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## **ON SOME ASPECTS OF DEVELOPING SPEAKING SKILLS IN ESL AND ESP COLLABORATIVE CLASSROOMS**

*The present paper calls attention to the problems that hinder speaking proficiency which is the most challenging task for language learners to master. A learner-centered environment and a well-rounded collaborative class can contribute to ongoing efforts to improve students' oral performance and promote critical thinking. The results of the analysis of the statistical survey undertaken by the authors can be useful to draw up a syllabus.*

**Key words:** *communicative approach, collaborative class, a learner-centered approach, speaking skills, oral performance, critical thinking, statistical survey*

### ***The Most Challenging of All the Skills***

The fundamental changes that are undertaken in our educational system suppose that communicative approach to language teaching should be one of the basic emphases in contemporary curricula. The roots of the communicative approach go back to late 1960s and early 1970s. Since then the text-based approach has gradually changed and teaching merely grammar structures and memorizing words cannot satisfy any requirements of contemporary world. Therefore, it is essential that language teachers pay great attention to teaching speaking /Kayi, 2006/. Mastering speaking skills is actually the most demanding for language learners. The classroom activities designed to develop speaking skills are the only environment for the learners to practice and boost their speaking capacity if they do not have any other opportunity to communicate with native speakers.

The purpose of this paper is to reveal, identify and analyze some of the problems that are the reasons of the slower mastery of speaking. The paper focuses on common difficulties encountered by students in oral performance, indicates the importance of critical thinking to trigger the acquisition of speaking skills, highlights the practice of collaborative techniques, offers a set of activities to encourage students' active involvement, and, ultimately summarizes the results of a survey held among our students.

A number of prerequisites such as language accuracy, sociolinguistic competence, extensive vocabulary, intercultural conditions and the ability to

successfully communicate in authentic environment are among indivisible components that provide the development of speaking skills. Constant involvement of the student in the process of communication is at core when designing and organizing a lesson is targeted at acquiring the skill. Reading and listening are viewed as more passive and receptive skills as students have less opportunity to manifest their knowledge in a more creative way, whereas speaking and writing, which are considered productive skills, give students ample opportunities to demonstrate a more independent command of the acquired knowledge. Unlike speaking which requires the production of sentences on the spur of the moment, when writing the student has time not only to think over grammatical structures and vocabulary but also to correct and improve their final product. However, there are a number of obstacles, objective and subjective, that make harnessing the speaking skills more difficult.

Of course, accuracy, which is the ability to produce sentences using correct grammar and vocabulary, and fluency, which is the ability to speak freely relating the meaning and the context, are the two factors that eventually determine the success of the learners. The situations in which speaking takes place can roughly be divided into interactive and non-interactive. Interactive speaking presupposes a more realistic face-to-face communication with the involvement of at least two or more people; non-interactive communication is realized by means of presentations and giving speeches before the audience.

Burkart states that “Spoken (and written) language changes according to the number of participants involved and the social and psychological roles they play in relation to one another. Settings, topics and functions interact with participants in intricate ways. Competent speakers of a language have learned to take into account who is speaking to whom, in what circumstances, about what, and for what reason”/Burkart, 1998:4/. Thus, to avoid confusion and embarrassing situations non-native learners need to be aware of the extra-linguistic context as well. Therefore, the teachers have to combine all the existing methods and approaches of teaching methods focusing on the latest and innovative ones to get complete attention of the student resulting in an active involvement in all the activities that the regular English class offers. In other words, the shift from teacher-centered environment to a learner-centered one is more than imperative, especially in case of promoting speaking skills.

### ***Critical Thinking and Speaking Skills***

Critical thinking and its application in different disciplines is an important topic in modern education. Teaching a foreign language is not an exception and, at present, it is of utmost importance for a teacher to integrate critical thinking into the classroom. One of the benefits of developing critical thinking with language

learners is that it helps the student to take independent decisions and monitor their own speech making it more meaningful, even more successful. By developing critical thinking the student gets an opportunity to become more creative, and, therefore, more motivated to display their own ideas and thus become more proficient language users.

