
THE PRACTICE OF EFL COMMUNICATION SKILLS AMONG STUDENTS WITH DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS: FROM PASSIVE TO ACTIVE SPEECH PRODUCTION

Igballe Miftari-Fetishi

International Balkan University, Skopje, North Macedonia, i.miftari@ibu.edu.mk

Abstract: Successful communication in a foreign language refers to the degree of one's understanding of the language; hence, it is at the heart of knowing a FL. It refers to the issue of linguistic knowledge and performance. For students of diverse backgrounds, however, many issues are encountered; students struggle with pronunciation, limited vocabulary, anxiety, low self-esteem. The majority also struggle with the cultural and contextual meanings and with the amount of time they need for speech production. This study refers to the experience with a group of 20 foreign students, enrolled at SEEU during the 2021/2022 post-Covid period. The lecture consisted of speaking tasks and activities, which were implemented in three phases: the first phase was the reflection phase, during which students were asked to reflect on their experience with speaking in a FL, the second phase was the implementation of the speaking activities and the last phase was the post-reflection phase and a summary of the experience. Students were also shown the difference between linguistic competence and performance and were provided feedback on the process of speaking, with emphasis on mistakes as being normal in the process.

It was noticed that during time-based questions and inquiry, students provided quick replies and communicated with each other without stress or anxiety. They showed eagerness to participate in the activities even though the experience referred to an unknown presenter (professor). This was also the aim of the presentation i.e. practicing and using English without fear and with self-confidence. At the end, student feedback was also required. Apart from many positive remarks, students pointed out the fact that their self-confidence relied on whether or not the professor interrupted them or corrected them, thus, correction was regarded as negative influence in the overall process. The experience proved to be both effective and interesting for the student participants, and many experiences were shared and the participants were involved in active critical thinking.

The activities, along with the procedure, the responses and the summary are also presented in the paper, along with implications and future recommendations.

Key words: passive, EFL communication, diverse, culture, correction, speech production etc.

1. INTRODUCTION

You can never understand one language until you understand at least two. Geoffrey Willans

Communication is considered as the heart of knowing a language. It is one of the most crucial skills of defining users of the language as either competent or incompetent. Issues that are related to communication are both linguistic and psychological. In the linguistic aspect, we consider *linguistic competence* and *linguistic performance*. The prior refers to the knowledge of grammar and language structure. It is usually considered as the *passive* knowledge of the language. The latter refers to the skills and competence of fluent usage of the language (here making a distinction between accurate and fluent usage of the language). Which matter is more important: knowing about the language or how to use the language or i.e. a focus on language forms to be learnt than on meanings to be communicated? This depends on the choice of activities in the classroom and on the aims of the teachers. With fluency based activities, correction is postponed i.e. there is no interruption. On the contrary, with accuracy based activities, immediate correction is applied (to eliminate fossilization) and for learners to “correctly learn” how language is used.

According to Littlewood (1981) “a balance of focus between language forms and meanings is of course a matter of degree, not an all-or-nothing affair. This would depend on the task or activity and on how the individual understands what the purpose is: is it to communicate meanings intelligibly, to produce correct language or to do both in equal proportion (1981, p. 16). Accordingly, the purpose of communicative activities varies. They might be intended to help in natural language learning, provide practice, or even improve motivation (p. 17). The psychological aspect of communication in a foreign language depends on the individual user, on the self-esteem and self-confidence. Usually, the less competent users of a language are those that fear mistakes and lack self-confidence. The present case study explains how with a good choice of tasks and activities, foreign students were actively participating in communication, without having any above-mentioned barrier present.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The lecture began as a brief introductory session and along the way, developed into a more serious conversational activity. The acquaintance phase was immensely important. Communication co-exists if and when two or more

people are interacting; interaction is possible when the individuals who are part of the communication feel secure and are willing to communicate. Accordingly, the first phase dealt with the issue of trust. Materials used in the activities are question posing tasks, authentic materials (handouts) and PPT's. The methods used are: group-work and individual response. Within group-work activities, the group consisted of a group representative i.e. a leader who would report on the choice and explain why the group agreed on the particular response. In the individual response, each student responded to a different question. Hence, both types of activities helped foster communication on the individual and on the group perspective. The matter of choice, the words and expressions used, the ideas gathered and discussed were all randomly delivered. The activities were such that actually maintained a free-flow, moving from one topic to another, with this, making it easier for the students to actively participate. Collaborative learning was also maintained i.e. "students worked with someone to produce something" (Macmillan Dictionary, 2022).

