DEVELOPING ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN THE TEFL CLASSROOM

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Abstract:
The present paper examines the main principles governing the development of speaking skills in learners of English at all levels, through the optic of the Communicative Approach. Dwelling on the importance of teacher and student attitudes towards classroom communication, of ensuring an adequate class atmosphere and context for meaningful communication, the present author goes on to discuss the most relevant and productive fluency-building activities and techniques meant to train students for meaningful self-expression and communication.

Keywords:
Speaking skills, fluency, appropriacy, free practice, communication.

Speaking and writing skills belong to the category of productive skills, as they require learners to produce language input, oral or written. Of course, we can talk about learner language production only with reference to free practice, communicative activities, based entirely or at least to a large extent on student input.

Needless to say, productive skills are more difficult to develop than comprehension skills, and require more time and effort on the part of both teacher and learners. With speaking and writing, progress is often slow and not so readily evident or so accurately measurable. Building fluency takes time and requires patience, sustained effort, plenty of confidence-building activities, as well as constant encouragement and positive feedback from the teacher.

As in the other areas of language and skills practice, speaking practice includes controlled, semi-controlled and free practice activities, in which teacher or student control over language depends on language proficiency level, activity focus and type (accuracy/fluency). As various types of more or less controlled speaking activities have already been illustrated in the

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previous chapters, this chapter will focus on free speaking, interactive, fluency building activities, aimed at developing oral communication skills.

A balanced general English course should include activities illustrating the **variety of text types** found in everyday communication, which can be categorised as follows:

a) Social/Personal: Small talk and social chat; Personal conversation; Anecdotes and jokes

b) Everyday transactional/informational: Service encounters (shop, bank, healthcare); Transactional conversations (instructions, explanations, directions, descriptions, arrangements); Discussions (planning and problem-solving); Meetings

c) Educational/Professional/Specialised: Lessons; Lectures and seminars; Reports and presentations; Speeches; Interviews and consultations; Discussions and debates; Plays and sk etches

A well-balanced speaking programme should include all activities from sections **a**, **b**, though some text types in section **c** can very well be used for free speaking activities.

1. MAIN PRINCIPLES IN SETTING UP FREE-SPEAKING ACTIVITIES

a) Motivation

Raising motivation is essential for the success of a speaking activity. This can be realised through selecting interesting topics, suited for the students' age and interests. The students also need to be **warmed-up to the topic** by lead-in questions, examples and queries which help generate interest. We should also give the activity a clear purpose, which can be created by giving the students a task to solve, involving a clear outcome, result, solution or agreement which they are supposed to reach at the end of the activity.

b) Class layout and seating arrangements

We should make sure that the class layout is suitable for the activity. Appropriate seating arrangements will be made for group-work (problem solving), pair-work (face to face for information gap/back to back for phone conversations) or whole class discussion (circle).

c) Planning

The procedure and organisation for the activity should be carefully thought out by the teacher before class: activity sequence and timing, necessary materials (visuals, hand-outs, crayons, poster sheets, etc.).

d) Preparation time

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In order to help the students perform the activity in good conditions, we should allow them enough time for preparation – brainstorming, working out ideas and opinions, thinking about useful language. Many activities are unsuccessful because the students are not given time to think things through. Group-work activities, in particular, require adequate preparation for the task.

e) Useful structures and vocabulary

The teacher has to make sure that the students are equipped with the appropriate structures and vocabulary they need to use. We should check/revise/pre-teach any useful vocabulary or structures we think necessary.

f) Clear instructions and demonstration

We should always make sure that the students have understood our instructions and know exactly what to do. To this effect, we can ask a student to repeat the instructions. Better still, we should give a short demonstration of what they have to do or what language to use during the activity.

g) Timing

We should not let the activity go on for too long, so that students will not be left to linger unnecessarily, lose interest or even switch off. We should also leave sufficient time for reporting, feedback and correction.

h) Correction

During pair-work or group-work speaking activities, the teacher should try to keep a low profile and not interrupt students or interfere with their work unless something goes wrong or communication breaks down. The best way of dealing with errors occurring during a speaking activity is **delayed correction**, i. e. after the activity – we can take notes of any language or interaction mistakes we hear and bring them to the students' attention at the end.

i) Integration with other skills

Speaking activities can and should always be integrated with other skills. They are often used as part of a listening, reading or writing sequence, or as free language practice for reinforcing grammar or vocabulary. A speaking activity should be used as a lead-in to more discussion or to a writing/reading/listening task.

