

Issues on the Enhancement and Evaluation of Oral Communication in the Foreign Language Class

Fawzia Bouhass Benaissi
Noureddine Guerroudj
University of Sidi Bel Abbas
Algeria

Abstract

The mission of most university English departments is to make students attain the most advanced levels of proficiency in the target language. Considering the fact that the skill of oral communication has become a passport to social and professional success during these last decades, it needs to become a central component in our curriculum. Empirical research as well as teacher experience in the Algerian university reveal that many students (and teachers, for that matter) have a limited oral communication competence. The present paper raises the following questions: What is involved in oral communication? What are the most frequently encountered difficulties in respect to teaching/learning how to communicate? What are teachers' wrong assumptions about this task? And what aspects of communication ought to be privileged in evaluating this competence: correct language, naturalness, fluency, pronunciation and intonation, or cultural appropriacy? The present paper addresses the above issues and attempts to set pedagogical principles that are likely to make of the EFL class an environment where genuine and targeted exchanges are possible. The questions raised in the present paper may open the space for fruitful discussions among language professionals whose primary concern remains the continuous progression of the student both as a language learner and as a citizen of this global world where efficient communication is highly desirable.

Key words: Cultural awareness, evaluation, fluency, oral communication

Introduction

Our students are learning the target language in a world of continual movement and change. In such a demanding environment, efficient skills in communication have become a passport to success. Foreign language teaching has conventionally been, and still is, based on the reference to the four skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Most language schools and university language departments teach and evaluate second and/or foreign languages in terms of these so-called passive and active skills. This paper deals with the teaching of speaking in the foreign language classroom as a separate skill, knowing that the latter is part of a more general and integrated language ability. In teaching speaking, which is also referred to in the related literature as 'conversation', the 'oral skill', 'oral communication' or the 'spoken language'; the aim is generally to make learners use the target language for communication purposes.

Oral communication

Communicating with others, be it face to face or through the numerous media channels available today, entails the presence of several characteristics:

Message transmission

Much of what we communicate in our daily exchanges is not actually always said, it is transmitted. Language is not based on the oral-aural channel only; it also significantly relies on the visual medium. Interlocutors say things to each other with words, but they also say a great deal with their body language eye contact, facial expressions, etc.

Spontaneity

The language we use for our daily exchanges is generally spontaneous, natural, i.e., not prepared or planned beforehand. This in itself makes it quite different from the written language which may be subject to repeated revision and reorganization.

The time constraint in natural conversations together with the concern of the speaker (who is less focused on the form) make him produce a language characterized by such features as frequent repetitions, false starts, hesitations, short sentences, frequent use of linking words such as "and", etc.

Variation

Language use changes from one culture to another because of varied the socio-cultural rules, and it also changes within the same culture because of differences in social contexts. Although speakers are generally unaware that they adopt their talk, they do not use the same language whether they are addressing a colleague, a friend, a child, husband or wife, etc.

Conversational routines

Most of the language we use daily consists of conventional utterances. Such language is usually referred to as "formulaic speech", "gambits", "automatised language" (Nash 1978) or "conversational routines" (Coulmas, 1981). These are sentences, clauses or words we use without much thinking, planning or structuring. They usually emerge naturally as build-up wholes and are produced spontaneously in related social contexts. Examples: nice to meet you; you're welcome; don't worry! I'll give you a call; really? I'm glad to hear that; sorry, I'm late; yes, please.

In teaching oral language use to foreign language learners, attention ought to be given to such conversational routines, as they constitute part of the socio-cultural knowledge of the TL in the sense that they carry common and salient culture specific features.

Conversational routines also help learners with limited communicative capacities put their meaning across and, in this sense, they stand as communication strategy that enables learners to make up for their communicative deficiencies and thus achieve a higher level of oral communication as well as fluency

Culture and speaking

Culture generally refers to shared patterns of behavior amongst a group of people (Fichtner & Chapman, 2001). These patterns are based on common valued principles, beliefs, and assumptions which will determine the dynamic of the group (Byram, M. et al, 1992). The culture of a community is also manifested in their music, literature, painting, etc.

Culture is an indissociable ingredient of language. Thus, any act of communication necessarily holds a cultural dimension. When people interact, they do so following the social norms of their community, as any failure will undoubtedly cause misunderstanding or even breaking up.

