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Activities Contributing a Great Deal to the Students' Interactive Skills in Foreign Language Classes

Abstract

While teaching speaking it is desired to provide a rich environment in class for meaningful communication to take place. With this aim, various speaking activities can contribute a great deal to students in developing their interactive skills necessary for life. These activities make students active in the learning process and at the same time make their learning process more meaningful and enjoyable.

Keywords: meaningful communication, interactive skills, authentic activities, real-life situations, communicative competence

Introduction

Speaking is a crucial part of second language learning/teaching. It is the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts. As for authentic situations and different kind of communicative activities, they contribute a great deal to the students' interactive skills in foreign language classes.

The goal of teaching speaking is to improve students' communicative skills, to enable them to express themselves and learn how to follow the social and cultural rules appropriate in each communicative circumstance. As D. Nunan states, through teaching speaking we help the learners to:

- produce English speech sounds and sound patterns;
- use word and sentence stress, intonation patterns and the rhythm of the language;
- select appropriate words and sentences according to the proper social context, situation or subject matter;
- organise their thoughts in a meaningful and logical sequence;
- use language as a means of expressing their attitudes-agreement, disagreement, judgments;
- use the language quickly and confidently which is called fluency (Nunan, 2003).

Now language teachers agree that students learn to speak in a foreign language by interacting. Communicative language teaching is based on real-life situations that require communication. By using this method in language classes, learners will have the opportunity of communicating with each other in the target language. So teachers should create a favourable environment where students have real-life communication, authentic activities, and meaningful tasks that promote oral language. This can occur when learners collaborate in groups to achieve a goal or to complete a task.

Obviously interaction lies in the heart of communication. It is what communication is supposed to be. Through interaction – discussions, joint problem-

solving tasks or dialogues, students can enlarge their language store as they produce or exchange authentic ideas, language material within authentic situations. Students use all they possess of the language – all they have learned or casually absorbed in real-life context. Even at an elementary stage, they learn in this way to exploit the elasticity of the language. In his book on speaking, S. Thornbury suggests various dimensions of different speaking events in order to describe different speaking genres (Thornbury, 2010, pp. 13-14). For example, a distinction should be made between transactional and interpersonal functions. Transactional function has its main purpose – conveying or exchanging information, whereas the interpersonal function is all about maintaining and sustaining good relations between interlocutors/communicators.

In the scope of this article we come across with several communicative activities that can serve as corner-stones for building and implementing an interaction in the language classroom.

Discussion

Discussion can be held for various reasons. The students may arrive at a conclusion, share ideas about an event, or find solutions in their discussion groups. Students can become involved in agree/disagree discussions. In this type of discussions, the teacher can form groups of students, preferably 4 or 5 in each group, and provide controversial sentences like “*People learn best when they read vs. people learn best when they travel*”. Then each group works on their topic for a given time period, and presents their opinions to the class. It is essential that the speaking should be equally divided among group members. At the end, the class decides on the winning group who defended the idea in the best way. This activity fosters critical thinking and quick decision making, and students learn how to express and justify themselves in polite ways while disagreeing with the others.

For efficient group discussions, it is always better to form not large groups, because shy students may avoid contributing in large groups. The group members can be either assigned by the teacher or the students may determine it by themselves, but groups should be rearranged in every discussion activity so that students can work with various people and learn to be open to different ideas. Lastly, in class or group discussions the students should always be encouraged to ask questions, paraphrase ideas, express support, check for clarification, and so on.

Some discussions just happen in the middle of lessons; they are **unprepared** by the teacher, but, if encouraged, can provide some of the most enjoyable and productive speaking in language classes. Their success will depend upon our ability to prompt and encourage and, perhaps, to change our attitude to errors and mistakes from one minute to the next. Pre-planned discussions, on the other hand, depend for their success upon the way we ask students to approach the task in hand.

