

PROPOSING THE APPLICATION OF COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING (CLT) IN IMPROVING ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS FOR STUDENTS OF ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES (ESP) AT UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY - THE UNIVERSITY OF DANANG

ĐỀ XUẤT ÁP DỤNG PHƯƠNG PHÁP GIẢNG DẠY THEO HƯỚNG GIAO TIẾP ĐỂ PHÁT TRIỂN KỸ NĂNG NÓI TIẾNG ANH CHO SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGÀNH TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC BÁCH KHOA - ĐẠI HỌC ĐÀ NẴNG

Tran Vu Mai Yen, Huynh Truc Giang

University of Foreign Language Studies - The University of Danang;

tvmyen@ufl.udn.vn, htgiang@ufl.udn.vn

Abstract - Over the past few decades, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of speaking in both learning and teaching a foreign language in Vietnam. This paper describes the situation of learning ESP among students at University of Science and Technology - the University of Danang. Thereby, it presents some suggestions of applying communicative language teaching in developing their English speaking skills. It is suggested that with the use of CLT (with authentic materials and suitable classroom activities) together with the teacher's role in class, students of ESP are offered more chances to produce the language in different contexts and more confident and active in their language learning.

Key words - ESP; CLT; authentic materials; classroom activities; contexts

Tóm tắt - Trong một vài thập niên vừa qua, tầm quan trọng của bộ môn nói trong việc dạy và học ngoại ngữ ở Việt Nam ngày càng được ghi nhận. Bài báo này mô tả thực trạng học tiếng Anh chuyên ngành của sinh viên Trường Đại học Bách khoa - Đại học Đà Nẵng, từ đó đề xuất việc áp dụng phương pháp giảng dạy ngôn ngữ theo hướng giao tiếp nhằm mục đích phát triển kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh. Với việc sử dụng phương pháp này (kèm các tài liệu thực tế và các hoạt động trong lớp phù hợp) cùng với vai trò của giáo viên trong lớp học, các sinh viên chuyên ngành được tạo cơ hội để sản sinh ra ngôn ngữ giao tiếp trong các bối cảnh khác nhau, đồng thời tự tin và tích cực hơn trong việc học ngôn ngữ của họ.

Từ khóa - tiếng Anh chuyên ngành; giảng dạy ngôn ngữ theo hướng giao tiếp; tài liệu thực tế; các hoạt động trong lớp; bối cảnh

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization, English is obviously the language of international communication, business and science. Therefore, how to use English effectively is definitely important to learners of English. The teaching of English at universities in Vietnam aims at developing the students' ability to use English fluently and accurately so that they will be able to communicate in their future jobs and social interactions. In most universities in Vietnam, English for specific purposes plays an important part in the curriculum as it is essential for students to exchange information in specific occupational settings. However, in an ESP class, more attention is usually paid to understanding scientific or economic reading items than improving speaking skills in specialized English. The scope of the article is restricted to ESP students at University of Science and Technology - The University of Danang. Some pressing problems in teaching and learning spoken English in these classes are going to be discussed, and some measures are taken into consideration.

2. The current situation of learning English for specific purposes

2.1. Research methodology

2.1.1. Description of Population and Sample

A survey on third-year students from faculties of Environment, Construction, Information Technology, Transportation, Mechanical Engineering is conducted in order to collect different ideas on students' difficulties in practicing English speaking in ESP classes. We collect the

data through responses of Likert Scale questionnaires, which are simple and clear enough. The method is used as a trend survey since we need to ask for opinions and experiences at a point of time.

247 questionnaires are actually distributed and collected directly or via emails, from which we receive 200 valid samples from 172 males and 28 females. This can be explained that there is a big gender gap at the university, and female students are outnumbered by males. The first part of the questionnaire is a short announcement about the purpose of the questionnaire and the study and general information questions. The second part includes 10 multiple choice questions with five-point scales of responses (*never, rarely, sometimes, usually, always*). Besides, in every question, a line is left for informants to show their additional opinions. It takes approximately 10 minutes to complete each questionnaire. The information effectively serves to work out the attitudes, difficulties, habits, motivation as well as desires of these students in learning spoken English. In the next step, we calculate a total score for the scale point.