Extralinguistic or Non-verbal Communication

Non-verbal communication has long been neglected by FL professionals. Sanchez, S.Y. (1999) writes,

Families and communities hand down language and culture to their young. Young children learn to understand those around them and to express their own fears, needs, and desires in the distinctive vocabulary of the home language that includes not only words, but also rhythms, gestures, patterns of speech and silence.

Kinetic features such as gestures, facial expressions and body movement that accompany language may have different interactional significances in different languages and culture (Hurley, S.D., 1992). Therefore, the student who is learning to communicate in the FL needs to how to use and interpret these symbols.

Some difficulties around teaching oral communication

The teaching and, for that matter, evaluation of speaking is still one of the most problematic issues in foreign language methodology. "...If communication practice is one of the most important components of the language learning/teaching process, it is also one of the most problematical". (Ur, P., 1985:2). A major difficulty inherent to the 'teaching' of speaking is the belief that it is easy to teach. Also, it may be assumed that if a teacher has a good command of the target language, he can 'teach' others how to speak it.

Moreover, many teachers do not know what to include or what to give priority to in their oral classes: should they focus on language correctness (in terms of grammar)? Should they rather teach how to use language appropriately (in terms of socio-cultural rules of use)? What place should they give to fluency? Intonation? Pronunciation? Naturalness? Accent?

Once (and if ever) they have classified all these components of oral language according to priority, teachers remain with the no less troublesome decisions to take: what activities and tasks are best to adopt in their classes? How frequently should they propose them? Should THEY propose them or should learners themselves choose what they want to do and how to do it? In other words, many teachers do not know the extent to which the oral class belongs to the learners.

FL teachers' frequent wrong assumptions

Students' lack of cultural awareness and their frequent inappropriate communication reactions and exchanges are most often due to their limited exposure to the target culture. Very little reference is made to the culture of the language they are learning as well as the people who use it. This may be due to the following reasons:

1- Some teachers do not give enough importance to the culture of the target language, and stress instead the linguistic aspect. In their study of FL teachers' affiliation to more than one culture, Fitcher, F. and Chapman, K. (2011) state "...FL teachers remain rooted in their own national identities while they have the opportunity to pass on their knowledge of the target culture".

2- Some teachers believe that since their students are learning the TL in a typically foreign language situation, they have very little chance to engage in Native Speakers/Non Native Speakers type of interaction and that consequently they do not need to communicate as native speakers do.

3- Many teachers have themselves a limited awareness and familiarity with the culture of the language they are teaching.

4- Many teachers have never come into contact with a native speaker of English and so never experienced a NS/NNS interaction and many have never travelled to a country where the target language is widely used, and so by no means got into contact with its culture and way of life of its inhabitants.

The FL class communicative potential

If we consider that 'an act of communication through speaking is commonly performed in face- to-face interaction and occurs as part of a dialogue or other verbal exchange (Widdowson, 1984:58), our objective should be to provide foreign language learners with classes where such opportunities of natural and spontaneous language interchange are made possible.

The assumption underlying this work is that the extent to which students attain acceptable levels of "intercultural competence" (Byram & Kramsh, 2008) is highly determined by what goes on in their classroom. This does not mean that there is a systematic, direct relationship between all that teachers do and make learners do in the classroom and the type or level of competence these learners achieve. Language development is to a large extent, an individual accomplishment ("Learner Autonomy", Little, D. 2013), but typically this internal process takes place in the public context of the classroom, the individual is one of a group, a member of the class, and the activities which are to set the process in train are determined by the teacher. In any language classroom there seems to be a specific pattern of teaching/learning: some tasks, types of interaction, activities, and attitudes appear to be more common and customary than others. These are believed to affect the outcome of a classroom experience.

The FL class does have a potential for developing students' oral skills. Yet, in order to allow this to happen; teachers ought to fulfill this set of conditions which are labeled here as 'the four Cs':

1- **Classroom atmosphere:** The affective state of learners is of paramount importance to the extent that it determines the amount and nature of the language they may develop. "Successful classroom communication and learning is contingent upon social relationships that are established between teachers and students" (Richards, R.J., 1998). Not only this, the class emotional climate highly influences learners' involvement in communication. The teacher is a decidedly influential partner here: his/her personality, attitude, relationship with learners, motivation, empathy, etc...all contribute to create either a safe inviting or a threatening and hostile communication environment.

2- **Communication:** When learners feel comfortable and relaxed they are most likely to venture communicate. Recent methodology, namely Communicative Language Teaching (CLT),

Competency Based Language Teaching (CBLT), and Task- Based Teaching (TBT), has placed communication at the centre of FL practice.

