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Teaching Communications skills during an English lesson

How to create the most natural conditions to teach communication skills in the classroom environment?

Communicating is a natural need of every human being, it takes place in certain circumstances and depends on a number of aspects. There are some basic elements of the speech acts which include: the sender, the receiver-addressee and the communication channel. The most important are reasons why people exchange information. In everyday life situations behind every conversation is hidden the purpose, which adds sense and meaningfulness to every speech act, due to the fact that between the speakers exists the 'information gap' – a different level of knowledge about the particular subject[1]. Oral activities conducted at schools usually do not possess the information gap and as a result students feel discouraged to communicating in the classroom environment. Text based exercises require repeating the same information, which has already been placed in the reading passage, similar situation appears when learners describe a photograph visible to the rest of students. Despite less and more successful attempts made y the teachers to teach communication skills, Bygate[2] notices that teaching communication is a primary ability which guarantees transfer to the other language skills. Scientists like

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[1]   H. Komorowska, *Metodyka nauczania języków obcych*, Warszawa 2009.
[2]   M. Bygate M., *Speaking.* In: R. Carter and D. Nunan (eds.), London 2001, p. 14–20.

Dakowska and Komorowska[3] (emphasize teaching communication as a prior ability in the communication era).

When we take a closer look and compare natural speech acts to the communication which takes place during the classes, some significant differences can be distinguished between them. One major characteristic of the classroom communication is the lack of equal status among the speakers[4]. The teacher stays at a higher position in comparison to his/her learners, he/she initiates conversation, asks students questions, controls and directs all of the speech acts. The teacher behaves like the leader who can order the student to be silent, ask the learner to repeat the sentence or modify the utterance, set the time frames or interrupt the student, what indicates lack of parity between the speakers. The student is expected to respect the rules set by the leader, because a teacher is the person who initiates speech acts, creates the situational context, possesses the widest knowledge in the class and the best language competence. In the classroom environment the students must accept to fulfill teacher's requirements in order not to get a bad mark, extra homework or a disapproval from the teacher. The more demanding the teacher is, the deeper lack of equality becomes, what consequently leads to uneven positions of the speakers. In real life similar situations are extremely rare, they only take place in the army, when the general communicates with the person of a lower rank from the hierarchy, however the majority of speech acts is conducted between partners who possess equal rights in a conversation.

The significant element which differentiates communication in the classroom from the one in the real world is setting the time frames. In natural circumstances a conversation has a free flow and the speakers produce their utterances in a similar amount of time. When one of the speakers dominates over the other in a communication act, it may be a result of the situational context, the purpose of the conversation or the feature of the character for example, being talkative. According to the research, lesson time is devoted in two thirds to the teacher talking time and only in one third to the student talking time. This model is remote from what is believed to be a natural conversation between partners and such structure does not enhance acquiring communication skills. It seems very important to prepare student oriented

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[3]   M. Dakowska, *Teaching English as a Foreign Language*, Warszawa 2007; H. Komorowska, *Metodyka nauczania…*

[4]   H. Komorowska, *Metodyka nauczania…*

classes and analyze time when the teacher speaks to the student in comparison to the time when the student produces live language.

Another crucial aspect of teaching communication abilities is the choice of interlocutors. It has been described before that in the classroom environment the teacher initiates the conversation, taking different roles for instance, being a judge, a consultant or a coordinator. He/she provokes the students to produce utterances by asking questions, or presents stimuli like, photographs, pictures, a short film, a real object and various activities which enhance authentic speech acts like, role playing, presentation of various dialogues, scenes, games, projects and discussions[5]. However Komorowska rightly notices that despite the wide range of communication activities, classroom language is, not like real language, very predictable. In an authentic situation the speaker can response in a number of different ways, sometimes quite surprising, but the classroom reality forces the student to give more predictable answers based on previously presented grammatical and lexical material[6]. As a result even the most intelligent students find it difficult to communicate in real-life situations. In this aspect, the major feature of an authentic communication is the equality of both speaking sides, freedom in creating utterances according to lexical and grammatical awareness. What is more, an important feature of natural conversation is redundancy, the ability to understand abbreviated information like, newspaper headlines, adverts and incomplete texts without being aware of every single word placed in them. The key element of authentic communication is using a wide spectrum of non-verbal gestures for example, miming or body language. Teaching communication competence during a lesson refers to a very difficult, unnatural situation in which the student is expected to convey a piece of information by using only verbal expressions. Body language is extremely helpful in communicating, gestures indicate the speaker's and the listener's feelings, they emphasize the most important elements in communication and according to Jay[7] they signalize taking turns in a conversation; the speaker becomes the listener and vice versa.

