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DEVELOPING LEARNERS' SPEAKING COMPETENCE: TEACHING APPROACHES AND CLASSROOM LIMITATIONS

Key words: teaching speaking, holistic approach, speaking competence

Introduction

Learning speaking is very demanding and challenging for most language learners. They experience a variety of difficulties and pressure when they try to apply their linguistic knowledge and speaking skills. However, there is much what teachers can do in order to help EFL learners develop and improve their speaking competence. As Harmer (2001) notices, in the course of learning a non-native language there are generally two types of speaking practice. Firstly, it is a controlled kind of language practice where students say many simple or more complicated sentences, using a specific piece of grammar or function. Secondly, it is when students use the language as freely as they can and want. They may use any and all the language at their command to carry out a kind of oral task. Harmer (2001) calls it "Activation". By applying this term he describes activities and exercises which are created to get students using the language communicatively. The aim for the students is not to concentrate on particular language constructions, grammar or vocabulary but just to use the language they are able to and which is appropriate for a given topic or situation. It could be treated as a kind of rehearsal for the real conversations outside the classroom. It gives students a chance to use the language with little or no restriction. Typical speaking exercises which activate students are discussions, debates and role plays, descriptions of pictures, problem-solving activities and stimulation (Harmer 2001:

119

26, 68). Another division of speaking is proposed by The Council of Europe in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). They divide speaking into two categories: spoken interaction and spoken production, but it can be noticed that Harmer's "Activation" comprises these two categories.

As aptly noted by Hughes (2011), it is not enough to give students an opportunity to practise speaking through various classroom tasks but it is also crucial to teach speaking. First of all, learners must be familiarized with the nature of speaking and communicative strategies. They must be aware of the fact, that they are responsible for their own speaking development; consequently, they need to know how to plan and cope with this process. For this reason, practising speaking is not equal with teaching speaking.

In fact, there are many approaches to teaching speaking and, according to Burns (1998) they can be split into two categories. The first group of approaches centres on developing separated speaking skills while the second one concentrates on oral communication and the speech production during communicative activities. These approaches are labelled respectively as direct (controlled) and indirect (transfer).

Approaches to teaching speaking

In the first place, a direct or controlled approach focuses on accuracy and stresses practice of language forms, so it causes that grammar forms of the target language and discourse structures play a significant role. The use of language is controlled and the goal is to develop speaking skills. Because of that, many pre-communicative activities are used during classes such as, drills, structure manipulation or pattern practice. On the whole, this approach intends to raise learners' consciousness of language structure and teachers are leaders who are responsible for the students' learning process, but also they need to teach their students how to plan and cope with this process.

On the other hand, the indirect approach is associated with fluency of speech and emphasises developing interaction strategies because language which is taught is used for communication. For this reason, there are many communicative activities during which functional language can be used, so students are encouraged to talk with other classmates. Teachers plan various tasks such as role plays, simulations, information gaps or discussions. To sum up, this approach is definitely learner centred and based on supposition that learners will transfer the speaking skills acquired through such communicative tasks to real life (Burns 1998: 103–105, Goh and Burns 2012: 134–135).

Nevertheless, as well expressed by Burns (1998), both of these approaches have some limitations and none of them "fully covers all the processes of EFL speaking improvement". For instance, the direct approach does not pay attention to the fact that the accurate grammar forms of the language are often developed and improved through speaking. On the other hand, the indirect approach focuses on fluency, which is understood as spontaneous talk with a small amount of hesitation, while language elements and their use are often neglected. What is more, many teachers mistakenly consider fluency of speaking as expressing meaning with few hesitations and even when a speaker makes many grammar mistakes or uses inappropriate language, it is enough to call him or her a fluent one (Nation and Newton, 2009). Therefore, the best option is to combine these two approaches and apply them together.

However, Goh and Burns (2012: 138) claim that, in most classrooms, these approaches are not linked and operate isolated from each other. It is also underscored that the research of some current textbooks shows that the materials are dominated by one of the perspective and what is more, *"the pedagogical procedures in some course books do not seem to be supported by any recognisable theoretical principles"* (p. 138). Each module presents rather a series of activities, which are linked by a common topic, and in many textbooks, designed for general English teaching, speaking tasks gain even less attention or they are constructed as pre-reading or pre-writing activities. The research, carried out by Faucette (2001), of available materials, such as textbooks or teachers' resource books paying attention to communication strategies, also shows that in some course books, there are only few communication strategies introduced and what is more, some non-recommended strategies are suggested. Additionally, there is a limited range of communicative activities so the conclusions drawn by Goh and Burns (2012) concerning materials seem to be significant.

