

DEVELOPMENT OF DISCUSSION SKILLS FOR PRIMARY TEACHERS IN TRAINING STUDENTS AT ENGLISH CLASSES

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Abstract. *The development of discussion skills is one of the most essential aims in the acquisition of foreign languages. Discussion skills are essential both for students in study process and for teachers in their professional work. The objective of the research is to investigate the improvement and perfection of discussion skills as well as motivate students to participate in discussions using the structured discussions, perfecting the discussions skills and acquiring the ESP vocabulary.*

Every discussion has to be purposeful and well-structured. The university lecturers have to perfect the skills of discussion planning, management and analysis.

The results acquired proved that students' discussion and listening skills, as well as the knowledge of ESP vocabulary increased. However, some other language skills, particularly the fluency that is based on the knowledge of the language structures did not improve considerably.

Keywords: *discussion skills, ESP vocabulary, listening skills, accuracy, structured discussions, objectives, lexical skills.*

Introduction

The development of communication skills is one of the main objectives in the acquisition process of foreign languages nowadays. Discussion skill is essential both for students in their study process and for teachers in their professional work. Both students and teachers have opportunities to participate in international projects, students and teachers' exchange programmes, international conferences and seminars. English knowledge and discussion skills are necessary in order to participate in these activities. The development of discussion skills is a life-long process. These skills have to be developed and they are an effective means in order to achieve a high level of proficiency.

The topic is theoretically up-to-date because both university lecturers and students have to broaden theoretical competence on the development of knowledge. The development of discussion skills also has a practically topical meaning. When primary school teachers-in-training enter university, the level of their English knowledge is not sufficient. One of the reasons is a low competition to this profession. It has several explanations. First, Rezekne University of Applied Sciences train specialists mainly for Latgale region, but in Latgale the demand for primary school teachers is not high, as unemployment rate is high and an average salary is lower than in other regions of Latgale, practicing teachers seldom quit their jobs. Second, students who have high academic achievements, seldom choose teacher's profession, as it is a difficult and responsible job, but salary is comparatively low. Therefore, an average grade for the students who study in the primary teacher's programme most often

does not exceed 5. Students' language skills are not developed well enough, they cannot express their ideas, summarize what they have read or heard, they mainly just retell, their vocabulary and grammar knowledge is not sufficient. Students are mainly used to a teacher-centered study process, they are afraid to take initiative. A lecturer has to work hard to develop students' motivation to perfect the English language skills.

The objective of the research is to investigate the improvement and the perfection of students' discussion skills as well as their motivation to participate in discussions, using structured discussions, perfecting listening skills and acquiring ESP vocabulary.

The studying and analysis of the literary sources, pedagogical case study, and the synthesis of theoretical and practical conclusions were used to do the research.

The essence of discussion development skills, theoretical aspects, problems and solutions

Working as a docent of the English language at Rezekne University of Applied Sciences, the author of the research faced both insufficient students' discussion skills and their great essence in students' learning process and teachers' professional work.

Using of discussions in the process of studying English can be a very efficient means to help students to apply abstract ideas and use a critical approach in their studies. The objectives of the English classes are to develop problem solving skills.

Discussions have some essential features. Discussion is purposeful. A university lecturer needs clear objectives of the discussion from the very beginning because his/her task is to ensure that a discussion reaches its objective. Discussion is the exchange of ideas and thoughts on the way to the objective.

It needs a logical plan; otherwise discussion will be chaotic and meaningless. Discussion is an oral process, so students and university lecturers have to be competent both in verbal and non-verbal communication skills. A discussion is a group process. Students who participate either in small or large groups have to interact. Every student has to perceive himself/herself as a part of the group. Discussion requires open and free reaction to all ideas, facts and opinions of the topic. Everyone needs an opportunity to speak and simultaneously s/he has to know time limitations and has to achieve the objective during the provided period of time. Every discussion includes some form of management. A university lecturer mainly is a manager or s/he lets the students manage the discussion. This activity requires both a great flexibility and ability to shelve his/her authority in order to encourage a mutual interaction during discussion.

