Unit 7
Teaching speaking skills

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1. Views of Teaching Speaking.

The progressive development view holds that speaking ability derives from the systematic study of grammar, phonology, and lexicon. This view, then, assumes that the ability of the speaker to express himself accurately depends on mastery of the language forms which he acquires through reading and writing exercises[1].

The immediate communication view considers that the development of speaking skills derives from the first contact with the language. Students should therefore, be encouraged to express themselves in simple ways from the early stages of learning the target language under the guidance of the teacher.

Rivers and Temperley (1978) believe that the ideal position is a middle position between these two views or approaches. Students should be encouraged to express themselves freely in the language from the beginning through

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[1] These exercises are usually based on either grammar-translation texts, or audio-lingual or aural-oral texts in which oral imitation, memorisation, and drilling techniques precede attempts to speak spontaneously.

experiences and games as an attempt for spontaneous communication. They should, however, draw on what they have already learnt through intensive study and practice techniques.

Littlewood (1981) adopts a similar approach to teaching speaking skills. He divides communication skills into two main stages: Pre-communicative and communicative. Littlewood considers the first stage a preliminary step leading to the other communicative stage.

In the pre-communicative stage, the emphasis is placed on isolating specific elements of the language for practising purposes. The aim here is to provide the learners with a command of the linguistic system of the language before actually using the leanguage for communicative purposes[1].

In the second communicative stage, the learner integrates his pre-communicative knowledge and skills for the communication of meaning. The learner, here, uses the language for communicative purposes and develops a social acceptability in the language in a socially appropriate situation.

2. Objectives of Teaching Speaking.

In teaching speaking skills, the teacher should firstly identify the skills or activities which the students need to practise[2].

The teacher is required to translate the skills which the students need into elements of what the students are expected to do at the end of the lesson in statements such as these:

1. The students can produce question forms correctly.

2. They can describe things in spontaneous speech.

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[1] Some of these activities create a link between language forms and their potential functional meanings and they can be labelled as quasi-communicative.

[2] For example, the students may require exercises which develop their ability to produce rapid speech, stress patterns, spontaneous use of the language, or the performance of everyday-transactions. (e.g. make an arrangement, buy things at the shops, make a telephone call, express greetings and thanks. (etc.).

3. They can exchange greetings with each other.

4. They can use the language in real communicative situations.

In general, the aim of teaching speaking skills is basically to help the foreign language learners to use the language for communicative purposes in and beyond the classroom.

3. Procedures and techniques.

Techniques of teaching speaking skills are designed to let the students pass through three stages of development: controlled, guided, and free practice[1].

3.1. The Practice Stage.

Chorus Work.

This technique requires all the students to speak in unison. The teacher may ask all the students to speak at the same time if the class is small, or he may divide the class into smaller units if the class is too large. Byrne (1989) suggests the following procedures for choral work:

a. provide a clear model[2].

b. Select the material for choral repetition carefully[3].

c. Control the choral responses[4].

d. Listen out for mistakes.

e. Correct mistakes.

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[1] (Broughton etal, 1978), or in Byrne's terms: the practice stage, from practice to production, and the production stage. (Byrne, 1989).

[2] The students cannot be expected to imitate what they cannot hear.

[3] Some sentences in a text may not be suitable for repetition because they are too long.

[4] Use, for example, a gesture to tell the class where to begin to repeat a sentence after you, and also to indicate the rhythm (i.e. the words or syllables that are stressed).

Advantages:

* Chorus work is best used at the presentation stage where the teacher presents new information.

* It helps students practise speaking through imitation[1].

* In addition, chorus work enables the shy student to participate in speaking and not to expose himself to embarrassment[2].

* It also keeps the class lively: everybody has to participate.

Disadvantages

However, choral work in large classes has its disadvantages.

* It is difficult for the teacher to make sure that all students actually participate in speaking.

* The lazy student may do nothing but move his lips, sing or shout in approximate unison with his classmates[3].

