

# Oral Communication in The Process of Teaching\_Learning English as a Foreign Language.

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## Resumen

El artículo ofrece una serie de posiciones teóricas acerca de la enseñanza aprendizaje de la comunicación oral. En él se ilustra cómo tratar didácticamente esta habilidad en la carrera de Licenciatura en Educación, Especialidad Inglés.

Palabras claves: Oral, comunicación, tareas, errores, profesor, estudiantes.

## Abstract

In the article we offer some theoretical information about the Teaching\_Learning of oral communication. In it, we illustrate how to deal didactically with this skill in the English specialty in Higher Training College.

Key words: Oral, communication, tasks, mistakes, teacher, students.

Communication constitutes a necessary and indispensable condition for man's existence, and it is one of the most important factors in his/her personal development. It is a very important process for any human activity; it reflects the objective necessity of human beings to associate, cooperate and interact among themselves. That is why today different sciences like Psychology, Linguistics and Methodology of Foreign Language Teaching devotes special attention to communication.

"What does learning a foreign language actually entail? The final goal of foreign language learning is the ability to comprehend and produce appropriately the foreign language. It is a goal that can be summed up by saying that (we) would like the learners to be able to use the language both with accuracy -which depends on mastery of the language system- and fluency -which derives from experience of trying the language out for oneself. The teacher's task is then to strike a balance to meet the needs of the learners so that, in the end, they are able to communicate adequately. (Wallace, 1978).

This involves the acquisition of the skills categorized as listening, speaking, reading and writing, which do not exist autonomously for they are aspects of a unified whole by means of which the human system of communication operates.

It is most significant that those specialists, in charge of scientific research to improve the aforesaid process, have deeply become aware of the importance of teaching how to use the oral language in any context. No matter the syllabus aims or the students learning level, the oral foreign language is a relevant means to present, train and assess the linguistic contents submitted to analysis; i.e. the communicative functions and the language forms. "Of all the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), speaking seems intuitively the most important: people who know a language are referred to as "speakers" of that language, as if speaking included all other kinds of knowing". (Ur. 1996). Consequently, this article aims at presenting tips to foster oral communication in the English lesson as a foreign language.

Communication then is not simply a matter of the transfer of information, not the negotiation of it and not even the exchange of acts. It is a collaborative process whereby information and acts are attributed mutually among the systems taking part in the process and in which all the elements make an influence upon another one by means of signs that are closely related. These fundamental elements of the process are the following:

- Source of communication (sender): This element is in charge of transmitting information. This involves a group of people, or just one person being able of transmitting the message effectively either orally or in a written way.
- Message of communication: It is the information to be transmitted and it may appear in different ways:
- Destination of communication (receiver): The receiver or receivers get the information and through a very complex process the message is decoded.
- Channels of communication: This element refers its essence through the channel by means of which messages are transmitted from a given departing point to a given destination. Messages are received by means of the five senses.
- Feedback: Since communication is a two way process, the receiver's response is very important. This response is called feedback, because it "feeds back" information to the sender whether or not the receiver has got the message -that is, whether the message has been understood as the sender meant it to be. When this phenomenon takes place, then a very real and efficient communication is achieved.
- Situation of communication (barriers): This involves everything that affects the sharing of the message: the sender, the receiver, the message itself, and the feedback.

Nowadays, teaching English to speakers of other languages claims, for an approach to language teaching which emphasizes that the goal of language learning is communicative competence.

Thus, foreign language learning is a process concerning with the ability to interact communicatively with other people. It is not a matter of learning language forms and functions, but of learning how to use them appropriately through communication. Consequently, different authors have defined the term communicative competence as:

- "The ability to use the language system appropriately in any circumstances." (Finochiaro, et.al., 1989).
- "The ability to use the linguistic competence at the time socio-psychological and cultural factors result from its development." (Fernández, 1994).
- "It is the volume of knowledge (of linguistic, psychological, cultural and social rules) unconscious and necessary for the individual to use the language adequately in each situation." (Giovannini, et.al., 1996).
- "The ability not only to apply the grammatical rules of a language in order to form grammatically correct sentences but also to know when and where to use those sentences and to whom." (Richards, et. al., 1997).

It is interpreted then that the communicative competence includes the knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary of the target language, the cultural and socio-psychological development of the students as well as their ability to communicate appropriately according to each situation (socio-linguistic, discursive and cultural competence) paying special attention to the acquisition of learning strategies by the students.

