

THE ROLE OF STUDENTS' SPEAKING DURING AN ESP CLASS¹

Abstract: *Communicative activities have the same importance for learners of English for Specific Purposes as they do for learners of general English. They provide great rehearsal opportunities, feedback for the teacher as well as for the students, and the chance to develop skills which will help students turn into autonomous speakers of English.*

Keywords: *communicative skills, natural conversation, competent communicators.*

Mastering the rules of the language, in our case, of the English language, has ceased to represent the ultimate goal for a teacher. When speaking about language skills, “there are various components which need to be considered” (Frendo, 2008:8), the learners’ knowledge of the language and their ability to use the language in real-life situations being only two such components. Communicative language teaching makes extensive use of real-life situations that require communication. Teachers set up situations that students are likely to encounter in real life. Modern teaching is centred on making students understand the importance of being able to communicate naturally in a real situation. Teachers do their best to come up with various strategies to encourage students to speak freely in class on topics of interest to them. There has been an implicitly noticeable change in the way of assessing students’ success in the process of English acquisition. In the past, teachers were inclined to measure students’ success solely by their ability to be accurate in producing the foreign language. In recent times, accuracy has lost ground to communicative competence.

Romanian students studying English for Specific Purposes often tend to regard the specific vocabulary of a certain field of study as a limited inventory of words. Apart from making the mistake of completely separating it from the general vocabulary of the language, they set themselves the goal of mastering it, and neglect the purpose of the course – that of continually improving their professional conversation skills in English. It has often been pointed out that “understanding specialised texts is not simply a matter of understanding or acquiring the relevant terminology” (Baker, 1988:91). Just as “the teaching of vocabulary in ESP follows similar general principles to those in EGP” (Dudley-Evans, St John, 2007:83), the learning of vocabulary should follow the same rules. Learners should clearly distinguish between vocabulary they need in order to understand and vocabulary they need in order to be able to produce. They can resort to various techniques in order to assimilate vocabulary: “in comprehension, deducing the meaning of vocabulary from the context and from the structure of the actual word is the most important method of learning new vocabulary. For production purposes, storage and retrieval are significant” (Dudley-Evans, St John, 2007:83).

Thanks to the innumerable similarities which exist between Romanian technical vocabulary, for instance, and that of English, a technical text, no matter how complex, may, at first sight, seem accessible to most of the students. Such core concepts in engineering as *mechanics, kinematics, thermodynamics, materials science* and *structural analysis* are easy to render into Romanian thanks to their resemblance in the two languages: *mecanică, cinematică, termodinamică, știința materialelor* and *analiză structurală*. Thanks to the high presence of such terms in an English text, Romanian learners are able to understand the text when reading it, but find great difficulty when faced with the task of using the acquired information from the text in their own words. Some very common English words such as

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engineer, engineering, design, chart etc., whose Romanian correspondents are very easily found by Romanian learners of ESP, pose many problems when it comes to the reverse operation, that of translating them from Romanian into English. In such cases, they either find it difficult to remember the words or they misspell or mispronounce them. Similarly, they can understand the main ideas in a conversation they listen to, but, in most cases, they are reluctant to engage in a new conversation.

As has already been shown, communication skills are not to be neglected during an ESP course. Communicative competence is proved only through the ability to use the language and to participate actively in communicative exchanges. The ability to communicate effectively will undoubtedly help boost a student's confidence immensely. Group discussions are meant to encourage students to express their own ideas and opinions without inhibition. Effort is required not only by students, but also by Romanian teachers who are faced with the need to change a fixed conception according to which the students' role during a class is restricted to taking notes and listening to the teacher. Students must understand the importance of feeling free to voice their own opinions in class, and of disagreeing with one another and even with the teacher.

More often than not, classes of students are likely to be heterogeneous as far as the students' personality and attitude are concerned. One can easily notice that students who are good at understanding messages and who know a fair amount of language, display great difficulty in taking part in a conversation. They have difficulty in finding their words, they lose track of their thoughts and ideas, they feel embarrassed every time they are corrected by the teacher, and, especially, by one of their classmates, and they end up abandoning the conversation. These are more passive students who will gradually become more involved if the teacher knows how to create an environment which allows even the most reticent students to produce messages and interact with their peers. If teachers manage to find interesting activities to challenge the students to defeat their shyness, they will make them take an active part in the conversation. Modern teachers successfully use a wide range of approaches which are designed to help students boost their self-confidence. Group and pair activities are preferred by most Romanian learners because they feel that they share the responsibility with their partners. Any type of activity should be successfully combined with a friendly classroom atmosphere which allows even the shyest students to become independent, creative and spontaneous. Some students regard their teacher's intervention as a support while others find it disconcerting. Teachers should take both categories' needs into account and act accordingly. Students who tend to play the leading role in a conversation are assigned to provide support and guidance for those who are more dependent on help and support. Both categories of students will benefit from this kind of group work. The good communicators will consolidate their communication skills while the poor communicators will gradually feel relaxed and able to begin to produce language freely and creatively.

