CZU: 811.111`233`243 **DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13353365**

METHODS OF IMPROVING COMMUNICATION SKILLS DURING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASS

Nelli CHIRIAC

asistent universitar
Universitatea de Stat, Chișinău, RM
orcid id: https://orcid.org/0009-0006-3589-7331

Communication is one of the most basic skills required for mastering a foreign language. As such, a big goal for any teacher is to motivate their students to develop their skills further. For that reason, this article sets out to define and analyse communication as a term and skill required for speaking in a foreign language. Additionally, the discussions delve into the components of communication, the importance of engaging students in meaningful interactions, and the necessity of developing fluency and efficiency in speaking a foreign language. Various teaching methods and activities, such as the 4/3/2 Technique and the use of multimedia resources, are highlighted here as effective tools for enhancing linguistic and intercultural competencies. Special attention is similarly accorded to defining and motivating the development of language fluency in students. This work also aims to encourage teachers to implement more activities that stimulate students to practice their communication skills.

Keywords: *second language acquisition, language learning, communication, motivation, class activities, fluency, the 4/3/2 technique.*

The task of the language teacher has always been to help their students in acquiring language skills in their target language. Language acquisition is not an easy task. In many ways, second language acquisition is more complex than first language acquisition. As the first language starts to be assimilated in the first five years of one's life, the second language acquisition can take place at any age following the onset of the first language. As a result, the second language acquisition is going to be influenced by the first language. The term *acquisition*, on its own, contrasts with *learning*. **Acquisition** refers to the somewhat incidental process of learning or 'picking up' a language without making any conscious effort to master it. Whereas, **learning** implies intentionally investing effort to study and learn a language. [3, p.17-18]

Outside of acquiring the necessary knowledge to understand a language the biggest challenge of any foreign language teacher is to inspire their students to use all the tools they've been armed with to express themselves and communicate. Thus, this article aims to aid foreign language teachers in their task of improving their student's communication skills.

The word **communication** comes from the Latin word *communicare*, which means "to share, to communicate, to allow participation, to do together and to unite". According to Keith Davis, "Communication is a process of passing information and under-

standing from one person to another." [2, p.113] Thus, communication occurs between people, so at least two or more people are involved. Ultimately, communication is a skill. This means one can learn and practice communication skills.

In addition to this ability, one also needs a will, i.e. the intention to engage in good communication and to practice and improve good communication [10, p.3]. According to Paul Watzlawick, the definition of communication is: "A two-way flow of messages between two or more people" [9, p.31]. Furthermore, in his work, Watzlawick specifies the key components of communication and the terms with which he addresses them. As such, he refers to a single unit of communication as a message, while a series of messages is catalogued as an interaction. [ibidem]

Communication involves the exchange of information. A message is transmitted by the sender and automatically interpreted by the receiver. In addition to the presence of a common character set, the meaning of a message ultimately also depends on the recipient's subjective assessment - a central component of interpersonal communication. Not only that, but the material of all communication is not only words, but also the tone of voice, speed or slowness of speaking, pauses, laughter and sighs; posture, expressive movements, essentially body language. This gives additional meaning to the spoken information and also shows or gives an idea of what opinion the interlocutor expresses. [9, p.4]

All this to say, teaching such nuances in a class setting cannot be done on a theoretical basis. Certain elements can be addressed or highlighted, but unless the students themselves engage in a discussion, they will not properly identify the key components of an effective interaction. Communication occurs naturally because people need to communicate and share specific information. That however does not mean everybody is effective at getting a point across.

Many students measure their progress in assimilating a language by the ease through which they can express themselves in the target language. Hence when a student perceives themselves as failing at this task, they lose motivation to pursue learning further. In addition to that, another reason can be that the students don't have the chance to showcase their speaking skills during lessons as many questions or exercises can be answered with a binary response such as "yes/no" or "true/false" followed by silence [1, p.26]. Therefore, the students feel like they are not challenged enough, as these activities may not be stimulating for the students more often than not. Put in perspective, mixing the exercises of different levels of difficulty to give the learners the chance to express themselves and demonstrate their knowledge will help them uncover weak areas for further improvement as well as show off the fruits of their work. For that reason, diversifying the classroom activities is highly recommended.