3- **Content oriented:** One of the teachers task is to inform the learners about the culture of the language they are learning, as well as make them aware of any likeness or disparity between the former and their native culture. A wide range of material ranging from literary novels and short stories, to plays, music, proverbs, advertisement, etc. may be exploited for this purpose.

4- **Culture based tasks:** Being in a positive affective class with well tuned cultural material, learners are ready to engage in activities (large or small group debates, drama) and challenge communication tasks allowing them to practise the TL with its cultural dimension. Target culture typical social situations and settings may be created in order to make students aware of what TL speakers say and how they say it in such cases.

Evaluating oral communication

The inability to comprehend what is being said, and the problem of artificiality are further difficulty that most teachers of 'speaking' face when they come to evaluation learners. Most teachers know what and how to correct a written work (content, coherence, paragraph organisation, spelling, grammar, punctuation, etc.), but many simply feel at loss when it comes to decide whether a given learner CAN SPEAK a given language. Firth, D.S. & Macintosh, H.G. write:

Many of the criteria used in oral assessment of English or, of course other native languages, can also be applied to foreign languages, but accent and pronunciation become much more significant, as well as the ability to comprehend what is being said. The problem of artificiality becomes more pressing since the difficulties of sustaining conversation in a foreign language are greater (1987).

Teachers often do not know what aspects of an oral exchange should be taken into account and to what extent. The procedures they should use to evaluate them remain difficult decisions to take. Being confronted to such a difficult situation most 'teachers simply teach and evaluate such a skill intuitively.

Teachers 'interpret' a teaching situation in the light of their beliefs about the learning and teaching of what they consider a second language to consist of; the result of this interpretation is what the teacher plans for and attempts to create in the classroom. (Woods D.1996: 69)

Evaluating students' oral spontaneous performance is considered by many teachers as being quite complex. In fact, what is often reported is the lack of objective and reliable criteria as well as tools for valid assessment. Thus, if the FL class is to reflect inter-cultural communication what aspects of this skill should be evaluated? What should teachers look at and/or listen to when the difficult task of evaluation is required? Teachers often find it difficult to test their learners' oral production capacities as there are no reliable objective tests so far. Thus, some use the reading of texts and dialogues as a written support to oral testing while others make individual interviews or do their assessment through an oral project. There is no doubt, however, that such techniques give teachers little 'information' on how well learners can use the TL in real communication situations.

Furthermore, what makes evaluating students' oral production a thornier issue is the time factor: short time constraints of producing oral discourse (by the speaker), and consequently listening to it (by the teacher-evaluator) leaves the latter with almost no scope for revising initial impressions, or having access to second opportunities for listening.

Assessment of oral communication with its various facets (cultural awareness, appropriate and correct language use, naturalness, fluency, etc.) may be done individually or by assessing pairs or even small groups of learners at the same time. A first step towards designing adequate assessment of communication may be to identify the ‘ingredients’ or features of this skill and set them in an analytical scheme. Issues related to the process of assessing interaction include concepts such as rating scores, assigning evaluation tasks, rating checklists, validity and reliability.

Assessment techniques

When learners are given tasks to perform, the output will be evaluated in terms of ‘accuracy’ and ‘fluency’ (Brumfit, 1984). Accuracy refers to correctness or well-formedness in which case the teacher will consider the frequency and importance of the linguistic mistake produced by the learner. Fluency means using words with ease (Richards, J., C. 2005). Teachers should account for all features of spoken discourse. They should test and judge verbal and non-verbal performance in read communicate situation. The scoring scale below is designed to assess various features of oral communication:

Table 1. Chart for assessing a student’s oral communication skills

Features of oral communication	1	2	3	4	5
Mastery of pronunciation					
1. Pronunciation					
2. Stress and intonation					
Mastery of the linguistic form					
1. Ability to use grammatically correct sentences					
2. Ability to use appropriate vocabulary					
Communicative ability					
1. Ability to participate in discussion					
2. Ability to convey factual information					
3. Ability to construct long turns					
Strategies of communication					
1. Ability to use without undue hesitation					
2. Ability to paraphrase					
3. Ability to negotiate meaning					
4. Ability to use non verbal signals (mime and gestures)					
5. Ability to appropriate conversation fillers					

Key: 5. Outstanding; 4. Above average; 3. Average; 2. Below average; 1. Unsatisfactory

When scoring students' performances, the teacher should concentrate on what individual students are doing with the TL and how they are using it to achieve their communicative goal. Clearly, minor errors which do not seem to impede communication will not be considered.

