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COMMUNICATIVE

T E C H N I Q U E S
I N L A R G E
C L A S S E S

Introduction

This paper is based on my work with several groups of Belgrade University students who took up English as their optional foreign language. It focuses on communicative techniques and is also intended to highlight the role of communication in large classes by suggesting how to activate as many students as possible and by analyzing particular techniques in an ESL classroom. The coursebook emphasizes communication and is intended to develop all four skills (speaking, listening, writing and reading), but I have decided to concentrate primarily on speaking.

A typical language classroom

Many language teachers base their work on outdated attitudes that a language can be learned by analyzing its structure and translating texts. Little attention has been paid to communication and student participation. Needless to say, such language classes are not very useful and the effect is not satisfactory. Students "know" English, but their fluency is not as good as projected in the syllabus. Many students describe their high school English lessons as boring, almost without their active participation, based on translating a text, its grammar analysis and many structure drills. Most of them think that what they need is speaking, or in other words, language in use and demand more conversation in English. Their demands are justified¹. Furthermore, if the classroom is crammed (40-45 students), students are not very likely to gain any useful knowledge, apart from some information *about* the language provided by the teacher. Even if the textbook is good, it is the teacher who is responsible for his/her students' achievements in learning. In fact, there seem to be many teachers who base their work on the Grammar-Translation Approach², which implies instruction in Serbian, little use of English³, focus on grammatical parsing and translating.

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1. The data came directly from the students.
2. The features of this approach are based on Celce-Murcia
3. As stated earlier, insufficient student talking time must also be attributed to large groups

M E T O D I K A I D I D A K T I K A

Speaking - an indispensable element of learning a foreign language

A language teacher must be fully aware of the importance of using a foreign language in his/her classroom. Since the Grammar-Translation Approach (or at least, its spirit) is still present in some classrooms, one of our primary tasks is to make use of what our students have learned so far and do our best to enhance their knowledge.

Linguistic performance is the most important aspect of language and must be carefully developed. The most efficient way of developing it is by speaking. Students need to "rehearse ... a real-life event in the safety of the classroom ... It is a way for students to 'get the feel' of what communicating in the foreign language really looks like." (Harmer 1998:87). Harmer (1991) also points out the importance of feedback for both teacher and students, which is evident as they speak. They are all able to identify language problems and are given enough room to eliminate them. Besides, if students know they are supposed to speak more they used to, they pay more attention to what they hear and read. Students simply "need chances to say what they think or feel ... [and] to test the hypotheses they have formed about the way language works." (Willis 1996:7).

However, speaking must turn into communication if we really want to make the most of it. On the one hand, speaking is part of communication and its crucial element, but there must be at least two persons if we want speaking to turn into communication. Peers will no longer play interlocutors; they will become real ones. *"Where there is no interaction, there can be no communication."* (Malamah-Thomas, 1987:11). Although this statement sounds simple, it summarizes the essence of our point and ultimate goal - to create the best possible linguistic environment which actually triggers the learning process.

Classroom management in large classes

Large classes are not very appropriate for effective language learning, but they create an atmosphere challenging for the teacher. Even if the classroom is well-equipped and full of students willing to learn, we still have to cope with limited resources and there is little time we can devote to each student. Every minute must be efficiently used if we want to give each student at least one opportunity to say something and take an active part in our work.

Since our groups can be up to 50-60 students, it is absolutely necessary to introduce pair and group work. However, it is virtually impossible to move desks in our classroom, since they are heavy, and there are too many desks in each row, which leaves little space for moving them around and organizing pairs and groups is thus made difficult. Re-seating students can sometimes take too much time and we try to avoid it unless it is necessary to form a group.

Working in adjacent pairs is our common practice since students have grown used to it and expect it very often. In our classroom it is used for vocabulary/comprehension sections and information gap exercises, sometimes for structure drills and new grammar. However, it has both advantages and disadvantages. The teacher cannot control many students while they are engaged in pairwork and there is no full feedback before pairwork has ended. The arrangement of desks hampers teacher circulation among pairs, but they are encouraged to ask

for help if a problem arises. On the other hand, "pairwork allows the students to use language" freely and "increases the amount of student practice." (Harmer, 1991, 206). We have also noticed that students become very co-operative and willing to help their peers only about a month after the beginning of the course. Groupwork faces exactly the same obstacles. The number of groups and of people in them depends on the number of students present, which is between 6 and 9 people in a group. As noticed by Harmer (1991), groupwork provides more people to react with and it increases the amount of student talking time. Even if they do not use English whenever they are asked to, they at least have to activate their knowledge in order to complete the tasks set. Giving instructions is facilitated: if working individually, some students are likely to misunderstand the instructions and fail to do their tasks properly. At the same time, it also builds self-confidence and creates better relationships between group members and in the whole class.