By thinking critically the student has more chances to overcome the difficulties connected with the given subject and further succeed in reaching the objective. As Willingham stated “Virtually everyone would agree that a primary, yet insufficiently met goal of school is to enable students to think critically. In layperson’s terms, critical thinking consists of seeing both sides of an issue, being open to new evidence that disconfirms your ideas, reasoning dispassionately, demanding that claims backed by evidence, deducing and inferring conclusions from available facts, solving problems and so forth” /Willingham, 2008: 21/. One of the constituent parts of this complex activity known as speaking is the ability to think critically. When speaking grammatical accuracy and rich vocabulary are not the only decisive factors to result in a successful reproduction of a coherent and meaningful utterance. The ability to analyze and justify ideas leads to a more logically structured speech, thus, positively contributing to both communication and presentation skills. Finally, the student who has the ability to think critically is considered as more capable to do the activities which those who still have not developed the skill fail.

### ***Organizing a Speaking Class***

A speaking class is actually a public speaking experience and not all students are inborn public speakers and most of them have to overcome fear and anxiety. The best results can be achieved if learners get involved in the activities through sharing ideas. Besides the endeavors to create a friendly and inspiring environment, the design of the assignments should be varied and aimed at enhancing problem solving results and developing skills for critical thinking. They should give the students the opportunity to generate ideas based on previously acquired knowledge and evaluate to what extent each option might be beneficial to accomplish the common goal.

The two-way communication between the instructor and the students is one of the prerequisites to establish trusting relationship in the classroom. Not all the students voice the problems that hinder better language performance. A collaborative classroom is one good example that may contribute to overcoming all the obstacles that a learner may face in the process. As mentioned above many problems rise from both internal and external factors: incorrect pronunciation, lack of understanding grammatical patterns, limited vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, shyness, and finally lack of motivation, which basically comes from

minimum opportunities that students possess to practically use the language in daily communication. In many cases, English lessons are the main and sometimes the only environment in which students not only learn the language, but also communicate in it, and therefore the teacher's ultimate goal here is to organize such a lesson that would contribute to the development of communication skills. “Speakers of English – especially where it is a second language – will have to be able to speak in a range of different genres and situations, and they will have to be able to use a range of conversational and conversational repair strategies. They will need to be able to survive in typical functional exchanges, too” /Harmer, 2007:343/.

Small group work in the ESL and ESP classrooms has proved to be one of the most effective ways of developing communicative ability. Collaboration in a team can motivate students to practice and improve their speaking skills, foster communicative learning and encourage to develop analytical skills. Even for students with relatively low language competence this strategy makes the learning process more meaningful and interesting, helps promotes language acquisition and active language practice. A collaborative class experience when the learners are assigned to make a brief survey of any issue attains higher-level thinking and preserves the information for a longer period than students working individually. This can be explained by the supposition that while working individually students are more inclined to memorize the information rather than analyze or clarify the details. Rather than leading students to pure memorization, providing a rich environment where meaningful communication takes place is desired. We can assume that collaboration is a kind of socialization that fosters the students to get aware of the knowledge and experience their peers have.

Organizing a speaking class is not that easy for instructors as it might seem. It is not advisable to start practicing team work activities at the very first meeting. In order to coordinate the work of a team successfully the teachers should take into account that just as in a puzzle each student's part is essential to get a final product. From this perspective it requires some time to get to know students' capability and personal interests, their learning style and talents, former experience and language competence and at last whether they are divergent or convergent thinkers. Mixed aptitude groups usually show better results as the students with comparatively low performance can increase their achievements.

Analyzing our experience of teaching speaking in ESL and ESP classrooms and judging by the progress acquired as a result of applying collaborative learning techniques in speaking tasks we can conclude that the following types of activities have proven to be very effective in getting students to speak fluently. They can be recommended to our colleagues in teaching-learning environment in a variety of ways: as an assigned task, like a presentation, an integrated speaking task

(involving reading and listening material) or a guided task by using images or cue cards. As a matter of fact, the role of a teacher is minimized, and he/she acts more as an observer or a feedback provider. Consequently, cooperation among students for a common purpose is encouraged, which leads not only to the improvement of the speaking skills of the students but also engagement, motivation and empathy among them.

