

# DEVELOPING STUDENT'S COMMUNICATION SKILLS AT FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSES IN THE RF

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## Abstract

The article dwells on the cases of challenges a teacher of English can come across while teaching students to speak English, highlights possible reasons of failures: both psychological and educational.

Speaking is thought to be one of the most essential aspects of learning a foreign language since a foreign language class is communication-oriented. A psychological barrier in speaking a foreign language is believed to be strong unless the class atmosphere melts it with partnership tasks, the teacher's friendly attitude and understanding the roots of lack of desire or will to start speaking a foreign language (English in our case).

According to a famous Russian psychotherapist and writer Vladimir Levi, we should address a student's Field of Confidence, i.e. his/her successful moments of the past which might help with ruining false self-images of the student when speaking English.

The key point of the research lies in a student's experimental estimation of social abilities and class building microclimate depending on the creativity of tasks offered and motivation level acquired. The quality of communication climate within the groups differs; it gets improved as long as the teacher's attention is drawn to motivating tasks and interaction development. It becomes worse in the case with one-face tasks oriented at academic skills mastering rather than speaking ones.

The students' psychological differences (confused nature or v.v. "celebrity" behavior) and varieties in perceiving new material (visual, audial, motoric-based) should be taken into account by the teacher.

The chief idea of the article is in underlining the teacher's necessity of organizing a special student workroom of mutual trust and jovial attitude towards each other. It has a direct influence on the speaking level of the group and should be taken into consideration by the teacher of a foreign language.

Keywords: communication skills, psychological barrier, motivating tasks, student creativity.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

What is the most crucial thing to teach a student? What answers can you get to the question? We bet they will be as follows: "Providing students with acute theoretical and practical knowledge" or "Developing a young specialist's competitiveness at the labor market and giving him/her a sound analysis of employment variants", or "Brushing up business doing skills", etc. It is essential, by all means! However, we omit one detail of high importance: teaching communication should prevail! We are social beings, therefore, communication is initial whatever profession you choose. Your success among peers, your company-building skills (both for work and friend-making), your dialogue-making abilities (e.g. when making a long-term agreement) fully depend on whether you are a good interlocutor or not.

According to Heraclitus, "Beasts living with us become tamed meanwhile people communicating with each other can get wild" [1]. "No one but parents can teach communication best" – you could suppose. Possibly yes, but have a look at modern parents working all day long and making a fortune for their families! How much time do they actually devote to real communication with kids and other family members? The family may gather together in one room in the evening and devote their time to surfing the net separately from each other. And we can blame no one for this modern phenomenon of virtual interaction with a vivid lack of real one.

"The only luxury I am familiar with is the luxury of human communication" – such was Egzuperi's vision of things [1]. Without well-developed communication skills one cannot be socially happy in the full volume, can hardly make an impression of a multi-sided person who is nice to talk to.

## **2 TEACHING DIGITAL GENERATION**

Unfortunately, teaching ethics is not compulsory in most schools and at most universities. Although John Lebbcock supposed that “for having success in life communication skills are thought to be even more essential than owning a talent” [1]. And who if not teachers of native and foreign languages should teach our “digital generation” – the generation that has become guru of device usage, making a photo-report of their life and chatting on the Net non-stop?

At our classes we frequently study the topics of communication from different viewpoints and in various locations: at airports and railway stations, at cafes and on the street, at home and in the office, etc. However, it turns out to be quite insufficient! Not enough for developing a creative-thinking personality with a friendly nature!

## **3 EXPERIMENT**

The authors of the article (foreign language teachers) have made an experiment which aimed at estimating the quality of students' communication skills and creativity of thinking in different task-formats and within a different teaching approach: we divided our students into two groups of 5-6 people (we would like to draw attention to the fact that they had not been acquainted before the experiment). During three months Group A had been doing reading tasks, tasks on text analysis and essay writing, sample-based dialogues with a certain set of vocabulary to be used. They were not asked to focus on interacting with their companions while doing the tasks, just to concentrate on what they were doing.

