PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES IN LEARNING AND IMPROVING SPEAKING ABILITY AT ADVANCED LEVEL

Student: **Muminabonu Ibrokhimova**
Scientific advisor: **Shakhlo Khalilova**
Faculty of Roman-german phililogy
Karshi state university

Abstract: The article deals with the problems of teaching and learning speaking, in particular those which are most relevant in the context of developing oral skills at the advanced level of foreign language proficiency. The complex nature of spoken discourse must be taken into account and reflected at each stage of the learning process. Thus, the article examines the difficulties connected with choosing the appropriate framework and approach and discusses the typical patterns of interaction in the foreign language classroom. It also examines forms of control and evaluation and suggests some speaking activities which seem most suitable for advanced language learners in the light of the above theoretical considerations.

Key words: speaking skill, genre, task, interaction, testing, evaluation.

The position of speaking in the hierarchy of language skills has evolved over the centuries. Rather ignored in the Grammar – Translation Method, it became a primary skill in the Direct Method. Audiolingualism brought even more focus on speaking, although the linguistic principle it was based on viewed oral discourse as imitative routine behaviour in typical and predictable situations. The grammatical syllabus of the Cognitive Method incorporated activities in all language skills, attaching equal importance to each of them. Finally, Communicative Language Teaching added a more realistic dimension to teaching oral discourse by introducing numerous forms of interaction to the classroom and practising the language in natural or probable situations which demanded defining of the discourse genre and the roles of participants.

According to Thornbury, the process of developing speaking skills consists of three stages[1]:

• awareness – learners are made aware of features of target language knowledge,

• appropriation – these features are integrated into their existing knowledge-base,

• autonomy – learners develop the capacity to mobilize these features under real-time conditions without assistance. It seems that at the advanced level of foreign language

---

[1] Thornbury (2007: 40) Conversation. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Skehan, P., 1998. A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Thornbury, S., 2007.

proficiency students and teachers' efforts should be focused on the stage of appropriation and its effective movement towards autonomy in target language use. For that purpose they need a range of speaking tasks that encourage a considerable degree of independence by relying on extensive oral practice (treated as a source of meaningful input and feedback) mainly in the form of student student interactions. The speaking activities presented below take into account the above assumptions.

Conversations in foreign language classrooms are considered to be not the result of language learning but rather the context in which learning actually occurs[2] . On the other hand, it is not easy to incorporate meaningful conversational interactions into a planned lesson as casual conversation is, by its very nature, spontaneous and unstructured. It becomes easier when conversation activities are based on a set of selected themes which are previously negotiated with learners. Useful conversational routines (opening and closing formulas, interrupting, asking for clarification) and helpful communication strategies (paraphrasing and reformulating, using vague language and hesitation fillers) should be taught and practiced beforehand to give students the appropriate devices for successful communication but elements of personalization should be given an equally important status. Conversation activities may proceed from more controlled ones, in which the language is limited by instructions, through awareness activities which make use of audiovisual materials, fluency practice, to feedback sessions during which students analyse their own interactions (Nolasco and Arthur 1987).

Interviews are demanding tasks in the sense that they require from the interviewer some preparation in the form of research, the selection of relevant questions and the prior analysis of native speaker interviews so as to properly evaluate both the questions and the elicited information (Dakowska 2005: 245).

A class survey is a version of a collaborative interview which, if properly carried out, may engage a large group of students in a communicative taskbased activity. Learners prepare a set of survey-type questions connected with a particular topic and they mill around in the classroom, asking the questions and noting the answers. Next, they return to their original groups to analyse the findings which are later reported to the class by a group spokesperson. Finally, the class decides whether the original claim put forward by the group is justified or not (Thornbury 2007: 83). Problems and challenges in teaching and learning speaking at advanced level 45

Discussion is another popular and useful form of classroom interaction. However, it must be stressed that the actual potential of this activity for developing an

---

[2] Thornbury 2007. Conversation. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Skehan, P., 1998. A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

individual learner's speaking ability can be implemented only under certain conditions (Dakowska 2005: 245), [3]particularly that: • the topic is controversial enough to open different perspectives and interpretations, • learners participate in the choice of the topic and are given enough communicative autonomy to be able to express their personal opinions and ideas, • students are interested in the topic and their general knowledge is sufficient enough to discuss it (this may require appropriate preparation – studying relevant sources and processing the teacher's or peers' input), • discussion is planned as a complex activity which combines working in pairs or groups and open-class or panel forms of interaction. A more formal version of discussion is referred to as debate. It involves discussing a topic from two opposing points of view which are earlier ascribed to members of the debating teams. Additionally, new points and arguments may emerge during the discussion. It is important that the arguments are logical and well-balanced and that they are presented in accordance with the social and cultural norms of the target language community. Academic presentations (are particularly useful for learners who study language for academic purposes and need practice in giving presentations or conference papers. This activity should be preceded by discussing the formal features of the genre and analyzing the specific language patterns typical of each stage of an academic presentation. Watching model or authentic presentations before students actually start preparing their own speeches should be treated as an important part of the activity, as well as discussing the effectiveness of individual presentations (reactions of the audience, delivery style, time – management) afterwards.

