

FROM "SPEAKING TO LEARN" TO "LEARNING TO SPEAK"

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As Hutchinson and Waters [1, p. 8] point out: "The growth of English for Specific Purposes was brought about by a combination of three important factors: the expansion and demand for English to suit particular needs, developments in the field of linguistics and educational psychology".

These factors highlight the need for increased specialisation in language learning. Since, in most cases, the specialisation is related to higher education, the teaching situation becomes even more complex, as the learner is not a pupil, but a young adult who has clear future objectives.

This study is based on classroom experience and is closely related to our attempts to approach the ESP class from the communicative point of view.

The teaching of speaking in any higher education institution should start with an analysis of the students' needs. As revealed by a questionnaire I have used with the ASE students, their needs as regards speaking fall into one of the following categories:

- future career (mainly in international business);
- access to scientific information in their fields;
- further educational projects (scholarships, specialising courses, post-graduate courses, master's or doctor's degrees);
- travelling (on business or on holiday).

The way most of the students have prioritised their needs demonstrates that they are able to "appreciate that language is an instrument to be used, not knowledge or information to be stored away" [2, p.74].

Knowing the students' needs will help teachers to organise their work in such a way as to meet the students' expectations, though there may be some constraints on teaching, out of which those mentioned below are most annoying:

- mixed-ability groups;
- reduced number of English classes per week ;
- large groups of students;
- teacher overloading.

Any approach to the teaching of speaking should take into account the following factors:

- teaching of speaking in the Romanian high schools;
- our students' previous learning experience;
- the approach to speaking employed in the textbooks currently used in ASE;
- teachers' ability in using communicative methods.

When they come to university, students have various levels of English and have already acquired certain learning habits that reflect closely their previous learning experience and the nature of the textbooks underlying it.

As regards speaking, it is at the level of the first year students that the confrontation between the two concepts "speak to learn" and "learn to speak" can be noticed. This occurs at both individual and group level. The lower the level of the student, the more obvious the attempt to catch up with the others by insisting on rules and repetition. This is not surprising at all knowing that most of the teachers of English in Romanian secondary and high schools have received a solid theoretical instruction in the spirit of such linguistic trends as structuralism, behaviourism, cognitivism. It seems that many concepts deriving from Saussure's, Bloomfield's, Skinner's or Chomsky's theories had a strong influence on several generations of teachers, as long as many young students still have the habit of "speaking to learn".

Although Chomsky's theory (1959) ultimately led to "demand for authentic language teaching materials" [3, p. 13], in many places the language taught was still written language spoken aloud. This was also the case of many schools in Romania. It was, no doubt, the effect of a far more general situation, based on the "assumption that knowledge about the second language (...) is sufficient for effective use of the second language in actual communication situations" as Canale [4, p.14] points out.

Practice has proved that this "knowledge-oriented approach"- as Canale calls it - though useful for certain stages of teaching, fails to help learners master the necessary skills in using the knowledge they have acquired. Emphasising grammatical and phonological rules rather than meaning and functions, this teaching method enabled learners to produce correct and

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accurate utterances but prevented them from developing the necessary speaking abilities.

"Skill-oriented activities" [4, p. 15] were practised only infrequently and sporadically in foreign language lessons in many Romanian high schools. Therefore, some years ago, many of our students were surprised, if not reluctant, when they were first faced with communicative techniques. Some of them have the same reaction even now. However, their initial resistance disappears short after they get involved in classroom interaction, particularly if the better students and the teachers ignore the mistakes the weak students make and support them when they lose track of discussions. These students' experience illustrates once more that "the actual use of language" cannot be attained simply by knowing the language system understood as grammatical knowledge. As Hymes (extract in Brumfit and Johnson, [5, p. 14]) points out, learners need "rules of use without which rules of grammar would be useless". That is why we think that the teaching of speaking would imply a clear and deep understanding of all aspects of communicative competence.