2. COMMUNICATIVE SPEAKING ACTIVITIES

Communicative activities for free oral practice commonly presuppose **pair-work and group-work**. In order to motivate students to work together in pairs/groups, the activities have to be **task-based** – if students know what they have to achieve, they will have a **purpose** to work towards, i. e. solving the task. Basically, the most common communicative activities are of four main types – **Information Gap, Guessing games, Problem Solving** and

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Role Play – but the range is in fact much wider, with mixed kinds of tasks. The most productive speaking activities for free oral communication are described below.

2.1. INFORMATION GAP ACTIVITIES (Info-gap)

Usually suitable for pair work, but also for group work, these activities are based on an information gap, i. e. the students have different information which they have to share in order to fulfil the given task. In other words, the need to exchange information provides the need to communicate, usually by means of question and answer patterns of interaction. In an information gap activity, each student working in a pair (A and B) is given a hand-out containing information his/her partner does not have. The task varies depending on the language or topic focus of the activity. Most often, they have to exchange information in order to reach a decision, an agreement, a conclusion, a certain result (filling in a chart) or to create something (a map, a drawing, a description, an object/handicraft item). As they are not supposed to see each other's information, the best seating arrangement for the pair is face-to-face. Possible tasks may include:

- **Agreeing on a common plan/action.**

Students are asked to agree on a time to meet, a place to go together, a course of action to take or choice to make, by working with hand-outs containing different information.

- **Achieving a result**

The hand-outs may also contain incomplete texts, tables, diagrams, or pictures, so students have to exchange information by asking and answering questions, as they depend on which other to complete their items.

a) Pictures with differences

The students are given quite similar pictures containing a number of differences (number/colour of objects, different people/animals/furniture/ street /position in space). They are told there are 10 differences, for example. To fulfil the task, they take turns to ask and answer questions, paying attention to and recording the differences they identify.

b) Chart completion

The students are given charts with different missing information. To complete them, they have to ask their partners, who have the information they need.

c) Map completion

The students are given hand-outs with the map of a street, village, town, zoo, store, etc. Each student has elements the other has not, so they

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have to ask and answer questions in order to complete their maps with the missing items put in the right place.

d) Drawing instructions

The students are given hand-outs with different shapes/objects/ places/people/animals. The task requires that each of them draws the picture on their partner's hand-out by listening to each other's descriptions and instructions. Without hand-outs, the task can be that each of them describes his/her room so that their partner can draw a plan of the room.

2.2. GUESSING GAMES

Guessing games are communicative activities roughly based on the information gap principle, involving the interaction between a 'knower' and a 'guesser'. The guessers will ask Yes/No-questions until they guess what the knower is miming or thinking about.

a) Guessing games: 20 Qs

This is a popular game. It can be played either in pairs or with the whole class. In a pair, the partners take turns as 'knower' and 'guesser'. Each thinks of an activity, person, job, animal, country, continent, place, etc. They try to guess what the other is thinking of by asking relevant Yes/No questions (up to 20) focused on structures and topics fit to the context. With the whole class, one student is the knower, answering the questions asked by his peers.

b) Mime/Charades

This is another type of entertaining guessing game, also used for amusement at social get-togethers. The knower has to mime the concept he/she has in mind, nodding or shaking his head in response to the others' questions.

c) In the manner of the adverb

This is a mime in which the focus is on guessing the manner in which a certain action is performed. A student is secretly instructed by the teacher to do an action in a certain manner, e. g. to make coffee **angrily**. The class will ask questions using adverbs of manner.

d) Hotel reception

This is another mime variation which can be played in pairs, with one student acting as a guest at a hotel and the other as a receptionist. The guest mimes a problem with the service or accommodation which the receptionist has to guess.

e) Names on the back

The teacher sticks 'name cards' on the students' backs. The cards can bear the name of a famous person (historical figure, politician, writer, music or film star, literary character) or, alternatively, the name of an animal.