At the most elementary level, the teacher can use the dialogue for controlled oral practice in chorus work[4]:

After choral, group and individual repetition to establish unfamiliar sounds, the teacher can proceed round the class to ask a different student each time. Then he can ask two students to say the dialogue at the front of the class. He may ask every student in the class to do with his neighbour the same as the pair at the front[5].

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[1] This builds in them the confidence to speak whenever they are asked to say something individually.

[2] It gives him a cover under the general perfomrance of the class.

[3] To reach better effects, the teacher should conduct choral work in small groups where he can make sure that all students participate in a more active way.

[4] T. My name is Sami? What's your name.
S. My name is Mohammed.

[5] This dialogue can also be used in a chain drill like this:
T. My name is Sami? What's your name?
S. My name is Mohammed (turns to student 2) What's your name?
S2. My name is Maher (turns to student 3) what's your name?… etc.

Mechanical Drills.

Mechanical drills are based on the behaviourist approach to language learning which places much emphasis on the formation of habits and the prevention of errors. In these sorts of drills, the learners are simply required to:

*   respond to teacher's initiations without much reasoning,

*   repeat and imitate utterances made by the teacher. In this way they can produce an endless number of correct sentences.

The good thing about these sorts of mechanical drills is that students gain confidence and fluency at the level of pronunciation and the inflections of nouns, verbs… etc. However, the learning value does not go beyond this limit: students will not be able to produce some types of sentence structures on their own[1].

These drills of controlled oral practice are structured so tightly that it is difficult for the students to make an error. This emphasis on correct responses in teaching speaking skills may enable the students to improve their pronunciation and produce short structured responses[2].

Meaningful Practice.

Most mechanical drills can be done in chorus work. All the students need is just a single cue to continue with the drill. However, such drills are not meaningful. In order to make them meaningful, the teacher has to:

*   tolerate students' mistakes and not insist on correct responses,

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[1] Substitution drills can be cited as an example of mechanical drills. They can be practised in chorus:
Teacher: Say this after me: this pencil is black.
Class: This pencil is black
Teacher: Instead of "black" say "white", like this: This pencil is white:
Class: This pencil is white.
Teacher: red.
Class: This pencil is red.
Teacher: blue…

[2] However it cannot help them produce extended responses, take long turns and engage in conversation. It does help them use the language to express themselves in daily life.

* accept alternative responses to the same question. One type of meaningful drills is guessing drills.

Guessing drills require students to find something out through guessing. This is known as "an information-gap" task because the students try to find out information which they do not know.

Information gap tasks are designed in such a way that speaker "A" knows something that speaker "B" does not know. Speaker "B" then has to bridge the information gap by finding out a piece of information. Information-gap exercises, then focus on the transfer of meaningful information in which speakers use the language freely. These sorts of exercises are good for many communicative activities[1].

Question-answer Technique.

Question – answer technique is one of the most common ways of giving guided – oral practice. The teacher can use a variety of question forms based on oral or written texts[2].

The teacher should not ask all the questions himself, but should give the students the chance to practise these question forms as well. He may let the students ask each other questions or he may let a student ask a question and answer it himself.

3.2. The Transition Stage.

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[1] Byrne (1989) gives the following examples:
a. The students think of their favourite colour (sport hobby, animal, etc). They then take it in turns to find out about each other's colours (etc.) by asking: is it (red)?… etc.
b. The students think or make up something that they did the previous evening (or weekend or on their last holiday). They then take turns to find out what it is by asking: Did you go (swimming)? (etc.). (p.40).

[2] Such as wh-questions, questions formed with an auxiliary verb, tag questions, true-false questions, and reasoning questions. Such types of questions offer better opportunities for language practice.

The above mentioned activities of the practice stage are done under the teacher's control. Students only produce the language they have learnt accurately. In order to be able to work on their own, students need to pass through a transition stage from controlled practice to production. In this transition phase, students may be asked to do pairwork where they can work on their own with the guidance of the teacher but without teacher control.

Pairwork.