Below we suggest the following topics that might evolve discussion in the classroom:

- *Breakfast is the most important meal of the day.*
- *Studying grammar is more important than practicing conversation skills.*
- *Television is the leading cause of violence in today's society.*
- *Smoking should be permitted in public places.*

- *Females are better students than males.*
- *Reading English is more difficult than writing English.*
- *Summer is the best season of the year.*
- *Children under 13 should not be allowed to babysit.*
- *High school students should wear uniforms.*
- *The government should pay for post-secondary education.*

Situation

Communicative language teaching makes use of real-life situations that enhance communication. The teacher must set up a variety of situation that students are likely to encounter in real life, and students' motivation to learn comes from their desire to communicate in meaningful ways about meaningful topics (Brown, 2010).

We suggest the following topics for situations to organise in class:

- *Someone asks you a question you do not want to answer. What do you say?*
- *You forgot your mother's birthday. What do you say when you see her?*
- *You want to buy an item located behind the cashier. What do you say?*
- *The man in the seat next to you is smoking. What do you say?*
- *Your child is playing with matches. What do you say?*
- *You need more time to finish an exam. What do you say to the teacher?*

Questionnaires

Questionnaires are useful because, by being pre-planned, they ensure that both questioner and respondent have something to say to each other. Depending upon how tightly designed they are, they may well encourage the natural use of certain repetitive language patterns – and thus can be situated in the middle of our communication continuum.

Students can design questionnaires on any topic that is appropriate. As they do so, the teacher can act as a resource, helping them in the design process. The results obtained from questionnaires can then form the basis for written work, discussions or prepared talks.

Information gap

In this activity students are supposed to work in pairs. One student has the information that other partner does not have and the partners will share their information. Information gap activities serve many purposes such as solving a problem or collecting information. Also, each partner plays an important role because the task cannot be completed if the partners do not provide the information the others need. These activities are effective, as all participants have an opportunity to talk extensively in the target language.

Brainstorming

On a given topic, students can produce ideas in a limited time. Depending on the context, either individual or group brainstorming is effective and learners generate

ideas quickly and freely. The good characteristics of brainstorming are that the students are not criticised for their ideas so they are free to share new ideas.

Story telling

Students can briefly summarise a tale or story they heard from somebody beforehand, or they may create their own stories to tell their classmates. Story telling fosters creative thinking. It also helps students express ideas in the format of beginning, development, and ending. Students also can tell riddles or jokes. For instance, at the very beginning of each class session, the teacher may call a few students to tell short riddles or jokes as an opening. In this way, not only will the teacher address students' speaking ability, but also get the attention of the class.

Interviews

Students can conduct interviews on selected topics with various people. Conducting interviews with people gives students a chance to practice their speaking ability not only in class but also outside and helps them becoming socialized. After interviews, each student can present his or her study to the class. Moreover, students can interview each other and "introduce" his or her partner to the class.

Story completion

This is a very enjoyable, whole-class, free-speaking activity for which students sit in a circle. For this activity, a teacher starts to tell a story, but after a few sentences he or she stops narrating. Then, each student starts to narrate from the point where the previous one stopped. Each student is supposed to add from four to ten sentences. Students can add new characters, events, descriptions and so on.

Reporting

Before coming to class, students are asked to read a newspaper or magazine and, in class, they report to their friends what they find as the most interesting news. Students can also talk about whether they have experienced anything worth telling their friends in their daily lives before class.

Playing cards

In this game, students should form groups of four. Each suit will represent a topic. For instance:

- **Diamonds:** Earning money.
- **Hearts:** Love and relationships.
- **Spades:** An unforgettable memory.
- **Clubs:** Best teacher.

Each student in a group will choose a card. Then, each student will write 4-5 questions about that topic to ask the other people in the group. For example:

If the topic "Diamonds: Earning Money" is selected, here are some possible questions:

- Is money important in your life? Why?

- What is the easiest way of earning money?
- What do you think about lottery? Etc.

However, the teacher should state at the very beginning of the activity that students are not allowed to prepare yes-no questions, because by saying yes or no students get little practice in spoken language production. Rather, students ask open-ended questions to each other so that they reply in complete sentences.

Picture narrating

This activity is based on several sequential pictures. Students are asked to tell the story taking place in the sequential pictures by paying attention to the criteria provided by the teacher as a rubric. Rubrics can include the vocabulary or structures they need to use while narrating.