There are some characteristics for a successful Speaking Activity.

1. Students talk a lot: As much as possible of the period of time allotted to the activity is in fact occupied by students' talk, this may seem obvious, but often most time is taken up with the teacher's talk or pauses.
2. Participation is even: Classroom discussion is not dominated by a minority of talkative participants: all get a chance to speak, and contributions are fairly evenly distributed.
3. Motivation is high: Students are eager to speak because they are interested in the topic and have something new to say about it, or because they want to contribute to achieving a task objective.
4. Language is of an acceptable level: Students express themselves in utterances that are relevant, easily comprehensible to each other, and of an acceptable level of language accuracy.

Even though these characteristics can make a speaking activity successful, there are some problems that might affect them:

1. Inhibition: Unlike reading, writing and listening activities, speaking requires some degree of real-time exposure to an audience. Students are often inhibited about trying

to say things in a foreign language in the classroom: worried about making mistakes, fearful of criticism or losing face, or simply shy of the attention that their speech attracts.

2. Nothing to say: Even if they are not inhibited, you often hear students complain that they cannot think of anything to say: they have no motive to express themselves beyond the guilty feeling that they should be speaking.
3. Low or uneven participation: Only one participant can talk at a time if he/she is to be heard. This problem is compounded by the tendency of some students to dominate, while others speak very little or not at all.
4. Mother-tongue use: In classes where the students share the same mother tongue, they may tend to use it because it is easier and because they feel less 'exposed' if they are speaking in their mother tongue.

There are some things teacher can do to solve some of these problems.

1. Use group work: This increases the amount of student talk going on in a limited period of time and also lowers inhibitions. It is true that group work means both the teacher cannot supervise all student speech, and the students may slip occasionally into their mother tongue; nevertheless, the amount of time remaining for positive, useful oral practice is still likely to be more, far more than in the full-class set-up.
2. Base the activity on easy language: The level of language needed for a discussion should be lower than that used in intensive language-learning activities in the same class, so the students can speak fluently.
3. Make a careful choice of topic and task to stimulate interest: On the whole, the clearer the purpose of the discussion the more motivated the participants will be.
4. Give some instructions or training in discussion skills: Include instructions about participation when introducing the activity. Appoint a chair person to each group to regulate participation.
5. Keep students speaking the target language: Appoint one of the group as monitor to remind participants to use the target language, and to report later to the teacher how well the group managed to keep to it.

As aforesaid, to study a foreign language it is not enough simply to have even an advanced knowledge of the language, it is necessary to be able to use that knowledge skilfully to carry out a range of communicative tasks. This also implies that managing the speaking class is a key point to be kept in mind.

To maximize the quantity and variety of speaking practice enjoyed by the students in the speaking class, teachers have to take each lesson through a sequence of interaction: for

example, students working individually, students working together in pairs or groups, students working all together observed by the teacher, the teacher addressing the whole class. It is important in all but the last of these for the teacher actively to monitor the students as they practice, circulating from pair or group to group as appropriate. In this way the teacher can assess, diagnose and select feedback to give to individual students and to the class as a whole. If possible the number of students in the class should be kept fairly small and the seating arrangements in the classroom should be flexible as to allow smooth transitions from one mode to another.

The success in teaching oral communication highly depends on a correct class organization. There are two main ways of arranging the students for their oral communication: frontally and in small groups. Communicatively speaking, the frontal arrangement consists of a conversation between the teacher and a student; meanwhile the other members of the academic group are listening to them. Also a group of two, three or more students may interact orally in front of the teacher and the rest of the audience.

The frontal technique assists the students' development of accuracy in the foreign language. This is so because when a speaker performs in public, he/she pays much more attention to the form of the language than when he/she him/herself interacts in small groups, in a more intimate conversation. This technique also helps the students learn how to address their oral speech to large groups of people.

An important feature while developing oral skills is that the students should work as much as possible on their own, talking to one another directly and not through the teacher all the time.

Choose an activity that:

1. Requires a minimum of student grouping: A good example is pairwork. Larger groups should be used only when it is appropriate.
2. Suits the level of the students: Ensure that the activity suits the language competence of the students.
3. Can be integrated into the objectives of the lesson.
4. Decide how to explain the activity to the students: The instructions given at the beginning are crucial. If the students do not exactly understand what they have to do, there will be time-wasting, confusion and lack of effective practice. Select activities that are simple enough to describe easily.
5. Decide how to verify the students' understanding: A good way to do so may be to ask the students to reformulate the explanation.

