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BUILDING FLUENCY IN SPEAKING THROUGH LANGUAGE LEARNERS' INTERACTION

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Speaking seems “intuitively the most important of all the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing)” [1]. To become a fluent speaker of a foreign language (and in most cases of the English language) is the aim of any language learner. Therefore, the task of a university teacher is to facilitate their students’ acquisition of English by providing them with useful tools for building oral fluency.

What should be taken into consideration for building and developing fluency? First of all, we need to integrate listening, reading and writing into the learning process to create favourable conditions for students. Working in pairs or small groups is another way to encourage learners to start using a foreign language. Thus, for successful communication it is necessary for an EFL student to know what to say (i.e. understand the topic under discussion), how to say (what grammar and vocabulary to use) and who to say to (their group-mates).

Our teaching experience at the business university proves that first-year students do not always feel confident when they are to speak on topics related to business. If learners have a vague idea about the topic under study and find it difficult to formulate concepts in their L1, it will lead to poor or even no production in L2. So, before students get to a speaking stage it is advisable to check how well they understand what is going to be discussed. For this purpose students are asked to form small groups and brainstorm any words which are associated with the topic. If there are students with higher and lower levels of English in one group, both sides will gain benefits from such interaction – either moral satisfaction or vocabulary enrichment. Then students form new groups and share the previously generated ideas with their new partners. At this stage it is repetition that helps to build the initial stage of fluency in oral speech. When repetition is only rote memorization, students find it tiring and useless. But when sentences are repeated for a different audience and the speaker realizes the importance of the utterance, repetition becomes an effective learning tool.

Rapid development of technology provides students with better educational opportunities. Teachers should encourage their students to become more independent in their learning process by helping them to define their learning needs and work out their own strategies. The use of audiotaped dialogue journals contributes a lot to classroom performance [2]. An audiotaped journal is an alternative to a written dialogue journal. It offers speaking practice outside the classroom. With the help of mobile devices students can record their speech and send it to the teacher or their group-mates for discussion. At the stage of preparing journal entries students devise their own cognitive and metacognitive strategies such as resourcing, organizing ideas, composing the script, etc. As learners are not limited to classroom time they can carefully prepare an entry and do several recordings of a conversation gradually improving their speaking skills and becoming more confident in themselves. So, keeping audiotaped dialogue journals makes an effective contribution to students’ language learning on the whole and developing oral fluency in particular.

One of the obstacles to fluent speaking is lack of vocabulary. There exist different ways of extending the range of words to be used in conversation and students can choose those which satisfy their learning styles. To help learners to be better understood it is necessary to teach collocations. The use of collocations saves time for choosing and producing words as phrases and adds authenticity to an utterance. When teaching collocation, special attention should be paid to pronunciation and grammar [3]. It is also necessary to explain how to use new vocabulary items and in what contexts they can be used. For this purpose students fulfill reading and listening tasks and then practice the chunks in conversation. If students understand the agreement of words in collocations, memorize the use of articles or prepositions, they will become more fluent in speech and sound more natural. When working in pairs or small groups students may be given different texts in which they underline chunks and then relate the information to their partners. For lower levels it is advisable to choose a text with noun / noun or adjective / noun collocations (e.g. a tennis club; public attention), whereas more advanced learners can be offered tasks with longer chunks (e.g. seriously affect the political situation in).
Mastering communication strategies involves developing the ability to automatically set phrases into conversations at appropriate moments. One of the strategies is making frequent use of phrases which express agreement (e.g. I share your point of view; he/she is absolutely right; I have no objection) or disagreement (e.g. I think otherwise; I am afraid that is not quite true; on the contrary), state opinions (e.g. as far as I am concerned, from my point of view; I guess that), begin or finish conversation (e.g. How are you doing? What's up?), etc. Students should be able to recognize formal and informal styles and employ suitable phrases as the context requires. They need to differentiate between the phrases “What does it mean?” and “Could you tell me what it means?” Encouraging students to use set phrases when interacting with their peers not only during classes but also outside classroom will provide learners with more opportunities to express their thoughts clearly and build fluency more efficiently.

Developing oral productive skills requires a great amount of time. At the initial stage when students try to overcome speaking barrier a teacher does not set strict time limits. But with constant practice it is necessary to introduce intensity into conversation activities by restricting the time for utterance. The following technique forces students to think and speak faster. Students form small groups where they present a four-minute speech. They need to be careful about the content and language they have covered at previous lessons. Then students repeat their speech in a different group, this time they are given only three minutes. As they have had the first attempt and are familiar with the content, vocabulary and grammar, they can produce meaningful utterances in shorter time. Students deliver their speech for third time and do it within two minutes. As they address a new audience they do not regard it as repetition, but, on the contrary, they are eager to share the information in a confident manner. Practice makes students’ speech fluent and natural.

Fluency in speaking is the result of intensive work of students under the teacher’s guidance. It can be achieved only when the four skills are integrated and conditions close to natural are created. Interacting with other language learners students can make considerable progress in speaking and gain an excellent command of English.

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