2.1.2. Instruments for Analysis

Likert Scale is applied to analyze data from the questionnaire. The items are assessed on a 5-point Likert scale (0 = never, 1 = rarely, 2 = sometimes, 3 = usually, 4 = always). First of all, a simple calculation is used to find the frequency of each choice from the questionnaires. Then, Excel is used to perform the statistical analysis. This program helps us convert the data from completed questionnaires to the spreadsheet with the formula:

$$\text{Average rating (X)} = \frac{0A + 1B + 2C + 3D + 4E}{N}$$

N is the total number of respondents.

A is the number of times that “never” were chosen

B “rarely”

C “sometimes”

D “usually”

E “always”

Based on the average rating (X), the obstacles, motivation and confidence of the ESP students are analyzed through bar charts.

2.2. Research results

2.2.1. About the ESP students

Students at University of Science and Technology have to take a compulsory course of ESP which is related to their major. Before taking this course, in the curriculum, they have to complete two courses of General English, from elementary to pre-intermediate level. These two courses provide basic English forms and functions as well as vocabulary on a certain topic that is familiar to them, which is a prerequisite for improving their competence in using English to discuss and exchange ideas on their specialty.

2.2.2. Difficulties in learning ESP

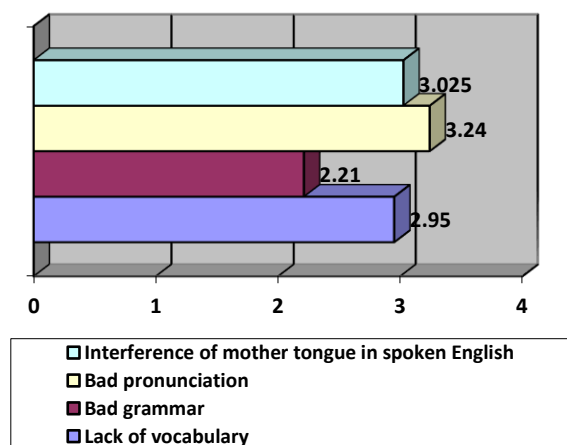


Figure 1. Main drawbacks when speaking English

This bar chart illustrates data on obstacles encountered when ESP students speak English. It is clear that the figure for *bad pronunciation* is the highest, with 3.24. In fact, students often find it difficult to be correct in pronouncing voiceless consonants and ending sounds. Besides, *lack of vocabulary* and *interference of mother tongue, namely Vietnamese, in spoken English* are chosen in similar quantities, around 3.0. Although being capable of understanding a wide range of vocabulary in textbooks, they are accustomed to using some common words in communication. Additionally, like most Vietnamese native speakers learning English, non-English major students experience some difficulties in that some language rules in the learners' inter-language are transferred from their first language [11]. Before making an English utterance, they usually think in their mother language first. Finally, bad grammar is still a serious problem among these learners

(with 2.21), and there is a strong possibility that grammatical errors interfere with comprehension.

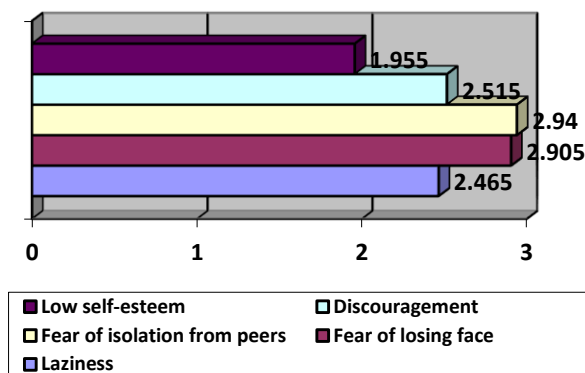


Figure 2. Main attitudes that hinder students from succeeding in speaking English