Group B had been responsible for making out funny collective stories on film-episodes, acting out diverse conversations with a possibility of choosing necessary vocabulary, creating group-projects in which each member had to deal with a definite task, etc. The emphasis of their work was made on communicating with each other in order to fulfill the tasks properly.

### **3.1 Differences in Communication in Both Groups**

It became clear from the way of the experiment that Group A was carrying out the tasks formally, consulting each other in the last resort only (when acting a cliché-dialogue out) and cracking jokes about each other's lack of creativity every now and then. In case of failing the task, some of them tried to put the blame on someone from the group. The students looked bored, tired and even a little depressed, they were not at war with each other but at the same time we could not define their communication as mutually friendly and sincere. They often asked what the time was and did not conceal delight at the end of the class – therefore, we could say that the motivation was really low. The class-building process went on slower than in Group B and could be metaphorically characterized as “one-way traffic with absence of inner regulations”.

On the contrary, the psychological atmosphere in Group B was open and emotionally healthy, their humor was kind and inoffensive, the students' mutual help could be vividly seen in common projects and role-plays. The class-building within the group went on quickly and demonstrated support and constant feedback both with other groupmates and the teacher. Their work showed much more responsibility, initiative and creativity, original vision of things. They often stayed in class overtime and discussed positive and negative aspects of their projects; they appeared to be honest about work-drawbacks and informed about them delicately without mixing personal relationships into solving this or that problem. It was easy for them to own up to their mistakes, they were not afraid of admitting them because other students showed their disapproval mildly – not to hurt each other's feelings. They offered the teacher to spend time together after classes, went to the cinema, cafes, music-shows, etc – unlike the guys and ladies from Group A. The students of Group B were always eager to make the most of their studies and their progress at the end of our experiment turned out to be brighter and quicker than that one with Group A.

### **3.2 Experiment Result and Conclusion**

We have a strong opinion about the results of our experiment: the more creative, interesting and multi-task, project-oriented the student work is, the quicker the student's communication within the group develops, the healthier their psychological attitude to each other is. Besides, the more interesting and captivating the group-task is, the higher students' motivation is. Additionally, the psychological barrier

of speaking a foreign language is overcome faster and easier if a person gets into the atmosphere of open partnership and support.

In view of that we, teachers of foreign languages, should always bear in mind that we have powerful instruments of teaching in our hands which are able not only to arm our students with a prospect of career promotion in case of foreign language knowledge but also to shape the students' personalities as initiative, creative, open for society.

## **4 OVERSTEPPING A PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIER**

Unquestionably, one more essential aspect in teaching a foreign language is overstepping a psychological barrier which every learner can come across at different periods of studies. Why does this barrier threaten to ruin communication sometimes? Almost every person aims at perfection (mostly subconsciously), so he or she believes he/she may look stupid or weak in a foreigner's eyes, or even lose authority and respect of society if he/she makes a mistake. We can admit that this fear possibly comes from the childhood when parents could tell them off for bad marks at school or misbehavior or when peers laughed at a person's illiteracy. Anyway, it is the privilege of professional psychologists to deal with problems like these; as long as we, teachers, should work with a formed personality and, so to speak, with the result of some parents' up-bringing mistakes and negative communication experience which make an obstacle on the students' way to speaking a language fluently and flawlessly.

### **4.1 Dealing with Students of Low Activity**

Simultaneously, among the reasons of the student's low activity in class might also be his/her acquired fears and the student's character. This category of students does not bother to construct speech in a foreign language: when addressed in a foreign language, they persistently answer in their native language or make up just cliché-based simple phrases in a language they learn. Moreover, they typically accompany their speech with remarks like: "I have said something wrong, have I?" People of the kind may strengthen their negative attitude and express it loudly confusing others [2].

The main advice for the teacher in this situation is to stay calm, cheer a student up, acquaint him/her with advantages of learning a foreign language and motivate with challenging tasks. No matter how grammatically disastrous the answer might be, allow them to speak and overcome their passiveness!