As has recently been shown [3, p. 22-23], spoken communication involves certain "interactional rules" which activate, to various degrees, each of the four components of communicative competence: sociolinguistic, semantic, strategic and linguistic competence.

It is particularly useful for teachers of business English to understand the way in which communicative competence (by all its components) employs these rules. Taking into account the "minimal condition rules" or "appropriate distance rules" when devising or selecting activities for business communication lessons, teachers may know better how to lead their students to acquire and develop business behaviour and skills. By raising the students' awareness of the cross-cultural aspects, the teacher equips them better for real-business situations. A correct understanding of the interactional rules that vary from culture to culture may help the students to use their semantic competence properly and create a relaxed atmosphere when they meet partners from various cultural areas. They would achieve what Malinowski referred to as "phatic communion".

Knowing that speaking was not given enough attention before and that it often "meant merely the production of well-formulated sentences with accurate grammar and good pronunciation" [3, p. 43], the teacher's effort in the classroom should be directed towards getting the students to make the necessary step from "speaking to learn" to "learning to speak". I have tried that with many groups of students. I started by organising group

and class discussions in which the students were asked to examine the way they speak in Romanian and to suggest possibilities of transferring this experience to the learning of speaking in English. The discussions led inevitably to the distinction between spoken and written language. Many of the characteristics of spoken language were mentioned and analysed this way. When necessary, the teacher came in by focussing certain aspects such as the spontaneous, unplanned character of the spoken language, its incomplete syntax, less specific vocabulary, false starts, repetitions, redundancy. These discussions proved to be useful in that they:

- facilitated a better understanding of spoken language;
- helped raising the students' awareness of learning to speak;
- encouraged the weak students to get involved in classroom interaction by understanding that hesitations, false starts, repetitions are not seen strictly as lack of ability but rather as compensation strategies;
- induced a change in attitude towards errors.

All this has led to the conclusion that, while devising tasks for our speaking lessons, the teacher should provide opportunities for speaking inside the classroom which may eventually lead to spoken output in the real world. These opportunities would enable the students to make their own choices, to control their own production and pass smoothly from "language-learning situations" to "language-using situations" as Wilkins points out [6, p. 76].

Working in this way, I have found communicative methodology very useful in meeting the needs of the students who aim at becoming proficient in both "transactional" and "interactional" conversations [7]. Interested in getting their message across, but also in creating and maintaining a socially favourable atmosphere during conversations (which will often be required in their future career), the students have discovered (and mentioned it in their feedback) that "learning by communicating" [8, p. 157] is an efficient way of developing their speaking abilities. This has contributed to their better involvement in interactive activities, although many other problems still remain, making the teacher's work difficult.

By relating my teaching situation to Lee's set of criteria, I have noticed that the success or the failure of some speaking activities in the classroom depends on the extent to which the teacher's responsibilities of *planning*, *managing* and *monitoring* are met when dealing with speaking tasks. Thus, language input and information input challenge the teacher as planner, particularly when creating their own speaking

activities, while selection and use of already existing materials move the teacher's responsibilities in the area of managing and monitoring, with a focus on language and information output, interaction and students' involvement. Of course, planning is not totally neglected, especially when the materials need adaptation.

From this point of view, I have often had to create tasks for my speaking lessons since not all the textbooks we have been using include efficient speaking activities, although they promote communicative methods and the authors state they do that.

In some cases, a speaking activity in the textbook needed only slight altering to meet the level of the group or to make it more challenging. Let us take the activity given at 5.2.C in *International Business English* by Leo Jones and Richard Alexander [9, p. 44]. The original group of students may be divided into small groups. The activity can be done exactly as in the textbook with some of the small groups who are thus exposed to **guided** communication (Appendix 1). The other groups may take up **free** communication: they are asked to brainstorm and find out six main rules for success as a manager. Finally, two small groups with different tasks will come together and try to reach an agreement about the behaviour of a successful manager. In this way, both **guided** and **free** conversation are practised in the same lesson. In addition, the final stage of the activity gives equal opportunities to all students "to bring (their) personal value system to the surface in the classroom [8, p. 157].

