TEACHING SPEAKING SKILLS

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Abstract: *The aim of teaching a foreign language is to make students able to communicate well. Speaking is one of the four skills of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and plays a significant role in daily communication and educational process. As a consequence of the fact that the communicative approach is increasingly used in EFL situation, we underline the importance of students' communicative competence. Learners have serious problems in mastering the communicative skills due to the fact that curricula pay more attention to English grammar, reading and vocabulary. Listening and speaking skills are not considered as important parts of many course books and teachers do not seem to pay attention to these skills while designing lessons. Speaking levels of learners are different from each other as this ability is affected by crucial factors. In many English language classes, the methods focusing on grammar are used for teaching and this method has proved inadequate to the demands for producing efficient English speakers. Speaking is a complex and dynamic skill that involves the use of several simultaneous processes and a speaker needs to almost instantly activate knowledge and skills. In spite of its undisputed importance, speaking has been a rather neglected skill in second language acquisition, research, teaching, and assessment. It is now widely accepted that speaking should be the basis of teaching practice and this is a serious challenge for English teachers; however, it is crucial in the development of English language communicative competence. However, there has been an increased focus on the speaking ability because of its perceived importance in language learning and teaching. This paper will briefly analyse the causes that create difficulties in speaking classes, in particular in the case of the advanced level of foreign language proficiency students. The difficulties examined concern the choosing of the appropriate framework and approach and suggest some speaking activities which seem appropriate for advanced language learners. Finally the paper will focus on a particular case that of preparing students for speaking tests they may sit for.*

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1. Introduction

Learning languages helps students realise their dreams, it opens doors to future careers, employers, organisations worldwide. Of all the four skills involved in teaching a foreign language, speaking seems more provocative.

First of all as Nunan (1991) wrote, "success is measured in terms of the ability to carry out a conversation in the (target) language." Therefore a great number of

people in general and students in particular consider that being able to speak a language means knowing the language and so they view learning the language as learning how to speak the language. Consequently students may lose interest and motivation in learning the language if they fail learning how to speak it or if they do not get chances to speak it during the language class.

Secondly, we simply have to admit that speaking is crucial to human communication. Only taking into account the amount of spoken exchanges we produce throughout a day compared to the written communication happening in the same period of time, it is obvious that speaking prevails over writing. Nevertheless the paradox is that during language classes the stress is not on speaking, most of the time being eaten up by reading and writing practice almost ignoring speaking and listening skills being simply left aside. Thus as Lawtie (…) rightly underlines, "if the goal of the language course is truly to enable students to communicate in English, then speaking skills should be taught and practised in the language classroom".

1.1. Problems in teaching speaking

Speaking is a highly complex and dynamic skill that involves the use of several simultaneous processes – cognitive, physical and socio-cultural – and a speaker's knowledge and skills have to be activated rapidly in real-time.

Its importance among the four skills involved when learning a foreign language has changed significantly: from being almost ignored in the Grammar – Translation Method, it became the leading skill in the Direct Method; moreover, audiolingualism (the principle based on oral discourse viewed as imitative routine behaviour in typical and predictable situations) brought more emphasis on speaking. In between there was the Cognitive Method which included activities in all language skills, considering them as equally important, whereas the Communicative Language Teaching added a more realistic dimension to teaching speaking by introducing numerous forms of interaction to the classroom where the language appeared in in natural or probable situations. Speaking is presently perceived as the most fundamental skill to acquire in spite of the inevitable different approaches, available methods, techniques or resources. Along with the rise of the communicative era, oral communication has been considered as the ultimate goal of language learning and its adequate development has become the point of interest of both teachers and learners. However, achieving proficiency in foreign language speaking in classroom conditions is not an easy task; there are many and frequent comments such as the following coming from teachers: "My students can read and write well, but it is a little bit more difficult they when it comes to speaking and listening" or "Some of my students are too afraid to talk in class. They are too shy to perform in front of their colleagues" or "My students can speak fluently but they make a lot of grammatical mistakes". On the other side, even advanced learners often finish a language courses being that they are not sufficiently prepared for speaking beyond the classroom.

