

Training and Improving Adults' Speaking Skills

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Abstract:

The present paper is intended to shed some light on one of the most difficult aspects of teaching English as a second language, namely generating and stimulating the development of speaking abilities. Speaking is, for some people the easiest and the most natural way to express thoughts or feelings, but, for others it is a sort of a „burden”; such people feel more comfortable when they use the language just for basic communication, not for an extensive source of externalization. Using a foreign language adds an extra stress level for them. This doesn't mean that those who find it easy to speak English, do it correctly. Speech errors may appear at the level of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, etc. However, these may be corrected in time and may not rise obstacles if the meaning is understood by the interlocutor. For introvert people, the situation is not exactly the same. In their case, there is an extra barrier that needs to be overcome: that of finding the right path to become more communicative. How is this possible, especially at an advanced age? How can teachers stimulate such students to become interested, fluent and more active? Is there a unique solution or a flexible approach is the key?

Keywords: *speaking; stress; communicative; barrier; introvert*

Speaking barriers

The latest tendency of communicating at an international level has been fully claimed by „English”. It has been adopted at all levels and it has gained an enormous „power” to streamline the conversation between people of different nationalities. The process has been a fast one so that a lot of people from different working fields have been somehow put into the difficult situation of having to acquire it in a rather short period of time. The advancement of technology has been of great help in this sense. Having been „forced” to cope with an enormous amount of information that has been provided only in English, most people have adapted and have got used to various terms. Writing short messages or mails has been facilitated by the auto-correct programs that have been installed on computers. However, speaking has still remained the most required skill

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in English and, for most people, the most difficult one. Why is that? Well, there are numerous reasons or at least this is what people state. One of the most contradictory ones which has been highlighted by many learners is the age limit. Adult learners consider that speaking a new language after a certain age is just like any new device or gadget that appears on the market: „interesting but difficult to know”. Is it really like this or is it an excuse for not devoting or not having time and patience? People tend to forget that everything that is new requires time and dedication. The effort is, for sure, rewarded. Once you discover the pleasure of communicating in English with easiness, you will have a wonderful sensation and you will work on improving it. Who said that learning at an advanced age is hard?

“You need to know right now that your age doesn’t limit your ability to speak English fluently. It’s more likely you believing your age is a limiting factor actually keeps you from learning. Once you overcome this mindset, you’ll discover that English isn’t as difficult to speak as you thought -and before you know it you’ve unlocked the secret that has prevented you from going any further.”² (Nelson, Withney, 2019:12)

Age has nothing to do with learning new things. It’s the only way to keep your brain active and effective. Deepening you knowledge in a foreign language is a plus not a limit. If you consider it a „struggle”, then your chances diminish. If you perceive it as a sort of a new and interesting hobby, then you will not fail. It’s essential to have the courage to try something that is new but extremely useful and pleasant. In the case of adults, the main drawback is the limit of free time they benefit of for investing in other activities. The job and the family take over their life, so, obviously, their tendency is to give up. Moreover, most of the English classes take place in the evening or at the weekends when they are already tired and feel the need to relax. In this case, those that find the study of English as something entertaining and pleasant will manage to master it. Unfortunately, for those that see it as „an obligation” that needs to be fulfilled quickly, will give up in a short period of time.

Age and the lack of time are not always the excuses that people make when it comes to using a new language. Adults have, unlike children, the experience of acquiring a huge amount of information and understanding the grammar rules easier due to their prior knowledge of their native language grammar. Still, when they exercise speaking they tend to put into practice all their grammar notions and do a sort of a translation in their mind of the ideas they want to express. That is perhaps one of the drawbacks since speaking should be a spontaneous act not a mechanical

² Nelson, Whitney, *English Fluency for Advanced English Speaker, How to Unlock the Full Potential to Speak English Fluently*, Canada, 2019.



translation. An additional factor of stress would also be the fear of making mistakes in front of others, the fear of being „judged” or „mocked at”. Adult learners have the tendency to compete with their peers; if they sense that another colleague speaks or knows better than them, they lose the ability to concentrate and the speech act is totally compromised. All these elements have been grouped under „affective factors”.

“Affective factors refer to the learner’s anxiety over the risk of blurting things out that are wrong, stupid and incomprehensible. The language ego that informs people „You are what you speak” makes learners reluctant to be judged by listeners. Apart from this, the greatest difficulties learners encounter in trying to speak is not the multiplicity sounds, words, phrases and discourse form that characterize any language, but rather the interactive nature of communication or the so-called interaction effect.”³ (Royani, Esti and others, 2020:11)

Adults are, unlike children, aware of the reaction of their peers. It is not easy to feel comfortable when you know that you have your peers’ eyes on you. Reading, listening and writing have a high degree of importance when studying English but they do not need direct interaction with the interlocutor like speaking. In addition, you may adjust your concentration time and not feel the pressure of having to be „analysed” on the spot. You may correct the mistakes and revise the information. The teacher may provide the feedback and your colleagues may not know the level or the result you got. It is a huge relief for people that are shy and lack confidence. Speaking is a direct act and implies cooperation; it’s a teamwork activity and requires supervision from the part of the teacher who is in charge of balancing the parts that participate at the dialogue. He/She should guide learners toward reciprocal help and should offer constant encouragement. He/she should identify and monitor the level of stress and search for the right methods to eliminate it.