Students can learn communication by watching and listening to their teacher and, also, to their peers. Even the most active students should be taught to listen patiently to their shy partners without interrupting them. The most reliable model for the students is, undoubtedly, the teacher himself/herself. Katherine J. Hendrix points out a number of strategies which largely contribute to the students' success in the process of language acquisition. All of them may be successfully made use of during an ESP class:

- a) talk "clearly, slowly and loudly to facilitate student note taking"
- b) provide "chapter outlines"
- c) offer students the opportunity "to check out sample speech videos and texts"

- d) offer “clearly stated concepts”
- e) always be “friendly and interested in the teaching material” (Hendrix, 2002:641).

It is worth mentioning at this point that the teacher himself/herself may, at times, learn from students and accept the idea that he/she “is not in the position of being the primary person with knowledge of the carrier content of the material”. The students may, in many cases (and certainly where the course is specifically oriented towards the subject content or work in which they are engaged), know more about the content than the teacher (Dudley-Evans, St John, 2007:13). For instance, it is very difficult even for an experienced teacher to distinguish among the following types of drawing: cross-section, elevation, exploded view, note, plan, schematic and specification. In this case, the cooperation between the teacher and his/her students who are training to become mechanical engineers will ensure the success of the activity.

It is essential for ESP learners to have the desire to take part in the exchange. To attain this goal, the teacher should choose for his/her class interesting texts, commensurate with their level and, especially, with the knowledge they have acquired in their specialty courses. In other words, “to enhance learning, materials must involve learners in thinking about and using the language....To stimulate and motivate, materials need to be challenging yet achievable; to offer new ideas and information whilst being grounded in the learners’ experience and knowledge; to encourage fun and creativity” (Dudley-Evans, St John, 2007:171-172). Variety is highly important in any language class, but “we feel that it is particularly important in an ESP class as there is sometimes the danger of the ESP class becoming rather a dry affair that fails to motivate learners. We need to practise a number of micro-skills in one class, we need to introduce a range of activity types and we need to vary the type of interaction taking place during the class” (Dudley-Evans, St John, 2007:177).

Students have different attitudes to the basic modes of oral communication – the expository mode and the conversational mode. The former relies on the student’s free presentation of a given topic. Students are not able to cope with this task if they are not proficient at English. But, even so, they may feel discouraged by the possible lack of reaction from their audience. What they need is active listeners. Active listening involves the non-verbal and the verbal encouragement given to a speaker (Dudley-Evans, St John, 2007:106). The speakers should make sure that the language they use is accurate, appropriate and grammatically correct. This presentation can be spontaneous or prepared. Students do not usually feel at ease when having to give a spontaneous presentation of a topic, finding prepared presentations much more accessible because they give them the chance to think about the topic at their own pace and to become informed about it.

The conversational mode is more problematic to most students because they engage in a dialogue which is unpredictable and, hence, often difficult to manage. Every student, no matter how competent at English, is likely to make mistakes because the interlocutors change roles very quickly, which does not allow them to formulate their intervention beforehand. Students should focus on being fluent during the conversation and they should be less interested in obtaining language correctness. Mistakes, repetitions, and fillers are permitted as long as the speaker succeeds in getting his/her ideas across.

In communicative language teaching, the teacher and the students change roles. The teacher becomes a patient listener. He/She will talk less and listen more. His/Her role is to monitor the students’ performance. Yet, it is natural for teachers to become involved, provided they do not tend to dominate. It is the students who do most of the speaking. The activity has every chance of being a successful one if the students understand that the

teacher's intention is to help them gain confidence in using English in and outside the class. The teacher gives them the opportunity to participate actively in dialogues and discussions, and they should be able to take advantage of this. Through practice, even the shyest students will learn how to control their emotions, how to organize their material logically, how to make themselves understood by their peers, and how to accept any reaction from the audience openly.

If students focus on the way they express their ideas and not on the content they want to transmit, they will risk finding themselves at a loss for words. The obstinate reluctance to use certain language forms will make the communication very stilted and unnatural. The teachers should not interrupt the students to correct possible mistakes or inadequacies. Yet, there are times when the teachers need to give assistance to their students, but they should do it sensitively. If teachers have a close relationship with their students, they can intervene during a speaking activity on condition that this intervention is quite gentle. There are times when the students may be asked to correct their peers' mistakes. They will find this task very stimulating and this method of correction will increase competition among them.

Communicative activities offer great opportunities for rehearsal, give the teacher and the students alike feedback, and motivate students thanks to their engaging qualities. They help students to produce language automatically and to become autonomous.

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