

POSSIBLE WAYS OF REACHING AUTONOMY IN SPEAKING

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The article focuses on one of the burning problems in contemporary ELT: how to achieve fluent speaking of students. The authors reflect upon their experience in using different activities which help to reach autonomy. The paper offers some practical ideas which have proved to be effective.

Key words: speaking, fluency, autonomy, communication, methods.

The issue of teaching speaking effectively is not a new one, lots of educators have been trying to invent the best and the most effective way of making the learners speak fluently. Working at the faculty of foreign languages of the Saratov State University and teaching future teachers of English it goes without saying that our aim in teaching spoken English is to inspire students to communicate. Whilst communication is always our goal, not all the activities we use for teaching are communicative. Having a general methodology course the students often wonder how to teach free speaking, how to help learners become more fluent. Some of the senior bachelor students and the majority of those studying for their master degree work as teachers at different language schools and centers.

For a long time it was assumed that the ability to speak fluently followed naturally from the teaching of grammar and vocabulary. But practice proves that speaking is much more complex. According to recent research speaking consists of at least three stages:

- conceptualization,
- formulation,
- articulation [2, p. 10].

Moreover the speaker is also engaged in self-monitoring while speaking.

As is known speaking is a skill so being skilful assumes having some kind of knowledge base. So learners need:

- a core grammar,
- a core vocabulary of at least 1000 high-frequency items,

- some common discourse markers,
- a core “phrasebook” of chunks,
- speech patterns for performing common speech acts,
- some adequate pronunciation [2, p. 40].

In this article we would like to look at autonomy which might be viewed as the most difficult to develop in learners. In other words it might be explained as “feeling fluent”. Some other characteristics of skilled performers are:

- speed,
- economy,
- accuracy,
- anticipation,
- reliability [2, p.90].

We teach spoken English so that our students can communicate. In order to get them to communicate, both communicative and non-communicative activities have their place. Non-communicative activities are necessary learning activities that can subsequently lead to full communication. Communicative exercises only work when the students understand what they have to do and can build up to the exercises gradually.

When we are in the process of selecting activities for our class it must be taken into account that the following conditions must be met:

- productivity,
- purposefulness,
- interactivity,
- challenge,
- safety,
- authenticity.

Non-communicative activities show no desire or purpose for communication. They focus on form not content, often on one language item. There tends to be teacher intervention and materials control.

Conversely, communicative activities show both a desire and a purpose for communication, focus on content rather than form and use a variety of language. There is no teacher intervention and no materials control. This doesn't mean that non-communicative activities aren't useful, they are because sometimes we need to focus on language. Many standard language activities like ‘listen and repeat’ are not communicative but are necessary learning activities. While we probably can't produce real communication in a monolingual foreign language classroom, we can produce activities that simulate the characteristics of real communication.

Classroom speaking activities that require a degree of autonomy include:

- giving presentations and talks,
- telling stories, jokes and anecdotes,
- drama activities, including role-play and simulations,
- discussion and debates,
- conversation and chat.

As for the first type of activity I would like to mention the two of them which work especially well for my students. They are SHOW –and- TELL technique and DID YOU READ ABOUT...? An object or a photo might be used by the teacher to stimulate free speaking. They may be related to a specific topic and the time for speaking is usually 1- 2 minutes. And the end of the speaking session the other students are welcome with their questions. DID YOU READ ABOUT...? can be done in small groups or pairs. This has become a tradition to start classes with this activity in some of the groups so the students come prepared having read something interesting at home.

Storytelling in various forms is one of the most effective and affective ways to promote learner autonomy. Among them I would like to point out the following activities:

- **INSERT THE WORD.** The students are given a card with an idiom or an interesting expression which has been studied recently. Then they take turns telling each other stories using that idiom or expression. The others have to guess it at the end.
- **PARTY JOKES.** Here students first learn some short anecdote, then they simulate a party, talking and exchanging jokes in pairs or groups of three. The repeated practice is the most important thing here which leads to feeling fluent.

Good speaking activities involve a drama element, where the learners can either be involved in a role-play (in this case they are given a card with the information about their new role) or take part in a simulation. In a simulation students play themselves in a simulated situation. Role – play is more time-consuming so I don't often use it and being used about twice a term it becomes even more desirable and attractive.

No one can deny that the best discussion is the one that arises spontaneously either because of something personal or because a topic triggers some debate.

In the example about 'love' it shows how a series of linked exercises can lead up to a full class discussion.

Introducing key language: The students start by placing *be fond of, adore, dislike, worship, like, idolise, not like very much, love* and *hate* in order from one to nine. Each student chooses 5 words from the list and uses them to talk about people, places or things.

Using key language: Each student completes a chart giving examples of one item he/she likes and one item he/she dislikes for each of these categories: *a country, a town, a type of music, a type of film, something to eat* etc. In pairs the students tell each other about their likes and dislikes.

Creating language: After reading a few examples of definitions of love – *Love is sharing an umbrella in a storm. Love is giving him your last chocolate*, students in groups of four write new definitions.

What do women like about men?: The class divides into male and female groups to discuss the question and list the features. Without comparing answers, they then discuss the opposite question. Then the male and female groups reveal their answers.

Using proverbs to stimulate thought and discussion: In groups of 3 or 4 students discuss the meaning and validity of proverbs such as: *Love is blind. Love me love my dog. One cannot love and be wise. Love will find a way.*

Children talk about love: As a full class, students read and discuss the comments of 5-6 year old children on the topic of love.

Class discussion “Love and commercialism”: As a full class, the students discuss the ways in which love has been commercialised (St Valentine’s Day) and the way that love is exploited in advertising.

It is important to notice the way in which the exercises grow from individual work through pairwork and small groupwork to larger groups and then to whole class discussion.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that only an enthusiastic teacher who is ready to try different new methods and who is a fluent speaker himself can inspire the learners to be the same or better.

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