Other activities that advanced students may benefit from include: **storytelling**, **jokes** and **anecdotes** which are common ingredients of causal conversations and drama, role-play and simulation activities Thornbury [4]They greatly expand the scope of registers and social roles that learners may encounter in the classroom (for example, by introducing simulated interactions with total strangers or face-threatening speech acts). The perception and reception of such tasks, however, may by different in different students and they depend to some extent on the personality of the individual learner. To conclude, it must be remembered that each speaking task needs to be productive, purposeful, interactive, challenging, safe and authentic if it is intended to ensure optimal conditions for effective and autonomous language use.

---

[3] Dakowska 2005: 246). Cazden, C.B., 1988. Classroom discourse: The language of teaching and learning. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. Dakowska, M., 2005.

[4] Thornbury (2007: 40) Conversation. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Skehan, P., 1998. A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Thornbury, S., 2007.

Testing the oral proficiency of foreign language students is a complex task which may cause considerable problems at any stage of the process. The difficulties concern not only the choice of the appropriate elicitation technique and form of assessment, but they may also emerge while designing or administering the test. Practitioners and researchers are divided in their opinions as to the validity of oral testing and put forward arguments for and against it. The most common arguments in favour of testing oral fluency are as follows (Ur 1995: 134):

• Each general language test should include all aspects and areas of the language, therefore it should include speaking;

• Speaking is generally considered to be the most important language skill, that is why it should take priority in any language test;

• An oral proficiency test at the end of the course will guarantee that teachers and students devote more time to speaking practice during the course (the washback effect), otherwise a tendency to neglect extensive speaking practice or not to give it enough time and effort can be observed;

• There are many students who speak well but write badly, a test based on writing may discriminate such learners and their overall assessment will not reflect their actual skills and abilities. However, there are also numerous convincing arguments against oral testing (Ur 1995: 134):

• Designing valid and reliable tests that make learners improvise speech in the target language is very difficult,

• Speech is very difficult to assess quickly and objectively, recordings can be made but this form of evaluation is extremely time-consuming and it does not guarantee objectivity;

• There is a problem of finding the right balance between accuracy and fluency testing. It is often not clear what criteria should be selected for assessment of the speaking skill or which should be given priority and why;

• Even a well-balanced selection of a set of criteria does not mean that testers will apply them in an identical manner, consistent and objective assessment may be extremely difficult to reach;

• Oral testing is a very time-consuming procedure, students are tested individually or in pairs in real time, educational institutions have problems with ensuring the adequate amount of time for every student to be tested appropriately.

The above arguments show that an assessment of learners' speaking skills is a very complicated process which involves taking many binding decisions as early as at the stage of planning the language course. Yet, despite all the difficulties, oral testing procedures constitute an important part of overall student evaluation in most institutional language courses. Testing may in fact be the starting point of the course (placement tests) and usually occurs at the end of it, too (achievement tests). There are

also tests administered at various times during the course which are meant to measure student progress.

Oral testing is practically implemented by means of the following spoken test types

• Interviews – learners are interviewed individually or in pairs but the formal nature of such interviews hardly ever allows for testing informal, conversational speaking styles and affects the interviewee's performance (the interviewer is also the assessor).

• Live monologues – students present a talk or presentation on a preselected topic. The interviewer effect is then eliminated but the test provides rather restricted information on the speaker's actual skill as it does not check students' ability to handle a casual conversation.

• Recorded monologues or dialogues – they are less stressful than live performance and give examiners more opportunities to work out consistent and possibly more objective assessment.

• Role-plays – this test format may be particularly reliable if it matches the needs of learners and aims of the language course, however the influence of the interlocutor on the performance of the testee is hard to predict and control.

• Collaborative tasks and discussions – learners act as themselves, but similarly to role-plays, the testee is influenced by the interlocutor or interlocutors, the test enables examiners to assess learners' interactive skills and their ability to express personal views. Deciding on the particular spoken test format entails choosing the relevant set of assessment criteria. There are two basic types of scoring employed in oral testing. Holistic scoring reflects the overall impression the learner made on examiners and it takes the form of a single score, therefore it is often used in informal testing of individual progress. Analytic scoring is more time-consuming as it involves giving a separate score for different aspects of the learner's performance. As a result it takes longer but offers a more complete, varied and, consequently, more reliable picture of students' skills. For these reasons it is more valuable in terms of the received feedback for higher level students. Learners at the advanced level of language proficiency are more likely to benefit from detailed descriptions of their speaking skills than from a single score which depicts their ability to 48 Magdalena Aleksandrzak communicate in general. The criteria used for any type of scoring usually take into account the categories of grammar, vocabulary, discourse management and interactive communication (Thornbury 2007: 127). The specific, more detailed criteria may be defined within each category with respect to the aims and character of the general evaluation procedure and the chosen spoken test format.

Reference

1. Cazden, C.B., 1988. Classroom discourse: The language of teaching and learning. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. Dakowska, M., 2005.

2. Teaching English as a Foreign Language. A Guide for Professionals. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN. Johnson, K.E., 1995.

3. Understanding Communication in Second Language Classrooms. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Nolasco, R., Arthur, L., 1987.

4. Conversation. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Skehan, P., 1998. A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Thornbury, S., 2007.

5. How to Teach Speaking. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited. Ur, P., 1995.

6. A Course in Language Teaching. Practice and Theory. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Webb, N.M., 1982.

7. Student interaction and learning in small groups. In: Review of Educational Research 52 (3), 421–445.