Where does this difficulty come from? It may be the result of the little chances and inadequate frequency of speaking opportunities that may happen in the classroom compared to the numerous possibilities and genres real life provides. Selecting appropriate types of speaking situations for classroom practice is also a hard decision as the aim of the activity is to reflect the natural occurrence and distribution of communicative situations. Then the number of students in a class

should be around 10, while in fact normal classes frequently exceed 20 which burdens the activity-students are not at ease, they are too shy and less comfortable. Additionally, an advanced speaking activity should create optimal conditions for developing learners' sociocultural knowledge, that is "the culturally embedded rules of social behaviour" (Thornbury 2007: 31) and their linguistic knowledge, which includes discourse and speech act knowledge, and knowledge of the grammar, vocabulary and phonology of the target language.

There is not much difference between native and target languages in point of the processes involved in speaking: conceptualizing, formulating, articulating, self-monitoring and negotiating. Still, the skill of speaking is not automatically transferable from the speaker's first language into the second (Thornbury 2007). Even students with good command of grammar and vocabulary of the foreign language find it difficult to unleash their oral discourse, extensive knowledge does not guarantee success in oral communication; this knowledge should be properly integrated or accessed.

Problems in speaking may be augmented by excessive self-monitoring and the habit of formulating utterances in the native language first and then translating them in the target language. The teachers' severe monitoring and constant amending of each and every mistake create obvious costs in terms of fluency and may lead to producing artificial and less fluent and natural discourse.

As Ur (1995: 121) rightly points out the individual learners' personalities and attitudes are also among the problems that are commonly observed in the language classroom and these may fall into the following categories:

1. i*nhibition* – fear of making mistakes, losing face, criticism; 2. *shyn*ess; 3. *nothing to say* – learners have problems with finding motives to speak, formulating opinions or relevant comments; 4. *low or uneven participation* – often caused by the tendency of some learners to dominate in the group; 5. *mother-tongue use* – particularly common in less disciplined or less motivated classes, learners find it easier or more natural to express themselves in their native language. Such problems seem to appear in any language class regardless the level of proficiency.

1.2. Activities for teaching speaking skills

When taking up teaching speaking, designing the language speaking class greatly depends on a number of factors such as the age of the students, their level of knowledge of English, the context and also the aim of teaching.

There are different possible approaches of teaching speaking: the genre-based approach which primarily relies on imitating models which is not necessarily the way in which people communicate in real life; the task-based approach that focuses more on the process of using language rather than on the language that learners actually produce, the comprehension-based approach relying on listening tasks (Thornbury 2007: 121). Apart from different theoretical aspects, the obvious thing is that in order to learn to speak or develop this ability, *learners have to speak.*

The process of developing speaking skills consists of three stages (Thornbury, 2007: 40): 1. *awareness* – learners are made aware of features of target language knowledge, 2. *appropriation* – these features are integrated into their existing knowledge-base, 3. *autonomy* – learners develop the capacity to mobilize these features under real-time conditions without assistance. The level of proficiency

requires different stage to focus on, for example it seems that at students having an advanced level of foreign language proficiency should focus more on the stage of appropriation and its effective movement towards autonomy in target language use.

We will focus on teaching speaking activities to advanced students as this is our target group, in other words this is the level of English proficiency of the students we are working with- students in Economics. They are students of the Faculty of Economic Sciences, University of Oradea, following the majors: International Business, Management, Marketing, Finances. They all took English courses at high school before their undergraduate education in ELT. They all took an entrance exam in English as the necessary condition for them to study English at the faculty. The exam covered questions regarding vocabulary and grammar knowledge. All of the participants had the same English proficiency level (i.e. ranging somewhere in between intermediate and upper intermediate) based on their scores obtained at the entrance exam.

We have to start from the fact that every learner enters any learning and communicative environment with his or her entire personality additionally shaped by their prior learning and communicative experiences, both positive and negative. And being aware of this truth is crucial as we meet students with good or very good knowledge of English who have difficulties when speaking. The only logical explanation of the situation is that they were not sufficiently trained in speaking and they were not given the opportunity to practice. Moreover, the lack is more profound: they admit that it is not only the foreign language class that does not give them space to state their own opinions, to express feelings, to comment on facts, it seems that this is the problem of the whole teaching system in Romania where students are seen as empty buckets that need to be filled up with information. Students are neither let nor taught to react, to express, to speak. Consequently we are yearly faced with generations of students who are used to look downwards, who are afraid to utter. Our task as teachers has proved even more difficult yet challenging and beautiful when in the end you see progress, you hear students speaking.