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Students will ask and answer questions so as to help each other guess their mysterious identity.

f) Call my bluff

Either in front of the class or in pairs, students will tell their peers a story or anecdote, real or invented. Alternatively, they can tell two stories, while the others have to decide in which the teller speaks the truth and in which he/she is merely bluffing.

g) Find someone who

The activity begins with a matching exercise, with two separate lists of items to be matched so as to obtain *adjective + noun* collocations, e. g. *light sleeper, heavy smoker, close friend*.

After checking the correct combinations, the students move round the class to find someone who: is *a light sleeper*, have *a heavy smoker* in their family, has *a close friend* of a different nationality, has had *a serious illness*, etc.

h) Information gathering: questionnaires/surveys

Students are asked to gather information about their classmates by devising a questionnaire on various topics: hobbies, pastimes, sports, holidays, eating/reading habits, likes/dislikes, etc. They have to go around the class asking questions and recording answers on their report sheet. At the end the students process the data collected and present their findings under the form of pie-charts, stack columns, graphs or diagrams.

i) Interviews

The students interview each other on a given topic: future plans/career/holidays, past experiences, family, relationships, friends, study or pastime preferences, etc. At the end each student produces an oral or written account of the interview. The interviewers/interviewees can act as themselves or play the role of other people (family members, friends – an exercise in empathy!), of celebrities or even animals, which really appeals to their empathic imagination.

j) Quizzes

Quizzes can be organized as pair, group or whole class activities. Each group can devise a quiz based on topics studied in class (wildlife, geographical/historical/cultural facts/films/books/music, etc. It can be conducted orally or in writing. It is more challenging if organised as a competition between two/three teams, in which the winning team has the most correct answers.

k) Story swap: urban myths

Multiple story swapping is a complex activity, involving jigsaw reading and exchanging stories. It can be organised with four very short stories, for instance urban myths or news articles. Students will be put in

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four groups A, B, C, D. Each group will read the same story and are asked to prepare to tell the story as accurately as they can to members from other groups. Then they are put into pairs AB, CD and tell their partners **the stories they have just read**. Then they get into other pairs BC, AD and then BD, AC to tell their peers **the stories they have just heard**. By telling and retelling stories they have heard from others, they actually replicate the way in which urban myths are created and circulated.

2.3. ROLE PLAY ACTIVITIES

Role play tasks involve a social or transactional type of interaction. The purpose of the exchange and the role particulars should be made clear on the **role cards** allocated to the students working in pairs or groups, which provide the information gap required for a meaningful exchange of information. Role playing also involves a strong focus on language functions: persuasion, invitations, refusals, agreeing, disagreeing, etc. In designing a role play, we should think of a context or situation presenting a potential clash conflict of interest, opinions or ideas. At the same time role plays should reflect clear social roles: teacher, parent, policeman, driver, ecologist, salesperson, customer, public figure, artist, etc. Role cards are essential in defining the profile and goal of the interlocutors students have to impersonate while interacting with their partners.

a) Agony columns/Agony aunts/uncles

This popular magazine column in which the columnist – called an agony aunt/uncle – offers advice to readers requesting advice on a problem can be adapted for role play focused on the function of asking for and giving advice. It works better in pairs rather than groups. Each student receives a role card containing a problem (relationships, school, work, career, health, etc). Every student complains about his problem and receives advice from his partner. Alternatively, both the problem and the advice can be expressed in writing, with each student receiving a problem card to respond to in writing. For this version, the role play can be dropped in favour of a self-expression exercise, where the students can write their own problems on unsigned pieces of paper, which the teacher distributes around the class, asking students to offer advice on the problem in question. As students may be sensitive about this self-revealing context, anonymity is obligatory. All the pieces of paper will be gathered on the teacher's desk, so the students can collect their 'advice letter' at the end of the lesson.

b) Celebrity interview

The students interview each other in the role of a famous person, taking turns to play the interviewer or interviewee. The roles can be either

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ascribed by the teacher or chosen by the students themselves, according to their preferences and interests.