The second chart shows some main attitudes which may exert adverse influences on speaking English. Looking at the chart in detail, we can see that the *fear of isolation from peers* is the most common reason that prevents learners from embarking on an English conversation, with 2.94. Because the majority in each class tend to speak Vietnamese in discussion and other activities, high-flyers are sometimes laughed at and teased due to their desire in practicing English. Another difficulty is that the notion of “saving face” still has an impact on their performance of the language. A great number of students are reluctant to ask questions and to raise their ideas while learning because they are afraid of making mistakes. Thus, what they prefer is listening to the teacher explaining everything and doing what the teacher requires. It is obvious to see in an English lesson, the language focus, vocabulary and language function are clearly explained to the students and instant drills and practice are done afterward based on most exercises in the textbook. Their *fear of losing face* comes a close second (2.905), considerably ahead of *discouragement when others do not understand them* (2.515) and *laziness* (2.46). They are also obsessed with how to speak in an accurate way together with good pronunciation. This may hinder their attempts to find appropriate words to express ideas. Fluency in speaking is thus not fully achieved.

The other excuse is that they suffer from *low self-esteem when comparing themselves with other learners*, which stands at 1.955. Such attitude may lessen their desire to study and their capability to concentrate.

Also in ESP classes, students tend to read more than speak. There is a lot of up-to-date information about new technology for them to keep up with. At the end of the lesson, students do not have enough opportunities to make a free production of what they have learned. Due to huge class size, they are not allowed time to produce and reflect on what they have achieved in the lesson. These are inevitable obstacles that prevent the students from improving their language acquisition and proficiency. As Nunan [8] says, success in language learning is measured in terms of ability to act out a conversation in the target language. Therefore, those who do not have any opportunities to speak or are not confident in speaking

may lose interest in learning. The fact that the students should be engaged in all classroom activities to stimulate their thinking and performance needs to be considered by the language teacher. Some forms of speaking activities should be carried out more often so that comprehensible output can be clear evidence of effective language learning and teaching.

3. The application of CLT in teaching speaking in ESP classes

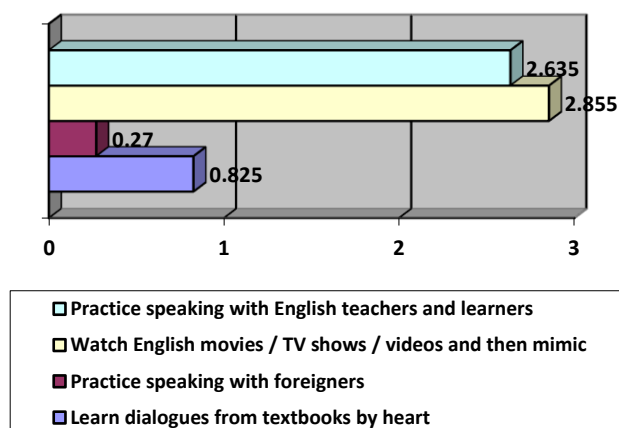


Figure 3. Favorite learning methods to speak English

Communicative language teaching has served the language teaching profession well for many years [1, p.280]. Unlike the audio-lingual and total physical response of language teaching, which focuses on proper drills and repetition, CLT can call for learners' production of the language, which may vary according to their response and reaction. Littlewood [7] states that the communicative approach helps teachers consider language not only in terms of its structures (vocabulary and sentence structures) but also the communicative functions that language performs. CLT can also be understood as "a set of principles about the goals of language teaching, how learners learn a language, the kinds of classroom activities that best facilitate learning, and the roles of teachers and learners in the classroom" [10, p.6]. Thus, the application of CLT is a good choice as it assists language teachers in developing learners' competence in using English as a means of interaction with international counterparts in the integration process of Vietnam.

