turns. It also often takes place in real time, with little time to prepare. In such context the speaker must have the capacity to organize and assemble a range of memorized lexical chunks for obtaining spoken fluency. The nature of the speaking process means that the grammar of spoken language differs in a number of significant ways from the grammar of written language. Apart from these general considerations which are applied to all conversational contexts, the ESP class requires an extra ingredient: the ability to use the professional input (technical texts, realia, audio materials, specific visual input etc) as basis of the communicative activity.

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: 13). Speaking is a crucial part of second language learning and teaching and even more so in the case of ESP. Most of the researchers agree that the best way in which students learn speaking skills is through "interacting". Teachers should try to use "real" situations that require communication and collaboration between students. This is one the most significant tasks of the language instructors: to create meaningful activities in which students can imitate real-life situations which they will encounter in their professional activity.

It is very important for an ESP student to have the motivation to participate in the conversation. For this to be achieved, the teacher must search for interesting texts and topics and create attractive activities that should be relevant for the student's professional background. A well organized situational context and a communicative purpose activate the learner's own knowledge and experience, develop their motivation and ease the learning process. The teacher's ability to persuade production of language greatly depends on his/ her talent and inventiveness in devising challenging communicative tasks.

Apart from the above-mentioned factors which influence the success of oral skill acquisition in the ESP class, the language instructor should also consider another specific feature of this approach to language teaching. If the general practice of language teaching pays equal importance to the categories of accuracy and fluency when assessing oral skills, in ESP the focus is definitely on the latter aspect. While not neglecting the importance of producing grammatically and lexically correct language structures, what matters most for ESP educational contexts is the easiness of sending and decoding the communication message. This comes from the specifics of the general objective of ESP, which is the pragmatic and efficient use of the language in real work-related situations. Fluency is therefore what is expected as a concrete result of speaking activities. Fluent conversation implies students' ability to get the message across with whatever resources and abilities they have, regardless possible language mistakes. Normally, students should not be corrected

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during fluency activities. However, when the feedback is given, the teacher should comment favorably on the strategies students used to increase the fluency.

Speaking practice in the ESP class cannot be implemented successfully without taking into account a series of factors. To start with, ESP classes tend to be quite heterogeneous in terms of language level, due to the fact that the selection criteria are not language-based, but depend on the students' educational profile and professional interests. The speaking practice must be taken gradually and taking into account students' language level. Learners with a lower level of English must be helped to produce simple messages by following a model or a pattern. For gaining their independence in speaking the teacher must guide them from controlled activities, from guided activities to free production language. At the beginning, the students' language is largely imitative: they repeat the model given by the teacher or the textbook and build up some simple sentences and using them they build up simple texts. As the range of technical vocabulary increases, the teacher helps them to build longer and more complex sentences and texts and allows them a certain amount of freedom. Using all kinds of aids (pictures, diagrams, tables, charts, etc) the teacher guides them and encourages them to participate actively in such way that when they advance they will be able to produce language with only a slight guidance by the teacher.

ESP language instructors should adjust speaking activities so that students in the early stages of language learning should have a chance to practise simple structures and exercise basic technical vocabulary and language functions. **Controlled speaking** activities refer to such tasks which are custom-made by the teacher to suit both students' language level and their communicative needs.

Beginner ESP students lack sufficient language exposure and do not have the required skills to produce messages on their own, so the teacher's main aim is to introduce specific vocabulary and develop basic language skills. At his learning stage, the students need models for their own language and they rely largely on the text and on the teacher. Consequently, the initial stage in language acquisition is basically imitative: the students listen to the teacher and repeat the words and the structures, or read aloud input material provided by the teacher. A successful method is the resort to building speaking activities based on language functions rather than extensive vocabulary. Learning unknown technical vocabulary to be applied in speaking activities is a tedious task which many students find useless and boring; the teacher can change this by focusing basic speaking tasks around the practice of language functions. Typical language functions which students can use even at early stages of language learning include: giving simple instructions, describing and defining objects, mechanisms, materials, properties, phenomena, asking for information, asking basic questions, expressing likes / dislikes, expressing cause and effect, agreeing / disagreeing etc.

When teaching speaking to lower level ESP students, it is really challenging for teachers to find suitable input material given the fact that the level of technical discourse texts is usually quite high. The teacher can adjust the input material, rearrange and restructure it – for example, in the form of dialogues which students can act out or

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reproduce. Dialogues simulate the most representative real-world linguistic exchange: face-to-face conversation. Such activities have the advantage of providing basic technical / special vocabulary in real-world situations. When reading a dialogue, the teacher may ask students to read them in a dramatized way. The dramatized reading takes students on the roles provided by the text and imitates the real-world interaction. Later on the students can change the dialogue and approach more complex communicative situations, for example discussing about the professional situation identified in the dialogue, communicating their own needs and ideas, tasks which the students carry out using language which they have been taught.

Generally, the lower the level of the ESP students the more controlled and guided practice the teacher will do. However, even the advanced students often welcome the chance to practice new vocabulary and grammar structures, expressions and model sentences in the classroom before using them in real-life.

Simulation is even closer to real-world interaction, as the students no longer read the text, but repeat it from memory, and they may also be allowed to make changes, according to their own knowledge of the subject. This is a good opportunity to revise technical / specific knowledge of the students' profile.