### **4.2 Peculiarities of Work with Students Unwilling to Speak a Foreign Language**

An equally important reason why some students show unwillingness to start speaking a foreign language may also be the difference in the level of commanding a language in a group which can possibly make slow-speaking students feel confused and awkward in front of more fluently speaking groupmates. It may appear that the student may be slow-speaking due to his/her temper! Without doubt, the described situation can strongly influence the student's self-esteem: the student may keep aloof from others, surf the Net, ignore group-tasks and look upset or absent-minded, or start cracking out-of-place jokes to distract others. To avoid the above mentioned way of student behavior in class, the teacher should highlight the student's strong points and focus on them in front of the class: e.g. can underline the student's ability to write good essays (even with little vocabulary!) or praise him/her for being accurate with word-usage, context; you can provide the student with a speaking role in group-projects (to develop the necessary speaking skills) emphasizing his/her contribution into the work of the whole team. What is more, sometimes teachers should praise students beforehand, to make them believe in themselves.

Likewise, the psychological barrier can be bred of the fear of being misunderstood by native speakers.

Finally, weak memory for new words and grammar phenomena or mere laziness of the student can become obstacles in constructing proper communication in class.

Naturally, we are about to hear your "What's the way out here?" A lot depends – as we have mentioned earlier – on the teacher's competence, patience, politeness and teaching intuition, as well as the sense of humour. The teacher may involve less active students into communication working in mini-groups with confident, helpful, positive-thinkers on condition that every group member should observe the following communication rules (declared by the teacher at the beginning of classes): every answer in the group matters, everyone should wait till a speaker finishes his/her saying, every

person should show respect towards another person's opinion especially in case it is opposite to yours; give a hand to each other in pair and group tasks, involve each other in extra-curricular work.

### **4.3 Famous Psycho-Therapist's Tips. Field of Confidence**

A famous psycho-therapist and writer, Doctor of Medicine and Psychology Vladimir Levi recommends people who have to work with those who have communication problems "... to address the Inner Child of your interlocutor – even if the latter is older, stronger, smarter... for a truly free mature personality the meaningfulness of any communication is balanced with his/her own meaningfulness" [3]. In other words, focusing on a person's advantages as a language-learner, making emphasis on his/her strengths in front of the other students will help him/her get adapted and let him/her feel at home. "Every person – even the one who is extremely shy has his Field of Confidence – the space, the time, the circumstances and conditions, the matter and that person – with whom, where and when he/she is at ease with, he/she can manage anything and nothing scares" [3]. According to Levi, we should highlight a person's positive communication experience, deliberately enlarging it in everyone's eyes, no matter how small his/her success was – in order to make this person believe in himself/herself, his/her communicative power and make his/her fears gradually decrease and fade away.

### **4.4 Practical Implementing with Silent Students and Students Who Tend to Show off**

Practically, silent students should be given speech patterns and clichés to form a good basis for phrase-making and later – speech-making. The cliché usage should be controlled in dialogues which tend to be disliked and avoided by this category of students. Every time a dialogue has to take place in class, the teacher ought to underline the importance of usage of learnt speech patterns which helps to be understood by other people.

Balanced against modest students, come up the ones who tend to show off and interrupt anyone in the group. They do not bother about ruining someone's thought or following mere politeness, their aim is to be in the centre of attention and shout out his/her answer whatever happens. Spotting such students is not difficult: they speak in an arrogant imperative manner, demonstrate impatient waiting with a loud sigh or theatrical pen-tapping while his/her groupmate is answering. They are usually among the first to raise their hands – which is actually good and shows their student activity and willingness to interact – and get offended in case the teacher asks to answer someone else.

The teacher's task in this situation is to balance all students' interests and classwork-participation. Communication abundance of "celebrities" should be directed to making personal projects, acting out creative scenes and dialogues which can appeal to leader features of the "stars" as their strongest ones. Meanwhile, we should teach them to express flexibility and tolerance to other students when they take the floor [4]. Moreover, "star-students" adore being asked for a piece of advice, so the teacher may take advantage of this special trait and ask him/her to help a silent student if necessary. Do not let them boast their assistance but turn it into a special student's talent and helpfulness. When it does not work, you can try delicate humor about "the star's" super-abilities – again, your humor should be as light as a feather.