For the purpose of getting them to speak, there is need for a range of speaking tasks that encourage students, offers them a considerable degree of independence that is acquired only on extensive and assiduous oral practice. The activities may take the form of student-teacher or student-student interactions.

According to Thornbury (2007) conversations in foreign language classrooms are considered to be not the result of language learning but rather the context in which learning actually occurs. Obviously it is not easy to have very natural, spontaneous and unstructured pieces of conversation in a planned lesson.

A possible scenario could rely on conversation activities based on a set of selected themes which are previously negotiated with learners. For example each student will have to present a topic of his own interest at the beginning of the lesson as a warm-up activity. After establishing the rule of speaking in turns, students need to be taught useful conversational routines (opening and closing formulas, interrupting, asking for clarification) and helpful communication strategies (paraphrasing and reformulating, using vague language and hesitation fillers).

Other types of activities may begin from a more controlled context in which the

language is limited by instructions, or with the use of audio-visual materials; other examples of speaking tasks could be even the feedback sessions during which students analyse their own interactions (from grammar, vocabulary, even attitude and body language).

A class survey is another sample of speaking activity which, if properly conducted, may engage a large group of students in a speaking activity. For example, students prepare a set of survey-type questions connected with a particular topic (for example banking requirements when asking for a bank loan) and they move around the classroom, asking the questions and putting down the answers. Afterwards they return to their original groups, they analyse the information gathered, prepare a presentation that will be reported to the class by a spokesperson. (Thornbury 2007: 83).

Debates are also very popular and useful forms of classroom oral interaction. Debates involve discussing a topic from two opposing points of view which are earlier ascribed to members of the debating teams (Dakowska 2005: 246). Nevertheless, as Dakowska (2005: 245) points out, there are several requirements for the chosen topic: it is controversial enough to open different perspectives and interpretations (i.e. the recent law against smoking in Romania); students involved are given enough space and autonomy to choose the side and to express their personal opinions and ideas; students are interested in the topic and their general knowledge is sufficient enough to discuss it; the debate is planned as a complex activity for example working in groups or pairs followed by open discussions.

Other speaking activities that advanced students may practice include: storytelling, jokes, role-play and simulation activities (Thornbury 2007). To conclude, note that each speaking task needs to be productive, purposeful, interactive, challenging, safe and authentic (Thornbury 2007: 90) so as to be able to ensure effective language use.

2. Preparing students for speaking tests: IELTS

As presented on its official website IELTS (International English Language Testing System) or the International English Language Testing System is the most popular English language test in the world. More than 2.7 million people pass these tests every year as IELTS can create new opportunities for living, studying and working worldwide. The same site proudly announces that more than 9000 organizations in 140 countries accept IELTS, including government organizations, academic institutions or employment and that IELTS is the only English language test that is accepted for the purpose of immigration by all countries that require a language test.

2.1. The IELTS Speaking test

The Speaking test consists of a discussion with a certified Examiner. It is interactive and as close to a real-life situation as a test can get. It lasts between 11 to 14 minutes and it is divided in three parts as follows: in Part 1, the candidate answers questions about himself, his family, his work and his interests; in Part 2, the candidate speaks about a given topic. The candidate will be given a task card which asks him to speak about a particular topic and includes points that he can

cover in his talk. The candidate will be given 1 minute to prepare his talk and he is expected to speak for 1-2 minutes; in Part 3, the candidate has a longer discussion on the same topic. The examiner will ask the candidate further questions connected to the topic in Part 2.The Speaking test is the same for both Academic and General Training tests .The candidate's speaking is assessed on fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, and pronunciation. A band mark is awarded between 1 and 9 with 9 being the highest. The purpose of the IELTS Speaking test is to assess a wide range of skills. The examiner will want to see how well the candidate can communicate opinions and information on everyday topics and common experiences. To do this the candidate will need to answer a range of questions, speak at length on a given topic using appropriate language, organise ideas coherently, express and justify opinions, analyse, discuss and speculate about issues. The candidate will be marked on the four criteria of the IELTS Speaking Test Band Descriptors i.e. fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, pronunciation.

