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POINTS TO CONSIDER WHEN BUILDING UP AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION ENVIRONMENT

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Dezvoltarea competenței de comunicare într-o limbă străină precum limba engleză reprezintă o provocare pentru unii studenți, în timp ce pentru un alt grup, aceasta reprezintă o simplă activitate care îi motivează să se dezvolte atât pe plan personal, cât și pe plan profesional. Cadrul didactic poate motiva studentul să descopere abilitățile cognitive pe care acesta le deține cu ajutorul unor modalități noi de activare a structurilor anatomice a creierului pe care le deține acesta în vederea achiziționării unei limbi străine. Pentru a dobândi o performanță lingvistică în spațiul educațional, neuroeducația vine în ajutorul profesorului cu o serie de teorii ce merită a fi analizate pentru a ajuta studentul să depășească barierele ce pot prejudicia calitatea procesului de învățare a limbii engleze. Aplicarea unor practici despre funcționarea minții umane în învățarea limbilor străine poate crește nivelul de implicare a studentului, gestionarea activităților și proceselor de învățare.

Cuvinte-cheie: *competență lingvistică, motivație, strategii de învățare, metalimbaj, medii de învățare*

As a language skill, communicative competence has been taken for granted for a lot of learners because it is considered to be the easiest one to acquire, but for others, speaking is the skill upon which a person is judged and this is something to be taken into account. When we communicate something to someone, we want to transmit a message, to express our thoughts on a particular subject. For our students who are studying English it is vital to experience real communicative situations in which they will learn how to develop their oral fluency and accuracy. As teachers, we encourage our students to talk and take part in all activities

that have been designed for them, to develop their listening-to-learn (the capacity to learn content materials while listening to and taking notes on lectures) and speaking-to-learn abilities, the ones they need to participate interactively with their teachers or colleagues while learning the challenging content featured in the courses (discussions, lectures, debates…), to increase the probability of their language acquisition, and achieve automaticity in their use of skills even though they may make some mistakes [1, p.20]. The process of studying a foreign language develops one of the most important key competences – *the communicative competence in a foreign language*. To communicate means to invest a part of us and our identity, respecting our students' opinions and the ability to value them. L. Breiseth ,the director of Colorin Colorado, the leading website for educators of English language learners, claims and we totally agree with her opinion that understanding the importance of getting to know your students (their strengths, challenges and background experiences) is especially important. At the start of the term, students may be anxious about getting to know you as a teacher and vice versa; the first day of class helps set the tone for the rest of the term. According to her, the following ten given tips can help us and our students have an open relationship and build meaningful connections [2]:

- *Student's name* (its correct spelling and pronunciation) – a teacher should learn students' names quickly because this allows more personal connections with them and can ease some of the classroom management challenges all teachers face.
- *Country of birth* – knowing where your students were born can give us important information about them as learners including: 1. Providing clues about what kinds of situations the student has experienced; 2. Sparking ideas for making the student feel welcome; 3. Making culturally responsive connections between students and classroom content.
- *Family background* – what language their families speak, who they live with, and bear in mind that any possible instance of family separation can be sensitive and difficult information to gather. Knowing these facts can provide insights on a student's social- emotional health.
- *Home language* (their primary language) – we can carry out a survey to find out if the student speaks multiple languages and which languages are spoken. This information will help us learn more about their linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

- *Educational experiences* – it is important to know if there were any interruptions in their educational process. Refugees or students with interrupted schooling may have big gaps in educational skills or content knowledge and these gaps should be taken into consideration when reviewing their data. This is a good way to build raport, increase their engagement, and identify their strengths.
- *Reading and writing skills in home language* – to get a better sense of your student's home language literacy is by providing a picture prompt. Ask him/her to write a story based on the prompt. This will help us determine if the student can write in the home language, and if those writing skills seem to correspond with their knowledge level.
- *English language proficiency level* – English language learners must develop proficiency in four domains of language: speaking, reading, listening, and writing. Every state has its own set of ELP standards and assessments that can describe what a student should be able to do in English in each of the four fields (see CEFFL).
- *English language proficiency scores* – students usually take two types of assessments that are aligned to a state's ELP standards: screener assessments and annual English language proficiency assessments. This will show us that they may be stronger in comprehension (reading and listening) than expression (speaking and writing) and it is easier for us to choose the correct activities and plan our lessons.
- *Students interests* – we can ask them to complete a questionnaire or even better to share some information about themselves by showing photos, drawing pictures.
- *Plans or goals* – we can help them achieve their goals by providing encouragement and maintain a positive attitude: we can ask them to write some of their goals by filling in a form: 1. By the end of this year, I want to……, 2. After finishing my first term, I would like to……. All this information can help us create a student's profile and help them to improve all their skills.