Interaction and educational objectives, which are concerned with complicated processes of thinking and the change of attitude, characterize discussion

(Seiler & Schuelke, 1998:149). Discussions have a lot of advantages: they help to develop organized thinking skills, for example, analyzing, synthesis and evaluation; they develop students' motivation and interest in English learning process; they provide an opportunity to receive and immediate response; they provide an opportunity for everyone to work actively with the ideas and concepts, which have been put forward. Discussions can help students in learning to solve professional problems, to find out others' opinions, to express one's own feelings, to check the opinions of others and gain the feeling of belonging. The researchers have found out that static tasks do not improve students' speaking skills, but these skills considerably improve while doing dynamic tasks (Nunan, 49).

A university lecturer can choose either to dominate during discussion or stay neutral. Both approaches have their advantages and disadvantages. If a lecturer dominates during discussion, s/he restricts the involvement of students and in this way s/he restricts students' creative approach and learning experience. If a lecturer stays absolutely neutral, s/he takes a risk that students can become disorganized and deviate from the objective of the class. In both cases the result can be non-productive and disappoint both students and a lecturer. A lecturer has to be a facilitator and a counsellor. It means that s/he has to join the discussion when his/her assistance to control, encourage, using his/her competence to achieve the objective is necessary. More able, responsible and older students can be trusted to lead a discussion themselves. They can choose a topic, find an appropriate article or write a summary of the topic, make a list of the questions (Celce – Murcia, 130), manage a discussion on the topic provided, which includes an introduction prepared beforehand and a spontaneous, summarizing conclusion. The development of discussion skills requires time, practice and a feedback.

The development of vocabulary in the learning process of discussions

Lexical skills are essential in the learning process of discussions. I.Nation (1999:15) emphasizes that lexis is like a muscle – the more we develop it, the stronger it becomes in order to work for us, and as any muscle, it never works alone. The students also agree that one of their main problems is the lack of good vocabulary knowledge. Vocabulary is essential for students – it is more essential in communication process than grammar. Lexical system is *open*, there is always something new to learn. In this way, the students who have a higher level of English knowledge are encouraged to broaden their vocabulary, understand the nuances of the word meaning, and become more competent in the choice of words and idioms. Students' receptive vocabulary in general is broader than their productive lexis. People who learn a language usually comprehend more words than they use. Every student learns lexis in a different way. J.Harmer describes lexical skills as the ones, which support vitally

essential organs, while the language structures form its skeleton (Harmer, 2001:153). W.M.Rivers considers that students won't be able to use language structures and functions for comprehensible communication without a well-developed vocabulary (Rivers, 1992:25). If a student knows lexical units of some topic, s/he will be able to understand the text even if s/he does not know all the structures used in the text. The student will be able both to comprehend an oral text or a conversation and speak and be understood even if there are grammar, pronunciation and other mistakes in his/her speech. And vice versa, even if student's knowledge of language structures is good, for example, s/he knows grammar rules, but his/ her vocabulary is insufficient, s/he won't manage the tasks. Broad and rich lexis is an essential component of language learning (Nunan, 1993:117). A broad vocabulary that differs from a written language is necessary to speak fluent English. The usage of vocabulary in the context, particularly in communication influences a longer maintaining in students' memory.

Practical application of discussion skills' development

As the primary teachers- in-training acquire a higher professional education, the course has been designed, taking into consideration their professional needs. The objective of the course is to develop the most essential English language skills and improve students' communicative knowledge. An integrated approach has been chosen with an emphasis on ESP.

A careful analysis of study programmes and study process at Rezekne University of Applied Sciences proves that students need discussion skills to participate in different international projects and student exchange programmes. The questionnaire of students and school teachers revealed that discussion skills are necessary and will be necessary in their professional development.

It is necessary to evaluate students' needs before setting up of the objectives. Students and their attitude to learning process are essential in the learning process (Richard & Rodgers, 2001:59).

The author of the research surveyed 55 teachers from Rezekne Secondary schools and 55 students. They were asked if they need English knowledge and if yes, what the spheres of life are where they need English knowledge. Analysing the common results of the questionnaire the following conclusions can be done:

- The teachers and the last year students consider English to be very essential in their professional field – participating in international projects, conferences, seminars, teachers' exchange reading of books and periodical issues in their profession. They already have a work and studies' experience and they comprehend how important English is in their professional field.
- The teachers surveyed do not consider the Internet to be very essential. The author considers that a lot of teachers do not have time for work on the

Internet because of high work load, and some teachers who are older are not good at using the Internet.

