Enhancing the English oral communication skills of the 1st year students of the Bachelor’s degree program “Communication and Public Relations”

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Abstract

The nowadays professional communicator and public relations officer needs to communicate successfully both in his/her mother tongue and in at least one international language in order to be absorbed by the labour market and to develop professionally all lifelong. Therefore, the bachelor’s program “Communication and Public Relations” of the “Politehnica” University of Timișoara (Romania) offers an educational framework that makes this possible by interweaving disciplines that are taught in Romanian and English, German or French. One of the disciplines taught in English, German or French is entitled Foreign language and is made up of three parts: Grammar, Writing communication skills and Oral communication skills. The focus of the present article is on enhancing oral communication skills in English used in professional settings. One of the major obstacles a student has to overcome during the English oral communication skills classes is his/ her reluctance to speak. The present article offers solutions with respect to the way in which a teacher may organise his/ her lesson so that the students become more confident when it comes to expressing themselves freely in speech, both in their daily and professional life.

1. Introduction

The contemporary society is characterized by an intensive cultural and professional exchange which is facilitated by the mastering of at least one international language. The capacity to express oneself freely in an international language both in professional and in everyday contexts is the first step towards one’s all lifelong personal and professional development. The incapacity to communicate in an international language is a major hindrance that stops us from keeping updated professionally and actively taking part in international professional activities, which imply both the enrollment to various courses, lectures, workshops, conferences of professional interest and the exchange of professional experience among experts of different nationalities. Moreover, many international companies have branches spread all over the world and the communication among the employees is done in an international language. Last but not least, the dynamism of our society is also reflected in the mobility of the

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Keywords: Lesson, lifelong, listening, oral communication skills, speaking.
population, that is the possibility to work and live in several countries in one’s life time. Taking all these into consideration, one can state without any doubt that the acquisition of international languages is a must in the contemporary social and professional life.

2. The academic discipline Foreign language taught in the bachelor’s degree program “Communication and Public Relations” of the “Politehnica” University of Timișoara (Romania)

The “Politehnica” University of Timișoara (Romania) has been running the bachelor’s degree program “Communication and Public Relations” for six years. One of the needs of the nowadays professional communicator and public relations officer is to communicate successfully both in his/her mother tongue and in at least one international language in order to be absorbed by the labour market and to develop professionally all lifelong. In order to fulfill the needs of the modern society, the bachelor’s program “Communication and Public Relations” of the “Politehnica” University of Timișoara (Romania) offers an educational framework that makes this possible by interweaving disciplines that are taught both in Romanian and in English, German or French. One of the disciplines taught in English, German or French (students opt for the language they want to study during the admission session to this bachelor’s program) is entitled Foreign language and is made up of three parts: Grammar, Writing communication skills and Oral communication skills. This discipline is taught in the first year of study for two semesters, each semester lasting for fourteen weeks. Foreign language comprises one two-hour lecture in grammar, one two-hour grammar seminar, one two-hour writing communication skills seminar and one two-hour oral communication skills laboratory per week. During the winter, respectively the summer exam session, the students sit an examination in each of these parts of the discipline, the average of the marks they get at each of these examinations being their final examination mark. Moreover, they get a mark for their involvement in the class activities and for their homework completion. The final mark at Foreign language is the average of the examination mark and of the activity mark. The students getting a pass mark are awarded four credit-points.

As one can easily notice in the above presentation, this academic discipline stresses the acquisition of the language structures in classes that are separate from those dealing entirely with their activation in certain professional, social and multicultural contexts. Thus the instructor focuses mainly on one aspect of the language learning process, namely grammar, writing or oral communication, correcting only the mistakes specific to that subject of study. He/ She draws the student’s attention on all the other mistakes only if they are flagrant and impede communication (Harmer, 1991, 2007). This approach has mainly the advantage that it is tailored to the needs of the student and it encourages him/ her to use the language without pointing to each single mistake.

3. Enhancing the English oral communication skills of the 1st year students of the bachelor’s degree program “Communication and Public Relations”

The 1st year students of the bachelor’s degree program “Communication and Public Relations” that have chosen English as a foreign language are intermediate students at the B2 level according to the European Languages Levels. This means that in terms of speaking students can interact quite fluently with native speakers, they can support their views, they can give detailed descriptions on various subjects of general interest emphasizing their advantages and disadvantages (www.coe.int). The main objective of the instructor is to help these students reach the C1 level, namely to be able to express themselves freely and to interact with native speakers in a professional context. In order to meet such an objective, the instructor has to choose his/ her materials so that the student activates as much of the known structures, enlarges his/ her vocabulary and uses it for professional purposes. This is not an easy task as most of the students are reluctant to talk, particularly in public, because they are not confident enough in their ability to do it successfully. Several reasons for having no experience in oral interaction and thus for being reluctant to talk may be singled out:

- the English classes are large both in the Romanian pre-academic and academic educational system (around 35 students/ class) and students do not always have the chance to speak English often enough;
• the arrangement of the classroom which sometimes does not favour communicative interactions so that
  the teacher needs a great deal of imagination to find an acceptable solution;
• the lack of motivation of the Romanian students;
• the appropriateness of the chosen materials in terms of language structures and student’s interest in
  certain topics;
• the lack of autonomy of the Romanian students due to the cultural perception that the teacher’s job is to
  provide learning and not to involve the students actively in the learning process (Harmer, 2007, p. 21).