Another difference between natural and classroom communication is the lack of the information gap in educational activities, what is impossible in the real world. The speech act takes place when the interlocutors need to exchange

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[5]   M. Dakowska M., *Teaching English as a Foreign Language*, Warszawa 2007.
[6]   H. Komorowska, *Metodyka nauczania...*
[7]   T. B. Jay, *The Psychology of Language. Upper Saddle River*, New Jersey: Newburry House 2003.

information about the particular subjects, because there are differences in their state of knowledge, emotions and opinions. However, in the classroom it is the teacher who mainly asks questions to which he/she knows the answers. What is more, it often happens that the students also know the answers in advance, because their work is based on previously read passage or on the presented in the classroom visual stimuli. In this kind of activities there is no information gap and it can be assumed that learner's efforts concentrate more on the form and grammatical accuracy rather than on the content.

Significant differences between real life and classroom based communication are noticed in the 'integration' of abilities. In everyday life people combine speaking with simultaneous writing, or listening with taking notes. During a lesson it is different however, each skill is developed separately to avoid piling up difficulties in the learning process.

It is a very important feature of real communication to use appropriate situational tone, more or less formal language and polite phrases naturally. In the classroom reality the student practises more neutral language not significantly varied in its form and style. This results in a number of difficulties which students have to face in natural communication regardless to their intelligence and language learning abilities.

To sum up, there are a lot of aspects that differentiate realistic communication from the classroom based one. To overcome the artificiality in the language trained at school, it is significant to establish equal rights to all speakers, create student oriented classes, pay attention to learners' needs, take into account unpredictable answers, encourage students to use non-verbal means of expression, vary the style of utterances according to the situation, improve teaching methods to promote learners independence in initiating communication.

## Making classroom communication more realistic through autonomous forms of practice

When we teach a foreign language it is worth considering the amount of time when the teacher speaks in comparison to the students' talking time. It is important to remember that every classes should be learner oriented and they ought to create opportunities to use live language in practice, what will result in making classroom communication more natural and realistic.

To achieve this goal it becomes crucial to change teacher's role from the leader who controls and judges students' work into a partner who coordinates their practice. It is significant to encourage students to express their suggestions, personal opinions, requests and give advice.

Presented diagrams illustrate classroom interactions when a) the teacher acts as a leader and b) the teacher acts as a partner:

a)   N-L

U   U   U

b)   N-P

U   U   U

More natural communication than the two presented above illustrates diagram c) which emphasizes the phenomenon of interaction not only between the teacher and the students, but also among the learners themselves.

c)   N

U ⟷ U ⟷ U ⟷ U ⟷ U
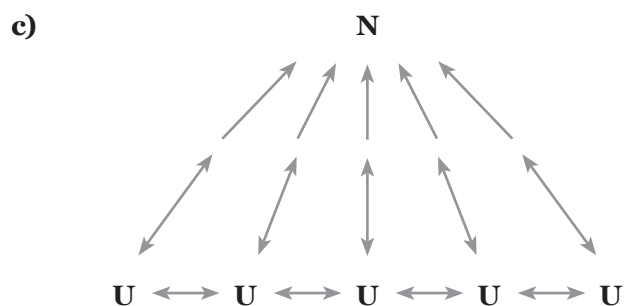
To incorporate variety into the classroom reality and take into account the equal rights of the interlocutors it is significant to establish different forms of practice like, working in pairs or small groups, what diagrams d) and e) present:

d)   U ⟷ U

e)   U ⟷ U

U ⟷ U

Pair work

Pair work is a fantastic opportunity to give students peer contact and create perfect circumstances to teach communication skills in a situation in which the speakers possess equal rights, feel convenient to express information and make closer relations with their classmates. Pair work is easy to organize due to the fact that learners can work with a friend from the desk, the person sitting behind their back, with a student whom they like the most as well as the one who they know the least in the class. The role of the teacher concentrates on coordinating the whole process, giving help in the field of lexis and grammar, rewarding students' progress and achievements. This kind of activities can be organized in open or closed pairs[8].

The first open pair should consist of a teacher and a very good student, because it requires acting out a dialogue in front of the class, it is important to present proper and accurate model to the rest of the learners.

Closed pairs require individual involvement of each student in the particular task. According to Harmer[9] it is a situation in which the teacher does not control every step the student takes and as a result the learner does not feel a huge pressure connected with public performance in front of the class. It is crucial to change students pairs very often to make the communicative situation more realistic.