Pairwork activities can be done through mini-dialogues. Students work with one another asking and answering questions through short dialogues. These sorts of[1] dialogues teach students the structures and functions of utterances. They includes features of spoken discourse[2].

It can be said that information gap exercises or guessing drills in which the emphasis is on the transfer of information from one person to another is best organised through pairwok.

Mini – dialogues in pairwork can be practised through language games[3].

It can be seen that these sorts of guided drills in which students are given limited freedom to use and practise the language with some constraints are more beneficial than those controlled done at the practice stage[4].

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[1] A. What are you doing tonight?
B. Nothing, really, why?
A. Why don't we have a game of Tennis, then?
B. Oh. I'll see you a bout five.
(Byrne, 1989, p.54)

[2] (e.g. short-form answers, question tags, hesitation markers such as well, and er.).

[3] For example:
* One student 'thinks' of one of the pictures (i.e. he does not tell his partner which one he has chosen). The other tries to find out which one it is by asking yes/ no type questions. For example, if A has chosen pen, his partner can ask: *is it big*? (No)/ *can you cut things with it*? (No)/ *Is there one in this room*? (Yes) (etc.) until he feels he knows the object and can ask: *Is it the pen*?
(Byrne, 1989, p.61)

[4] Here, the teacher provides the general situation and content of what is to be said, but allows some freedom in the use of expressions.

However, within this limited freedom, students are given little opportunity to use the language creatively. What is needed, therefore, is a more flexible attitude. Group work at the production stage provides a better alternative.

3.3. The Production Stage.

* At the practice stage, the beginning learner needs to take part in simple language practice in which he responds to what the teacher says[1].

* Techniques in the transition stage might begin with short responses, continue with ways of expanding on what the previous speaker has said, and suggest forms which would enable the speaker to take the initiative on his own under the guidance of the teacher.

* It is fairly insufficient to communicate in a foreign language in short turns. There is little communicative effect for the student who responds to the teacher's questions and react to the previous speaker's utterances. Therefore, students need to activate their knowledge of the language practice they have learnt in order to produce the language on their own.

* At the production stage, then, students are expected to make use of the language they have already practised at the practice and transition stages in a more natural way.

This is the stage where students feel that they have the basic machinery which enables them to use the language and express themselves as they want and not in the way they are channeled by drills[2].

Situations in which students are involved in group-work can provide such an opportunity.

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[1] This is the technique of the aduio-lingual method.

[2] This, however, is not an easy task to do; it needs the careful thoughts of the teacher to provide situations which encourage the students to use the language creatively and take part in conversation in a more communicative way.

Group work.

In group work activities, students are divided into groups in which they face one another in a small circle and talk freely. The activities may be centred on discussions of a certain unspecialised topic of particular interest to the students. Pictures can be used to provide a basis for discussion.

The teacher's job is to:

*   advise the students as required.

*   act as a consultant rather than a conventional teacher.

*   act as a supervisor who stimulates the discussion by showing his interest in the students' ideas.

*   leave the chance to students to do most of the talking.

*   appear to be informal and relaxed. Pictures can be used to provide a basis for discussion.

Problem-Solving Activities.

Problem-solving activities is another technique used to help students produce the language in longer turns on their own. Such activities require the students to find "solutions" to problems. Some of these problems involve learning processes in which the learners are asked to link between two things or find differences and similarities between two things.

Byrne (1989) gives the following examples:

Finding Connections:

The students' task here is to establish connections between two items such as "horse" and "book". Can you find connections between "a horse" and "a book"?[1]

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[1] the connections might be as follows.
i.The horse is famous because it has won lots of races, so its owner had decided to write a book about it.
ii.The horse belongs to a man who likes reading and riding. When he goes for a ride on his horse, he often takes a book with him to read.
iii.A man was sitting under a tree in a field, reading a book. A horse began to come towards him. The man was afraid, so he got up and ran off, leaving his book.When the horse went away he went back into the field and got his book .(p. 94).