The first two reasons are external and the teacher has little influence on them. The other three reasons are internal
because the teacher can contribute to their improvement and thus to better results in terms of oral interaction.
Therefore, they will be discussed in detail.

The students’ motivation can be improved if:
• the instructor chooses the teaching materials taking into account the students’ future professional needs;
• the instructor selects the teaching materials so that a smooth transition is made from controlled practice
  to free expression exercises (Byrne, 1991, p. 11);
• the instructor helps the students make best use of the language knowledge they have (Byrne, 1991, p
  11);
• the instructor emphasizes that the students are making progress (Byrne, 1991 , p.11);
• the students are aware that their active participation in the classroom activities influences their final
  mark.

The students of the bachelor’s program “Communication and Public Relations” are interested in topics such as
  customer care, small talk with a customer, call centers, human resources, including conceiving a job advertisement,
  planning and taking part in a meeting, organizing and taking part in a trade fair, making a presentation, marketing
  strategies, target-groups, pricing the products, introducing the product to clients, offering product discounts and
  incentives, planning an advertising campaign, choosing the right advertising strategy, new media, branding
  strategies, internal and external communication of an institution, crisis management and so on. So the teaching
  materials should take into consideration their professional interest and simulate real life situations. When dealing
  with such topics, certain language structures are also activated in order to express oneself through different
  language functions, such as: information-handling, expressing attitudes, describing logical and personal relations,
  suasion (Brieger & Comfort, 1992, p. 139-178).

Finally, in order to make the Romanian students more autonomous during the Oral communication skills classes,
the information contained by the selected teaching materials has to be introduced gradually, starting with controlled
practice and ending with free expression exercises. As oral communication implies the receptive skills of listening
and understanding, and the productive skills of speaking (Byrne, 1991, p. 9), the instructor should take them both
into consideration when designing and planning the lesson. The well-known and accepted stages of any learning
process are:
• presentation (something new is introduced to be learned);
• practice (students use the new information under the instructor’s control);
• production (students are give opportunities to work independently) (Byrne, 1991, p. 2).

The presentation stage may start with a brainstorming activity or/ and the description of some topic-relevant
pictures which are a pretext for introducing the new vocabulary and language structures. The practice stage may
include a variety of exercises: listening to a recording, followed by filling in some gaps in the script, by assessing
some statements as true-false, by ordering the mixed up paragraphs of the script, by correcting a flawed script so
that one gets the original recording, by rephrasing some relevant statements so that one gets the same meaning or
the opposite and so on. The production stage is obviously the most difficult one, but if the two other stages are prepared
carefully, one can get astonishing results. Here the instructor may choose some pair-activities as role-plays in which
each participant is given a role to conceive and play or a group activity in which a topic is discussed pointing to
advantages and disadvantages. During these activities the participants have to negotiate meanings and sequences of
meanings until they get a final version of a certain assignment. In the end, a whole class discussion activity could be
done in order to summarize the students’ pair or group work. At the end of the semester, after having got enough
speaking practice, the students have to prepare an oral presentation on a given topic thus encouraging them even more to activate the language and vocabulary structures they have learned during that semester. Although designing and planning your lesson may be time-consuming, if it is done carefully enough, it is highly rewarding.

4. Conclusions

The present paper offered an overview of the contemporary social and professional context which generated the need to master at least one international language in order to ensure one’s lifelong professional development. The bachelor’s degree program “Communication and Public Relations” of the “Politehnica” University of Timișoara (Romania) filled that need by offering students a curriculum comprising both academic disciplines taught in Romanian and in English, German or French. The academic discipline Foreign language taught in English, German or French is made up of three parts: Grammar, Writing communication skills and Oral communication skills. After shortly describing it, the paper focused on the Romanian 1st year students of “Communication and Public Relations” and the hindrances preventing them from successful oral communication in English. Several external and internal reasons were singled out. The external reasons were identified as those relating to the number of students in a class and the class arrangement. The internal reasons were described as the ones which might be influenced by the instructor and therefore detailed: the appropriateness of teaching materials, the Romanian students’ lack of motivation and autonomy. Finally, taking all the presented facts into account, the paper offered solutions for enhancing the English oral communication skills of the 1st year students of “Communication and Public Relations”.

References