

Oral production in the Foreign Language classroom: Teachers, Reflections and Suggestions



Linguistics

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Abstract

The teaching of foreign languages has proved to be as necessary as the current globalized world demands more and varied codes to keep communication between individuals from different places. Thus, we could state that English has become a kind of 'lingua franca' which, somehow, enables communication at a higher level as its influence expands to every corner on Earth. However, the oral production is still considered the most difficult linguistic skill to be developed, according to most foreign language learners. Therefore, as foreign language teachers, we need to inquire into those reasons why our pupils do not feel comfortable when speaking in English; what our part is respect to that circumstance and what we can do to solve it. Then, the following pages seek to promote a reflective thinking and provide certain alternatives to ease the process of speaking and interacting orally in the class of English as a Foreign Language.

1. Introduction

Unfortunately, it is well known by most of Foreign Language teachers that oral production skills do not enjoy of popularity among young language learners. Though nowadays the communicative act channelled by means of different linguistic codes is much more viable than in the past -thanks to the noticeable symbiosis between the Internet and the information and communication technologies-, its incidence on the oral skills remains quite low along the different educational stages and, specially, in Secondary. Thus, departing from the latter appreciation, the following dilemma is set: 'if speaking and talking are the first things we do and learn to do in the mother tongue, why are they the last thing we learn to do in the foreign language?'. This question, among others will be the guiding thread we will focus on throughout the following pages.

2. I, Teacher

Bearing the last question from the introduction still in mind, it is very likely that, unconsciously, we point at our alumni as the main cause for the aforesaid situation. It is because we, in most of cases, consider ourselves the ultimate owners of knowledge and good teaching practices by the mere fact of being teachers. Food for thought! Actually, the reason why our subconscious generates this roaster of ideas dwells in the expectations we have about ourselves and about our students. For instance, taking as starting point a favourable perspective, let us consider the following: if the teacher is good at developing his/her professional activity, it must be very likely his/her students, users of the foreign language, are communicatively competent in the target language. Nonetheless, on the other side, if the students are not able to communicate orally in a proper way in the foreign language, does it imply the teacher is unprofessional or ineffective in his teaching duties? More food for thought!

Probably, at this point, we should be wondering about whether we are truly efficient in our didactic task or not; what, at the same time, is a good symptom. By means of the previous exposition I do not intend to suggest that our students are ‘good’ or ‘bad’ due to the teacher who guides them throughout the learning process of a foreign language, but, very often, we are not certainly able to reflect on what we expect from our students or what they do expect from us during the Foreign Language lessons.

3. I Teach You, Therefore *Speak!*

The previous reflection must be transferred to the whole teaching-learning process of foreign languages, as well as on those aspects which usually show a higher difficulty in whatever subject. In fact, based on my own experience, the feature that worries me the most from my duties as a teacher of English as a Foreign Language is how capable my students are to speak and communicate orally in the target language. That is why, after the inevitable and necessary initial frustration, the question I asked to myself the most was: ‘what am I doing wrong?’. If as a teacher and specialist in the foreign language I do guide my students throughout the teaching-learning process, offering them the necessary linguistic instruments (vocabulary, grammar...), which are essential to allow them to speak, why aren’t they able to communicate by using the foreign language?

The answer to that question cannot, or better said, must not arise from the same source of uncertainty, the teacher in this case. That is why, from own my experience, it is me who must step forward and ‘speak’ first. Then, ‘why don’t you speak in English if you already know the grammatical structures and the instrumental vocabulary?’. After a brief but endless silence surrounded by an atmosphere of suspicion towards that unexpected question, my students reflected on what was requested and, generously, they shared three key reasons: **embarrassment**, **insecurity** and **level**¹.

The former of the aforesaid reasons, **embarrassment**, is the most common of the three if our students are not used to communicate in the foreign language since an early age. It is wide and vast the academic literature which supports the thesis that the earlier the contact with the foreign language is, the less objection the student will show in using that code. Consequently, it is necessary to bear in mind, as teachers, the existence of a ‘conflictive’ phase dealing with embarrassment. That phase coincides in time with the age of adolescence, when our students experiment big and deep changes at all levels, and when their self-image, and the one they project upon the rest of the world surrounding them, occupies a special place in their lives.