Description

The teachers can use this technique to evoke interaction in class. For this account they can introduce different objects, pictures, phenomena, events, etc., to make the students talk.

Below we suggest the followings:

- *Describe a famous park or recreation area in your home country.*
- *Describe an interesting neighbor you have had.*
- *Describe something you could never give away.*
- *Describe a place you will never forget.*
- *Describe a sporting event you attended recently.*
- *Describe a memorable birthday celebration.*
- *Describe a place you go for recreation or exercise.*
- *Describe your childhood home.*
- *Describe someone you respect deeply.*
- *Describe the nightlife in a city you are familiar with.*
- **Picture describing** – This is another way to organise description activity in class. For this activity students can form groups and each group is given a different picture. Students discuss the picture with their groups, and then a spokesperson for each group describes the picture to the whole class. This activity fosters the creativity and imagination of the learners as well as their public speaking skills.
- **Find the differences** – For this activity students can work in pairs and each couple is given two different pictures, for example, picture of boys playing football and another picture of girls playing tennis. Students in pairs discuss the similarities and/or differences in the pictures.

This is not the complete list of interactive procedures in class. The activities are different according to their context, format and difficulty. So, interaction is successful, if it is based on a knowledge and successful performance of turn-taking. Speakers should use various discourse markers to benefit time (*ummm... well... you know...*), to start a turn (*well... I'd just like to say...*) or to mark the beginning or the end of a segment (*right... now... anyway...*).

There are some categories of discourse, such as:

Conversational openings:

- *How are you?*
- *That's a nice dog.*
- *At last some sunshine.*

Interrupting:

- *Sorry to interrupt, but...*

Topic shift:

- *Oh, by the way, that reminds me...*

Closings:

- *It's been nice talking to you...*
- *Well, I don't want to keep you from your work... we must get together sometime.*

The interactive teacher should be fully aware of the dynamics in in classroom. The success of classroom learning is very much dependent on how students relate to each other, what the classroom environment is, how effectively students cooperate and communicate with each other, and of course what roles the teacher and learners play.

Teachers can play many roles in the course of teaching:

- the teacher as a master controller;
- the teacher as a manager;
- the teacher as a director;
- the teacher as a resource;
- the teacher as a facilitator;
- the teacher as a partner.

As P. Ur states, the good language-teacher combines the following qualities that are interwoven:

- pedagogical skills;
- technical knowledge;
- interpersonal skills;
- personal qualities.

Good Language-Teacher Characteristics:

- technical knowledge;
- pedagogical skills;
- personal qualities;
- interpersonal skills (Ur, 2012, pp. 284-286).

Here we suppose that teachers should take into consideration the following tips while encouraging interaction in class:

- Provide maximum opportunity to students to speak the target language by providing a rich environment that contains collaborative work, authentic materials and tasks, and shared knowledge.
- Try to involve each student in speaking activity; for this aim, motivate the learners for their active participation.
- Reduce teacher speaking time in class while increasing student speaking time.
- Indicate positive signs when commenting on a student's response.

- Ask eliciting questions such as “What do you mean? How did you reach that conclusion?” in order to prompt students to speak more. Don't ask general questions (requiring only yes/no answers).
- Provide positive/constructive feedback like “Your presentation is really great. It is a good job”.
- Do not correct students' pronunciation mistakes very often while they are speaking. Overcorrection would distract students from their speech/communication.
- Provide both in-class and out-class activities to practice speaking (Task/Project-Based Language Teaching).
- Stroll around classroom to ensure if the learners need help while they work in groups or pairs.
- Provide the language material (vocabulary, grammatical structures, speech patterns) beforehand that students need in speaking activities.
- Diagnose problems that some students will face in expressing themselves while practicing the spoken language, try to encourage them.

Conclusion

With all interpretations mentioned above we infer that the heart of communicative language teaching is interaction, through which the real life enters the class, associated with authentic activities, situations, and language material. Interaction makes the learning process more meaningful, enjoyable, active and positive, contributing a great deal to the development of learners' communicative language skills and their interculturalism.

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