3. PROCEDURE

The procedure consists of different tasks and activities that promote free communication. Students were a total of 20, with diverse backgrounds and different language proficiency levels. The main aim of the activities was to foster and promote free communication and to teach students to listen and understand. The first phase consisted of the ice-breakers session, namely, it consisted of self-reflection on the process of speaking in a foreign language. It is known that the first impression of speaking in a foreign language is that it causes frustration and stress. Language is a means by which we express thoughts, ideas...and a means by which we convey a message. **To what extent do foreign students get the message across? What do they struggle with?**

For most students, the same was reported. Students lacked self-confidence; they came from diverse backgrounds and regarded the cultural issue as immensely important in the process. They also referred to L1 interference and the issue of appropriacy (i.e. what is regarded as appropriate).

4. PHASE ONE: SELF-REFLECTION

Students were asked the following questions:

Take a moment to reflect:

What do you feel when you speak in a foreign language? Do you feel secure?

Do you feel confident and competent?

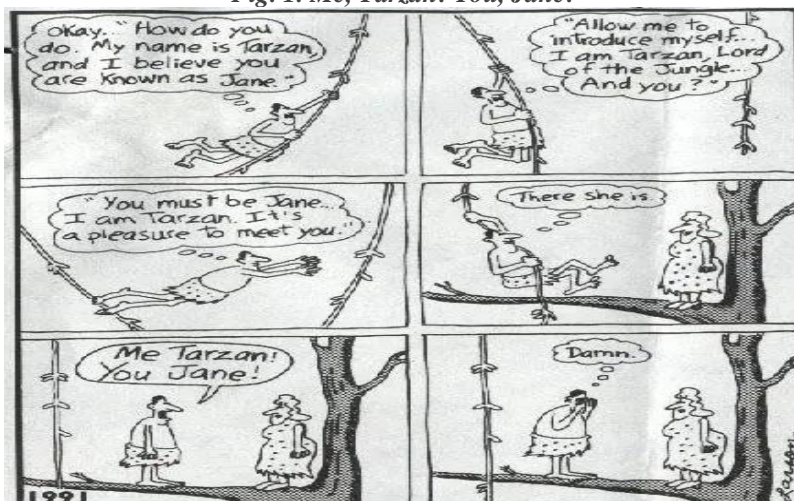
What do you have most difficulties with? WHY?

Please explain your situation with FL communication.

During this phase, students had additional time to gather their ideas, they wrote a concept letter and whenever they felt ready to participate, they raised their hands. At the beginning, the tension was noticeably higher. Students were randomly grouped and they lacked self-confidence. Towards the middle, it was noticed that most of them felt the same when communicating in a foreign language and that they shared experiences. Regarding the first question, students agreed that they were insecure and that due to this feeling, they were not only anxious but also felt language inhibition; they recalled L1 interference as a barrier in correct language usage. They did not feel confident and felt less competent due to the many different factors. Regarding the third question, most students agreed that they had the most difficulties with the lexical items, phrasal verbs, idioms and the context. They referred to the cultural and situational context. They also pointed out that they had many difficulties with fluency versus accuracy tasks. They agreed that within fluency based activities, they had fewer issues, whereas with accuracy based activities, the issue of over-correcting was mentioned. Students did not feel comfortable being corrected by the teacher and this resulted in lack of participation in the activities.

Afterwards, students were shown an illustration. They were asked to comment on what they saw and how they could relate to the experience. Students agreed that on most occasions, they were "Tarzan". Hence, they believed that they knew much more about the actual language than the results i.e. the performance. They also admitted such an example was never shared previously with them and that this caused for them to believe that no one else encountered their issue of competence. They agreed that it was indeed a relief that others shared the same experience with them.

Fig. 1. Me, Tarzan! You, Jane!



Source: (1991, n.d.)