It will be seen that the connection between the two items is stated very briefly in the first example. Students may be asked to elaborate on it by saying something about the races and perhaps give the book a title. In the third example, the connection is presented in the form of little stories.

Another example on the use of problem solving activity is to ask students to find differences and similarities between two pictures (photographs of streets, beaches) or two places (office and classroom).

For example, students might state the differences and similarities between offices and classrooms as follows:

Differences	Similarities
Offices have telephones	There are usually chairs and tables in both places.
People don't have lessons in offices.	Both are usually part of a larger building.
There is usually a lot of equipment in offices, such as type-writers..	Both are usually closed at night.

Finally it should be noted that providing students with opportunities to use the language regularly at all stages throughout the course is an essential part of a long process of developing fluency[1].

Grading the Activities.

One of the communicative skills that students need most at the production stage is the ability to extract the relevant salient features from a mass of other details

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[1] For example, at the practice or guided stages, students will have limited opportunity to use the language, perhaps to ask few personal questions. Yet it is an opportunity, no matter how limited, to say something in the language. It is an attempt to make the best use of the little things they know. It provides them with the mechanism of using the language freely at the production stage.

and to communicate an event about them. The teacher should therefore train his students to communicate about particular information in a graded process[1].

Descriptions of things can be graded so that it will become easier to describe simple relationships than more complex ones[2].

In choosing a particular task, the teacher should:

*   Select the level of difficulty he wants his students to cope with and base the task according to that level.

*   He must analyse the linguistic requirements which a particular task puts upon the speaker as well as the cognitive demands.

*   The teacher should then set up a task which requires the use of the necessary linguistic skills in a certain context[3].

4. Taking Part in Conversation.

It should be remembered that when teaching students to take part in conversation, little attention, if any, should be paid to the teaching of pronunciation and intonation[4].

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[1] Let us give an example.
Suppose a student is asked to give a description of a story.
*First, he should be directed to give an indication of the setting of the story: whether the scene is in the city or in the countryside, indoors or out of doors.
*Next, he must tell his listeners about the characters in the story.
*Later, the speaker is asked to choose a distinguishing feature of each character so that he can distinguish the characters of the story from each other.
*The speaker may then be asked to narrate the sequences of events in the story.

[2] For example, a student may find it easier to describe a simple diagram containing few items in simple relationships than a more complex one containing a number of items.

[3] (Brown and Yule, 1983, P. 50)

[4] Taking part in long conversation is a stressful task in itself, and the teacher should not make it more stressful by interrupting the students and correcting their pronunciation. Students need all the support they can get from their teacher not criticism of minor things unimportant to the conveyance of the message.

If the teacher is particularly interested in pronunciation, he must deal with correction of students' pronunciation after the task is completed.

It should be noted that native speakers of the language typically:

* Produce short chunks of discourse which are more or less phrases and only loosely strung together.

* pay little attention to grammatical accuracy.

* delete some elements of the sentence as subject, auxiliaries, and other redundant forms[1].

It should be remembered:

* It is necessary that the conversation be conducted in a relaxed and informal atmosphere so that the students feel more confident and comfortable in producing the language.

* The conversation must have some room for songs, games, and puzzles.

* Humor and jokes on the part of the teacher are essential[2].

* How can we help the teacher identify informal types of interaction which leads to successful conversations?

* What are the bases for the classification of types of spoken discourse?

* How can we aid the student's comprehension in listening to spoken discourse?

* What is the role of the teacher in making classroom interaction more informal and interactive?

* What are the characteristics and the strategies of natural discourse?

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[1] If this is the case with native speakers, there seems no reason that foreign language learners should be expected to produce complete and correct utterances.

[2] It is in this way the conversation classroom can be an enjoyable place and the boredom through conversation for conversation's sake can be avoided. It is in such an atmosphere that students can build their confidence in speaking and expressing themselves in the target language.

*   Which types of interaction preserve the characteristics of natural discourse that we try to in incorporate in the classroom? The following unit provides research answers to these questions.