- The first year students do not consider participation in international projects, seminars and conferences very essential. The author explains it with the fact that they have just graduated school, so they have little experience with independent work, and they do not comprehend the essence of independent work with literary sources in their studies and future work. They are interested in studies and work abroad but not in international projects, seminars and conferences.
- The first and the second year students are more interested in communication with foreigners than the last year students and the teachers. The author considers that at present they are more interested in general communication, but not in the professional one.
- The teachers and the last year students evaluate reading and watching of the films higher in studying English.
- However, the questionnaire proves that English is essential both for teachers and students in their professional work and studies.

The following topics were chosen for discussion classes:

- *Teacher's world*
- *Effective teaching*
- *Diversity of students*
- *What schools are for*
- *Good schools*
- *What has been taught at schools*
- *Philosophy of education*
- *Risk factors in modern community and their influence on children.*

Different strategies were used for the acquisition of vocabulary and the development of discussion skills in these discussions. Discussion skills were assessed according to the following indicators:

- Listening skills;
- Comprehension skills;
- The skills of information analysis;
- The skills to link acquired information with one's general knowledge;
- Abilities to express one's thoughts clearly;
- Fluency of speech;
- Accuracy of speech;
- Usage of ESP lexis;
- Answering of the questions;
- Summarising skills.

The students achieved the best results in listening. It is a positive feature because the listening skills help to develop speaking skills comprehension skills, the usage of ESP lexis, answering of the questions follow. It should be added that

the students often used grammatically wrong structures while answering of the questions. But it is positive that they tried to answer thoroughly. The students tried to use the acquired ESP lexis. All skills are essential in the development process of discussion skills. Summarising skills were the next in the assessment rating. It proves that the students are not very good at summarising of information, they mainly retell the text and they have some problems in expressing of their thoughts. The research lasted for five months. The questionnaire was also made for the students, and its results were summarised and analysed.

Conclusions

Every discussion has to be purposeful and well-planned. The lecturers have to broaden their skills in the planning, management and analyzing of discussions.

The results acquired proved that students' discussion skills, listening skills and ESP vocabulary increased and improved. However, some English skills, particularly the accuracy of the language, which is based on knowledge of language structures and grammar, did not improve considerably. The author considers that the main reasons are insufficient development of these skills at secondary school and inadequate number of English classes at university level.

The tasks appropriate to the students needs were worked out. They were based on ESP texts, which students read independently at home. A variety of listening, vocabulary and discussion tasks were worked out to motivate students and increase their interest.

Learning process is often described both as arts and science. A lecturer can develop and promote students' choice through the usage of different techniques and methods. This advantage includes in itself not only the formation and perfection of students' discussion skills but discussion skills can be the most outstanding acquisition from English course at university level for a lot of students in the facilitating of students' learning process and their future professional work.

Although the development of discussion skills is a student-oriented activity, a lecturer's role is essential in the achievement of the objectives. A lecturer has to comprehend deeply the types of discussions, anticipated problems, and the opportunities of their solution. S/he has to motivate students to develop and perfect the discussion skills.

Discussions can have different formats. The most typical of them are the formats of problem solving, brainstorming and open discussion. Discussion is an oral process therefore both lecturers and students have to be competent in verbal and non-verbal communication skills. A lecturer has to react openly and freely at all the ideas, facts and opinions of the discussion topic. Everyone needs opportunity to speak but at the same time s/he has to follow time limit.

Lecturers and students should follow the following advice during discussion: not to criticise others' ideas, not to consider any idea unreasoned, the quantity of

ideas is essential. Everyone should use his/her ideas to supplement the ideas offered and to perfect them.

The choice of appropriate questions is an essential part of the discussion. Clear, open, well-structured questions, which require the most thorough answers, facilitate discussion. Discussion is a group process so students have to respect others and perceive themselves as a part of the group. Lecturers have to plan both vocabulary work and the number of vocabulary units. Students have to acquire skills how to work with unknown vocabulary units.

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