Guided speaking activities are different from controlled activities in the way that with guided activities learners no longer imitate, but they produce texts similar to those in the initial input with the use of a different material. In order to meet the objectives of preparing students to be fluent in an English-speaking professional surrounding, the language instructor must make sure that the input of the speaking activities is but a starting point, a pretext to motivate students to talk. The real objective is to go beyond this input, in an initially controlled, then freer manner, so that students should imitate real-life professional situations as much as possible. Conversation means interaction, production of messages, transfer of information and negotiation of meaning, so that the teacher must introduce the students to real life creative conversations as soon as possible, students must engage themselves in creative conversation practice. For this to be achieved the classroom activities should be active and interactive, oriented towards the productive language.

The question-answer exchange is the most common type of guided conversation, usually related to the text studied. The teacher guides the conversation through questions and involves the students in producing language. 'Real life' topic texts link the students' professional interest with the new material and motivate them to participate. Such topics activate the learners' prior knowledge of the subject and thus ensure concrete support for language production. The techniques of formulating questions might vary from very simple ones, the "yes/no" type (e.g.: "Is the source of renewable energy described in the text efficient?") to more complex specific questions ("Why is wind energy considered to be an alternative to traditionally produced electricity?") and also questions which activate students' knowledge without referring directly to the input provided ("How do you think energy production facilities will change in the coming years?").

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Teachers must motivate the students to speak by involving them into real, authentic subjects inspired from their professional background. Producing longer stretches of language may seem more difficult than sharing and negotiating information. Without the support of the interlocutor's questions the speaker will soon run out of things to say.

Another guided practice activity is the exposition. This kind of activity relies on other types of props such as: figures, graphs, pictures, sketches, diagrams, technical drawings, etc. anything that can facilitate language production. Students are encouraged to use the information in these props to produce their own sentences. For example, students may be asked to analyze a graph, extract the main information they can find and present the findings orally by comparing trends, figures, predicting future trends etc.

The advantage of using guided practice when reinforcing speaking skills to ESP students is that through teacher modelling, collaborative practice and individual application the learning and the cognitive load is shifted to students. Sometimes the release of responsibility happens instantly when students are asked to make use of prior knowledge after few or no modelling.

A specialized text can be used in various ways to achieve effective communication and provide opportunities to practice speaking. If, for example, the teacher uses as input a list of instructions for a specific operating procedure, the activities may follow this sequence: the students take notes based on the tips given by the teacher. Then they are asked questions about the instructions referring back to their notes. The teacher allows students to answer the questions independently or in small groups. This example provides little to no practice for students before moving to independent practice. An example of independent practice based on the example above would be for students to prepare a speech in which they should present the specifics of various operations to newly hired employees. Alternatively, they may be asked to explain the consequences of not following the procedures described in the initial input.

Another example is the narrative exposition. A succession of pictures of people performing various stages of a working procedure is exhibited while the students are asked to rearrange the correct order of the operation. Such activities are efficient, as they develop simultaneously several language skills: paraphrasing, summarising, organizing the material, etc. Through these activities, students must understand that fluency of speech, stress and information, gesture, mimicry and body language carry great weight and that they must pay attention to their non-linguistic behaviour, too.

Free communication is the most advanced stage of speaking and the ultimate objective of communicative activities implemented in the ESP class. At this stage of language learning, activities are usually designed to give either creative practice opportunities for predicted language items, or general fluency practice, where the specific language focus is less relevant.

The objective of guided activities was for the students to become less dependent on models and support and begin to produce language freely and creatively. Free communication activities give students the opportunity to experiment, to see how far they can communicate in different contextual, work-related situations, to practise the fluent use of language they

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know. This kind of activities will increase the students' motivation, since the student talk for themselves, and help bridge the gap between the controlled language practice from the classroom and the professional context in which they will deploy their activity.

One way of ensuring effective free communication is by selecting the appropriate types of interaction. The use of collaborative tasks, the encouragement of cooperation and group work should be one defining principle of ESP speaking activities, given the fact that real communicative situations at the workplace, in any professional background, are essentially collaborative tasks. With the help of efficient group work, teachers must train the students to function as teams: students who manifest independence and creativity should help, advise and provide support for those who still need to be guided. Such group work activities are beneficial for both categories of students: those that can give support and are good in producing language and those who need support.

In the case of free communication activities, the teacher's role is that of organizer (he/she is the one who designs the activity), of prompter (pushing students forward, suggesting things they might say next and helping them out of difficulties), of participant (the teacher's active presence is a motivating factor for students).

To reach the communicative purposes of the ESP class, the teacher must devise complex activities that should involve students intellectually as well as emotionally. The language instructor has a variety of techniques he/she may implement and successfully meet the proposed goals. Such activities which represent free communicative practice and can be implemented especially at upper intermediate, advanced and proficiency levels are discussions based on specific work-related topics. A variation of this activity is the debate where students can give their opinion on specific professional matters. One common method of organizing such activities implies splitting students into two groups, each assigned with specific tasks: one group will think in favour of the topic, giving as many arguments as possible while the other group will bring negative arguments on the topic. Apart from improving the students' linguistic proficiency and enhancing their language skills, such discussions also aim to increase students' analytic power.

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