Group work

Group work similarly to pair work gives students some independence and autonomy, however it moves a lot of responsibility for practicing new material on the learner. A teacher who is going to establish group work during his/her classes should higher the number of students in each team gradually starting from pair work, then groups consisting of 3, 4, 5 or 6 people. It is not recommended to exceed this limit, because it may finish with chaos and as a consequence the teacher will achieve quite a contrary result to what was expected. It is worth considering group work well in advance, plan how the students are going to be divided into teams, set the arrangement of tables and chairs to accomplish lesson goals successfully and avoid wasting time on the organizational mess. Each team of learners ought to consist of more

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8   H. Komorowska, *Metodyka nauczania...*
9   J. Harmer, *How to Teach English*, England: Longman 1998.

skillful as well as weaker students because different division for example, more intelligent pupils versus less intelligent ones will decrease their motivation to accomplish certain tasks. Stronger students would see no point in working efficiently and weaker learners would feel lost from the very beginning. Worth noticing is also a social aspect of creating teams which must contain members with various intellectual abilities due to the fact that intelligent students are usually outcasts who keep away from the social life, they live in a very hermetic world and they make friends with difficulties. They possess wide knowledge, but they rarely share information with their friends. Less intelligent students are easy-going by nature, they have got a lot of friends, they are dynamic and more decisive. Organizing group work according to the model described above is highly beneficial for learners in terms of education, exchanging information, state of knowledge and organization to keep the right pace during the lesson. Pair and group work is a perfect way to avoid boredom and predictability during the classes. What is more, this kind of practice is accepted with great enthusiasm by the students, their positive attitude results in better achievements. Group work increases the number of time devoted to practising communication skills, involves all students to accomplish certain tasks, integrates classmates, encourages the shiest ones to work and creates more realistic circumstances to teach more realistically.

Despite many advantages, teachers are often afraid of group work during their lessons, they mainly worry about losing control over the students and lack of discipline. Of course, it is important to not to let students devote precious time to chat in their mother tongue, that is why students should be well prepared for communication activities. To do this the teacher can use pre-communication activities, revise necessary material, write down key words and the most important grammar structures on the blackboard. It seems important to give short and clear instructions, describe the final product of the exercise, set the time frames of each activity. Caution and forehead thinking can help to avoid discipline problems. The teacher ought to be prepared for a situation in which some students finish doing the task faster than others that is why it is advisable to have a colourful magazine, a comic strip or a supplement with English jokes to interest this group of learners and prevent them from talking during the lesson. Another method to keep students attention is giving them particular functions to fulfill for instance, designate the person who watches

the time, a secretary, someone who gathers materials, the person who corrects the mistakes, the learner responsible for presenting achievements, etc. This way everybody will feel responsible for something and important in the classroom.

Taking into account all aspects related to autonomous forms of work during the classes it can be assumed that they are extremely beneficial for the learners. Conversation conducted in pairs and groups is similar to natural communication and the speakers possess equal rights in it. Above all, these forms of practice motivate and involve every student in a lesson plot, they help to avoid boredom during the classes and give the student autonomy in learning a foreign language.

The mistake in the Communicative Approach

There are two quite contrary attitudes towards a language mistake, one deriving from the necessity to teach grammar accuracy and the other one resulting from the need to concentrate on the fluency of utterances. On one hand teachers would like their students to acquire grammar structures, be aware of using them orally and in written compositions; and on the other hand they realize that grammatical mistakes do not disturb expressing ideas quite freely or being understood by the interlocutor. What is more, constant correction discourages students from answering to the questions creatively or expressing their thoughts and beliefs spontaneously. A perfect situation is when both grammatical as well as fluency enhancing activities are practised simultaneously. When a particular lesson is devoted to learning new grammar structure, teacher's attitude towards a grammatical mistake would be negative, but when developing communication skills is practised his/her attitude would be acceptable. Attitude towards a language mistake in the Communicative Approach is mild and it is a combination of both previously described points of view. It is difficult not to agree with Komorowska who claims that mistakes in students utterances must be eliminated because this is the core responsibility of every teacher. The same author suggests:

⬦   every mistake should be eliminated in the presentation stage,
⬦   all of the mistakes must be corrected when students express and practice new material in pre-communication activities, devoted to the language accuracy,

◇ accept a language mistake and treat it naturally as an element of acquiring knowledge in communication activities which enhance fluency[10].

To sum up, committing mistakes is an integrated process connected with acquiring new information. It is worth to separate grammatical activities from the ones which emphasize expressing thoughts in a creative and free way. It is advisable to write down students' mistakes on the blackboard when he/she finishes his/her speaking. It is also important to remember that correcting errors too often discourages students from expressing their opinions and creates a negative attitude towards speaking.

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Streszczenie

Nauka komunikacji na lekcji języka angielskiego

Artykuł ten traktuje o nauce komunikowania się podczas nauki języka obcego (języka angielskiego) w grupie uczniowskiej. Ukazuje złożoność i wielowątkowość tego procesu. Opisuje aspekty dotyczące zbliżenia sytuacji klasowej do autentycznej komunikacji dziejącej się w życiu codziennym. Omawia jednocześnie autonomiczne formy pracy na lekcji sprzyjające naturalnej komunikacji, a także stosunek do błędu językowego w podejściu komunikacyjnym.

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[10]   H. Komorowska, *Metodyka nauczania...*