

ENHANCING STUDENTS' SPEAKING SKILLS

Štěpánka Bilová

Masaryk University Language Centre
Faculty of Law, Masaryk University, Veveří 70, 611 80 Brno, Czech Republic,
bilova@law.muni.cz

***Abstract:** Effective speaking skills practice belongs to one of the most challenging tasks for ESP teachers, mainly because it is complicated to provide individual feedback, but also because students' approach to communication tasks can be rather ambiguous or uncertain. The presentation aims at sharing the experience from developing students' speaking skills both inside and outside their classes. We use examples from English for legal purposes, nevertheless, the methodology can be adapted to various other professional settings. The tasks focus on practicing discussions, role-plays and short spoken deliveries. In order to succeed in effective oral practice, it is beneficial to engage the students in the feedback. If such activities are used systematically, the students can be a natural part of the evaluation procedure and they become more confident in performing communication tasks.*

Key words: ESP, legal English, speaking, feedback, peer assessment.

INTRODUCTION

The paper deals with activities which aim at developing students' speaking skills in ESP courses. It includes several practical suggestions which are to improve students' awareness of the language they use, which consequently leads to enhancing their oral performance.

After explaining the motivation leading to innovating oral activities, the paper briefly mentions several aspects related to research in the area of speaking within ESP, and then focuses on concrete examples of speaking tasks. It intends to share several activities which have been lately used in the author's classes of English for legal purposes and can be easily applied to various other ESP settings.

1. FROM A NEEDS ANALYSIS TO NEW ACTIVITIES

The increased focus on the students' performance in oral tasks resulted from the needs analysis survey carried out among students and former graduates of the Faculty of Law at Masaryk University with the aim of determining relevant current and future needs of law students and graduates concerning their English language instruction (Chovancová 2013). Based on the outcomes of the survey the existing syllabi of legal English courses were modified and a great number of new activities was introduced. The innovations brought more systematic and thorough approach to developing language and professional skills including speaking.

The activities described in the paper come from lessons of legal English at the Faculty of Law for the first and second-grade undergraduates whose level of English is B1-C1 according to the CEFR. The tasks concentrate on developing the students' abilities to present clear and detailed descriptions, to explain their viewpoints and to compare the advantages and disadvantages of various options, which corresponds to the target level of B2 which the

students are to achieve after finishing the course. Moreover, the activities are implemented into professional or academic settings, which are the areas referred to as two communication contexts inevitable for ESP students (Feak 2013: 42).

The activities cover discussions, role plays and individual short deliveries set as home assignments. Presentations, as one large area of communicative activities, which is also part of the syllabi, have been omitted since they would deserve a paper of its own. Discussions and role plays are usually intended as fluency practice related to expressing ideas and presenting advantages and disadvantages, individual speaking tasks can concentrate on improving the accuracy. Innovative features in the new syllabi assigned a new role to students by including them into the feedback and evaluation.

2. RESEARCH IN SPEAKING

There has not been much research published in the area of developing speaking skills in ESP, Feak even claims that "in comparison to other approaches to English language teaching, relatively few pedagogical materials are readily available" (Feak 2013: 49).

Some research has been performed in the area of discussions and debates. A research at US schools has shown that foreign students have problems participating in class groups with native speakers (Feak 2013). The research even showed that classrooms discussions "have been described as particularly stressful for students from non-Anglophone countries who see themselves less capable, but nonetheless eager to contribute to classroom and small-group discussion." (Feak 2013: 38). Discussions therefore seem to be an area where students need to become more confident and proficient.

Literature on developing speaking skills in ESL/EFL suggests that oral activities ought to be used systematically and should support and push learners to produce spoken output in a variety of appropriate genres and to provide opportunities for cooperative interaction (Nation and Newton 2009). In the area of ESP it is particularly important to create opportunities relevant to the specific field of studies. If the learning is then organized around the following four strands: meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development (Nation and Newton 2009), students can efficiently work on developing their English speaking skills.

3. IN-CLASS INTERACTIVE TASKS

Pair work and group work are favourite activities which substantially increase students' speaking time, however, the teacher is not able to provide sufficient immediate feedback to all students. The following examples present group and pair work in which students themselves are engaged in observing and giving feedback.

3.1. Discussions with facilitators

In a group of five/six students, two are assigned special roles: one is a discussion facilitator, one becomes a reporter. The facilitator is responsible for the discussions; his/her task is to ensure that all others are equally involved in the discussion. The reporter does not participate in the discussion, he/she just listens and makes notes which can concern the topic only, or both the topic and the language used.

At the beginning of the activity: the teacher introduces the theme for discussion, e.g. the work of Czech police, advantages of civil law and common law, the existence of death penalty. The students are given appropriate time to prepare (the facilitators prepare questions related to the topic, reporters decide on organizing their notes, the rest of the group gathers their ideas). The teacher can set a specific time for the discussion, or the debate can be stopped after an appropriate time. After the discussion all reporters summarize the main points discussed, if relevant they could share interesting vocabulary and phrases mentioned by their peers.

It is advisable to practice facilitated discussions more often to enable the students to get acquainted with individual roles and learn to perform them naturally and meaningfully. The teacher can also help with providing useful phrases such as opening a discussion, asking questions, giving opinions, moving to the next point, summarizing. If the students are below B2 level, the topic for a discussion can be complemented with several hints to help the facilitator develop the debate.