Speaking test format:

Part 1	Examiner and candidate introduce themselves, candidate answers general questions on familiar topics e.g. family, job, studies, free-time etc.	about 4 to 5 minutes
Part 2	Candidate asked to speak on a given topic (information is written on a task card) for 1-2 minutes. One minute of preparation in which the candidate can make notes is allowed.	4 minutes
Part 3	Discussion on more abstract issue related to the chosen topic in part 2 of the test.	about 4 to 5 minute

Source: https://www.britishcouncil.ro/examene/ielts/date-taxe locatii?gclid=CMCJ75j5-csCFTAz0wod5Y0I8Q

2.2. Tips for preparing the IELTS speaking test

IELTS measures the candidate's reading, writing, listening and speaking skills, and assesses his or her ability to communicate for work, study or life in an English-speaking country.

The Speaking test is a face-to-face conversation with a certified examiner. It is as close to a real-life situation as a test can get. The examiner will ask the candidate about familiar topics such as home, work or studies in part 1. This should help the candidate feel comfortable when speaking.

The decision to take an IELTS test made, enthusiastic students start preparing for it. They read, fill, write, listen and try to speak. After having tried the IELTS sample exam most students conclude that speaking was the hardest. They say: "I could have done better" or "I just couldn't think about what to say at the time" or "Two minutes is too long" - some admit to having been overcome by nerves. The

speaking test can be both frustrating and nerve wrecking for candidates.

IELTS candidates are assessed on their actual performance in an interview that shouldn't last longer than 14 minutes. To someone having to do a speaking test in a foreign language, 14 minutes may seem like a long time but in fact it is a very short time for a candidate to really show off their English speaking ability and perform at their best. There are several training activities that may help students prepare for all parts of the speaking test. Thus this part of the paper aims to provide ideas for activities similar to those students will encounter in the speaking exam.

The first step for the students is to make sure they understand the IELTS test format. They need to know what to expect on the test day. They need to study the test format by looking carefully at the content of each part of the IELTS test sample: listening, reading, writing and speaking and by getting to know the different types of questions they may be asked in each part. Candidates should be relaxed and talk fluently. They will need to speak naturally.

  a.   One idea suggested by the IELTS trainers themselves is that the students practise their long-turn speaking using questions they have made themselves. It is in fact very simple for the teacher to "create" the pattern questions, but there can be a real benefit in getting the students to do this themselves. They get to understand not just structure of the question, but also the type of response it requires. To see how the questions are modelled, look at this example:

Describe [an adventurous person who you know.] – insert your own topic

You should say:

•   *who* [the person is] insert detail wh question
•   *how* [you know this person] insert detail wh question
•   *what* [this person does that is adventurous] insert detail wh question
•   and explain *why* [you think this person likes to take risks.] insert explanation why question

The idea is that there is always a topic based on real life/experience that has to be expanded using detail and some explanation. If students to write their own questions, they are much more likely to see what type of detail they need to use. Also, psychologically they are much more likely to focus on answering the question (rather than provide some pat pre-learned language) if they have written thee questions themselves. That is as good exam practice as it gets.

Additionally, questions can be categorised into *People* (describe someone who..), *Places* (describe somewhere..), *Objects* (describe something that..), *Habits, Plans* and *Experiences.*

  b.   Another possible activity that proves useful is to make students look around, look at their possessions, go through their photo albums – make cue cards to describe those people, things and experiences – those are exactly the sort of things candidates need to talk about in the exam.

  c.   Other suggestions regarding the speaking test is to take time before the test to practise speaking with a partner, friend or teacher. Students are advised to talk as much as they can, talk as fluently as possible and be spontaneous, relax, be confident and enjoy using English, develop their answers, speak more than the examiner, ask for clarification if necessary, do not learn prepared answers; the examiner is trained to spot this and will change the question; the students are also

encouraged to plainly express opinions, to practise at home and record themselves.

    d.   Another useful piece of advice is to use natural spoken English as this will help students speak more fluently and improve pronunciation. Here are some examples of what works: short forms like *it's* instead of *it is*, words like *quite* that are used a lot in speaking, common spoken phrases like *I guess* and *I suppose*. The best way to learn this type of language is often to listen to native speakers. Students are also encouraged to extend their answers. For example, this is inappropriate: Question:" How many languages do you speak?" Answer: "Two. Chinese and English."