Since groups cannot be formed according to abilities, there are always some weak and shy students in each group, which gives them more opportunity for practicing the language freely. Our groups do not always have leaders, because such an environment gives every member enough opportunity to express themselves, makes a "democratic" atmosphere and there is no pressure. Monitoring groups is again a problem, but they are welcome to get any help they need.

Criteria for choosing activities

Activities cannot be chosen at random. Before moving on to any activity, we have to analyze them first and see if they meet certain criteria. The basis for some of the criteria stated in this text were established by Ur and Wright (1992), but are slightly modified.

- *Learning value* - every activity must be useful. It means that it must be intended for practicing something (e.g. word order, vocabulary revision, spelling, etc.).

- *Level appropriateness* - it is known that "activities are often suitable for a variety of levels." (Ur and Wright, 1992:xi). However, the teacher being the best judge of his/her students' knowledge, can always modify them and make the most of them.

- *Syllabus-related* - activities must also have something in common with syllabus requirements. It means that an activity offering a quiz about ecology is not suitable unless students are required to learn some vocabulary and phrases used in ecology.

- *Preparation and organization* - before introducing an activity, the teacher should carefully plan how to carry it out. If some extra materials are needed (cards, pictures, photocopied materials, etc.), the teacher should make sure they are ready some time before the lesson. If students are willing to help, their help should be sought in advance. If the teacher knows the students it is easier to predict what kind of obstacles might arise and how they should be dealt with.

Introducing communicative activities

Communicative activities cannot be introduced on the spur of the moment. Providing a favorable linguistic environment is the primary task. Instruction in English is a good foundation. At the same time, a number of activities which give students enough opportunity to talk should gradually be introduced. Nolasco and Arthur (1995) suggest performing memorized dialogues, contextualized drills, cued

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dialogues, discourse chains, role play and improvisation. This set of activities is often referred to as *communicative continuum*. All of them "center on verbal communication." (Nolasco and Arthur, 1995:50). Since the students still rely on prefabricated patterns, they are supposed to develop a sense of freedom "by gradually reducing controls" (Dobson, 1989:9) over what they say and thus facilitate communication. Moreover, these activities will "help the student move from pseudo-communication to communication where he expresses his personal ideas and needs in the context of reality." (Dobson, 1989:1). It is necessary to be patient until they get used to speaking a foreign language when talking to peers. Some extra time is inevitable if the class is monolingual. At this stage it is good to encourage students even if their English is not good, e.g. by helping them to express themselves in spite of their limited vocabulary, because all that many of them need is confidence. Emphasizing that their utterances are acceptable because they get the message across is useful. In fact, some who are resourceful enough will soon be able to resort to avoidance, as to one of very useful communication strategies. Furthermore, when students get to know each other, learn each others' names, get to know the teacher and what he/she requires, they will be ready to take part in communicative activities and cope with all tasks.

Discussion

Discussion is a well-liked and useful technique. It can be carried out in several ways, both in groups and with all students participating in it. To make a distinction between those two kinds of discussion, we will term them as *common discussion* (in which all students can equally participate) and *group discussion* (in which students are divided into groups and discuss a particular topic).

Common discussions are more easily carried out in our conditions. There is always a variety of topics which students find interesting and most of them are willing to participate. Our choice of topics is often based on the textbook and are often directed so as to practice new grammar and vocabulary. Discussions are often directed towards the students' personal experiences and thus personalized. Personalized discussions are always more likely to be successful, since students are always willing to give their own opinions or to describe something that will make them popular among their peers. It is always important to ensure the participation of all students, or at least, of as many as possible. Some who are shy or not fluent enough require special attention, encouragement and patience. Such students should always be treated with extra care and their questions should always be easy, amusing, or in some way interesting. When the teacher's help in asking questions is necessary, his/her questions must be open-ended, demanding multiple statements, (as suggested by Dobson, 1989:28), or in case of *yes-no* questions, always followed by *why*.

As we have already mentioned, the topics are often based on the materials covered in class. However, when choosing a discussion topic, we often have to begin it with questions related to the text, but at the same time, we should focus on an interesting point made in the text. For example, after a text about ghosts and witches, we started the discussion with questions about the students' personal experiences, but very quickly (in different groups) moved on to an "analysis" of superstition, on quasi-

psychics who appear on our TV networks and even on necromancy.

Causing students to disagree on trivial issues and, in certain moments, turning the current discussion into a debate is also useful. The discussion will then become more dynamic and activating. This is useful particularly if a student expresses a view too "scientific" for the rest of the class or if his/her presentation is monotonous. Of course, when any conflict of opinions appears, the teacher must act immediately if it turns into exchanging insults or causes disruptive behavior.

A discussion can often change its focus from fluency to accuracy, e.g. a discussion about the importance of money can often be redirected into conditional practice by asking *What would you do if you had a million dollars?*, or about any assumption expressed by the same verb form.