Speaking in a second language is not easy because it can provoke anxiety. We are challenged to speak on topics that may be not familiar to us. Thus, our emotions play a huge role in the communication process because they express our feelings, fears, and characterize our behaviour when talking to someone. Depending on the intensity of our emotions, our reactions may create different types of barriers in communication.

As teachers, we have to bear in mind our voice and our body language because these paralinguistic features have a great impact on students' personality. Students can overcome all these barriers by increasing their self-awareness and careful listening. Amanda Morin explains the power of praise and the way it can be delivered to our students for their hard work. She says that praise is the most powerful tool to engage and motivate our students to learn. Teachers who use it regularly tend to have better relationships with their students. The Institute of Education Sciences identified teacher praise as one of the top five most effective practices. There are three main types of praise that teachers use:

- *personal praise*: teachers usually focus on students' natural talents rather than the effort they put in or the techniques they use.
- *effort-based praise* emphasizes what students can control.
- *behaviour-specific praise* lets students know what they are doing correctly, providing specific feedback to describe teacher's approval of student behaviour [3].

It is known that speaking a language is different from knowing it: even though we may have some knowledge of some grammatical rules and some vocabulary, or chunks stored in our brain, we have to know how to apply all this material in order to interact and speak in real time with no planning. "We can speak a foreign language, in fact, only when we can use it…" [4, p.110]. So speaking is the skill that challenges us the most. A.Vizental says that communicative competence represents the ability to use the language:

- *accurately*: correctly in terms of vocabulary and grammar;
- a*ppropriately*: adapted to the situational/social context in which the exchange takes place and to the discourse type;
- *functionally and strategically*: using the language tactfully and politely, to get things done and achieve real-world aims;
- *competently* in terms of cultural background [5, p.26].

In this context, the communicative competence in a foreign language such as English represents a major problem of contemporary educational system, thus becoming a complex task of the formation of the student's personality. The subject matter of communication skill can be approached through a neuropsychological and psycholinguistic perspective. Cognitive neuroscience is the study of our brain functions and linguistics represents the study of human languages. So if we are aware of the

networks of neurons in the brain and its physiological process when we acquire or lose our language skills, then we will know how to activate the whole learning process. Researchers have identified three turning points in the history of speculation and research on language in the brain: 1) the first was an empirical breakthrough – the discovery by Paul Broca around 1860 that damage to certain parts of frontal cortex can be accompanied by impaired speech production; 2) the second was a theoretical breakthrough – the proposal by Noam Chomsky and others around 1960 that language is a computational system, defined by a finite vocabulary plus a finite set of rules that can be used to generate an infinite set of sentences and 3) the third was about a technological breakthrough – the introduction and diffusion around 1980 of methods for in vivo neural measurements in humans and of computers for the analysis and simulation of experimental data [6, p.23-28]. This field is still unknown for us but we will try to understand it and increase our awareness of the way it can help us and our students to learn better.

Teachers' experience has come to the conclusion that students learn according to the model of their educators, depending on their way of teaching, their personality and behaviour. In the vision of the modern pedagogy, the teacher is not only the person who teaches lessons and contents, but also the person who should create an appropriate environment for learning in which the student is interested, motivated to study, to ask questions having no constraints, and build positive relationships with the teacher and their colleagues. We need to set and maintain a comfortable affective environment. Thus classroom interaction is the best pedagogical strategy to develop the students' speaking skill. But despite the applied efforts, a lot of students often fail to reach those levels of performance that native speakers of this language possess. Few if any students achieve fluency in a foreign language solely within the confines of the classroom. Linguistic competence has been always within the view of researchers using different definitions depending on the specialty and purposes of each of us. Even nowadays, linguists continue to discuss this issue because everyone has his/her definition of the competence to speak a foreign language. Our students have different needs, different abilities, and different cognitive skills and this is the reason why we try to use different approaches, methods and techniques when teaching them. Some researchers state that cognitive neuroscience and psychology are

