TEACHING SPOKEN ENGLISH TO ADULT LEARNERS

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Abstract. Teaching spoken English to adults has officially gained importance since new, important changes occurred in modern curriculums around the world after 2010. This paper attempts to shed light on what characterizes real speaking tasks. Additionally, it discusses whether the course books used in Moldova, manage to live up to their reputations and to what extent teachers make use of them. Moreover, it provides the six criteria- which can be defined as "any activities that encourage and require a learner to speak with and listen to other learners" [10, p.41] and ideally illustrates that pair work and group work offers undisputed benefits that may very well outweigh all the challenges that could be argued when organizing the class this way.

Teaching speaking in the classes where English is taught as a second or a foreign language seems to be quite a difficult task. This may originate from the fact that speaking a foreign language, especially hearing oneself imitating its pronunciation and its intonation is a very personal, often unusual sounding process somewhat that can be compared to singing, for instance. There are lots of people who would not like the idea of singing in public; they might even feel reserved doing it in front of their closest friends. Hughes points out the difficulty of having to change and expand identity as a language learner and the challenge of "speaking appropriately with a new voice" [1, p. 9]. Yet, teachers expect learners to take part in role plays and engage in speaking activities which might be even inhibiting. The inclusion of speaking in the EFL classroom is a task which only seems to be manageable successfully when learners are involved in tasks encouraging them to speak and listen to other learners. Planning this actually constitutes a challenging mission and even responsibility for teachers and course book writers. Although all parties involved in learning and teaching – learners, teachers, school boards, course book writers - state that they intend to achieve the same goal, which is putting an emphasis on the improvement of speaking, there often seems to be a general subjective impression of an unsatisfactory result- there are many cases when people can not say too many things in English even after they have studied it for twelve years at school.

One significant change regarding speaking from the year 2000 to the officially updated versions of the modern curriculums published after 2009 is that instead of the initial four skills there are currently five skills mentioned: speaking is divided into conducting coherent and cohesive monologues and participating in dialogues and discussions. Mathematically presented, speaking has gained importance from the former 25% (as one fourth of the four skills) to a more substantial 40%, as spoken production and spoken interaction are supposed to cover 20% each, and 20% respectively for listening, reading and writing. However, curricular guidelines are kept fairly general, which demands a lot of dedication of teachers on the one hand but allows a lot of autonomy and self-determination on the other.

When reading, listening or writing are taught each student is expected to be involved in practicing these skills during a certain time; it is absolutely the same for speaking- students should have their reasonable shares of involvement. Ever since the learners should

be offered activities that support speaking and listening to each other, the question comes as to what makes a good speaking activity. According to Lightbown & Spada's research, `comprehensible output does not automatically follow comprehensible input` [2, p. 176]. Learners need opportunities for communicative practice, as it is stated in real speaking activities, which can be defined as "any activities that encourage and require a learner to speak with and listen to other learners" [10, p.41] and ideally include the following six criteria: 1. Productivity: The focus is on output; 2. Purposefulness: The activities focus on meaningful results and/or social functions; 3. Interactivity: The speakers communicate with other people; 4. Challenge: The activities include enough but not too much new information and/or language so that they are interesting and challenging but not impossible to solve; 5. Safety: There is sufficient but not too much scaffolding so that the individual learner is prevented from getting lost but not spoon-fed either; 6 Authenticity: The activities are related to real life; adapted from [5, p. 90-91]: Nation and Newton have recently declared that a well-planned language course has equal shares of what they call "the four strands": 1. Meaning-focused input: learning through listening and reading 2. Meaning-focused output: learning through speaking and writing by passing on information 3. Language-focused learning: learning through consciously 'noticing' and practicing language features such as grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation 4. Fluency development: using familiar language repeatedly and at an increasing speed in order to become "fluent in what is already known". [4, p.1-9] When teaching speaking, it is certainly necessary to start with pre-communicative activities or form focused learning but teachers have to understand that this provides the learner with one puzzle piece of the language for the bigger picture of communication, e.g. pronunciation "without actually accomplishing an illocutionary act" [3, p. 8]. Thornbury points out that `speaking events do not exist independently of other language skills; in the real world not only listening is involved but frequently reading and writing are necessary as well` [5, p118].This means that speaking has to be practiced in combination with other skills in communicative activities, no matter how scaffolded they may be in order to meet the learners' needs. When communicative activities are planned, the social organization of the class has to be taken into consideration: Whole class activities often involve the risk that the learners could be engaged in activities superficially unless hardly involved at all. Plenary class activities might work well for some situations such as drills or guessing games where it may be possible to keep the attention span of the majority of students quite high for a while. However, class discussions, for example, are usually dominated by a few fluent speakers and there is the danger to fall into the trap of believing that simply because there is an animated discussion going on that all the students take part in it. Arithmetically it is not even possible for 15 students in a class to speak for more than a minute or two per lesson. Individual work can be applied especially when the class is organized in frequent self-directed learning settings where the learners might use headphones to listen and respond. They might use recording devices, such as their mobile phones, to record their speaking for the teacher or their peers to comment on later. In pair work and group work all learners are involved at the same time. The list below illustrates that pair work and group work offers undisputed benefits that may very well outweigh all

the challenges that could be argued when organizing the class this way: Benefits: 1. There is an increased chance that every student is actively involved in language use. 2. Shy students often find it easier to express themselves in small groups. 3. The teacher's role changes from 'doer' to observer: group or pair work allow to assist when needed, assess the performances of individual students, note language mistakes for future corrective work and devote a little more time to slower learners. 4 Different tasks can be assigned to different pairs and groups, which may then lead to final discussions or natural sharing time. Challenges: 1. Students will probably not provide as good language models as the teacher. 2 In monolingual classes learners may be tempted to slip into their native language. 3. The organization and planning can be more time-consuming than whole class settings. 4. Classes may be noisy or even disruptive.

Although the importance of teaching speaking is manifested in Moldovan curriculum, and course book writers and teachers are conscious about the importance of teaching the spoken language, there is still a long and winding way towards the targets for speaking according to the curriculum. The aim should be to increase both the communicative tasks and the speaking time in the classrooms. This goal can only be achieved if profound changes in teacher training and continuing teacher education are made by introducing a more communicative approach to language teaching and by reanalyzing traditional classroom arrangements. A more profound knowledge about different aspects of teaching speaking is expected to lead teachers to a more critical approach concerning course book activities. This might ideally set demands on course book writers to provide not only a sufficient number of speaking activities per academic year but also to increase the number of high–quality and truly motivating communicative tasks, such as real life activities requiring creative thinking and genuine interaction, and the necessary basic tools to support the learners in their progress. Secondly, it might ensure that course books would actually assist teachers in teaching speaking instead of leading them into wrong directions.

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