

SOME ASPECTS OF TEACHING LANGUAGE SKILLS TO STUDENTS OF NON-LINGUISTIC SPECIALITIES

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The article analyses some approaches to teaching language skills to students of non-linguistic specialities, considers the ways of enhancing teaching strategies in the study process.

Key words: basic language skills, reading strategies, discourse analysis, social-constructionist approach, integration of teaching strategies.

It is generally accepted that teaching English to students in non-linguistic specialities is related to a specific domain of knowledge, aimed at achieving specific goals within certain time limits and intended for adult learners.

A great number of foreign scholars have been researching in the field of methodology of teaching English for specific purposes for the last decades: Richards, J.C. (1983), Bowen, T. and Marks J.(1994), Flowerdew, J.(1994), Dudley-Evans, T. and St. John, M.J.(1998), Haley, M.H. and Austin, Th. Y.(2003) and others.

One of the basic principles advanced by them is the necessity of taking into consideration the nature of interaction between a teacher and a learner. Teachers of English for specific purposes, as a rule, have a humanity-based education and do not possess the relevant subject knowledge but they should teach learners from different disciplines. Therefore the teacher's task is to be interested in the subject area, be flexible in his/her teaching, be able to access the situation and then select and adapt the teaching methods to match the learners' needs.

Reading plays an important role in the development of proficiency in a language and a content subject. Nowadays the reading approach suggests a combination of the so-called top-down reading (when a reader uses his/her own experience to understand a text) and bottom-up, or interactive reading. Readers interact with the text, calling upon their knowledge and experience to interpret the new information.

There are different reading strategies that are related to effective comprehension of texts. Strategies refer to the actions that readers select to achieve their goals. For example, teachers activate background knowledge, using titles and illustrations to predict content, searching for main ideas, practising various modes of reading, and guiding lexical guessing. Comprehension exercises include summarizing and interpreting, and a final task integrates or transfers the information beyond the text.

There exist different ways of reading. Extensive reading involves reading long pieces of text. As learners read, their attention and interest vary – they may read some parts of the text in detail or they may skim through other parts. Extensive reading is rapid reading for main ideas of a large amount of text. Intensive reading is reading for complete understanding of an entire text. Reasons for reading influence how we read, i.e. which reading skill we use. Skimming requires the reader to look for the main idea or the general gist of a passage. Scanning is a quick overview of the text, looking for specific details or information.

The activities in a reading lesson often follow this pattern:

- pre-reading activities; an introduction to the topic of the text and activities focusing on the language of the text;
- while-reading activities: comprehension activities developing reading skills;
- after-reading activities: spoken or written activities which require the use of the language students have met in the text.

Haley and Austin (2003) suggest the following reading comprehension tasks corresponding to the above-mentioned groups of reading activities:

1. Skim the text for general ideas. Read the introduction and conclusion. Do semantic mapping.
2. Predict the main idea of each paragraph. Skip unknown words; guess meaning from context.
3. Summarize the text. Relate the text to your own experience [4].

Semantic mapping is the illustration of the key points of a text using some sort of visual representation. It fosters a fuller comprehension of the text, as it allows the reader to explore key issues in the text and focus on what is of personal significance to the reader. A well-known reading technique in which learners take an active

and systematic approach of reading texts is as follows:

- skim the text for content, organization and main ideas, look at the first and last paragraphs and at the major headings for each section to get a general impression, pay attention to graphs, charts, glossaries for key information;
- ask questions about what one hopes to get from the text, use *who, what, when, where, why* and *how*;
- read the text while looking for answers to previous questions;
- recall the important points of the text;
- review the importance and relevance of what has been read.

In teaching English for specific purposes the development of reading skills has to be as authentic as possible. A reading part of the lesson can take different forms according to the needs of the learners. In most cases the purpose of reading is usually to get information; therefore, the extraction of information from the text should be of primary importance and language focus work comes secondary.

The importance of teaching *writing skills* cannot be overestimated. The following key concepts are related to it, i.e. discourse, register, genre, etc. Discourse analysis is the study of language use above the sentence level, aimed at understanding the structure and function of language use to communicate meaning.

