COMMUNICATION TECHINIQUES FOR FIRST YEAR STUDENTS MINORING IN ENGLISH

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Rezumat

Lucrarea prezintă importanţa si modul în care se desfaşoară cursul practic de tehnici de comunicare pentru studenţii anului I, specializarea Româna-Engleză, Istorie-Engleză din cadrul Facultăţii de Ştiinţe şi Litere a Universităţii 'Petru Maior'; pe de altă parte, lucrarea de faţa mai evidenţiaza şi rolul profesorului ca moderator in cadrul acestui curs.

One of the most important issues of the today society is, by no means, that of communication between people. A good communication is at the basis of any good relationship, be it family or business relationships; that is the reason why the English Department of the Sciences and Letters Faculty of the 'Petru Maior' University of Tg. Mures organises communication techniques practical courses for students in their first year of study.

The great honour and pleasure of conducting and moderating this practical course occurred to me, and while I myself was at the very beginning as a teacher, I found this 'job' more than challenging.

At the very beginning of the course, I had to 'diagnose' the situation of the class, in order to make a general impression on where students stand and a general idea on how to organise the practical course. The very first technique I found to be appropriate was the free talk and self-presentation; this gave both the students as well as myself a perfect opportunity to 'break the ice' and get to know one another. This helped us smoothen our way towards what was to become an entire communication process. An important thing for me to discover was that the students enjoyed very much playing different types of games, considering them as being both funny as well as useful; therefore, I gathered a great variety of games and used them as an important tool in the communication techniques practical course. The ideas for games were picked mainly out of two very interesting game-focused books: Jill Hadfield, *Advanced Communication Games, a collection of games and activities for intermediate and advanced students of English, Nelson, 1987,* and Tony Augarde, *The Oxford A to Z of Word Games, 250 word games and how to play them, Oxford University Press, New York, 1994*, but also from my students, who came up with very interesting topics for discussion, as well as games and interactive activities.

It is important, however, to underline that the games I used were by far children's play, but those games which helped my students achieve some skills and abilities. It is true that games are usually referred to as being funny, but that's not all there is to it: in her book[1], Jill Hadfield considers that 'a game is an activity with rules, a goal and an element of fun'; later on, she talks about two kinds of games: '*competitive games*, in which players or teams race to be the first to reach the goal, and *co-operative games*, in which players or teams work together towards a common goal'.

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The same author underlines that they are *communicative games* as distinct from *linguistic games*[2] that is, they are activities with a non-linguistic goal or aim. Successful completion of the game will involve the carrying out of a task such as drawing in a route on a map, filling in a chart, or finding two matching pictures rather than the correct production of a structure. However, in order to carry out this task it will be necessary to use language and by careful construction of the task, it will be possible to specify in advance roughly what language will be required.

In the case of these types of games, the emphasis in the games is on successful communication rather than on correctness of the language. Games, therefore, are to be found at the fluency end of the fluency-accuracy spectrum. This raises the question of how and where they should be used in class. Hadfield[3] underlines that: 'games should be regarded as an integral part of the language syllabus, not as an amusing activity for Friday afternoon or for the end of term. They provide, in many cases, as much concentrated practice as a traditional drill, and, more importantly, they provide an opportunity for real communication, although within artificially defined limits, and thus constitute a bridge between the classroom and the real world. This suggests that the most useful place for these games is at the free stage of the traditional progression from presentation through practice to free communication; to be used as a culmination of the lesson, as a chance for students to use the language they have learnt freely and as a means to an end rather than an end itself. They can also serve as a diagnostic tool for the teacher who can note areas of difficulty and take appropriate remedial action'.

The games in this book[4] are suitable for intermediate and upper-intermediate students. They have been written to cover the range of functions and structures that the student might encounter at First Certificate level, so they could be used to prepare students for the oral part of that examination, though obviously they may be used with non-examination classes of that level and above.

Each game is written within a specific functional area, focusing on a range of structures appropriate to that function. Most games have a clearly defined lexical field.

The games make use of a variety of techniques. Variety is important in language teaching, and a succession of games based on the same principles, though exciting and novel at first, would soon pall. Techniques used include information gap, guessing, search, matching, exchanging and collecting, combining and card games, problems and puzzles, role-play and simulation techniques. All these techniques are described briefly in Hadfield's book: the simplest activities are based on the *information gap* principle. In these activities Student A has access to some information which is not held by Student B. Student B must acquire this information to complete a task successfully. This type of game may be one-sided, as in the above example, or reciprocal, where both players have information which they must pool to solve a common problem. The games may be played in pairs or in small groups, where all the members of the group have some information. *Guessing games* are a familiar variant on this principle. The player with the information deliberately withholds it, while others guess what it might be.