According to Richards and Rodgers (2001: 250), the impact of various teaching approaches can be observed in the published materials which are used by language teachers. That is why, it is teachers' responsibility to become familiar with diverse approaches and methods, which develop constantly and play the central role in teaching profession. Teachers are the ones who must use the materials in the best possible way, in order to assist learners and give them the tools to communicate in a target language (Faucette 2001). What is more, teachers must be able to use these approaches creatively and flexibly, in order to adapt them to classroom reality, language learners' needs and the goals they need to achieve. Therefore, in 2012 Goh and Burns presented a holistic approach. The brief presentation of this approach is grounded in *Teaching Speaking: A Holistic Approach* – study conducted by the authors mentioned above. The methodological framework for this approach is presented in Figure 1.
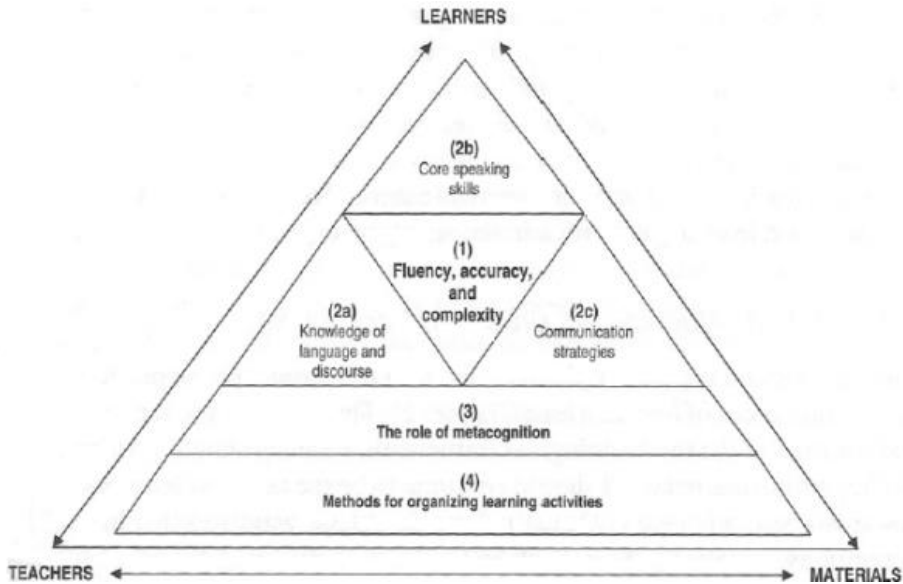
Figure1. A methodological framework for a holistic approach to teaching speaking adapted from Goh and Burns (2012: 139).

A holistic approach takes into consideration three essential components, in order to succeed in language learning: teachers, materials and learners. The role of a teacher is to focus on learners' cognitive, affective and social needs, as well as to help overcome obstacles and learning difficulties and to support their skills development and improvement of the language. The second factor – materials – is three-dimensional. The materials are divided into three categories:

1. Those that provide speaking practice.
2. Those that promote language and skill learning.
3. Those that facilitate metacognitive development.

Apart from that, "in a holistic approach to teaching speaking, materials should be varied in form and purpose, in order to engage learners in different dimensions of learning". (Goh and Burns 2012: 5). What is more, there should be materials which let learners develop their metacognitive knowledge about foreign language speaking and are favourable to them to plan and self-evaluate their personal learning. As Tomlinson (2008: 143) reports, "there is evidence that what teachers and learners actually do in the classroom is determined principally by what the course book tells them to do", so it is important to adapt the material offered in the textbook in a holistic and modern way and treat the textbook as a tool not as a goal.

Last but not least, the role of learners is the key one, because they must be aware of their own responsibility for managing learning and improving lan-

guage. One of the ways to achieve it is to become a more conscious learner, "by better understanding the nature and demands of speaking and by critically considering strategies that can facilitate their oral communication" (ibid.: 6). Obviously, learners' goals and needs are the most important; however, they can fulfil them only if they receive adequate support from well-informed teachers and suitable materials. To develop and acquire speaking competence, learners need to produce appropriate speech and at the same time speak fluently. These aspects should also be taught by EFL teachers.