Concluding remarks were also made. Some facts were pointed out regarding the illustration. It was concluded that performance-competence usually refers to tension and anxiety for non-native speakers of a language i.e. a person knows a language when communicating in it on everyday situations and occasions. On the contrary, it is a challenge.

5. PHASE TWO: IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ACTIVITIES

During the second part, students were more comfortable with each other. They now felt more motivated to show their competence and were eager to participate in the activities. A continuation of tasks followed, the first consisting of *open-ended responses* and *free talk*. Students were advised to use **phrases on opinion expression** as well.

Fig. 2. Open-ended responses and free talk sample of questions (n.d.)

1. Would you play a lottery that had a prize of time? What would you do with that power?
2. Which do you think is harder to master? Reading or speaking? Why?
3. Can money buy happiness?
4. Where did you last go on holiday?
5. What was the last thing you played?

Feel free to use phrases on how to express opinions, such as:

- "In my opinion..."
- "I believe that..."
- "In my eyes..."
- "From my point of view..."

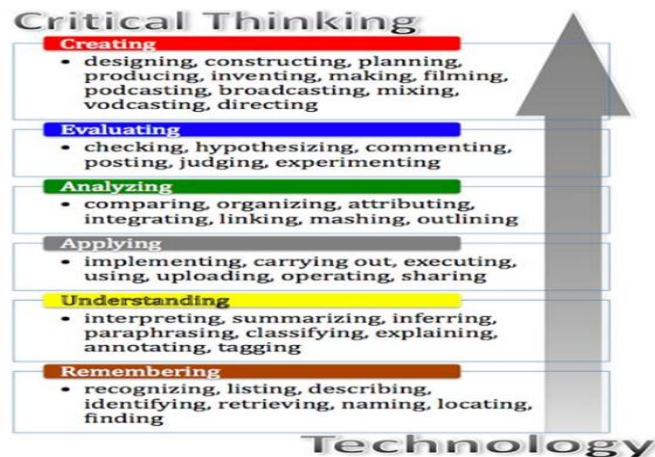
Source: Author research

Students were very active during this stage. They freely chose one question to respond to. Question number one and number three were the most frequently answered; however, the responses of course differed. Students had different opinions regarding the questions and different experiences.

Higher order skills and critical thinking

Being actively involved in a language and being competent in communication nowadays requires much more than the basics. It requires higher order skills and critical thinking. Tasks and activities are those that move past the traditional grammar-translation method or drills. The activities provide learners with real-life situations instead and require from them active participation in different situations and within different tasks. Critical thinking is seen as a key skill in the development of a student's thinking ability and capacity, as well as it is considered to be a crucial competence in the educational settings (Idrizi, E. 2022, p.14).

Fig 3. Critical thinking process (n.d.)



The following activity required *higher critical thinking*. The students apart from their choices had to provide reasoning as to why they chose the specific five people to save. During the discussion, students showed readiness to explain their choices and argue the reasons behind their decision. It was a very lively atmosphere and students were laughing at the choices and decisions of their peers, some of which would rather save a singer than a doctor (the reason being the age factor, for e.g.) or not ever saving a politician or a lawyer (the reason being society).

Fig. 4. TEACHTHIS, Critical Thinking and Problem Solving, The Elevator (n.d.)

Situation: There is a fire in a hotel. Fourteen people are trapped on the 26th floor. There is one working elevator which holds a maximum of five people. The elevator can only go down once. Your group has to decide which five people you will save and why?

1. A politician- female, 41, active environmentalist.
2. A journalist-female, 29, recently voted journalist of the year for exposing illegal drug trade.
3. A professional musician- female, 25, has recorded several successful albums.
4. A professional football player, male, 28, a millionaire.
5. A farmer, male, 51, has made two failed suicide attempts.
6. A doctor, female, 44, consultant in children's illness.
7. A company President, male, 66, wife died last year in a traffic accident.
8. A lawyer, female, 38, mother of four young children.
9. A cook, female, 46, takes care of her elderly mother.
10. A mailman, male, 41, suffering from cancer but responding to treatment.
11. A priest, male, 54, does a lot of community work.
12. An accountant, male, 38, likes to raise money for charity.
13. A shop assistant, female, 17, an only child.