Search games are another variant, involving the whole class. In these games everyone in the class has one piece of information. Players must obtain all or a large amount of information available to fill in a questionnaire or to solve a problem. Each student is thus simultaneously a giver and a collector of information. My students enjoyed this types of games, especially when the degree of difficulty became quite high.

Matching games are based on a different principle, but also involve a transfer of information. These games involve matching identical pairs of cards or pictures and may be played as a whole class activity, where everyone must circulate until they find a partner with the same card or picture; or as a pair-work or small group activity, where players must choose

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pictures or cards from a selection to match those chosen by their partner from the same selection.

Matching-up games are based on a jigsaw principle. Each player in a group has a list of opinions, preferences or possibilities. Only one of these is shared by everyone in the group. Through discussion the group must decide upon a common preference, in order to agree on something such as, for instance, a dinner date or afternoon activity.

Exchanging and collecting games are based on a 'barter' principle. Players have certain articles or cards which thy are willing to exchange for others in order to complete a set. This may be played as a *whole class activity*, where players circulate freely, exchanging cards or articles at random; or as an *inter-group activity*, where players agree to collect a certain set of articles as a group and then exchange articles between groups; or as a card game on the 'rummy' principle.

Combining activities are those in which the players must act on certain information in order to arrange themselves in groups such as families or people living in the same flat.

All the above exercises may include elements of puzzle-solving, role-play or simulation. *Puzzle-solving activities* occur when participants in the game share or pool information in order to solve a problem or a mystery. Many games include an element of *role-play*. Players are given the name and some characteristics of a fictive character. However, these are not role-plays in the true sense, as the role-play element is always subordinate to the game for the purposes of language use. The outcome of a game is 'closed'; once cards are distributed, it develops in a certain predetermined way, while role-play proper is open-ended and may develop in any number of ways. *Simulations* -the imitation in the classroom of a total situation, where the classroom becomes a street, a hotel, or a supermarket- are also use, particularly in those games which practice interaction between the individual and services such as shops, banks, tourist offices, stations and airports. However, for reason discussed above these activities are simulation-games rather than true simulations since the outcome is again 'closed': students have a specific task or series of tasks to complete within the context of the simulation.

These very appealing types of games imply the players' using their imagination and fantasy and I was quite impressed to discover how resourceful many students are. The great challenge was to pick the activities in such a way for them to use their resources and this 'job' was by far an easy one. Not only did I have to monitor and moderate their performances, but I also had to make sure that the activities chosen are proper for their age, background, linguistic level and that they do not bore them.

On the other hand, I also had to take into consideration another important aspect: i. E. some practical considerations. This implies *pair work*, involving two partners, *small group work*, involving groups of three or four, and *whole class activities*, where everyone moves freely around the room. All these activities require some flexibility in the constitution of groups and organisation of the classroom. It is best to have the desks in a U-shape, if possible. Students can then work with the person sitting next to them for pair work and groups of threes and fours can easily be constituted by alternate pairs moving their chairs to the inner side of the U, opposite another pair. Whole class activities, which involve all the students circulating freely, can take place in the empty area in the centre of the U.

Simulation activities may involve special arrangements of furniture, but when there's no possibility to arrange the desks in the appropriate way, the traditional arrangement of front-facing desks can be easily adapted to pair work, with people at adjoining desks working together, while small groups can be formed by two people turning their chairs round to face the two people behind them. Whole class activities present a little more of a problem, but usually there is a space big enough for students to move around in the front of the class, or desks can be pushed back to clear a space in the centre.

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Another interesting activity which may require special practical conditions is the role-play; it involves two distinct phases: preparation and production; in the preparation phase, students should be given sufficient time to digest the information on the role card and to ask the teacher for help with anything they do not understand. Some of the games may have quite lengthy role cards that are almost mini-reading exercises in their own right, and students may find it helpful to make a few notes on the important points to help them. The teacher, the moderator, may also be in the situation to provide students at the beginning of the game, with any likely 'problem vocabulary', i. E. lexis that the students may find difficult. In case of large classes, where the role-play is to be done in two or more groups, it is helpful to put students with the same role cards together in groups at the preparation stage to discuss the information on their cards and talk themselves into the role. When the students are sufficiently prepared, and all problems of comprehension ironed out, the role-play can begin. The moderator should encourage the students not to rely too heavily on looking at their role cards, but to remember the information. With the shorter role cards, it is a good idea to collect them in before the role play begins; with the longer role cards, the students may feel they need to keep the notes they have made as a back-up, but they should be encouraged to internalise as much of the information as possible and to refer to the notes only if absolutely necessary.