Learning a foreign language goes beyond just memorising a different set of names for the things around us. Friederike Klippel would even suggest that it also represents an educational experience. Language is closely linked with the personality and culture of its speakers; therefore, it is only natural that the process of acquiring a new language should delve further into these specific topics [5, p.5]. This would allow students to immerse themselves in the culture and draw comparisons between their own culture and

that of the English-speaking communities. The captivation about something new and unknown would draw the attention of the students and motivate them to discover more through language-orientated activities.

Following this line of reasoning, teachers should incorporate in their lesson plans certain teaching methods and tools that facilitate the development of communication skills. Anna Sass suggests using movies, more specifically short films or video sequences during language lessons to expand learners' linguistic and intercultural skills through the use of specific vocabulary. As technology progresses and becomes more accessible, it is a waste not to integrate these tools during lessons to draw the attention and curiosity of the students. The goals of the exercises with video material should be to understand the content, explain the narrative, name and describe the characters and comment on the story. The teachers can ask certain leading questions and point out key features of the dialogue and characters themselves to let students know what they should pay attention to. In this scenario, the students develop their listening skills as well as communication by answering questions and taking notice of the dialogue played out in the sequences. [8, p. 9]

Less experienced students should focus on describing the characters and key details they gleaned from their dialogue. Meanwhile, more experienced students should summarize the actions of and characterize the main cast of the video narrative. The teacher can also ask the more experienced students to describe the behaviour of a character by repeating certain film sequences and allowing students to analyze their motives and emotions. Thus, covering a wide range of topics and vocabulary, and developing their linguistic, listening, speaking and observation skills at the same time.

A different method resides in the classroom activities themselves, which much like games or folk songs were invented but rarely recorded to belong to one author alone. Essentially, these activities are handed down from teacher to teacher. This allows teachers to have free reign to curtail an activity to better fit a class. Klippel in his work, observes teachers utilizing two devices to help create communication activities. Those are the *information gap* and *opinion gap* exercises. [5, p.4]

Information gap exercises refer to activities that force the participants to exchange information in order to arrive at the proper solution. Such exercises include guessing games, jigsaw tasks and problem-solving activities. These exercises combine visual and audio elements to stimulate the students in developing their reading, listening and speaking skills while also relying on the prior knowledge gathered from outside sources as well as rehearsing previously learned material. The teacher has here a minimal role as they only need to correct or guide the students to the correct answer. Thus, these activities have great potential for rehearsing material and engaging the students in various types of exercises, but not so much for sparking conversations, unless done in groups or pairs, where they need to interact in the target language to get the right answer.

Opinion gap exercises are created by incorporating controversial or thought-provoking texts and ideas, which require the participants to describe, argue and defend their perspective on these materials or subjects. These activities can be developed into organized debates or project presentations that can better portray the participants' views,

as well as cover multiple previously not considered. In these kinds of activities, the intervention and administration of the teacher can be both minimal and prevalent. As the learners will be the ones to mostly speak in these instances, the role of the teacher is to monitor and administer order of presentation and interaction as well as intervene if the speakers go off-topic, neglect to talk on specific aspects or go out of line when defending a topic. These activities can have a variety of positive benefits for the students as they primarily develop their communication skills at the same time as doing their own research, formulating a plan, working alone, in pairs or in groups as well as displaying their final work in front of an audience.

Outside of activities orientated on simulating communication and interaction in a foreign language, a secondary skill to improve upon during class should be the fluency and efficiency of speaking in a foreign language. Lennon describes **fluency** as "the rapid, smooth, accurate, lucid, and efficient translation of thought or communicative intention into language" [7, p. 26]. As such, fluency concerns the precise and unambiguous form of expression of the speech that helps get the message across, as fluency does not entail only speed but also social interaction.

Uniformly, Fillmore reflected that fluency can be characterized by four different dimensions. Firstly, fluency is defined as the ability to talk with few pauses as well as the capacity to fill time with talk. Secondly, fluency is assigned to those capable of talking coherently and showing proficiency in the semantic and syntactic resources of the language by crafting semantically dense sentences. The third dimension reflects the ability to navigate any conversation and setting. The speaker is confident in discussing all manner of topics and in different environments. Lastly, the speaker shows a creative and imaginative form of speaking, weaving puns, metaphors, wordplay or various other styles into their speech to enrich their delivery. A skilled speaker can encompass all these aspects thus, showing true fluency in the language [4, p.93]. In that respect, fluency is a very crucial competence in need of developing during foreign language classes.