The second reason has to do with **insecurity**. Both sound synonymic, a priori, embarrassment and insecurity are not the same, though one may lead to the other. In such a way, we do understand as insecurity the fact that any act might derive into a negative consequence or generate any kind of

¹ Understand level as academic or instrumental level.

damage to the one who carries out the action, as it could be making the fool in front of an audience when giving a speech. At this respect, they are multiple and varied the reasons that can be numbered by which insecurity emerges in our students: the class's affective atmosphere; relationship among other agents involved in the class (teacher and classmates); instrumental knowledge in the target language; little practice in the sphere related to the oral discourse...

Level, and instrumental level specifically, has been already mentioned as it accounts as other of the main reasons why students do not consider themselves able to communicate in the foreign language. In fact, it exists a disturbing incongruence at this respect, because, if students are usually well prepared in relation to the instrumental features of the foreign language (grammar, vocabulary, etc.) since a very early age, how is it possible they are not able to use those structures and vocabulary in the oral practice? The answer is quite simple: language is learnt through speaking and active practice, not only by means of expositive sessions and repetitive and uncontextualized exercises in forms or text books. Although it sounds paradoxical, in the present 21st century, this type of out-of-dated methodology, which does not attend to our didactic needs, is still in use in certain foreign language classrooms.

4. The Missing Ingredient: Motivation

Regardless the essential character of the three reasons provided above, in order to break through the barriers, which hinder the aim of speaking and maintaining a conversation in the classroom of Foreign Languages by making use of the target language, motivation or, better said, the lack of motivation is another important element that determines participation and implication during the oral exchange and the use of the foreign language itself. Though students are not aware of it, sometimes, their body language says much more than they do believe, and it can provide us of valuable information about the level of interest our speech awakes on them. In the same line, the teaching experience leads us to consider that it seems the participation incidence during a conversation in the foreign language can be higher when the topic issued is concerned with 'the top singer's last single released', rather than when talking about 'global warming'.

See the examples below:

- *Lady Gaga featured the song "Nature Boy" along with Tony Bennet.*
- *Global warming is directly concerned with climate change.*

Nevertheless, if we as teachers do redirect the conversation to the perspective of 'how the top singer supports the fight against global warming', our students' motivation and interest should not have decreased apparently. The reason is simple: motivation is a fundamental ingredient within the dialogical mechanism of every foreign language learner particularly, as it is in every subject generally. See the example:

- *Lady Gaga, along with Tony Bennet, sang “Nature Boy” in order to make people aware about the importance of nature and to fight against global warming at last night’s gala.*

Dörnyei (2005), at this respect, considers that motivation ‘provides the primary impetus to initiate FL learning and later the driving force to sustain language and often tedious learning process’ (p.65). In other words, motivation is the element which promotes any type of learning. However, as teachers, we should be conscious about how diverse motivations and how unexpected they could be. In relation to this idea, and taking into account Deci & Ryan’s self-determination theory (1985), we can categorize two types of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic. The former has to do with the inner reasons and curiosities that arise from the learner her/himself to ‘want’ to learn; whereas, de latter refers to the outer causes which somehow ‘oblige’ the continuity of apprenticeship. Nonetheless, though they seem opposites at first sight, an extrinsic motivation, as the aforesaid ‘global warming’ issue, could become an intrinsic one, because the interest has already been activated by means of the learner’s own interest, as it is the top singer who supports environmental causes, as cited in the example above.

As it can be observed, and as many teachers have already experimented, motivation is a fundamental key along the teaching-learning process; however, it is not as exploited as it should be out of the pedagogical literature.

5. Why?, When? and How?

Once we are aware about some of the reasons why our students are unable to communicate orally in the foreign language, it is quite convenient to wonder about a series of questions:

Why do not my students speak in English? Is it only because of the embarrassment, the insecurity, the low instrumental level and the lack of motivation? The answer is “no”. The reasons above mentioned are mainly a big part of the whole; however, it exists many other reasons which directly concern the teacher him/herself rather than the student. First of all, as Pavón (2006) states, “even when it must exist a balanced teaching among written and oral skills, the latter ones are usually relegated to a testimonial role respect to the written skills²” (p.420). That is to say, the oral production worked in the classroom does not make such an impact as written production does, what implies that there is not any physical and easy-to-assess testimony of that oral production that cannot be admired and enjoyed as the so recurrent murals and written essays we are accustomed to. The latter conjecture leads us to reflect on what we teach in the classrooms and how we do it; nonetheless, despite this reflection is inherently linked to the issue that concerns us in this paper as well, we will not go deeper into it this time. Therefore, it is quite evident the quick and brief work done -certainly superficial in some cases- concerning the oral communication in the classrooms of Foreign Language.