6. Decide how to monitor the students' work: Three possibilities are offered here: the teacher circulates while the students are working; the teacher remains at his desk and acts as a resource person; a student in each group is appointed to work as a monitor.
7. Decide how to end the activity: If a time limit has been set, then this will help to draw the activity to a close at a certain point while the students are still enjoying it and this will be a way to transfer what it has been done to another activity.

It is really important to have a clear knowledge of both how to operate with the wide range of techniques and procedures through out which the students' communicative competence could be developed and how to create the best conditions for learning. "In a sense, then, teachers are a means to an end: an instrument to see that learning takes place." (Byrne, 1989).

At the presentation stage, the teacher's main task is to serve as a kind of informant. Being the center of the stage, the language teacher presents something new to be learned while the students, by no means passive, try to decode the message. At this stage emphasis is given to linguistic forms and accuracy.

At the practice stage, the students do most of the talking and the teacher devises and provides the maximum amount of practice. It is the teacher's turn to give each student a chance to participate and then to monitor their performance. It is at this stage when the teacher can begin to take individual differences into account in spite of the fact that whole-class practice is still used here.

Since the students are expected to be able to use the language with accuracy and fluency derived from the mastery of the language system and from experience of trying the language out for oneself, respectively, the teacher's task is then to meet the needs of the students by means of striking a balance between these two goals so that in the end of the learning process the students are able to communicate adequately.

Thus, at any level of attainment, the students need to be given opportunities to use the language freely and have the teacher as a facilitator during the production stage. This is the way to have the students become aware that they have learned something useful to them and are encouraged to go on learning.

At the practice stage most of the activities are mainly under the teacher's control. That is to say, the whole-class work provides opportunities to reproduce what the students have learned accurately and it also enables the teacher to check whether the students are able to do this as they are encouraged to work occasionally on their own. At the production stage, on the other hand, the teacher should not be the medium throughout which the

students talk. What is needed, then, as a first step is a transition phase from practice to production to provide the students with the maximum amount of meaningful practice.

It is the task of the teacher to show the students how to make the best use of what they know, how to accommodate what they know of the language to the situations in which they are required to use it. This is a vital stage of learning; it is precisely here when the teacher shows the students how they can use the language rather than let them believe that they will be able to do it at some remote time in the future. Just so, it can be said that priority is given to fluency at this stage.

So far it has been pointed out that the teacher's role is closely related to the three stages of learning; most important, however, is another key role that cuts across these three stages: the teacher as a motivator. In language learning, motivation to arouse the students' interest on learning is crucial. Smooth transitions are necessary as to allow the teacher be authoritative and flexible at the same time.

There are some situations where teachers might prefer not to correct the students' mistakes: in fluency work, for example, when the student is in mid-speech, and to correct would disturb and discourage more than help. But there are other situations when correction is likely to be helpful. The recommendation of not correcting a student during fluent speeches sometimes turns to be an over-simplification. Oral corrections are usually provided directly by the teacher, but may be also elicited from the student who made the mistake or by another member of the class. As to oral correction, it does contribute to some extent to learning; however, this contribution should not be over-estimated. It is better to invest time and energy in creating opportunities for the students to get things right as much as possible as in painstaking work on correcting mistakes.

Not all the mistakes need to be corrected: the main aim of language learning is to receive and convey meaningful messages, and correction should be focussed on mistakes that interfere with this aim.

The teaching of oral English demands an approach to language teaching focused on the goal of oral language learning: the oral communicative competence. This is clearly the aim concerned with the communicative approach to foreign language teaching where forms and functions (meaning) are as important as the students' abilities to be appropriate and effective while communicating.

To illustrate the theoretical analysis developed in this work, an oral expression lesson for first year students of English from Higher Pedagogical School "José de la Luz y Caballero" is presented below. It belongs to Integrated English Practice syllabus. The theoretical

elements previously analyzed, as well as the authors' experience as teachers are shaped in it.

## **Unit 10: Are you O.k.?**

### **Spectrum 2**

Topic: Talking about past activities.

Lesson: Your Turn (Speaking)

Level: First year students

Time allotted: 2 hours

Teaching media: Chalkboard, tape recorder and cassettes, cards.

