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Developing Productive Skills among ESL Learners

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ABSTRACT

Language is not just words and structures; its value lies in the communicative function it performs. Littlewood (2007) says that students must develop skills in manipulating the linguistic system in order to use language spontaneously and flexibly to express their intended message. They must gain the ability to develop skills for using language to communicate meanings. They should become aware of the social meaning of language forms as well. This naturally demands the teacher to facilitate such learning experiences which would familiarize the students with skills like abstracting social meaning of language forms. The teacher should combine learning values with interest and enjoyment so that the students are highly motivated.

As Jeremy Harmer (2007: 265) mentioned, teachers have a tendency to talk about the way we use language in terms of four skills- listening, speaking, reading and writing. Receptive skills is used for reading and listening, meaning is extracted from discourse. Productive skills , a term devoted to speaking and writing skills which involves students actually producing language themselves. We might want to question a once commonly held view that receptive skills are somewhat passive, whereas productive skills are more active. Although productive skills are different in many ways, we can still provide a basic model for teaching and organizing them.

INTEGRATION OF SKILLS

It makes little sense to talk about skills in isolation, as Eli Hinkel points out, 'in meaningful communication, people employ incremental language skills not in isolation, but in tandem' (Hinkel 2006:113). When we engage in conversation, we are bound to listen as well as speak because otherwise we cannot interact with the person we are speaking to. Teachers often rely on notes of their own. Even reading, generally thought of as a private activity, often provokes conversation and comment.

Writing too, is rarely done in isolation. Much of today's communication is electronic (for example via emails and text messages). We read what people send us and then reply fairly instantly. And even when we are writing on our own, we generally read through what we have written before we send it off. Sometimes, of course, this is not the case when dealing with emails and text messages, but writers and texters often regret sending their messages in rush. Clearly, therefore, if skill use is multi-layered, it would make no sense to teach each skill in isolation.. We can therefore, look at how input and output are connected in the classroom, how skills can be integrated, and how skill and language work are connected.

METHODOLOGY FOR DEVELOPING PRODUCTIVE SKILLS

A key factor in the success of productive-skill tasks is the way teachers organize them and how they respond to the student's work. We can here set down a basic methodological

model for the developing of productive skills among ESL learners (Jeremy Harmer, 2007: 275-276).

Lead-in stage

In the lead-in stage, we engage students with the topic. Perhaps we ask them what they know about a certain subject e.g. we ask them what they know of politics if we are going to have a politics debate or we might, if we are going to role-play checking in at railway station, get them to think about the kind of conversation that usually takes place when people check in.

Set the task

When we set the task, we explain exactly what students are going to do. At this stage we may need to demonstrate the activity in some way. For example, if we want students to work in pairs, we can show the class how creativity works by being one of a public pair ourselves so that everyone sees the procedure in action. We get students to repeat the task instructions back to us. We will also make sure that students are given all the information they need to complete the tasks, for example, describing pictures, picture differences, things in common, role cards, etc. for a role play (Penny Ur, 1999:49-50).

Monitor the task

This may mean going around the class, listening to students working and helping them where they are having difficulties. With writing tasks, we may become actively involved

in the writing processes as we respond to the students' work and point them in new directions.

Task feedback

When the activity has finished, we give task feedback. This is where we may help students to see how well they have done. We may respond to the content of the task and not just to the language the students used. We may also show positive aspects of what they have achieved and not concentrate solely on their failings.

Task-related follow-up

Finally we may move on from the task with a task-related follow-up. Frequently, then we may re-set the task and go through the sequence again.

STRUCTURING DISCOURSE

In order for communication to be successful, we have to structure our discourse in such a way that it will be understood by our listeners or readers. According to Jeremy Harmer (2007:276) in writing certain genres will push us to supply information in certain prescribed ways. But in order to for writing to be successful, it has to be both coherent and cohesive. Coherent writing makes sense because you can follow the sequence of ideas and points. Cohesion is a more technical matter since it is here that we concentrate on the various linguistic ways of connecting ideas across phrases and sentences.

INTERACTING WITH AN AUDIENCE

Part of our speaking proficiency depends upon our ability to speak differentially, depending upon our audience and upon the way we absorb their reactions and respond to them. Part of our writing skill depends upon our ability to change our style and structure to suit the person or people we are writing for.

Where people are giving lectures, they are likely to adapt the way they are speaking and the words they are using on the basis of audience reaction. Just as good actors are expert at feigning a laugh or changing their pace to suit the mood of their audience, so good presenters, sales people and politicians keep their ears and eyes open to see how their words are going down and speak accordingly. Even when lecturers read their speeches, they change their pace, repeat words or lines, and perhaps add in or take out some phrases on the basis of how their listener are responding.

Writers engaged in an email correspondence modify subsequent communications on the basis of the reaction of the people they are communicating with. In informal spontaneous conversations, we are constantly alert for the reasons we are interacting for so that we make our communication as informative as possible, modifying it depending on how the other participants in the interaction react.

HANDLING THE PROBLEMS

When speakers or writers of their own or of a foreign language don't know a word or just can't remember it, they may use some or all of the following strategies to resolve the difficulty:

- a. Improvising
- b. Discarding
- c. Foreignising
- d. Paraphrasing

As teachers we should encourage paraphrasing and improvising as more useful techniques than discarding thoughts or foreignising words blindly. However, a major reason for having students perform oral communicative tasks in class is to give them practice in just these kinds of strategy.

THE LANGUAGE CONCERN

Learners engaged in a productive task can become very frustrated when they just do not have enough vocabulary or the grammar they need to express themselves. Sometimes, of course, they can study language they would like to use, but this can make writing a very difficult process, and in speaking, such an option is anyway not available, at least not in spontaneous speech.

There are a number of steps we can take which will help students achieve success.

- a. Supply key language

- b. Plan activities in advance

Language production activities which fall at the communicative and of the communication continuum are not just practice activities, however. One of the strategies which speakers need to develop is the art of getting round language problems in communication; writers, too, will have to find ways of saying things even when a lack of language makes this difficult.

PROJECTS

Project work is popular in EFL/ESOL teaching and learning too, though its use is naturally constrained by the amount of time available for its implementation. It is far more popular, for example, on courses where learners are full-time students and have access to a wide range of resources and people.

There are many possible areas for project work in an EFL/ESL setting. Many teachers, for example, encourage their students to produce a class newspaper. Other classes produce guides to their town or books on culture. Some projects look at people's attitudes to current issues or ask students to produce brochures for a public service or a new company.

Managing projects

As Jeremy Harmer (2007: 278-280) stated, projects can be organized in a number of different ways, but they generally share the same sequence:

- a. The briefing / the choice
- b. Idea/ language generation
- c. Data gathering
- d. Planning
- e. Drafting and editing
- f. The result
- g. Consultation / tutorial

Although projects may not be suitable in all situations, still they usually involve a satisfying integration of skills. They require detailed planning and idea generation and encourage students to gather data. At the end of the whole process, students have work they can show proudly to their employers and friends, or they have the chance to be involved in really important presentations both oral or with presentation equipment, such as overhead projectors and computer-supplied data projectors.

CONCLUSION

The teacher should supervise the activity and facilitate interaction among the students. He may control the class and correct the mistakes, if necessary. He can focus on grammar or lexis alternatively, if needed. Based on the level of the students, he may choose interactive games, discussions, problem-solving activities or role -plays for their practice. The average students always feel comfortable when they are given opportunities in pairs or small groups since it would be less demanding than the individual turn taking in front of the entire class.

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