² My own translation from ‘aún cuando debe existir una enseñanza equilibrada entre las destrezas escritas y las orales, estas últimas quedan relegadas normalmente a un papel testimonial con respecto a las destrezas de carácter escrito’.

All of us, teachers, do know that our main enemy in the classroom is time, which works against all those contents, skills and competences we want to work along our lessons. Therefore, time is another reason which obstacles the oral communication practice in the class of English and the reason why we wonder the following: **When do we work the oral production?**

Actually, the answer to the previous question is quite obvious and simple: always. We cannot conceive as effective and meaningful the learning of a foreign language if the practice of the oral skill is not constant along the development of every lesson. It does not imply that we must assess every single word our students utter constantly by means of a rubric or any other instrument, as it would prove to be ineffectual, counter-productive and it would make our students to be more uncomfortable when communicating orally.

Therefore, if I must favour the oral practice in my classroom in a continuous way without disregarding my obligations as a teacher, **how do I encourage my students to speak?** Firstly, the priority is to be conscious about every single student of ours has her/his own story and a different relationship with the foreign language. In some cases that relation may be positive, in others it might be indifferent and, in the broad majority it is negative. Departing from this consideration, it is vital to assimilate that our role as guides must be as flexible and facilitating as particular and varied our pupils are.

Once we have clarified the previous point, it is convenient to realize about how important oral communication in the foreign language is, but it does not imply it has to be a complex task. Departing from that premise, let us frame orality in our classrooms by means of activities and games which do not mean success or failure but, on the contrary, they do reinforce the student positively when she/he is able to say or communicate anything in the foreign language. In that way, the activities help to reinforce the learner's motivation as well as anxiety, insecurity and embarrassment decrease at the same time. Krashen (1983), in his Affective Filter Hypothesis, suggests that a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom, along with little pressure and punctual corrections, contributes to learners to have a low filter, it is, a low level of anxiety and insecurity.

Furthermore, as evaluators, we must make our students participants in the assessment process along the development of their oral skill. For that purpose, it is convenient that students listen and, bearing in mind the facilities provided by the different digital devices surrounding us in our daily life (voice recorders, smartphones, tablets...), it is immensely easier to have a physical proof of what they say and how they say it. Listening to your own oral production implies an intrinsic exercise of reflection and self-criticism, which are the basis of a proper self-assessment. The evaluation, from the pupil's perspective, in most of the cases, will be charged of negativity. At that stage, it is the moment when we, as motivators, should outstand their progress and those aspects where they have improved and those they need to enhance, becoming the latter in affordable short and medium term objectives which motivate a continuity in the oral practice with the aim of improving within that skill. Although it may sound idyllic, students are usually more honest and objective than we can imagine, what also underlies an objective self-assessment.

6. In their Shoes

Neither of the aforesaid premises developed along these lines should have taken us by surprise. In other words, before becoming teachers, we were pupils and learners of foreign languages; that is why we perfectly know, or we should not have forgotten, those reasons or causalities which usually hinders the teaching-learning process of any language different from the mother tongue. Despite the difficulties which teaching entails nowadays, it is necessary to empathize with our students and to know better what provokes their rejection towards the oral practice in the foreign language.

It is demonstrated that, in most of cases, insecurities, embarrassment and fears in the Foreign Language classroom can be minimized by taking advantage of motivating elements and circumstances which invite the student to participate, to speak and to talk to their most immediate linguistic neighbours: teachers and classmates. For that purpose, first and foremost, teachers should be honest and reflect on what is right and what is not good in our daily teaching practice in the classrooms. In that way, we can find out a solution to the daily inconvenients involved in the communicative practice because, in the opposite side of the mainstream, students are not always responsible of not learning properly.

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