([Critical Thinking Problem Solving ESL Activities Games Worksheets](#))

Hence, critical thinking is the ability to use higher-level thinking processes to search for meaning in an action or event...The kind of thinking we use to question doubt, compare and contrast, and make judgments. (Collins & O'Brien, 2011)

The third activity consisted of **Just a Minute**. During this activity, students were limited the time to express themselves. On a piece of paper they were provided only the topic and had a minute to talk about it. This allowed for the students to talk about important things, their hometown, their family, the most delicious food (introducing here traditional dishes and ingredients), best movies etc. For topics of interest, such as feeling homesick or food-sick, or missing their family, even with limited time, students perfectly expressed themselves. They found support in how they felt and found that they all felt similar. When asked about dish ingredients, students were eager to explain how

a certain dish was cooked. They laughed at the thought of “Chicken Biryani” which they found in North Macedonia to not resemble the same thing as their native dish.

Fig.5. Just A Minute Activity (Author data)

- Hometown
- Family
- Favorite thing
- Most delicious food
- Favorite teacher
- Best movie

6. PHASE THREE: POST-ACTIVITIES REFLECTION

The last phase consisted of a self-reflection. It is very important to reflect on the experience and to conclude what was felt during the activities. The students admitted that at the very beginning they did not feel as if they would communicate freely, that they feared embarrassment and that an unknown person in the class was twice the challenge. They also pointed out that the random position of the activities, the issue with self-reflecting and the example with the performance-competence illustration all helped them achieve the desired outcome and all had a positive effect on the speaking skill. They regarded the overall experience as quite useful, though they added that they feared mistake-making and were relieved that it was seen as a process. The time-limit issue was also mentioned. Students found the issue of time distracting, however, for the chosen topics, they stated that they were well-selected and that they related to things they could speak about “off their heads”. They pointed out that they learned that practice made perfect and that more practice of random topics and speaking activities would help them. Another remark was on the choice of topics, which related to the outside world. Since the students were from computer sciences, they felt as if all the course materials prohibited them from natural usage of the language outside the classroom. They believed that ESP content materials should also apply everyday situational contexts and that the normal, day to day conversation is something that is very much needed for foreign students, including here the cultural context. They felt that too much computer science terminology was in fact, not useful to the extent of communication and speaking skills.

Fig. 6. Post-Reflection Questions (Author data)

- How was the experience?
- Did you encounter fear/stress?
- What did you learn for your own practice of English?
- **Any comments or suggestions?**

7. CONCLUSIONS

The paper not only introduces some issues in communication, but also provides different tasks and activities and their flow. The outline of the tasks provides learners not only with the mutual support and acquaintance issue, but also provides “hints” as to how language learning is a process and that every learner struggles in speaking a FL at a certain momentum in life. The representation of linguistic competence versus performance competence, time-based communication, and fluency over accuracy (or at times, even a balance) of skills help learners notice the elements in learning a language and how to communicate using it. Emphasis should be put on the choice of materials, tasks and activities. Learners interact more when spontaneous, natural language is required. Even in cases with ESP, learners have the necessity for normal, outside of the classroom (or field) English. The more exposure to language provides learners with the natural context of language usage, hence, communication is facilitated.

8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

The study has some limitations, such as the sample number of participants and the duration of the procedure. There is a probability that with the use of other activities or a different group of learners, the results would differ. Additionally, sessions on communication, with a balance of ESP and natural language could have been used. The case study developed almost spontaneously and this helped in the overall effect. The student participants were unaware of the goal and were unaware of the fact that they were, in a way, being tested in terms of competence and performance. The lecture session began as a normal introductory and developed into a pre, during and post activity. Along the way, participants were provided with support and were required to think critically about different topics, collaborate with one another and argumentatively report back. There was a balance between group work and individual work and there was also a feedback session. The self-reflection activities at the beginning and at the end

helped learners understand the process of speaking in a FL. Thinking back on the experience and reflecting on the difficulties or issues encountered during communication helps the learners understand that they are not alone and that with the needed input and support, effective communication can be achieved. It is suggested that English teachers provide such support and also make a balance of accuracy versus fluency activities, the latter being more frequently applied. It is also suggested that over-correction be minimized so that natural language is produced.

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