### *Types of Activities Frequently Practiced in a Collaborative Classroom*

**Debating** in a group is perhaps the most frequently practiced type of a classroom speaking activity. One of the most effective ways to organize the activity is to offer the groups cards with different debatable issues of real-world problems. The main purpose of this activity is to encourage the students to brainstorm and share ideas over the topic they are offered. The group has to explain why they agree or disagree with the given statement. Relevant explanation of the assignment is of vital importance as the time allocated is limited and the students should not waste time discussing the details. The teacher's task is to follow the course of the discussion and encourage all the students of the group to make equal contribution to the activity. The feedback supposes follow up questions, offering new ideas, challenging assumptions and new conclusions by the other group(s). As a result, besides revealing the students' speaking ability the debate fosters their active involvement and helps develop critical thinking and quick decision making.

**Webquests** are a very useful tool for preparing students for debates. It is a kind of an Internet-based project where different links are given to different groups with a task to research some issue. They have to summarize the issue and offer their solution. Rival groups have to assess their suggestions and present their arguments in favour or against.

**Making presentations** can be considered one of the case-based learning activities where the final product is a film, a poster or a Power Point presentation in class. The formats assigned can vary from an individually prepared presentation to a larger group project, but the goal is the same, i.e. to get all the students involved. It can take place either in the preparation process when it is carried out as teamwork or after individual delivery of the task in the follow-up phase when students are asked to come up with questions or give a feedback on the presentation. Their task is to brainstorm the content and evaluate and filter the key message(s) of the report and pose questions to the presenter to make comments over the message(s) delivered. It should also be followed by a discussion. The key to a successful presentation is, first of all, to be a skillful public speaker which itself is quite demanding, but fortunately can be acquired through practice. Although the final product is a prepared formal talk which requires quite well-developed speaking skills, it has to integrate all language skills as well.

One way to create and deliver an effective presentation is by watching TED talks. Also, assigning the students to listen to famous speeches by some of the most motivating speakers may have an incredibly inspiring influence on them and help students overcome their fear of public speaking, work out proper tone and posture and learn how to organize their presentation. By watching TED talks students can learn lots of techniques, e.g. on how to grasp the attention of the audience: by telling a personal story or a joke, asking an unexpected question, introducing a message in an interactive way, etc. They can initially model the style of the presenters and later opt for their own approach. This experience can foster the preparation of a presentation and be used as another activity to practice speaking – TED talk discussions. In groups the students have to analyze the process the presentation underwent: framing of questions, information sources, crafting of the speech itself, the use of supporting materials and technical tools, time management, etc.

*Simulations and role-plays* can be of great benefit for the students to develop their speaking skills. They encourage general oral fluency and train students for specific situations as this type of activity may involve real-life situations such as a conversation in a restaurant, a hotel reception or a shop for an ESL class or a business meeting, negotiations and model conferences for an ESP class. Speaking activities through *listening to audio materials or watching videos* is actually one of the opportunities to add fun and encourage the students to imitate pronunciation patterns of native speakers and try to speak as naturally as possible since the language is used in realistic, real-world context. The use of videos as a teaching source motivates the learners to practice a wide variety of language skills. The relatively short videos cover many aspects of the English language and are easily digestible for learners of all levels. Students may choose to act as themselves or take on roles. Whichever option they choose this activity is both fun and motivating. In addition, it allows the students to use more extensive vocabulary than some more task-centered activities may do /Harmer, 2007/.

The practice of *student-created audios or videos* might be a creative way for our students to demonstrate previously acquired knowledge in an ESL class combining it with some newly acquired techniques, meanwhile trying to improve their speaking skills over time. It is an entertaining kind of a summative assignment during which students can show what they have learned. By means of recording or filming themselves they can observe and assess their own verbal and nonverbal communication skills and figure out what they need to do to improve them. Besides, it involves a constant collaboration process between them both in the research and preparation stage and the collection and analysis of the feedback. By looking honestly at and assessing their own performance it is possible for the students to brush up on the weak points and improve public speaking skills with practice.