As suggested by Dobson (1989:9), if our class is large, small-group discussions "are an excellent way to give students opportunities to speak." (Dobson, 1989:62). Instead of monitoring each individual, a more relaxed atmosphere is created by monitoring the groups and helping them when necessary. Of course, the class is divided into groups and each group can be given either different or the same topic, but interesting enough to activate every member and with enough points to be mentioned. It is wise not to appoint a group leader/spokesperson at the beginning of the activity. This will make groups use more English than they usually do and make them feel equal. The groups can also be allowed to elect their spokesperson, and for the same reason, it can be done when the discussion is about to end. Other groups should be encouraged to ask a few questions after the presentation of another group's spokesperson if there is enough time. Instead of topics, various parts of the textbook can also be used in such discussions.

D e b a t e s

Debates are similar to discussions, but there must always be two sides with different opinions. Therefore, the choice of the topic is now even more important. Since we know there must be some disagreement, the topic should be as neutral as possible so as to avoid quarrels. On the other hand, the topic should be provocative enough to motivate the students to take part in it. A number of topics suggested by Dobson (1989:65) meet these criteria:

- Television does children more harm than good
- Parents are too permissive with their children nowadays
- Examinations are unnecessary
- We have too much leisure
- Living in the city is better than living in the country
- Old traditions prevent progress
- A universal language is possible

Before starting a debate, it is necessary to clarify the topic and see if there are enough students who agree and disagree with it. If there is a topic about which almost all students agree or disagree, it is better to find another one if we want to make it successful. Asking students in advance to speak in favor of an idea or against it is not always productive, because those who do it reluctantly are likely to benefit

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little from it. There is a number of topics, also suggested by Dobson (1989:65), which are not likely to be very successful in a modern urbanized society, e.g:

- It is better to marry for love than for money
- Women should be allowed to enter any profession they choose
- Money is the most important thing in life
- It is useless to explore the past, etc.

Even if there are statements some people agree with privately (e.g. that money is the most important thing in life), those who do will certainly hide their true opinions because expressing such views in public could make them unpopular among the rest.

Both in discussions and debates the teacher should not take sides but merely help the participants to express themselves, ask questions and make sure the discussion/debate flows smoothly.

Fluency and accuracy in language classroom

Communicative activities are very often fluency-oriented. However, it is impossible to neglect accuracy, and correcting students is often a difficult task. The problems which arise are *how* and *when* to correct students. A good teacher must bear in mind that frequent correcting, even if errors/mistakes appear in every sentence, can often result in students' frustration, which hampers fluency development.

Contemporary methodologists agree that both errors and mistakes are important for language learning. As pointed out by Edge (1997), students must be given enough opportunity to make mistakes because they need 'space' to experiment with the language "and to work out new and better ways of saying things." (Edge, 1997:258). These attitudes are based on the fact that every language is acquired (or learned) *gradually*. At one point, there is a system which is "neither the system of the native language, nor the system of the target language [...]; it is a system based upon the best attempt of learners to provide order and structure to the linguistic stimuli surrounding them." (Brown 1987: ch.9). This system is known as. Until the system is stabilized errors are frequent, and in fact, they are evidence that learning is taking place. Errors are likely to disappear in the final stage, stabilization. However, our students are more likely to make occasional mistakes and are able to correct themselves when prompted. It implies that they have reached a final stage, termed systematic⁵.

Correcting - how and when

These two questions refer to the focus of our attention, i. e. whether we are helping students to improve fluency or accuracy.

When we are paying attention to *what*⁶ the students want to say, their fluency is in the focus of our attention. When an interesting discussion is taking place, a teacher too eager to correct every mistake is very likely to ruin it. Students must be given enough time to practice speaking. At the same time, students must be aware that we do care about what they say. Frequent distractions, such as our focusing on

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4. As stated by Brown, (1987)

5. As suggested by Brown, (1987)

6. Based on Edge, (1997: ch. 4 and 6)

form only, will make their communication less efficient and show that we do not care about what they say. "Students need the experience of being listened to as people with things to say." (Edge, 1997:20)

Of course, we do not claim that accuracy should be neglected. It is just necessary to emphasize that it should not be too conspicuous or expressed through obvious punishment and criticism, which students can easily take as humiliation. Further paragraphs will explain how mistakes and errors should be corrected.

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If students' linguistic competence is satisfactory, self-correction will prove very useful in the classroom. If the teacher gives a hint that a mistake has been made, the student is likely to repeat the wrong part of the utterance correctly, he/she will not feel frustrated, and the rest of the class will be able to recognize the mistake. A hint can be given by gestures, facial expressions, saying something like "er...mmm?" or by tentative questions, e.g:

Situation 1

Student: He was born in *the 1959.

Teacher: Are you sure there should be an article?