The third chart shows some major methods in learning English of these students. It can be clearly seen that *watching movies / TV shows / videos and then mimic* and *practicing speaking with English teachers and learners* are the most popular. They believe such practice could give rise to fluency in speaking. The number for the first way is 2.855 compared with 2.635 for the second one. Consequently, teachers should mix the two methods to obtain the best results. By contrast, the figures for *learning dialogues from textbooks by heart* and *practicing speaking with foreigners* are relatively low, with 0.825 and 0.27 respectively.

3.1. The use of authentic materials and tasks

In communicative language teaching, authentic materials, argued by Larsen- Freeman [6], are considered preferable to give learners opportunities to develop their strategies for

mastering the language as it is actually used. As Guariento and Morley [4] discuss, using authentic texts brings a lot of advantages in language teaching, which expose students to the language of the real world, increase students' motivation for learning, meet different learning needs, and support more approaches to teaching. Simplification should be made to the texts as it "contributes both to the current communicative event and to no longer- term language development" [8, p.15]. Such authentic materials as audio-visual, semi-scripted materials and newspapers will be effective in enhancing language competence among learners. According to Brinton [3], authentic texts can reinforce for learners the direct relationship between the language inside the classroom and the outside world.

To deal with the texts, authentic tasks are taken into consideration. Taking the ideas of Swain [13], Willis [14] and Skehan [12]; Guariento & Morley [4] state that successful use of tasks provides a means of giving learners chances for production and opportunities for attention to various forms in the target language.

Based on the theory of authentic materials and tasks, on working with students of Environmental Engineering, the speaking task can be carried out with the support of videos taken from television news or the Internet which raise the matters of air and water pollution. Students learn how to use the passive and active voice to identify what happens to the air and source of water, and what people cause to the living environment in many different regions. At the next stage, they will have more chances to discuss solutions to the current problems. With such authentic materials, students are not only exposed to the language in the real world and in their specialized field but also form their attitude towards public concern. Particularly, pair work tasks will develop the learners' ability to use the suitable strategy in communication. Together with speaking, the gap-filling task is, at the same time, suggested to develop the students' ability to listen for specific information. Authentic materials are also created by the students themselves. They should be encouraged to bring into the classroom their own authentic data collected from fact-finding trips to contaminated areas, eco-tourism sites or water and garbage treatment factories. Talking about personal experiences and opinions about the national ecosystem and the application of modern technology are related to the students' interests and thus mainly emphasized in speaking. In addition, group presentations and interviews can attract more attention and contributions to the speaking activities. These tasks are desirable for learners to evaluate their learning outcomes at some aspects of language learning and for the teacher to get significant implications in teaching.

3.2. Classroom activities

CLT is intended to lead learners to interact in a conscious way, referring to their real experiences; and to engage them in real- life communication in the target language. The learning outcomes will vary according to their reactions and responses to different problem- solving situations. Hence, such typical activities in CLT classes as pair work, group work, role- play, and class discussion would increase learners' motivation and confidence in

practicing their language in meaningful ways. They will participate in classroom activities that encourage them to cooperate rather than work in individual and to take responsibility for their own learning [10].

In CLT, role plays are significant in giving learners chances to communicate in different contexts with different social roles [6]. The teacher sets the situation, tells them who they are and what they will do, and then they will decide what to say. After getting familiar with English functions of persuading, students of Information Technology may be involved in a situation in which a computer programmer tries to convince the team members to use a suitable programming language for their new anti-virus program. Students who act as team leader must develop arguments that they think will convince the team member. The others preparing the role of the team member have to think of the questions about the viability of the future program. Their fluency and accuracy as working in pairs or role plays are significantly suggested. According to Harmer [5], they increase the self-confidence of hesitant students, because, in role plays, they will have a different role and do not have to speak for themselves, which means they do not have to take the same responsibility.