“Teachers should, therefore, encourage learners to support one another’s speaking development, not just as communication partners in a speaking task, but also as learning partners who share their learning plans and goals. Through dialogue, students can co-construct knowledge about what is needed to be proficient speakers, and to apply their knowledge and skills in real-time communication. However, learners should not be left alone to struggle through the learning process. Their efforts must be supported by teachers who can provide the necessary scaffolding, input and guidance”.⁴ (Goh, Christine, Bruns, Anne. 2012:6)

³ Royani, Esti, S., H., M.Pd., M.H., C.PS, C.Me., C.Htc., *The Students’ Speaking Skill*, Zahir Publishing, 2020.

⁴ Goh, Christine, C.M., Burns, Anne, *Teaching Speaking: A Holistic Approach*, Cambridge University Press, 2012.



Raising interest in the lesson

Perhaps one of the most essential elements when teaching English as a foreign language to adults is to do whatever possible to draw their attention. In this sense, the teacher has to come up with materials that rise the learners' attention and stimulate them to produce effective utterances. The topics should be connected either to their work, leisure time hobbies or other points of interest. A survey at the beginning of the course would help the teacher get a clear idea of what exactly they enjoy doing or talking about. Moreover, the teacher has to focus on finding a wide range of activities so that students don't get bored and permanently discover something new. It is, for sure, hard to design interesting and useful materials but the reward the teacher gets when he/she sees that students struggle to exceed their limits is a source of immense joy and generates a certain feeling of accomplishment. Students' progress gives the teacher the right orientation. If the progress is significant, it means that the teaching method is the appropriate one. If, on the contrary, the progress is slightly noticeable, the teacher should look for other ways to conceive the lessons.

“It is very important for lessons to be interesting and to contain varied activities to give students, (...) as much encouragement as possible. Students need to participate actively and to enjoy their English classes. Even in large classes, where there are few resources and space is limited, it is possible to do useful activities.(...) Teachers in different learning situations can organize lessons which motivate their students and give them the best possible chance of improving their spoken English”.⁵ (Baker & Westrup, 2003:8,9)

Still, despite the wide range of activities and the effort that a teacher pays to conceive functional lessons, there is a certain category of adults that has the tendency to give up. It has nothing to do with the teacher, the lesson or the dialogue partners. They simply become demotivated for a number of other external reasons. At the beginning all students are willing to study English either because of the necessity to use it at the workplace or for their own personal intellectual satisfaction. In time, things change. Adults study a foreign language in their own free time and on their own financial resources. These elements may become a „burden” once time passes; there are periods of time when the heavy workload and the family pressure becomes too much and diminishes their motivation and desire to succeed. Like all new things, acquiring a foreign language needs an amount of time that cannot be anticipated and implication in terms of self

⁵ Baker, Joanna, Westrup, Heather, *Essential Speaking Skills, A Handbook for English Language Teachers*, Continuum Publishing, 2003, p. 8-9.



studying or practising at home as well, not only in class. Under such circumstances, there is no wonder that only those that are truly stimulated by the job demand to master a language, by an inner stimulus to be better than others by an extraordinary teacher and wonderful materials, end up being proficient in English. To put it in some other words, motivation plays an essential role and is generated either by the workplace requirements or by a personal desire to evolve. Just as Paul Vergese states, „we need English not only for operational purposes but also for identifying ourselves with those who use the language (...) abroad. Two main kinds of motivation are at work: instrumental and integrative. Geoffrey Broughton and his colleagues (...) say: when anyone learns a foreign language instrumentally he needs it for operational purposes-to be able to read books in the new language, to be able to communicate with other speakers of that language. The tourist, the salesman, the science student are clearly motivated to learn English instrumentally. When anyone learns a foreign language for integrative purposes....he wants to feel at home with it”.⁶ (Vergese, Paul, 2007:6)

No matter the type of motivation or the free time available to dedicate to the study of English, in my opinion, it is all connected to the personality of the individual. There are, and there will always be people who give up easily when meeting an obstacle or finding a situation a little bit difficult just as there are people who will look for endless solutions to evolve, to become better and to succeed. There is a circle in the teaching process that includes the learner, the teacher, the resources, the motivation, the level of adaptability of each, the classroom environment and many others. Once the teacher and the learner find a common path, the process of acquisition will be a lovely way to success.

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⁶ Vergese, Paul, C., *Teaching English as a Second Language*, Sterling Publishers Private Limited, New Delhi, 2007.