Student: Oh, yes, he was born in 1959.

Situation 2

Student: I must have *took it because it was raining.

Teacher: You must have took it. Don't you think there's something wrong with it?

Student: I must have taken it...

Peer correction is sometimes useful, but some limitations must be imposed as soon as it is introduced in the classroom. It is the teacher who should decide when to ask students to correct their peers, e.g. when students are asked to do something in groups or pairs. It is good to try this with as many students as possible, but it is essential to ask one student at a time so as to avoid unpleasant situations. Ten students correcting their peer simultaneously is just one example of it. It can be combined with self-correction to make it less frustrating:

Situation 3

Teacher: What do you call the person who rides horses in races?

Student 1: ... A rider.

Teacher: I think we might use some other word in this context...

Student 1: ...

Teacher: Jasna, can you help her?

Student 2 : A jockey.

Peer correction involves all students in "listening to and thinking about the language" (Edge 1997:26) and at the same time, "the teacher gets a lot of ... information about the students' ability."(Edge 1997:26). On the other hand, students do not like being corrected by other people who are supposed to be their equals, and this technique should not be applied very often.

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7. As suggested by Edge, (1997)

Teacher correction should be used if all other options fail. Edge (1997) describes this technique in combination with the two techniques mentioned above, but we will concentrate on teacher correction in a narrower sense. If the student fails to use the correct form after hints given by the teacher, we should name the correct form and see whether the student can use it at all. In either case, an explanation why we use a particular form is useful and the students who were not sure about it will be able to hear the rule once more. Repeating a form in context, together with a teacher, should be avoided if possible, because many students find it frustrating. Emphasizing a missing morpheme/mispronounced word is also very helpful, but as Edge pointed out it should not be too unnatural so as to avoid overstressing it. Further advice, such as "Be careful when you pronounce XYZ" and repeating it in isolation is far better than pure repetition of the incorrect word and emphasizing it alone.

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Students can be corrected either immediately or some time after the error/mistake has been made. In my opinion, frequently made errors should be corrected immediately, such as forgetting to add an {s} to the third person singular or to noun plurals. In our experience, when an error like this one occurs, the teacher should unobtrusively elicit words with the missing morphemes from the same student and use self-correction immediately and respectfully.

Both errors and mistakes which cause ambiguity and sometimes make the utterance sound funny should also be treated immediately:

Situation 4

Student: As soon as I arrived I went to the *bitch but the sun was too hot.

Teacher: You went to the bitch? I didn't know you had a pet there.

Student: Whoops! What I meant was *beach*.

In case of mistakes and occasional errors, the teacher can jot them down and tell the student what was wrong, but a better way would be to do it without the student's knowledge. A teacher can simply use his/her notes as guidelines and try to elicit the incorrect structures in a casual conversation with the student who produced them.

Mistakes (and in some cases) errors can sometimes even be prevented. If we can predict that many students whose mother tongue is Serbian are likely to pronounce the word architect as */a:hltekt/, we should point out this difference *before* we ask them to use it. I have tried this in my classroom with three groups of students. Two groups were told about the difference (B and C), but the control group (A) was not. Students from the control group pronounced the word as */a:hltekt/ more often than the other two groups.

E v a l u a t i o n

A good language teacher should make a thorough analysis of his/her work. Some teachers seem to be afraid of their students and think that their opinions are insignificant since they are "not qualified". However, it is essential to get some feedback and talk to students in order to evaluate both them and ourselves. An anonymous questionnaire can give many useful hints and ideas for further work. It

is likely to provide objective answers since students are not required to reveal their names and know that there will be no consequences whatever they have written. Even a seemingly insignificant remark should be taken into account and carefully analyzed or discussed with colleagues.

Testing students' knowledge is another valuable source of information. Their knowledge can be checked virtually every day. Apart from occasional tests or mock-exams, keeping a permanent progress record is very useful. A simple checklist can be more than helpful for this task. Simplified interviews aimed at eliciting certain structures and/or vocabulary test both their speaking and comprehension. These interviews must be carefully directed and notes should be unobtrusively taken so as to avoid the pressure which might arise. Students whose progress is more closely monitored should be regular and of different linguistic abilities. It is easier to monitor weaker students, since their English always requires "corrections" and constant effort to improve their knowledge.

A discussion about the syllabus and its requirements can sometimes be more successful than we expect. We were more than surprised to hear some students' comments about their own knowledge and "blanks" in it. After a short debate about the necessity of grammar in language learning, some students said they had problems with certain verb forms (conditionals, perfect forms) and articles.

Conclusion

The subject-matter of this paper can never be exhausted. There are some chapters which might seem unfinished. That is *partly* true. Neither new nor old ideas in language teaching have been fully used. Improving one's way of teaching is a never-ending process, which requires constant feedback, patience, self-evaluation and creativity.

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