For many years the concept *genre* has been used to refer to particular kinds of literature or other media of creative expression. However, recently the usage of the concept has been expanded to embrace the recurring academic, professional and other texts that are used in a range of contexts. Genre analysis is a part of discourse analysis and is the analysis of the regularities of structure that distinguish one type of text from another type. There is a range of genres, e.g. lecture notes, summaries, reports, essays, research papers. Genres are based on external, non-linguistic criteria, i.e. a communicative purpose and target audience [5].

Register analysis has been defined in respect of the linguistic properties of texts. They mainly include: the nature of the text itself (report, research paper, essay, etc.), the subject matter of the language use which is reflected in the lexico-grammatical patterns and peculiarities of semantics, the degree of formality and politeness [5].

In science, writing implies writing reports to register scientific methods of enquiry: formulating questions, making hypotheses, following procedures for measurement and documenting observations. To give a visual support, different formats can be used, such as graphs, charts, slides, posters, etc.

There are two main traditional approaches to teaching writing: the product and process approaches. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) suggest another approach – the social constructionist approach, which is based on the genre analysis and the studies of professional discourse. It uses the elements of both the product and process approaches. The social constructionist approach to teaching writing skills in English for specific purposes puts emphasis on the context in which students are writing, which imposes certain constraints on the writer in order to meet the expectations of the target readers. The teacher has to analyse a relevant genre to be able to teach it. The scholars propose the following stages in the social constructionist approach to teaching writing:

- develop awareness by looking at model texts;
- practise specific genre features;
- carry out writing tasks showing awareness of the needs of the readers and the purpose of writing;
- evaluate the writing (through peer review or reformulation) [2].

The development of *speaking* and *listening* skills is of great importance for students, since they need them in real life and to learn a subject matter in the target language. Listening is a receptive skill, which involves responding to language, whereas speaking is a productive skill, which involves using speech to express meanings to other people. As teachers provide a lot of information in the relevant field orally, it is expected that learners understand and respond appropriately to it.

The speaker uses a set of interactive strategies in order to initiate the discourse, which involves:

- starting the discourse, introducing a topic by using verbal and non-verbal cues;
- developing the discourse (e.g. acknowledging, replying, giving feedback, asking for clarification);
- extending the discourse (e.g. by exemplifying, adding points, shifting the topic, turn taking), etc.;
- closing the discourse involves concluding the topic by using appropriate verbal cues such as summing up, etc.

Learners should be able to participate in spoken interaction in a range of situations, in which listening and speaking are both required for communication. In general, there can be one-to-one spoken interactions, involving two people, e.g. socializing, telephoning and multi-person spoken interactions, e.g. seminars, discussions, meetings.

The notions of fluency and accuracy indicate the level of communicative achievement. Fluency

is speaking at a normal speed, without repetition or self-correction; it involves the use of discourse markers to provide connected speech. Accuracy entails the use of correct grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation.

Learners often need to listen to different genres. The way learners listen depends on their reason for listening: listening for gist and skimming; listening to get a general idea of what a text is about; listening for specific information or scanning, i.e. listening to get a specific piece of information, etc. The following teaching principles should be taken into account when teaching listening skills:

1) Relevance. The selection of texts for listening is the central aspect of teaching listening. Learning materials, i.e. texts, topics, tasks are relevant if they relate to learners' interests and involve self-selection and evaluation of materials.

2) Authenticity. Learning materials should meet the current needs of the learners and reflect the use of the language in the real world. They should also involve the features of the language used by native and non-native speakers of the English language: speed, rhythm, intonation, pausing, etc.

3) Genres. Learning materials should comprise a range of genres that learners may encounter in real life situations.

The activities used to develop *listening* skills often comprise three stages: introductory activities or a pre-listening stage: discussions of the topic, the use of visuals; main activities or a while-listening stage: a series of comprehension activities developing different listening sub-skills, e.g. practice in note-taking; a post-listening stage, in which learners describe what they understood and what comprehension difficulties they had.