the domains that can help us build our students' confidence, motivation, and resilience. Neuroscience is the science that analyses how the brain reacts and "*manipulates important information to learning through pathways of functional attention and memory* [7]". In the late 1990s, researchers discovered that MRIs could be used to look not only at the structure of the brain, but also at how it functions. A. Morin explains how this process works, so let us have a look at it: first of all we have to know that the blood in our bodies contains varying levels of oxygen. Some blood is oxygen-rich and some is oxygen-poor. These types of blood respond differently to the magnetic field in an MRI (magnetic resonance imaging). Oxygen-rich blood responds with more strength and shows up as a stronger signal on the scan image (it looks brighter or bolder). When a part of the brain is active, the brain cells (neurons) cause a change in blood flow. That causes an increase in oxygen-rich blood in that area of the brain. When students learn new information or are doing different tasks (like reading, answering questions) this part of the brain is more active [8]. According to R.T. Jenkins, there are two new ways of teaching that can help us to motivate our students learn better and be more involved during our activities: *BTT* (Brain-Targeted Teaching) and *BB* (Brain-based). BBT model is a framework used by „*teachers who wish to enrich their practice…. and understand how pupils learn...* This model is divided into six important domains that worth being taken into account while teaching (Hardiman, 2012):

- establishing the emotional climate for learning;
- creating the physical learning environment;
- designing the learning experience;
- teaching for mastery of content, skills and concepts
- teaching for the extension and application of knowledge, creativity and innovation in education;
- evaluating learning.

In order to achieve a better level of communicative process, we have to create opportunities for our students to activate their thinking, their creativity, and their motivation to understand the way the language works. The collaboration has to be mutual (teacher / student, student / student) otherwise we may lose sight of an essential part in learning and teaching process. If we want to prevent the breakdown of the communicative process, we have to bear in mind these principles: a relaxed atmosphere in

our class so that students are not frightened of speaking and we need to expose our learners as much as possible to naturally pronounced speech by bringing different authentic material to listen to (some practice pronunciation work or clear recordings that can prepare them for listening outside the class), and of course to accustom our students to combining listening and speaking in real time, in natural interaction (our body language while teaching and by simplifying our speech are of a great help here to make them understand what we are talking about during the lesson). In the second model, *Brain-Based*, Willis (2006) mentions only four domains and namely:

- memory, learning and test-taking success;
- strategies to captivate pupils' attention;
- how stress and emotion affect learning;
- assessment that builds dendrites [9].

Following these principles, we can arouse our learners' interests in studying new concepts, ideas, accept different opinions, and be more confident about their abilities. When correcting them, we have to direct our attention to their way of building up the confidence in using English for effective communication, not on their mistakes (if they are not serious of course). To some extent our feedback influences positively or negatively the way they interact during the lesson. When we communicate something, we take into account both the context and the content. In contrast, communicative competence represents our personal ability to formulate the thought or message we want to convey to the receiver with accuracy and correctness. We all know that it takes a lot of time to learn to communicate effectively in English; we need a lot of further work. If communication in English is our main goal, then it should be used for real communication in the classroom as much as possible. The capacity to learn a foreign language represents an individual and unique ability for each of us because this represents a rather difficult task. New ideas are continually arising and we have to feel what is more likely or unlikely to work with our students (the best approach, method, and activities). Another well-defined point to know would be the purpose of our communication, what we want to achieve and what the proposed objectives are because the communication activity is based on an intention and a certain purpose. An efficient communication respects two fundamental principles: it creates positive connections with the person we come in contact

with (relationship) and leads to the obtainment of the desired result in the actual communication situation (information). In order to create these positive connections, we need to create a state of well-being on both sides. Since we are born, our brain is ready to absorb new information by using some specific strategies. A good practice when we study some new material is to categorize it by the purpose of information, by the practical use of information, by the meaning of the information etc. So the organisational process is very important when starting to create a new habit; it's all about changing our old habits into new ones, overcoming your fears and moving your life in a more interesting direction. Because oral communication is the most demanded soft skill of the 21st century, we need to focus on all our abilities to communicate in English not only during our in-class activities but also outside the classroom. The communication process from the didactic point of view is based not only on rational arguments, but also on emotional and motivational elements.

Real success in English language teaching is when our students can communicate in English inside and outside the classroom. Field work research suggests that lack of vocabulary competence affects students' speaking skill that is essential for language proficiency. But we have to think of our students' wellbeing as well. The process of learning is a continuous and an interactive process only if we want it to be like this. Psychologists teach us that learning takes place in our mind while behaviourists state that learning process takes place due to our interaction with our environment. Assisting learners in learning to work efficiently with new material, encouraging them to communicate by using strategies like avoidance, miming, gestures, and paraphrasing when they don't have enough vocabulary is a great technique to enhance the speaking ability and help them overcome their inhibition.

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