Some other types of interesting games, this time, *linguistic games*, are to be found in Tony Augarde's, *The Oxford A to Z of Word Games, 250 word games and how to play them, Oxford University Press, New York, 1994*. This dictionary describes more than 250 games with words. The author of this dictionary considers that: 'language is a superbly rich resource, not only for writing and speaking but also for playing games. One can play with the meanings of words, the sounds of words, or the spelling of words; one can play even with the letters of words by shuffling them around or arranging them in particular sequences. There are games based on the alphabet, and games that arrange words in patterns or interlocking grids'.

One of the most important features of word games is that most of them are very simple and require little or no equipment[5]. Instead of spending a large amount of money on a computer game or boxed game, one needs only a pencil and paper -or simply voices- for hours of innocent enjoyment. Some words are competitive, but in many games, everyone is a winner: getting pleasure from the mental stimulation, the challenge, the social interaction and the sheer fun that such pastimes provide. Sometimes it is somehow difficult to draw the line between word games and other games, as some games which are mainly focused on words, are also concerned with the things that words represent. It is also difficult to distinguish between word games and various forms of wordplay: the latter are generally included if they have the character of a game or form the basis for a game.

There are very interesting types of linguistic games; as stated previously, most of the games are either written (and require pencils and paper) or spoken (and need no equipment). Therefore, one can find *active games*, which involve physical activity or movement; *challenge games* which present players with a challenge: something to solve or achieve; *cumulative games* are those which build up gradually through the contributions of all the players; *grid games* which arrange words so that they interlock or form a pattern; *word-building games* that involve building up words, usually one letter at the time; *word-finding games* which involve finding words that are hidden in some way, or thinking of words to fit stated categories.

Games are best set up by demonstration rather than by lengthy explanation, this meaning that the teacher, as the moderator, should explain briefly what the game involves, hand out any photocopied cards, giving the students a little while to study them and then demonstrate the game with one of the students in front of the class. The idea of the game is easier for students to grasp from seeing the cards than from a verbal explanation and as they

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become familiar with the idea of the games and the techniques used, any initial problems caused by unfamiliarity will quickly disappear. Where more complicated card games are played in small groups, teachers should hand out a photocopied rules sheet to each group of students together with the card(s).

Therefore, the teacher's role in these activities is that of monitor and resource centre, moving from group to group, listening, supplying any necessary language, noting errors but *not interrupting or correcting* as this impedes fluency and spoils the atmosphere. It is a good idea to carry paper and pen to note any persistent errors or areas of difficulty. These can than be dealt with in a feedback session after the game. In many cases, the game could then be played again with different partners or with different role cards. In other cases, mostly in those activities involving puzzle solving, this will be not possible. However, a similar game with different information could easily be constructed to practice the same exponents.

As for the amount of time involved in these types of activities, the average time necessary for most of the games should be no longer than 20-30 minutes, depending on the number of players. There are, however, cases when games may require an hour or more, but such games must be constituted very carefully, for students not to lose track of the situation.

At the end of this communicative techniques practical course I came to a final conclusion concerning the role of games in the language programme. The role played by games as teaching methods in the learning system once again proved to be a very important one, as they enable the students (and why not, the teacher) to react and interact appropriately according to certain situations. This communication techniques practical course proved its usefulness as the students involved, sometimes unknowingly, or unconsciously, were developing their skills in the English language and what's even more, most of them became self confident, feeling able to manage in English in various situations. Sometimes they even felt the need to prove their abilities, their skills, to their colleagues, to the teacher, but especially to themselves.

Therefore, the inclusion of games as an integral part of any language syllabus provides an opportunity for intensive language practice, offers a context in which a language is used meaningfully and as a means to an end, and acts as a diagnostic tool for the teacher, highlighting areas of difficulty. Last, but certainly not least, although the above discussion has tended to focus on methodological considerations, one of the most important reasons for using games is simply that they are immensely enjoyable for both teacher and student and, last but not least, give them all the possibility to know one another, to communicate.

Notes:

1. Jill Hadfield, *Advanced Communication Games, a collection of games and activities for intermediate and advanced students of English*, Nelson, 1987, pg. iii
2. which will be dealt with in a later section of this essay
3. idem
4. idem
5. see the practical considerations in the case of communicative games discussed so far

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