### **4.5 Setting Rules of Communication is Essential**

And as we were saying earlier, it is essential to set the rules of communication right from your first classes: no shouting together with someone's speaking, speaking in turns, showing respect to other points of view, etc. These rules must be unbreakable!

## **5 SENSOR TYPOLOGY AND STUDENT COMMUNICATION IN**

As a matter of fact, there is one more promising technique of student's communication organizing: the so-called *sensor typology*. It goes without saying, people perceive information differently: some of us take and understand about 90% of what is being said through ears (*audial type*), others ask to show new words first (*visual type*), for the third group it is necessary to write new vocabulary down to remember it (*kinesthetic type*).

Pure types are rare – two are generally mixed with the one that prevails. For example, a visual-and-audial type memorizes information much better if it comes in pictures together with the sound. A

kinesthetic-and-audial type finds it difficult to rely only on visual images – he/she basically needs to hear it a few times and put it necessarily down [5].

## 5.1 Teaching Tips on Developing Students' Communication in Class Based on Sensor Typology

Teachers should bear in mind the sensor typology to estimate the quality of the language mastering; they should introduce various multi-purpose tasks to their students, alternate visual material with audial one and remember about regular written works. Indeed, it can make teaching more productive.

Defining the prevailing type of information perception of the group can enable teachers to rely on it when learning new vocabulary and simultaneously develop other perception types with a variety of tasks. It could be comfortable both for the teacher and his/her students.

As an illustration, if *visuals* form the group majority – they scan and skim texts easily, memorize words photographically - the teacher should select more visual material to make students feel even more confident. You can spot visuals without any difficulty by phrases like “I see what you mean”, “Let’s imagine...”, etc. Kinesthetic-type students say something like “I feel that...”, “I cannot catch the thought...”, etc.

Audial no-text-based tasks may seem challenging to such students; that is why the teacher could recommend them to draw story contents while listening or put down the words they are interested in.

By the way of contrast, the group which abounds in *audial-type students* – who tend to pronounce words like “I hear what you are saying”, “Listen...”, etc, they are loud and talkative, like arguing – the teacher may try to organize regular debating. Let them argue in a foreign language! Let them make a wide range of dialogues, act them out in pairs and estimate the partners' work. In general, they should be taught monologue-presenting as well as dialogue speech; besides, they should learn to strictly observe no-interrupting rules.

By the way, *kinesthetic-type students* – who like touching buttons or pens while talking – can turn out to be real actors because they can easily scan the human behavior and mood by his/her walking and talking manner and imitate it. Such students are not into sitting long hours – they should be allowed to have a walk in class (e.g. to gather group statistics), to take part in pantomimes, plays. Being static long frightens such people, so teachers have to put up with this fact.

All in all, if the teacher tries to build a long-term communication with students, he/she should take their sensor type into account as well.

## 6 COMPARING A STUDENT'S PROGRESS

It goes without saying that every person is interested in what impression he/she makes on other people. We are all social beings, so we need to hear words of approval or criticism every now and then.

The words of praise can bring wings to the person who hears them – especially if they dwell on the student's progress at the starting point of studying a foreign language and at the moment of estimation. So we should frequently give an optimistic picture of the student's language abilities, enumerating drawbacks of the study very carefully and generally face-to-face with the student. If discussing disadvantages takes place in class, teachers should report on them namelessly. Let the person you are hinting at make conclusions himself/herself

And unquestionably, teachers can't compare the group's educational ups and downs with the other group's results. Just with their own ones!

## 7 CONCLUSION

Summing it all up, teaching communication in a foreign language is not easy not only due to differences in grammar and pronunciation phenomena and mentality, but also because of differences in students' characters and temper, sensor types, etc. Naturally, a positive teaching result also depends on students' own language abilities though quite a great deal depends on methodological techniques teachers choose and how competent and skilful they are while teaching, how quickly they can scan the class atmosphere and motivation-level, attitude to things. This is not a one-day or even one-year task, by all means. But it is worth it!

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