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DEVELOPING COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN ESP

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Abstract

It is essential that students should be given opportunities to develop their own skills. They must be encouraged to collaborate, to help each other and correct each other. They will do so if they are given the appropriate situations and consistent long-time encouragement.

Speaking practice must be active and spontaneous, too, that is obvious. Students must not sit and think for long periods about what they should or might like to say. Communication is definitely an activity.

Key-words: communication, fluency, accuracy, collaborative learning, activity

My long-time teaching experience has offered me one precious lesson: students can *learn* to speak a language, and certainly teachers can help them, but no one can teach students to *speak* a language. Because that is an entirely different thing and it can only be achieved through a lot of practice and communication.

That is why I have wondered how to get students really talk to each other – not just one talking and the others listening as in ‘classic’ interactions during foreign languages classes. It is obvious that students need opportunities to practice, but when given an opportunity, many find that they have nothing to say. So I wondered how to get them actively practicing on-topic material, correcting each other, and improving their English at the same time.

I started from the definitions of ‘fluency’ and ‘accuracy’, as it is obvious that the sum of these two can offer good communication skills to the speaker. **Fluency** is the transmitting and receiving of ideas and information. **Accuracy** refers to using correct grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation.

Fluency + Accuracy = Communication

This means that students must be trained to: (a) give one of the commands; (b) pause a few seconds to allow the other students to think; and (c) name a chosen respondent. This is, of course, a basic technique to classroom management, getting attention and spurring the thoughts of some of the students.

Small groups and group leaders

Although it is more convenient to demonstrate these training techniques when all the students are together in one group, the class should be broken down into smaller groups once the teacher is sure that the students understand what is required of them. This is to maximize individual pupil talking time, minimize the potential for student loss-of-face, and provide a situation conducive to students correcting one another. There should be three or four people per group plus a group leader.

The group leader’s job is to give commands, act as a student teacher, and be the primary source of peer correction, at least until the group members feel comfortable correcting each other. Then the leaders choose their group members.

Moving the leaders to different groups once in a while lends to more variety to activities, and assists in learner motivation. As each individual has different strengths and abilities, interchanging the group leaders occasionally widens the range of interaction for all the students.

Word-sentence-question-answer (WSQA)

WSQA (and all its variations) helps beginners build fluency. It is also appropriate for intermediate learners building accuracy and self-confidence. It can even be used with advanced students, particularly the variations involving word meanings and verb tenses.

WSQA

1. The teacher says “Word”, pauses a few seconds, and then calls on a student. That student responds with any word in English that he/she likes or finds interesting.

2. The teacher then says “Sentence”, pauses, and calls on another student. That student is to respond with a sentence incorporating the word given previously.

3. Then the teacher says “Question”, pauses, and calls on a third student. That student is to respond with a question about the previous sentence. The question should be about the sentence, and not simply a transformation of the sentence into a question. For example: “book” – *I have a book*. Appropriate questions would be: What *colour* is your book? Where did you buy the book? or Do you like the book?

4. Then the teacher says “Answer”, pauses, calls on a fourth student to answer the question given by the previous student. The fourth student should answer the question with an answer appropriate to himself/herself.

5. After going through this routine several times, the teacher should call on a student to be “teacher” and have him/her take the class through the same routine. Have a few students come up in turn to be the “teacher”.

6. Now the class should be broken up into predetermined small groups, and the group leaders carry on drilling the students in the same manner.

Once the groups have begun using WSQA and the system is proceeding smoothly, the teacher’s job is simply to circulate around the class listening to the various groups and supervising the student’s work. The teacher is there to monitor, answer questions about usage, and take notes of teaching points to bring up with the class later. By having the students rely on themselves and each other, the teacher builds up the students’ confidence in their language ability.

Variations on WSQA

W(RT)SQA (recently taught). With this variation, the group leader is to keep his/her textbook or notebook open while the group members keep theirs closed. The group leader uses the book as a source of *recently taught* (RT) words – as well as other words and terms the students should know. Here the leader supplies the “Word” required each time and then quizzes the group with “SQA”. This variation is particularly useful for dealing with ESP vocabulary.