Hence, activities aiming to improve fluency should be considered to be applied during lessons. Activities utilising **the 4/3/2 Technique** proposed by Maurice Keith are a fitting example [6, p.28]. The goal of the technique is to help intermediate and advanced students improve their expressiveness in the target language.

Maurice highlights that all speakers, whether they are native speakers or non-speakers tend to make pauses, lose track of their thoughts, and rush in with a string of words before just as abruptly stopping only to enunciate utterances such as "uh", "you know", "something like" and so on. In any speech, such instances are unappealing, unprofessional and distracting. This is especially noticeable in speakers who are unfamiliar with the subject discussed. As such this technique sets itself the aim of training the students to present information in a concise and consistent manner. As people warm up after talking about a topic multiple times, the pauses and utterances lessen.

Following a similar logic, the technique proceeds as follows: Students are paired up and given four minutes to discuss a subject. One person speaks, the other listens. Once the time is up, they change partners and have to do the same speech in three minutes, then again with a different partner in two minutes. Hence why the name of the technique

is 4/3/2. The aim of the technique is not to rush the students to retell the same piece of information as fast as possible but to challenge them to relate the same information as succinctly as they can. That can be achieved by summarising the key points of the speech, saying the positive and negative aspects or making comparisons to already familiar topics so that the listener can fill in the blanks on his own. The students can utilise any method they see fit to discuss the subject as long as they fit in the time frame and use their own words.

This technique has the benefit of placing the students in a situation where, they need to know a subject well enough to retell and then, condense the presentation enough to fit in the time limit, while simultaneously a new person is listening to them every time, thus the speaker is exposed to a new person that cannot rely on prior discussions to comprehend the topic. This exercise can be changed and modified by the teacher to fit the class better, such as making the speakers merchants, who are advertising their wares, or messengers and giving them any topic of discussion. Therefore, this activity can be suitable for any lesson without much preparation.

In conclusion, teachers are responsible for providing the students the opportunities to acquire the skills and experience during lessons and outside them. This article aims to aid and encourage teachers and researchers to utilise the examples given here to improve the teaching experience of foreign language learners, as well as their communication skills. It underscores the multifaceted nature of language learning and the critical role of communication skills in language education. This work advocates for a holistic approach that integrates cultural immersion, diverse classroom activities, and targeted exercises to foster students' linguistic proficiency and confidence in using a foreign language. By emphasizing the importance of practical application, engagement, and continuous improvement, educators can create dynamic learning environments that empower students to communicate effectively and navigate the complexities of language acquisition with confidence and skill.

Bibliography:

1. BAHRANI, T., SOLTANI, R. How to teach Speaking Skills? In: *Journal of Education and Practice,* 2012, Volume 3, No 2, pages 25-29. ISSN 2222-1735
2. DAVIS, K. Methods for Studying Informal Communication In: *Journal of Communication*, 1978, Volume 28, Issue 1, Pages 112–116, Available online at: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1978.tb01572.x
3. ELLIS, R. *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*, 2015, Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN-13 978-0194422048.
4. FILMORE, J. C. On fluency. In: *Individual differences in language ability and language behavior*. 1979. New York: Academic Press, pp. 85–102. ISBN 0-12-255950-9.
5. KLIPPEL, F. *Keep Talking. Communicative Fluency Activities for Language Teaching.* 1985. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 0-521-27871-6.
6. MAURICE, K. (1983). The fluency workshop. In: *TESOL Newsletter*. Vol. 17 Issue 4, p. 28-29. Available online at: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED289347.pdf
7. LENNON, P. (2000). The lexical element in spoken second language fluency. In*: Perspectives on Fluency* (pp. 25-42). Michigan: University of Michigan Press. ISBN 13: 9780472086047

8. SASS, A. (2007) Filme im Unterricht - Sehen(d) lernen. In: *Fremdsprache Deutsch* Hefte 36, Hueber Verlag, , p. 5-13. ISBN 978-3-19-999183-0
9. WATZLAWICK, P. BEAVIN, H. J., JACKSON, D. *Pragmatics of Human Communication*; 2011, New York: W.W. Norton & Company. ISBN 978-0-393-70707-6.

Web site:

10. Handout of basic communication and communication techniques. EFAS, 2020. Available at: https://www.efas-web.de/files/teges/Teges_Handout_Kommunikation_FINAL_SCREEN.pdf [Accessed on: 09.04.2024]