Summing up the holistic model, fluency, accuracy and complexity are central and constitute quality of speech as the desired outcome of teaching and learning but are not sufficient enough to achieve speaking competence. Learners also need to gain knowledge of the target language and spoken discourse, as well as to know how to use communication strategies and develop the core speaking skills. These three elements refer to speaking competence. However, to be a successful and competent EFL speaker, metacognition (thinking about one's thinking/learning) is also essential. The students must, firstly, be aware of their learning processes and secondly, control them in order to plan their language development. All of these dimensions are supported by the fourth one, which concerns the methods for organising learning activities and emphasises the role of teachers and materials in assuring the effective teaching (Goh and Burns 2012: 138–150). Developing all of these aspects of the language is needed to succeed in the oral examinations.

All in all, this holistic approach seems to give an opportunity to achieve a new quality of foreign language learning and teaching. As has been stated, according to Hughes (2011: 6–10), teaching speaking is not separated from other goals appearing in a classroom activity. Frequently, when the spoken language is the centre of interest of a lesson, the other aims overlap it, so the spoken language can be used to practise some aspects of linguistic knowledge, for instance a grammar rule, to develop some productive skills or to raise learners' awareness of some socio-linguistic elements, such as how to interrupt politely and so on. Because of that, Hughes (2011: 7) considers the role of teachers and asks whether they are engaged in "teaching the spoken form of a language or teaching a language through speaking". She suggests that there is a huge amount of speaking during classes but it may be different from the successful teaching of speaking as a holistic skill. She also emphasises that "there has been too great a separation of form (grammar and vocabulary) and delivery (pronunciation and fluency)" (ibid.: 7).

One of the reasons why such particular emphasis is put on presenting the holistic approach is that in this approach speaking is treated as a combinatorial skill where fluency, accuracy and complexity are the outcomes of teaching and learning. In addition, fluent speech is understood as a demonstration of "mastery of

form-function relationships" which "is manifested in the accuracy and complexity of the language produced" (Goh and Burns 2012: 140). What is more, it highlights the components of speaking competence which must be developed to achieve the goals, so students need to acquire linguistic knowledge, core speaking skills and communicative strategies. Furthermore, the metacognitive aspect is incorporated into learning processes, which can raise learners' awareness of being a conscious EFL speaker. Finally, it gives suggestions how to organise successful speaking activities, and explains the roles of teachers, learners and materials to ensure the effective teaching of speaking. All of these elements play a significant role in passing the oral EFL examinations and succeeding in real communication.

Classroom limitations

There are many classroom limitations which delay, refrain and inhibit the language learning process and the development of speaking competence.

First of all, there are still a great number of teachers who spend time in the classroom doing writing and reading tasks, while speaking practice is almost ignored (Bahrani and Soltani 2010). Actually, there is a continuously significant focus on the language system (grammar and vocabulary) in many classrooms rather than on skills. According to Thornbury (2005: 117–119), the speaking skill is integrated with other skills and cannot be taught in isolation. For instance, for many foreign language learners understanding what other speakers are saying is often an extreme difficulty. Therefore, speaking should be practised in combination with other skills. Secondly, performing various speaking activities and giving feedback to learners' individual performance is sometimes very difficult or even impossible in large classes (Burns and Joyce 1997). Too many students in a group and/or too few language lessons are the reasons for not giving enough opportunities to practise speaking by learners, which consequently leads to failure in speaking in the target language. The time restriction is also an obstacle to prepare students for their final examinations in English. In addition, in EFL context it is common that learners' speaking possibilities outside the classroom are limited, so if the chance to speak a foreign language is restricted also during the EFL classes, they are unable to practise and succeed in communication. As a result, they soon become demotivated and lose interest in learning a language (Bahrani and Soltani 2010). Additionally, many language teachers claim that students do not want to talk at all. There can be a few factors which cause this situation. Firstly, the learners do not want to talk because they are not confident enough in a language and as well the problem of anxiety to talk aloud and peers pressure must be taken into account. According to Jamshidnejad (2011: 8–9), the

less the students speak, the less they improve their speaking skills, and the more they are frightened of speaking. Moreover, constant teacher's correction of mistakes and negative feedback or lack of this feedback can also be demotivating and discouraging from speaking. Secondly, the speaking activities provided by teachers can be simply boring because they do not capture students' interest or create a real necessity for communication (Bahrani and Soltani 2010).