Objective: The students should be able to:

\_ express themselves orally up to a free production level by means of the forms and functions of the unit. As to experience a sense of successfulness on learning the target language.

Functions: Talk about past activities, tell someone what is wrong, tell someone what happened, and report an emergency

Forms: past tense irregular verbs.

### **Motivation**

#### **1.- Check independent work. (Narrations)**

After listening to three or four students (one advanced, two or three average, and one or two slow students. I will ask them about what happened to John Russo, a character they learn about in the class.

- Why did John have that accident?
  1. Was he paying attention to what he was doing?(He was riding a bicycle)
  2. What are consequences of acts like this one?
- Now you are going to listen to Frank describing what happened to him on Saturday. Draw what comes to your minds as you listen to him. Number your pictures.(The teacher will play the recording and will make pauses to give the students time to draw)

### **SCRIPT**

#### **1. My boss invited me to his birthday party on Saturday night.**

I thought I would better take him a nice present, so I bought him a really nice tie.

#### **2. When I got to the party, my boss's wife met me at the door and invited me inside.**

#### **3. Then I went in. All my friends from work were there.**



4. I heard my boss's voice behind me, as he came out of the kitchen.
5. I turned round to say hello, and guess what? He was wearing exactly the same tie as the one I had bought him.

2.- The teacher puts the students in pairs to retell the story to each other following the sequence of their drawings.

3.- Then the teacher will rearrange the students. This time in groups of three or four. He will ask the students to gather all their drawings and not to keep two more drawings that are alike. Then, they will place their pictures face down and will mix them. Afterwards, they will arrange them as they please and will make up another story taking into account this new arrangement.

- The students are going to be given ten minutes to make up their stories.
- Then, a member of each team will tell the story they made up.
  - As teachers to be, what would you do if a student in your classroom were on birthday?

4.- The teacher tells the students they are going to continue talking about past events. This time by means of role plays.

- The teacher distributes the cards at random in the classroom, so that the pairs or groups are different again. The students are going to be given five minutes to be ready to talk.
- The teacher will take fifteen minutes to listen to the students and evaluate them.

## **CARDS**

### **Student A-1**

You went camping and hiking over vacation. Tell your friend your opinion about your trip. Talk about the things you did. Find out what your friend did over vacation. If something was wrong, find out what happened.

### **Student A-2**

You ran into your friend Tony after vacation. Find out what he did over vacation. Find out his opinion about what he did.

You couldn't do much on your vacation because your husband / wife had an accident. Tell your friend what happened to him.

### **Student B-1**

You get home after work and as you don't feel like cooking, you invite your roommate to go out for dinner. As you walk down the stairs, your friend slips and falls down. Find out what happened to him /her. If necessary report the emergency.

### **Student B-2**

Your friend gets home after work and invites you to go out for dinner. As you walk down, you slip and fall down. Tell your friend what happened to you. You probably broke your leg. You think you need to go to the hospital.

### **Student B-3**

You are an emergency operator. Someone calls you to report an emergency.

Find out where the emergency is, and what the problem is. Find out the name of the person who is reporting the emergency. Assure him /her ambulance is going to be there soon.

### **Student C-1** (For advanced students)

You haven't seen your friend Chris since high school. You run into her at a party. You greet each other and catch up on what both of you have done since then. Later you share your memories about things you did together or with other friends.

### **Student C-2** (For advanced students)

Your friend Robert and you haven't seen each other since high school. He runs into you at a party. After the greetings you catch up on what each of you have done since then. Later, you share your memories about things you did together or with other friends.

**5.** - The teacher will take five minutes for general correction.

**6.** - Assignment.

Write a letter to a one of your friends and tell him/her about something that happened to you a few days ago. (T.B.H.I) for the next lesson.

### **Assignment for slow students**

Go back to exercise 1 and write down what happened to Frank on Saturday night. Be sure to keep the right sequence of events. (T.B.H.I).

It is clear that in order to achieve the learning of English oral communication as a foreign language, it is necessary to make use of a group of techniques connected not only to a variety of their typology to have the students perform in class, but also to the students' arrangements in the classroom and to the teacher's role which guarantee both the encouragement of oral speech and the correct distribution of learning tasks in the lesson allowing the acquisition of foreign language learning strategies.

Most important is that the teaching-learning process of English oral communication is susceptible to be fostered throughout the flexible application of the methodological guidelines suggested in this article for they reflex the contemporary tendencies of the communicative approach to foreign language teaching.

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