There is no doubt that listening and speaking are interconnected in our daily lives, so one cannot be taught without integrating the other. Some students may possess quite advanced level of listening and speaking skills, still at times experience problems when asked to combine those skills and produce an integrated response. That is why, teaching integrated speaking skills is so important in an ESL and an ESP class with a view of the prospective use of the skills outside the classroom in real life situations.

**Integrated speaking tasks** in fact involve the use of several language skills: listening, reading and speaking. The outcome is a monologue which should cover in brief the main idea of all the materials used. The authentic reading passages may range from different kinds of announcements to articles, whereas the listening passages may be presented in the form of conversations or lectures. The key point here is to summarize the information and give a comprehensive reply in the end. Besides, this activity entails paraphrasing to underline the main idea and to clarify the details. However, these activities can be successfully used in a collaborative ESL speaking classroom and include team discussion and response.

One more task that requires the use of analytical thinking is watching **riddle videos** such as TED Eds. They may serve as a very useful resource for teachers for multiple purposes, as the scope of the topics allows them to be used both in an ESL and an ESP class. The main advantages of this resource are that the explanatory videos are quite short, mostly about five minutes, and they require strong sense of logic. This is a challenging way to implement speaking skills in problem solving activities. The process is two-stage: listening to a stated problem and providing a solution after discussing the details in pairs or groups.

**Interviewing** is also considered to be one of the effective ways of collaboration in the form of a dialogue in class. Students can be asked to prepare for a face-to-face or two-on-one interview in advance. The interviewee and the rest of the group should contribute to the team work by identifying the situation, i.e. they should introduce the issue, brainstorm the details they are going to tackle and outline the course of the interview. The interviewee is asked to surf the Internet and other sources to find out information over the issue and about the person he/she is going act as. At the final stage each group has to sum up and analyze the information they have learned.

Another workable way to encourage students to practice their speaking skills and efficiently develop their ESL speaking abilities is by means of a cooperative learning technique known as **Three Step Interview (TSI)**. This technique serves as a useful instructional activity for the development of communicative purposes through the interview process which can influence the students' enthusiasm for learning ESL.

The TSI serves as a powerful socialization technique as well. This activity creates a specific conversational context in which students communicate according to the roles assigned to them, i.e. interviewer, interviewee and reporter. To put it briefly, the TSI involves three basic steps according to the roles assigned and as a result of the further switching of the roles: asking questions in an interview, answering questions in an interview and sharing information in an oral report. Thus, the students either in pairs or in groups learn the rules of polite and proper oral communication within a given situation by applying different questioning strategies and providing simultaneous accounts.

Mostly the competences of spoken language can be built only in a teaching-learning process, which actually takes place in a classroom. In order to improve ESL and ESP speaking performances these types of activities both need to be practiced and trained for over some period of time. As they involve a communication process not only speaking skills but also social relationships and information transfer are promoted. Moreover, today strong oral communication skills are a job requirement for many positions, so besides fulfilling one of the academic requirements their mastery of the skill may make them competitive candidates in today's job market.

The complicated nature of the problems related to the development of speaking skills necessitated a factual analysis based on the results of a survey conducted among students. Based on the fact that students encounter difficulties while developing speaking skills as mentioned in the paper, our team decided to conduct a survey among freshmen for an ESL course and those who study English for specific purposes. The choice of the first year students is conditioned by the fact that at this stage, they generally face more problems. It was decided to conduct the survey in the second term in order to identify the existing problems, since in the first term, due to some objective and subjective reasons, students, as many teachers notice, have a greater reliance on reading, as it allows them to avoid most of the mistakes. Even those students who have better developed speaking skills also do not exhibit enough enthusiasm in speaking activities. In addition, practicing reading activities, which they can perform much better at this stage, gives the student more confidence among their teammates, thus, allowing them to demonstrate their knowledge and as a result create a more favourable ambiance for further socialization, which is not the least important factor in the whole process of language learning.

### ***Description of the Survey Results***

This report covers a range of 1<sup>st</sup> year students' opinions of Yerevan State University based on a questionnaire on employing speaking skills in English. The detailed description and analysis of findings are followed by a table containing the



survey questionnaire with responses. The table presented in this report illustrates the survey findings in percentages. All figures have been rounded, so all they may not add to 100%.