After a content-based lesson, a discussion in groups or practice in pairs can be chosen. In this task, students are able to share ideas, or find solutions to the given problems. Before the discussion, the teacher should set the purpose of the activity so that students can avoid talking about irrelevant things. For example, students can take part in agreeing/disagreeing, negotiating, making suggestions discussions. In this type of discussions, students of Civil Engineering can work in groups and discuss the reasons for cracks, subsidence, and collapse in some instructions; then find feasible solutions to those incidents and make further suggestions to limit them in the construction process. Group discussion is also useful for students of Transportation to talk about the structure and principle of operation of systems in engines and automobiles. Group discussion should start with small groups for less confident students to have more chance in practicing speaking with their peers. Additionally, by working together in groups, students will develop their skills of teamwork and understand the importance of group work in problem-solving activities.

3.3. The roles of teachers and learners

In CLT, the teacher serves as a facilitator [6], allowing students to be responsible for their own learning. He/she may act as an independent participant, getting involved in students' communicative activities. As Littlewood [7] states, the teacher plays the role of an advisor, giving guidance when necessary, answering students' questions and monitoring their performance during the activities. While they work in groups or pairs, the teacher circulates around the classroom to make sure that students are doing the right thing and see whether they need help. As to the roles of language learners, according to Breen and Candlin [2, p.10],

learners act as a negotiator between the selves, the teacher, other students, the learning process and the learning object. In the learning process, the learner 'should contribute as much as he gains, and thereby learn in an interdependent way'. Thus, teachers of ESP should provide a rich environment with collaborative work to motivate students to speak the target language. They should be encouraged to do much more speaking, and the classroom atmosphere during communicative speaking activities is active. Given a lot of opportunities to participate, students are more in charge of their learning. They play the central role in their learning process rather than the teacher. The activities such as group work, pair work or class discussion in which the teacher is a facilitator help motivate students to think independently and be able to present and defend their ideas.

4. Conclusion

It is widely recognized that speaking skills play a crucial part in mastering a foreign language. In order to achieve a better goal, students of ESP should engage themselves in interacting in English more frequently, which provide opportunities to sharpen their English. It is the teachers' task that gets learners involved in collaborative work, authentic materials and meaningful tasks as well on a regular basis. As a result, "losing face" will no longer be an alarming issue among the students. Hopefully, the application of communicative language teaching will bring enjoyment to ESP students of the University of Science and Technology in particular, and all English learners in general.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bax, S., "The end of CLT: A Context Approach to Language Teaching", *ELT Journal*, 57(3), 2003, pp. 278-287.
- [2] Breen, M. & Candlin, C.N., "The Essentials of a Communicative Curriculum in Language Teaching", *Applied Linguistics*, 1(2), 1980, pp. 89-112.
- [3] Brinton, D.M., *The use of media in language teaching*, In M. Celce-Murcia (ed.), *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*, Boston: Heinle and Heinle Publishers, 1991.
- [4] Guariento, W. & Morely, J., "Text and Task Authenticity in the EFL Classroom", *ELT Journal*, 55(4), 2001, pp. 347-353.
- [5] Harmer, J., *The Practice of English Language Learning*, London, Longman, 1984.
- [6] Larsen-Freeman, D. (Ed.), *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching (2nd ed.)*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- [7] Littlewood, W., *Communicative Language Teaching: An Introduction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- [8] Lynch, T., *Communication in the Language Classroom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- [9] Nunan, D., *Language Teaching Methodology*, UK: Prentice Hall International, 1991.
- [10] Richard, J.C., *Communicative Language Teaching Today*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- [11] Selinker, L., "Interlanguage", *IRAL*, 10, 1972, pp. 209-231.
- [12] Skehan, P., *A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- [13] Swain, M., *Communicative competence: Some roles of comprehensible input and comprehensible output in its development*, in S. Gass and C. Madden (eds.), *Input in Second Language Acquisition*, Rowley: Newbury House, 1985.
- [14] Willis, J., *A Framework for Task-Based Learning*, Harlow: Longman, 1996.