

Teaching Oral Expression: Challenges, Approaches and Exercises

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Abstract: The aim of the present article is to look at the different ways and affiliated exercises of teaching oral expression to first year Translation Studies and PR students taking the practical course in view of developing the professional and transversal competencies highlighted in the course syllabus.

Keywords: oral competencies, listening, speaking, didactics, teaching activities

1. Introduction

Teaching oral expression is a particularly challenging task even for more experienced teachers. Translation Studies and PR students require listening and speaking practice doubly so compared to other students of English as a second language. Therefore, the aim of the present article is to look at the different ways and affiliated exercises of teaching oral expression to first year Translation Studies and PR students taking the practical course in view of developing the professional and transversal competencies highlighted in the course syllabus.

The former refers to efficient and proficient communication in the professional and cultural contexts typical for the field our students will choose to work in, by using the language, its structures and registers, properly. The latter refers to learning teamwork techniques, developing empathy and interpersonal communication, assuming various roles while working in a team, with the ultimate goal of optimizing group activities and saving resources. The ultimate goal of the exercises in this course is performance.

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Over the course of decades, numerous methods have been devised in order to facilitate teaching and learning, each with their respective types of exercises. From the very first one, the grammar-translation method, which used to focus narrowly on reading and writing, and emphasized accuracy, the reform movement generated quite a few approaches that concentrated almost exclusively on oral learning, i.e. the oral approach and situational language teaching, the audiolingual method. Other approaches were the communicative language teaching, the natural approach, or the more unusual ones: the silent way or total physical response (Richards, 1994).

The one method that I believe works for a modern-day classroom, especially at an upper-intermediate level / in faculty, is the communicative method since it advocates using English in a genuine context, which for future translators and PR specialists is paramount. Moving away from an explicit manner of teaching and learning helps students assimilate the linguistic structures implicitly, as much as this is possible. In the words of linguist Dell Hymes (1971: 277-278) “there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless.”

Emphasis is on authenticity rather than accuracy which means that the students will do most of the talking as they start to practice what it actually means to use a language. At the same time, this approach is lauded because it seems to take pressure off the teacher, by letting the student be in charge of their own performance. The teacher becomes a moderator.

2. Main approach

Oral expression encompasses two main areas, listening and speaking, thus most activities in class would ideally connect the two. Listening with only follow-up comprehension exercises can be as rigid as any traditional teaching tool, whereas speaking without a central theme, runs the risk of becoming chaotic.

In order to achieve the objectives and competences included in the syllabus and immerse the novice students in the intricacies of the English language, all listening fragments should present authentic language used in context. For this purpose, Youtube can become an endlessly resourceful tool. Finding a suitable listening item, however, can be quite an endeavor for the teacher, as well as thinking up all the related comprehension exercises and the speaking part.

The latter is a pivotal part of the decentralized communicative approach to language-learning, since its main purpose is to teach students how to communicate. Even if our students are already, ideally, at an upper-intermediate level, talking is still a sore point with many of them, either because they are shy or because it is genuinely a skill they are less competent at.

As the creators of the blog *Fluent U* (2018) point out, the students interact with each other, despite the awkwardness and the grammar mistakes. Finnish researchers studying learning oral competences in Finnish vocational schools suggest going from a structured task to one less so. Roleplay is a greatly-favored type of exercise because it fully involves students in completing the task at hand, stretching

their abilities and requiring a two-way exchange of information, problem-solving, discussion, creative role-playing and simulation and experiential learning (Kuivamäki 2015: 18).

3. Practical activities

For instance, the first two introductory seminars propose phonetical exercises aimed at familiarizing the students with the phonemes of the English language, especially the tricky diphthongs, triphthongs and the discrepancy between written and spoken language. Rather than going the traditional route, namely the teacher explaining and struggling to pronounce some of the more unusual phonemes, with the help of technology (computers, smart phones, tablets, and listening devices), the students can access materials made readily available for them by such sites as Cambridge.org (Figure 1):



Figure 1

Although not completely authentic content, this site does offer students the opportunity to hear native speakers pronouncing the phonemes and the words in which they appear. It takes some of the burden off the teacher. Nevertheless, one still has to verify at the end that the students have acquired the information properly, perhaps with matching exercises between the written and phonetically-spelled words, or by having the students arrange jumbled words according to the specific phonemes they contain.

A speaking exercise that might follow could hinge on the students organizing themselves in smaller groups and trying out a similar pronunciation-based quiz, or even a small competition between groups to see which one can spell as many words as possible. A less structured type of groupwork would be for the students to come up with their own words which their teammates have to guess. In another type of groupwork, the teacher could organize a charades-like game in which the students

would have to search and define certain words from the competition while their groupmates guess the word.

Another activity I would suggest for this introductory seminar is one that begins exposing students to the various accents of the English language. Youtube proves to be a wealthy resource in this respect as well with popular videos of native speakers quite impressively imitating various accents.

The one I have used in class, *One Woman, 17 British accents*, takes the viewers over the map of Britain while the speaker, Siobhan Thompson names and describes the accents: for instance, Received Pronunciation, East Anglia, Southern and Northern Welsh, Birmingham, Scouse, etc. The task I assigned to them while having them listen to the video, without the visuals, is to skim through and merely identify where the accent is from and which popular TV personality can be associated with it.

But there are many other videos which illustrate Commonwealth English accents as well, such as *The Aussiest Interview Ever*, or *The Most Irish Interview Ever*, and yet more others which explain the differences between the American and British accents, or exemplify the French, German, Italian or Russian accents. Students seem to be more capable of identifying the latter rather than the British accents.

If time allows it, not only do I bring to class a fragment from Irving Welsh's novel, *Trainspotting*, to further show how big the gap between spoken and written English can be, but I also play a little video from the eponymous film.

I believe this exposure to all these English accents is crucial especially for those in Translation Studies who are more likely to come across foreign-spoken English rather than the standard, BBC English.

A speaking activity connected to this would be in trying to imitate some of the more resonant and easily distinguishable accents. This activity may be continued at home, as homework, namely having the students record themselves at home while speaking in any of the accents they are best successful at, and then having the class trying to guess the accent, in the following seminar.

Together with traditional material, the Internet nowadays offers a wide range of possibilities when it comes to providing authentic listening material. The challenge is to research, find, or, quite often, to create, the speaking activities that could be associated with the goals of the syllabus and the lesson plans.

4. Conclusion

Listening and speaking are two principal competencies for students in Translation Studies and Communication and PR. These competencies are fostered by constant exposure to authentic materials that engages the students' interest and, thus, motivates them to move being personal misgivings and start producing the language mistakes and all.

The ultimate goal is to help the students communicate efficiently and proficiently in English in their chosen professional field but also to develop their

teamworking skills, their empathy, their interpersonal communication, together with everything else that will ensure a successful career.

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