The survey of 87 students on exploiting their speaking skills in English covered 10 points on their attitude to speaking English in different situations.

This section of the research provides an overall summary of data that identifies key analytical points about the approach of the students to speaking in English.

### Speaking Skills Survey Questionnaire

1. Of all the 4 language skills I prefer	Reading 28%	Listening 15%	Speaking 50%	Writing 8%
2. I experience difficulties speaking English.	Never 5%	Always 8%	Often 26%	Sometimes 62%
3. Do you like speaking activities in English?	Yes 87%	No 13%		
4. I like speaking activities	based on a reading material 28%	based on an independent topic 30 %	through listening or watching videos 42%	
5. Do you avoid speaking English	with your instructor? 19 %	in public? 81 %		
6. I avoid speaking English because of	poor grammar 6%	difficulties with pronunciation 26%	lack of sufficient vocabulary 68 %	
7. I like to practice my speaking skills through	making presentations 20%	interviewing 7.5%	building dialogues 63%	monologues guided by cue cards 10%

8. When I cannot remember a word, I replace it with another.	Never 0%	Often 47%	Sometimes 33%	Always 20 %
9. Do you feel a lack of confidence when speaking English?	Yes 72%	No 28%		
10. While speaking, I think of what I want to say in my native language and then put it in English.	Never 10%	Always 37%	Often 23%	Sometimes 30%

**Point 1. *Of all 4 language skills I prefer reading/listening/speaking/writing.***

The first point of the survey concerns the preferences of students in practicing the four language skills namely reading, listening, speaking and writing. Overall, exactly half of the respondents, which comes to 50%, enjoy employing speaking skills, followed by the second popular skill, reading, 28%. There is a significant difference in percentage of students who tend to exercise listening skills the number of which reaches 15%. Finally, writing, which is the least practiced skill is mere 8%.

**Point 2. *I experience difficulties speaking English.***

The aim of the *second* point was to reveal to what extent the respondents encounter difficulty speaking English. Those who *sometimes* have any difficulty comprises the largest number of respondents, while the option with *often* has the second largest number of responses. Approximately about 8% of the participants *always* face difficulties and only 5% *never* have any obstacles communicating English.

**Point 3. *Do you like speaking activities in English?***

The survey analysis indicates that though most of the participants find practicing speaking English challenging *sometimes*, 87% of respondents do not avoid being involved in speaking activities.

**Point 4. Do you feel a lack of confidence when speaking English?**

The data point to a message that the overwhelming majority of the respondents (72%) lack confidence in ability to communicate their message in English, probably, due to both objective (e.g. difficulties with pronunciation, insufficient knowledge of grammar and vocabulary) and subjective (e.g. the fear of making a mistake and being laughed at, shyness etc.) reasons.

**Point 5. Do you avoid speaking English with your instructor/in public?**

The data reveal the more favourable situation in which students prefer to demonstrate their speaking skills. About one fifth of participants (19%) feel more comfortable communicating with the instructor than speaking in public. The choice may probably be attributed to the fact that students primarily accept the role of the instructor as someone having the right to correct and make remarks. At the same time, 81% of the respondents avoid speaking in public either because of the subjective and objective reasons of being afraid to make a mistake or being corrected by a stranger whose social role is not intended to assess.

The information retrieved may serve as a source to design and exercise such activities that may help overcome the fear of speaking in public.

**Point 6. I avoid speaking English because of poor grammar/ difficulties with pronunciation/lack of sufficient vocabulary.**

The figures reflect the fact that insufficient vocabulary hinders around 70% of the participants to communicate in English, while pronunciation proves to be a prime obstacle only for 26% of the students. It is noteworthy that only 6% consider poor grammar to be the cause of inconvenience for speaking.

**Point 7. I like to practice my speaking skills through making presentations/ interviewing/ building dialogues/ monologues guided by cue cards.**

With more than 60% of the respondents building a dialogue generates enthusiasm practicing speaking skills. Only one fifth of the participants are willing to do an independent speaking activity such as making a presentation, while the options with monologues guided by cue cards, pictures etc. and different interviewing activities are among the least popular ones, 10% and 7.5% respectively.