Added to that, an important limitation is the fact that students' language competences are frequently very poor, and even after studying this language for many years learners are not able to communicate in the target language. The first oral language examination taken by Polish students is held in the secondary school. The results of First European Survey on Language Competences announced in June 2012 by European Commission in Brussels, which compared language competences of 14-15-year-old teenagers (students of middle schools – *'gimnazjum'* in Poland) from 14 countries, show that the level of English as a first foreign language competences of 24 % of Polish tested students is pre-A1 (CEFR[1] measurement) – it means they do not achieve the first level proposed by CEFR so they do not gain enough language competence to be able to communicate in the target language, for 34% of the Polish respondents their level is classified as A1, which means that they are basic users who can use very simple language with support, 17% – level A2 – advanced basic users who can use simple language to communicate on everyday topics, 15 % – level B1– independent language users who can deal with straightforward, familiar matters and 10% – level B2 – independent language users who can express themselves clearly and effectively.[2] The language competences of 58% of teenagers in Poland who finish their middle schools are very poor and actually they are not able to communicate in English. Finding the answer why the situation is like that, despite the fact that Polish students start their EFL education in the primary school, is out of the scope of this paper but it is an issue for further analysis. However, this lack of language competences definitely influences learners' reluctance to speak in the target language, because as was previously stated, the knowledge of a language is one of the important elements of communicative language competence.

All things considered, teachers need to seek the ways of supporting students and giving them more opportunities to learn and practise speaking. One of the possibilities to do it is to apply new technologies in learning and teaching routines. This aspect will be developed and presented theoretically and practically in another paper.

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[1] Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: teaching, learning and assessment.

[2] For the details of this survey see European Commission, Education and Training full report available online, see also Perlmann-Balme, 2013.

Conclusion

Summing up, there are many classroom limitations to teaching EFL speaking. Some of them depend on the teachers and their role in the classroom, others – on some external conditions which are out of teachers and learners' liability, such as the number of students in one class or number of hours for a foreign language teaching, as well as some technical issues, for instance, classroom interiors or possibility to use ICT devices during lessons. However, teachers need to be familiar with the approaches, methods and techniques for teaching speaking, modify and adjust them suitably for their students' needs and goals. The quality of materials used by teachers plays also an important role. There must be given as many speaking practice opportunities as it is possible in and out of the classroom, in order to enhance language knowledge, develop speaking skills, teach communicative strategies and encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning process. A holistic approach is one of the possibilities offered to language teachers to help students prepare for their final examination in the target language and also to communicate in this language in the future.

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TEACHING APPROACHES AND CLASSROOM LIMITATIONS

Summary

The purpose of this article is to present the problems concerning teaching speaking in a foreign language. The author attempts to analyse the approaches used in the teaching process of this skill, paying special attention to the holistic model, in which she sees the chance of success in developing and improving the EFL learners' speaking competence. What is more, the paper discusses the classroom difficulties and limitations and offers suggestions how to cope with them.

Key words: teaching speaking, holistic approach, speaking competence

ROZWIJANIE KOMPETENCJI KOMUNIKACYJNEJ UCZĄCYCH SIĘ:
PODEJŚCIA ORAZ TRUDNOŚCI W NAUCZANIU

Streszczenie

Artykuł porusza problemy dotyczące nauczania mówienia w języku obcym. Autorka podejmuje próbę zaprezentowania podejść stosowanych do nauczania tej sprawności, kładąc szczególny nacisk na model holistyczny, w którym upatruje szansę na pełne rozwijanie kompetencji komunikacyjnej uczących się języka obcego. W drugiej części artykułu omówione zostały trudności i ograniczenia, z jakimi musi zmagać się nauczyciel przygotowujący uczniów do egzaminów ustnych w języku obcym oraz sugestie jak sobie z nimi radzić.

Słowa kluczowe: nauczanie mówienia, podejście holistyczne, kompetencja komunikacyjna