In other cases (*Headway*, for instance, where the speaking activities are highly controlled and limited to pair work), I have tried to improve or replace these activities by more challenging ones. For instance, in Unit 12 - *Headway Intermediate* [10], I have often replaced the speaking task by a role play devised by Liliana Kiritescu¹, using the listening exercise in the unit as input (Appendix 2). The "what" and the "how" considerations of the interaction are satisfactorily achieved and the students' involvement in solving the problem is also high.

When I select certain communicative techniques (information gap, simulation or role play) using pair or group work, for the speaking activities, I do it in such a way as to give my students opportunities to learn how to make the best use of the language they know. We also try to discover their areas of difficulties, particularly the psychological problems that various speaking activities may generate. It is well-known that

some students are inhibited when they have to speak in a group of colleagues or in the presence of the whole class. Others worry too much about the mistakes they may make and dislike being corrected. In order to know more about the psychological impact that various speaking techniques or other aspects of classroom interaction may have on my students, I have often discussed this matter directly in individual interviews or asked them to answer some specific questions as in the hereattached questionnaire (Appendix 3). The analysis of their answers has revealed that:

- weaker students prefer pair work;
- more advanced but shy students are also in favour of pair work;
- advanced students often find pair work boring and show preference for group work and class discussion.

As far as error correction is concerned, most of the students do not mind if this is done by the teacher, a small number of them prefer peer correction and only few show oversensitivity to any sort of correction in the classroom.

These aspects may help the teacher to choose the right speaking technique or, moreover, to adopt a suitable strategy for making the students familiar with the techniques that they originally rejected.

The students' attitude to errors may show if the teacher is perceived as an authority responsible for error correction or as a member of the group or both. This, of course, makes the teacher's work as manager and monitor much easier and more efficient.

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Appendix 1

Activity 5.2.C from *International Business English Student's Book*, p.44

Work in groups of three or four. Ask your partners what they think of the following opinions on the actions of management and bosses. Decide which of the opinions you can agree on:

- people working in business should be told what to do and should do it without asking questions
- employees want to be recognised as people with their own (personal) needs
- employees have to be forced to work: otherwise they are just lazy
- managers need closely control what employees do
- nobody wants responsibility at work
- if there are problems to be solved in a company, everybody should be asked their opinion before anything is done.

Then ask another group what they have agreed on and see if you agree. Can the two groups together agree on how management should act? Should it be authoritarian or co-operative?

Appendix 2

Role Play (suggested for Unit 12 - Headway-Intermediate)*

Dying forests

Situation: A recent survey on the situation of forests in Romania indicates that 20% of the trees in our country are dying. Researchers have found that car exhausts is the main cause. In order to take adequate action, the government has called a meeting to discuss this issue with the representatives of the forestry engineers and of the Motorists' Association.

Purpose of the discussion: to find the best way(s) to stop or reduce the destruction of forests.

Roles: Leader: the government representative
Representative(s) of the Ministry of Forestry
Representative(s) of the Motorists' Association.

Stage I: group formation; students assign roles as they wish.

Stage II: students with the same role group together to share opinions and propose solutions; then, they will go to their original groups to discuss the issue with the other members.

Stage III: leaders of the groups will present the whole class the most efficient suggestions and the solution may be selected by class voting.

Appendix 3

Questionnaire

1. Do you feel nervous when you have to speak in the classroom?
2. Which of the following speaking activities do you prefer and why?
 - pair work;
 - group work;
 - role play;
 - class discussion.
3. How do you feel when your mistakes are corrected by:
 - the teacher?
 - a classmate?

* This role-play, devised by my colleague Liliانا Kirişescu, was originally used as a starting point in a writing activity. Since it worked very well in the classroom, I have decided to use it as part of other activities.