**Point 8. When I cannot remember a word, I replace it with another.**

The survey analysis indicates that all the students completing the questionnaire find paraphrasing to some extent (often, sometimes, always) as a helpful means when they cannot recall a word. This fact can probably be attributed to such reasons as lack of vocabulary and inadequate performance of speaking skills.

**Point 9. *I like speaking activities based on a reading material/ based on an independent topic/through listening or watching videos.***

More than 40% of the students opt for speaking activities based on listening. While reading material and independent topic is popular with a smaller number of students, 28% and 30% correspondingly. The choice of the speaking activities based on reading or an independent topic is probably conditioned by the fact that both activities provide more time to focus attention on vocabulary and grammar, and thus, have more time to prepare their oral response.

**Point 10. *While speaking, I think of what I want to say in my native language and then put it in English.***

With varying frequency (*always 37%, often 23%, sometimes 30%*), however, 90% of the respondents admit the fact that when speaking in English they first think in their native language and only 10% never resort to their mother tongue. A tendency to over-analyze may also be a reason to impede their ability to find a foreign word. Finally, the learner's social environment and mentality, mostly conditioned by their native language and an insufficient use of leaning strategies are bound to affect communication.

In conclusion, we can assume that all the respondents of the survey are avid for practicing speaking in class and only one third of them lacks confidence speaking English especially in public. At the same time, the survey indicates that the presence of the instructor cannot be considered a major barrier or a psychological pressure when practicing speaking skills as only a comparatively small percentage of the students feel uncomfortable speaking to the instructor. As far as most of the respondents of the survey learn English for specific purposes, the lack of sufficient vocabulary is a serious obstacle to practice speaking through listening but it is easier for them to do the task through reading and building dialogues on independent topics as they are quite good at paraphrasing and have time to concentrate to accomplish the assignments more successfully.

The survey data point the way toward a number of openings through which the instructors of English will have the opportunity to build greater understanding and raise the awareness of problems connected with speaking skills and develop and exercise activities to foster the skills discussed in the paper.

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**Լ. ԲՈՍԱՆՋՅԱՆ, Ի. ԲՈՒՌՆԱՋՅԱՆ, Ա. ՊԱՊՈՅԱՆ – Համագործակցային դասերի միջոցով անգլերեն բանավոր խոսքի հմտության զարգացման որոշ խնդիրների շուրջ.** – Հոդվածում հատուկ ուշադրություն է դարձվում բանավոր խոսքի զարգացման խոչընդոտներին, որն ի տարբերություն այլ հմտությունների, ամենաբարդն է: Նշվում է, որ ուսանողակենտրոն համագործակցային դասավանդման մեթոդների մշակումը կարող է նպաստել բանավոր խոսքի հմտությունների և վերլուծական մտածողության զարգացմանը: Կատարվել է հարցում, որի վերլուծությունը կարող է օգտակար լինել անգլերենի դասընթացի ծրագիր կազմելու համար:

**Բանալի բաներ.** հաղորդակցական մոտեցում, համագործակցային դաս, ուսանողակենտրոն մոտեցում, խոսելու հմտություններ, քննադատական մտածողություն, վիճակագրական հարցում

**Л. БОСТАНДЖЯН, И. БУРНАЗЯН, А. ПАПОЯН – О некоторых аспектах применения методики обучения в сотрудничестве для развития навыков устной речи в рамках курса английского языка.** – В статье особое внимание уделяется проблемам, препятствующим развитию устной речи, которая является наиболее сложнодостижимым навыком. Отмечается, что личностно-ориентированный подход с применением методики обучения в сотрудничестве может способствовать повышению уровня коммуникативных способностей учащихся и развитию их критического мышления. Анализ результатов проведенного опроса может быть использован при разработке учебной программы английского языка.

**Ключевые слова:** коммуникативный подход, совместный класс, личностно-ориентированный подход, навыки устной речи, критическое мышление, статистический опрос

Ներկայացվել է՝ 22.03.2021

Երաշխավորվել է ԵՊՀ Անգլերենի թիվ 2 ամբիոնի կողմից

Ընդունվել է տպագրության՝ 14.04.2021