c) Job interviews

Students are distributed into job seekers and members of the interviewing board. Both candidates and interviewers will be given the job description and requirements. Individual candidates will be interviewed by the board, which will then deliberate on the most suitable candidate for the job. While the activity can be really challenging, its competitive nature may cause problems and upset those not selected, so things should be handled sensitively.

d) Party

Students are given cards about different party guests. They have to mingle and make conversation with the other guests, acting out the respective part they have received. A variation can be a party with parents, children and teachers, in which the guests discuss problematic issues related to school or family life.

e) Criminal investigation/trial

Students are given the particulars of a criminal case and of the people involved – accused, plaintiff, prosecuting counsel, defence counsel, police officer, judge, jury, witnesses, character witnesses, etc. Each student will be allocated a role to play in a class staging of a trial.

f) Brokers/Merchandisers

Students will be divided into brokers and clients. The brokers have to promote a certain product and convince their potential buyers of the benefits. They can broker any kind of goods or services, or more abstract things such as luck, fortune, beauty, celebrity, love, etc. When they have found their clients, they sit down together. During the feedback session, the clients will tell the class why they chose a certain product and what arguments convinced them.

2. 4. PROBLEM SOLVING/DEBATE ACTIVITIES

a) Problem solving

This activity can be done either as a role play, with students in the group assuming a given role in a given context, or, for a more realistic context, the students can discuss issues from their own perspective, acting as themselves. The activity consists in asking the students to discuss and agree on possible solutions to a certain problem. A real or imaginary problem is presented by the teacher, orally or on a fact-file handout. This can be in connection with a real problem – solutions for cleaning a polluted area/reducing pollution in their area/publicising an event or product/repairing a malfunctioning machine or vehicle/converting or finding

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a use for an old building in town/refurbishing the school building/raising funds for a cause/protecting an endangered species/community/area, etc. Alternatively, the problems can be brain-teasers or puzzles to work out, or more imaginative problems like being on a space mission and having to deal with a technical problem.

b) Choosing candidates

The students are given a list of candidates for a competition, job, manager, as well as relevant information about them. The candidates' profiles should include details about their background, qualities, abilities and skills, experience, interests, commitment or leadership potential. The group has to discuss their suitability and reach a decision about the most suitable candidate. The functions practiced can be agreeing, disagreeing, suggesting, persuading, arguing one's opinion, expressing ability, possibility, positive/negative deduction (using modal verbs).

c) Priorities rating

This type of activity requires prioritising elements in a critical situation e. g. survival contexts/ games (fire, shipwreck, flood, earthquake, vehicle breakdown, etc. Students have to rate their priorities according to certain criteria (usefulness, urgency). This involves thinking and talking about what actions should come first, what objects might be useful in a given emergency or survival scenario.

d) Balloon debates

Balloon debates are also based on a priority rating principle. We tell students that they are in an overloaded balloon which is in danger of falling and they have to get rid of an element – person, thing, ideas or concepts – in order to save the balloon. They have to decide which element has to go first, which is likely to generate discussion and arguments.

e) Debates

The students are introduced to a controversial issue in the real world, relevant for their age, level and interests. They have to discuss the respective issue, from various perspectives, arguing their standpoints, giving arguments and examples. A debate can be organised in groups or with the whole class.

Conclusions

I rrespective ofthe organisation of free practice activities – individually, pairs, groups, whole class – opportunities for self-expression will promote better learning and aid retention. By having students share their personal experience, feelings, tastes and interests with their peers, we enhance a good rapport between students and a cooperative atmosphere.

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Students should be given ample opportunities to share information about issues relevant to their everyday life: their plans for the weekend/holidays; travel experiences; childhood memories; favourite pastimes/food/ books/film/music stars; opinions on topics of general human interest, etc. They can extend the discussion to their family and friends. They can do this in pairs, groups or in a whole class discussion. Alternatively, the students may be encouraged to prepare a short speech on a certain topic and give it in front of the class. They can choose to speak on a topic studied in class or on something that preoccupies or interests them – a hobby, an extracurricular activity, a social, economic, political or civic problem. Personalisation and successful self-expression is the key to meaningful communication practice. Rewarding communicative activities carried out in class help build confidence in the students about their speaking abilities, which prepares them for the communicative exigencies of real life context.

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