Bowen and Marks (1994) give the following recommendations for listening activities:

- set tasks or questions before the learners listen, not after;
- pre-teach selected key vocabulary;
- set while-listening tasks that require non-linguistic or minimally linguistic response;
- grade the task, not the material;
- work on general understanding before detailed listening [7].

The activities that involve *speaking* often have the following pattern: lead-in, which is an introduction to the topic and/or activities focusing on the new language; practice activities and tasks in which learners use the new language; post-task activities in which learners discuss the topic freely and/or discuss with the teacher feedback on the language used. While providing speaking activities, the teacher should:

- engage learners in speaking both monologues and spoken interactions (one-to-one and

multi-person). Practise speaking in tasks that are as authentic as possible. Authentic topics provide many opportunities for practising listening and speaking skills;

- use both controlled practice activities, which concentrate on accuracy in speaking and less controlled practice activities, which give learners more opportunity to practise communication, interaction and fluency;

- if necessary provide help to prepare for speaking: practise the necessary vocabulary, give time to organize their ideas, etc.;

- practise interactive skills in pairs and small groups. Structure the tasks so that everyone has a role: there should be reasons for listening to each other as well as speaking;

- give clear instructions and monitor the task so that groups/pairs in difficulty are supported;

- tasks should always have language feedback [1].

Monologic communication plays an important role in the study process. Listening to the reports, presentations, etc. is a communication process where the presenter (reporter, etc.) is trying to convey a message using a spoken text and the student is trying to understand it. Note taking is an indispensable part of the process, as it serves as a correlation between oral and written discourse, bridging the gap between the two of them.

For the communication process to be successful, the student involved in a comprehension process has to employ at least five types of competences: pragmatic, semantic, syntactic, lexical and phonological, which interact with one another.

The comprehension of different genres of spoken discourse involves two-stage processes: the so-called top-down and bottom-up approaches. The bottom-up approach entails the processing of the language. In the bottom-up approach, the listener's lexical and grammatical competence provides the basis for the processing of the text [3]. The main skill used by students in decoding meaning in spoken discourse depends on their phonological competence or the ability to identify the important information through recognizing features specific to spoken discourse. When listening to a discourse, prosodic features are very important since learners do not have a written text, and they cannot look for punctuation, headings, sub-headings, paragraphs, etc.

The top-down approach entails the use of background knowledge of the topic to comprehend the spoken text. Learner's knowledge of phonology, morphology, syntax, lexis cannot be activated until a certain degree of coordination and collaboration between the teacher and the

learner is achieved. Examples of top-down processing are:

- inferring the role of the participants in a situation;
- inferring cause-effect relationships;
- inferring the topic of discourse;
- distinguishing between facts and opinions.

Fluent listening depends on the use of bottom-up and top-down processing. The development of effective listening skills is an essential task for the learners.

Richards (1983) singles out the following skills necessary for successful academic listening:

- ability to identify the topic of a discourse and follow topic development;
- ability to identify relationships among units within discourse (e.g. major ideas, generalizations, hypotheses, supporting ideas, examples);
- ability to identify role of discourse markers in signaling structure of a presentation/report (e.g. conjunctions, adverbs);
- ability to infer relationships (e.g. cause, effect, conclusion);
- ability to recognize key lexical items related to subject/topic;

- ability to deduce meanings of words from context;

- ability to recognize markers of cohesion;
- ability to recognize function of intonation to signal information structure (e.g. pitch, volume, pace);
- ability to detect attitude of speaker toward subject matter;
- ability to follow different modes: spoken, audio, audio-visual;
- familiarity with different styles of presenting: formal, conversational, read, unplanned;
- ability to recognize function of non-verbal cues as markers of emphasis and attitude [6].

The teacher is an expert in using the language; therefore, he provides learners with the models of the language use. When presenting new information, the teacher should use appropriate technical vocabulary using linguistically appropriate language, if necessary paraphrasing, giving definitions and exemplifying to clarify meanings.

To conclude, it is important for the teacher to be aware of the learners' needs and take them into account when selecting methodological approaches and applying different techniques in the study process, it makes the acquisition of the target language more effective.

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