Not all mistakes need to be corrected: the main aim of [communication] is to receive and convey meaningful messages, and correction should be focussed on mistakes that interfere with this aim, not on inaccuracies of usage (Ur, 1997, 224)

Students' oral communication abilities may be evaluated through various communication tasks and activities.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper is not to put the blame on teachers; it is rather to highlight the problems and difficulties encountered in the teaching and evaluation of speaking. It is hoped such an awareness may lead both language professionals (such as Syllabus designers, textbook writers or specialists in didactics), and teachers to think about better attitudes, and stimulating techniques in order not to 'teach' learners how to speak, but mainly to create a supportive and efficient oral class in which through communicating, learners can gradually develop communication abilities in the target language.

Future research may contribute to answer the question that could be asked at this level: should teachers help foreign language learners use a fluent inter-communication with its local characteristics and specificities or should they rather lead them towards a near-native skill of communication? knowing that such students are learning their TL in a typical foreign language environment in which they are more likely to be engaged in NNS/NNS than in NS/NNS interaction. Finally, it stands to reason that if we want to get genuine learner/learner and learner/teacher interaction in FL classes, it becomes necessary to revise the present practices and reexamine the 'parameters' that we generally tend to favor in our practice. Awareness that the target language is not only a linguistic entity, but also a cultural manifestation is necessary in order to enable our students to fully function as members of a large intercultural community.

About the Authors

Dr. Fawzia Bouhass Benaissi holds an MPhil in Arts Education and applied linguistics from Warwick University (Great Britain) and a Doctorat from Djilali Liabes University (Algeria). I teach and supervise postgraduate students in areas of applied linguistics and psycholinguistics. Areas of interest: intercultural communication, differential psychology, assessment, and teacher growth.

Dr. Nouredine Guerroudj holds a Doctorat in applied linguistics from Djilali Liabes university (Algeria). He teaches TEFL and British literature. Areas of interest and research: learning strategies, drama in literature teaching and discourse studies.

References

- Coulmas, F. (ed). 1981. *Conversational Routines: Explorations in Standardized Communication Situations and Prepatterned Speech*, Moulton.
- Dobson, J.M., *Effective Techniques for English Conversation Groups*, Newbury House Publishers, 1996
- Frith, D.S., and Macintosh, H.G., *A Teacher's Guide to Assessment*, Stanley Thornes publishers Ltd, 1987
- Hurley, S. D. 1992. Issues in teaching pragmatics, prosody, and non-verbal communication. *Applied Linguistics*, 13 (13), 259-281.
- Byram, M., Nicols, A. & Stevens, D., (2001), *Developing Intercultural Competence in Practice*, Clevedon, Multilingual Matters.
- Fichtner, F. & Chapman. (2011), The cultural identities of foreign language teachers, *L2 Journal*, vol.3, N°1.
- Genessee, F., & Upshur, J.A., (1998), *Classroom –Based Evaluation in Second Language Education*, New York, Cambridge University Press.
- Lee, I., (2000), Can a Nonnative Speaker be a good English teacher? *TESOL Matters*, vol.10, N°1.
- Little, D. (2013), Learner autonomy and second/foreign language learning, *LLAS Linguistic and Area Studies*, available at www.llas.ac.uk/resources/gpg.
- Richards, R.J., (1998), *Understanding Communication in the Second Language Classroom*, Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J.C. 2005. *Communicative Language Teaching Today*, Cambridge University Press.
- Sanchez, S.Y. 1999. Issues of language and culture impacting the early children care of young latino, *Unified Transformative Early Education*.
- Sercu, L., (2005), *Foreign Language Teachers and Intercultural Competence: An International Investigation*, Multilingual Matters.
- Stadler, S, (2011), Intercultural competence and its complementary role in language education, Available at www.academia.edu/6688384.
- Thanasoulas, D., (2001), The importance of teaching culture in the foreign language classroom, *Radical Pedagogy*, vol.3, No.3.
- Ur, P. 1997. *A course in language Teaching: Practice and theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Ur, P. 1985. *Discussions that Work, Task-centred fluency practice*, Cambridge University Press.
- Widdowson, H.G., *Teaching Language as communication*, Oxford University Press, 1984.
- Woods, D., *Teacher Cognition in Language Teaching, Beliefs, decision – making and classroom practice*, Cambridge University Press, 1996.