The role of the reporter might be unexpectedly tricky and difficult. Reporters need to listen, note down main ideas and summarize concisely. Ideally, they should be able to provide feedback on the language, however, this has to be trained as the students are not used to noticing the language structures actively.

If the class needs a complex and intensive practice on speaking, the discussion could be recorded and the students themselves could self-assess their performance and make suggestions for improvement.

3.2 Role plays with supervisors

In legal English classes there are mainly two situations role played: lawyer - client interview and lawyer - lawyer discussion/negotiation. In both cases there could be another person present - a supervisor who will observe the conversation and give feedback afterwards. It is easier for students-supervisors to use a check list which can be then handed over to the teacher.

As in the case of facilitated group discussions, students have to be trained to provide a meaningful feedback after role plays. Checklists can be more detailed and structured at the very beginning, later, they can include only open questions, e.g. what strengths an observer identified and what recommendations he/she suggests. The criteria should include the points with which the students are familiar e.g. from the previous lessons.

4. OUT-OF-CLASS ACTIVITIES

4.1 Home assignments

The availability of technology brings wider possibilities of working both inside and outside the classroom. I have introduced a simple assignment of setting audio homework into the courses. Students can easily record themselves either on their mobile devices, or they can use online tools mentioned below. The audio files are then uploaded for the teacher or fellow students to listen to and assess. I will present examples which involve simple audio recordings or a combination of voice and slideshow.

Audio tasks can be used for preparing a presentation, an explanation of a new topic, or revising a topic. Such tasks can efficiently supplement reading comprehension tasks, such as read a text and write a summary/answer the questions. They can either be used as a preparation for work in the lesson or can be followed by peer reviewing. One of their benefits is that students have sufficient time to produce adequate results and thus prepare more cautiously.

4.2 Examples of tasks

Task A (e.g. used for explaining new terms): Read a text and prepare a 1-minute presentation on the main points which you record and submit.

Task B (e.g. a summary of a topic, the teacher prepares a slide): You have a slide with a few bullet points, explain them in 2 minutes. Record the explanation and submit it.

Task C (adapted Three-Minute Thesis (3MT), used e.g. for case briefs): Present a topic in 3/2/1 minute(s). You are allowed one slide.

Task D (adapted “Pecha Kucha”, can be used e.g. for summarizing): There are five slides (pictures) related to one topic dealt with in the course. You have 20 seconds for each slide to summarize the topic. Submit your 1min. 40 sec. audio. The pictures are either given by the teacher, or students can select their own pictures illustrating the topics.

Audio tasks which are based on subject specific source texts or terminology are rather complex. Apart from understanding the text or the topic and practicing pronunciation and intonation, the students usually need to practice text transformation - the source text is available as a written formal text, nevertheless, they are instructed to submit an audio which should be understandable to lay audience.

4.3 Tools for recording voice or voice+slideshow

Teachers need to be careful with employing the technology as they cannot expect all the students to be enthusiastic using it. It is, therefore, preferable to suggest the easiest option, or provide adequate instructions if necessary. If the slides are fixed, e.g. prepared by the teacher, it is sufficient to upload only audio files. Students can use their mobile devices or there is various software available for creating commented slides/pictures. You can find a list of available online tools together with their description on the Internet e.g. VOKI, VoiceThread, or JING (Paul 2014).

When preparing audio homework, instructions it is essential to set a time limit. One to two minutes is usually sufficient, especially if the teacher is to provide individual feedback. Moreover, if the students are to keep the time limit, they learn to be concise and they have to rephrase the main ideas coherently.

My experience shows that some students find it extremely difficult to transform a written text into concise spoken delivery, they therefore need some kind of scaffolding or tips and examples how to deal with the change in the form.

It is beneficial to integrate students themselves into feedback. One way can be peer assessment. Each student listens to two recordings and evaluates them according to given

guidelines which may cover the content, structure, clarity and accuracy, depending on the aim of the task. Assessment can be either written or audio. Giving feedback to audio recordings follows the same principles as peer reviewing written pieces (see e.g. Keatley and Kennedy 2007). A step further in enhancing students' speaking skills can be introducing self-assessment to oral tasks.

Even though audio assessments do not practice real-life immediate conversation, they are of great benefit especially for those students who do not feel confident to participate in the discussions in the lesson. When performing the task they can prepare as much as they can, nobody watches them and they can record the delivery as often as they like before finally submitting it. Thus, they gain more confidence in speaking. Even the students who are fluent in English can enhance their speaking skills by concentrating on accuracy and technical vocabulary building.

Peer reviewing results in better prepared work, especially after students learn to provide it effectively. Peer-reviewing enables students to be aware of their classmates' problems, and consequently, of their own mistakes, nevertheless, such peer or self assessment needs to be trained systematically.

CONCLUSION

The paper presents several oral activities in which the students themselves participate in feedback. My experience shows that in order to improve the skills effectively, it is important to provide a relevant context and sufficient and systematic preparation. Learners should be aware of the process and the rules for evaluation. Such preparation is in harmony with the trend described in Feak that "much recent work in ESP speaking continues to be aimed at providing appropriate, tailor-made instruction." (Feak 2013: 49), however, as Czech students are not used to being part of the evaluation process, careful instructions have to be complemented with experiencing the roles. Students may feel uncertain when first introduced to facilitated discussions, supervised role plays, peer reviewing or audio homework, nevertheless, in the second encounter with the same task they cope with the roles in a considerably more confident and natural way, which results in a more efficient and meaningful practice.

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