The better choice of answer would be:

Answer: "I speak two languages. My first language is Chinese and I speak English too. I've been learning English since I was 10. I started learning it when I was in primary school."

However there are situations when short answers are better, for example if students get a question they do not know very much about. Insisting on talking about it will bring along incoherency.

    e.   Students may very well give themselves time to think – repeat/reformulate the question. In parts 1 and 3 you there is no thinking time: the candidate is supposed to start speaking immediately. This does not mean, however, that you he/she has to start answering the question straight away. Instead s/he can start by repeating/reformulating or commenting on the question: "What did I enjoy doing as a child? Let me see…" or "That's not something I've thought about before. It's an interesting question.' This approach has several benefits. It is good communication as it allows a little more time to think.

    f.   It is always good thing for the student to correct himself if he can do it immediately. If the student mistakes and he can correct it immediately, he is advised to do so. This will show the examiner that he has control over the language.

    g.   This is a speaking test and not a listening test. If you the question is not properly understood, the examiner is encouraged to ask the examiner to repeat or explain it; if a question is not completely understood, the candidate will almost certainly become incoherent.

    h.   In addition, students are suggested to learn and use a range of functional vocabulary such as opinion language as the examiner will be listening to see whether the candidate can say *I think* and *I like* in different ways. This can be a tough skill to learn as it may require learning new speaking habits.

    i.   Part 2 of the test is the scary one where the candidate needs to speak for up to 2 minutes. This is a slightly unusual task and the candidate should effectively use the preparation time. An idea could be for the candidate to try and write 1 or maybe 2 sentences so that the ideas are clear before he starts speaking-sentences come easier than words out of a context.

    j.   The best advice for IELTS speaking test is very simply to listen to the question and its grammar and answer it. One example here is in part 1. If the question in the past tense "What sports did you play as a child?" the only good answer is to use the past tense as well, the examiner will be listening for this.

    k.   Trainers also suggest not to be afraid of repeating yourself – think

coherence – the "as I was saying" trick may save. Part of the score in speaking is fluency and coherence. One way to become more coherent is in fact to repeat yourself. This is something professional speakers do a lot. The trick is not to use the same words both times. A practical suggestion is to think about finishing the speech by referring back to something that has already been said. A key phrase here may be "As I was saying/As I said before" as it helps show the examiner that ideas are linked together and that in fact is what coherence is.

l.   There are persons who find it difficult to explain things or tend to give short answers, and in this case giving examples may help as examples are great for explaining ideas and it is much easier to say for example than because. When offering examples, people just describe things they know and are familiar with and that takes very little mental effort.

m.   Details are very good proofs of mastering vocabulary and IELTS is a language test therefore the more language used the better. For example, a question like: "When did you first start to learn English?" should be answered by giving extra details such as: "I first started to learn English when I was in primary school. We had around 4 classes a week with our form teacher and sometimes a native speaker came to help her out and talk to us in English. It was quite funny because we didn't understand a word he said. At first I hated it because my teacher was very strict and forced us to write in English every day."

n.   Candidates should keep in mind that it is an exam and they need to show the best side of their spoken English. Relaxing too much and becoming too conversational, may harm English. That is not a true dialogue between two people: it is more of an interview with one person speaking and the other listening.

5. In conclusion

The paper was intended to stress the importance of teaching speaking to students of all level focusing on the category of students with advanced proficiency in English. This teaching of speaking should determine the roles played by the teacher, the learner and the materials. The main aim of speaking tasks is to help students develop the fluency of expert speakers where meaning is communicated with few hesitations and in a manner that is appropriate for the context. Learners may develop and improve their speaking performance through activities that focus their attention on language, skills and strategies are therefore an important part of teaching speaking. The paper also presented some possible activities that help learners develop their knowledge and also some tips that enhance their speaking ability.

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