W(FC)SQA (from context). Here the teacher gives the *context* for the vocabulary items to be chosen by the group leaders. It can be any context, ranging from one student interest (such as sports) to one of ESP.

WMSQA. The “M” in this variation stands for “Meaning”. The student called on with the command “Meaning” will give the meaning or synonym for the “Word” given in response to the initial command. It is often necessary to emphasize answering in complete sentences for

this variation. For example: “Word” – *chronological*; “Meaning” – *Chronological means in order by date*. These are the kind of responses that should be encouraged.

Sub-variations of this activity are:

1. Word-Synonym-Sentence-Question-Answer
2. Word-Spelling-Sentence-Question-Answer
3. Word-Antonym-Sentence-Question-Answer

PoSSQ. In this variation the “PoS” that replaces the “Word” means “Part of Speech”. The student giving the initial command says “Noun” or “Verb” or “Adjective”, etc., instead of “Word”. The student responds with a word or phrase that can be used as the part of speech stipulated. The student responding to the command “Sentence” should use the specified word or phrase so it fulfils the part of speech function stipulated in the initial command.

Students must be careful with words that can function as different parts of speech. For example: “Adjective” – *clear*; the “Sentence” *Clear the papers off the desk, please* is incorrect. An appropriate “Sentence” would be *I like a clear desk*.

W S&T Q&T A. With this variation the student commanding “Sentence” should also indicate the verb tense (T) required, for example: “Sentence – Past Tense”. The student responds in the tense stipulated, incorporating the “Word” given in response to the initial command. The same procedure is followed with the subsequent command on “Question”.

Additional collaborative activities

A. How Many Do You Remember?

The class is asked to supply vocabulary items until a total of 15 to 30 items have been given. The topic area may be left open or it may be specified as pertaining to food, sports, travel, business vocabulary, etc. The students should have their notebooks closed while this part of the activity is going on. The teacher makes a list of the vocabulary items on a piece of paper.

After the 15 to 30 vocabulary items have been collected, the students sit quietly and listen as the teacher reads the list aloud twice. When the teacher finishes, the students open their notebooks and write down as many as they can remember. Students should be told that this is a kind of contest so they feel encouraged to work independently.

After giving them a couple of minutes or so to finish writing, the teacher should find out who remembered the most words, thereby identifying the tentative winner(s) of the ‘contest’. The winner should call out the words to match his/her list with the teacher’s. The teacher writes the word on the board to give the other students the opportunity to complete

their lists and to check their spelling. Then the teacher goes through the list item-by-item explaining the meanings of those words the students do not know.

After this the students should be given some time to use the new words in conversation (in pair or in small groups). Useful activities include WSQA, short role-plays, etc.

As the reading-writing component of this activity, students can be directed to collaborate in pairs or small groups to write a short story or dialogue incorporating all the vocabulary items on the list.

A variation of this technique is to have an 'envoy' read his/her group's composition to another group. Any member of this group can stop the leader if there is a mistake and help him/her correct it before continuing. The envoy brings the corrected composition back to his/her original group and the leader dictates the corrected version for them to copy.

B. Picture Talk

Students are divided into pairs or small groups. One student in each pair or group is given a picture. She/he describes it so the listener(s) can make a drawing. The 'artists' may ask questions for clarification, and the person giving the descriptions can point out any discrepancies s/he sees between the drawing(s) and the original picture.

After the drawings are completed, the teacher should put each original picture beside its drawing(s) so students can compare and contrast them. As students point out discrepancies between original and its drawing(s), the teacher should write relevant vocabulary items on the board for the students to practice.

After the pictures and the drawings have discussed, the members of each student pair or small group should collaborate on writing an accurate and complete description of 'their' picture. The next class period the picture should be displayed as a student reads the description of it to the class.

If the students make a lot of mistakes in their descriptions, the teacher can put two pairs or groups into a larger group and have the descriptions read to the new group so they can assist in making corrections. An alternative technique would be to use an 'envoy' to get help from another group in writing a corrected version.

Conclusion

The above activities are efficient ways to help students develop communication skills. Through listening-speaking and collaborative in small groups, students become more motivated and their time and energy in class is well spent.

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