Improving Speaking Skills during Technical English Classes

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Abstract:

By the mid-1970s, textbook developers were beginning to focus more on learners' purposes, goals and expectations rather than on specialist language as the thrust engine leading technical English classes. The concept of need was becoming central to language classes from all walks of life as a result from turning back to the essential issue: what does this specific customer need? The approach of needs analysis clearly reconsidered the place of needs as central to ESP. In order to investigate one's needs, the target situation for which learners were being prepared has to be defined. According to Chambers (1980: 123) [...] needs analysis should be concerned with the establishment of communicative needs and their realizations, resulting from an analysis of the communication in the target situation- what I will refer to from now on as target situation analysis (TSA).

Keywords: *essential issue, target situation, learners*

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The learners and their purposes for learning English for professional communication represent the focal point of technical English classes. Students are usually young adults who have already had some form of contact with English and are learning the language in order to

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communicate and develop a set of professional skills and to perform particular job-related functions. A technical English programme is therefore centered on an assessment of aims, expectations and needs and the functions for which English will be used in the future technical career the students will embark on.

As ESP combines subject matter and English language teaching so students are able to apply what they learn in their English classes to their main field of study, be it accounting, business management, economics, computer science or various engineering fields. Being able to use the vocabulary and structures that they learn in a meaningful context reinforces what is taught and increases student participation and motivation. Moreover, learners in technical English classes are generally aware of the purposes for which they will be using English. Having already oriented their education toward a specific field, students are able to see their English training as complementing their future professional career. Knowledge of the subject area will enable the students to identify a real context for the vocabulary and structures of the technical English classroom. Thus, the learners can take advantage of what they already know about the subject matter to learn English.

During technical English classes, university students approach the study of English through a field that is becoming known and relevant to them. This means that they are able to use what they learn in the ESP classroom right away in their work and studies, the relevance of what the students are learning is enhanced in the sense that students become aware of what they know and they become motivated to learn even more English and to interact with professionals, English speakers and specialized texts. The ultimate goal in developing speaking skills is to ensure communicative efficiency in their preferred profession. In order for learners to be able to make themselves understood they should learn how to employ their current proficiency to the fullest while harnessing newly emerging communicative contexts that pertain to their profession. Another important aim is to become aware of and avoid confusion in the message due to faulty pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary, and to observe the social and cultural rules that apply in each communicative situation.

Students develop communicative efficiency in speaking when the teachers choose balanced activities that combines language input, structured output, and communicative output. In technical English classes, getting students to speak or improving their speaking is often impaired by the misconception that speaking about technical subject is more difficult than speaking about other things. This is not necessarily the case if the teacher is well aware of lesson objectives and students aims,

capabilities and proficiency and adapts the speaking subjects to them and vice-versa. In recent years, teachers and educators worldwide have created a new generation of ESP materials based on the understanding of learning and to a number of learning-centered approaches:

> „Our concern in ESP is not with language use- although this will help to define the course objectives. Our concern is with language learning. We cannot simply assume that describing and exemplifying what people do with language will enable someone to learn it …. A truly valid approach to ESP must be based on an understanding of the processes of language learning."
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> (Hutchinson and Waters, 1982)

Language input can refer to teacher talk introducing a subject matter, listening activities, video watching, reading passages, vocabulary and visual diagrams as well as the language heard and read outside the classroom. It provides learners with the material they need to begin producing language themselves. Language input may be **content oriented** or **form oriented**. Content-oriented input emphasizes information gathering, be it a brief product chart or an extended presentation on an academic topic. Content-oriented input may also refer to descriptions of systems, technical objects, phenomena together with instances of their usage.

On the other hand, form-oriented input focuses on manners in which the language is actually used. It is often accompanied by guidance from the teacher or another source regarding vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar (linguistic competence). It can also refer to what is appropriate to say in specific contexts (discourse competence); expectations for rate of speech, pause length, turn-taking, and other social aspects of language use (sociolinguistic competence). It can also include explicit instruction in phrases to use to ask for clarification and repair miscommunication (strategic competence). Additionally, it can refer to modelling syntax that students can replicate to create their own utterances such as how to give instructions, how to describe a technical process, how to render safety measures with modal verbs etc.

In the initial stages of a lesson, the ESP teacher combines content-oriented and form-oriented activities. Essentially, input that is actually provided in the target language depends on students' speaking and listening proficiency and also on the situation. For instance, at lower levels, or in situations refining a vocabulary relation, it is often the case that an explanation in English is more appropriate than one in the target language especially is the teachers also uses visual aids.

Structured output insists on the use of the correct forms, students are provided with options for responses, but which require them to use the specific form or structure that the teacher has just introduced. Structured

output is intended to make learners feel more comfortable producing specific language items recently introduced, sometimes in combination with previously learned items. Technical English teachers often use structured output exercises as a transition between the presentation stage and the practice stage of a lesson plan. In order to generate structured output, teachers can use templates that can be adapted to new communicative topics, they can use guided speaking modelling or instantiate gradual expansion into increasingly complex structures.

The *communicative output* refers to activities in which the students' main purpose is to complete a task, such as obtaining information, developing an action plan, or creating a technical tutorial/description. Students thus may use the language that the instructor has just introduced, but they may also employ and practice additional vocabulary, grammar and communication strategies that they possess. In communicative output activities, the measure of success relies heavily on whether the learner manages to convey the intended message and achieve communicative interaction. Accuracy is not under scrutiny unless it produces misunderstandings of the message.

Nonetheless, in actual practice, the teacher will use a variety of activities from these categories of input and output as the combined approach is more likely to result in effective language learning.

How can teachers increase speaking competence during Technical English classes?

Communicative output activities allow students to practice the language they know in situations that resemble real situations they will be faced with in their future professional lives. During communicative technical English activities, students should work together and negotiate to develop a solution plan, resolve a problem, or complete a process. The most common types of communicative output activity are *role-plays* and *discussions*. During role-play activities, students are assigned roles and asked to act as if in situations that they may actually encounter outside the classroom. Because role-plays imitate life, the range of language functions that may be used expands considerably and is virtually inexhaustible as a teaching resource. Additionally, the role relationships between students involved in role-plays enable them to practice and develop their linguistic competence as well as their social integration skills. Students will have to adapt and employ language that is appropriate to the situation and to the characters while coping with the challenges of speaking as a professional in a technical domain. This obstacle can be overridden if the speaking activities are chosen in a way that they set a starting point for effective communication and not a high standard for technical knowledge. In other

words, though the topics for discussion may cover some professional situations in engineering, their purpose should not be to specifically verify or deepen technical or super-specialized vocabulary. Students need to gain the necessary confidence to start and carry out a conversation about technical issues in their future engineering profession with a range of vocabulary and grammatical structures that are available to them at that specific moment. In other words, the aim of the speaking activity should be emphasized as communicative achievement rather than the need to impress with hyper-specialized knowledge of the subject matter.

Role-playing and discussions are normally engaging and relaxing, but students who suffer from anxiety or low-confidence levels or have lower proficiency may find it intimidating at first. There are some pre-requisites for teachers to make sure they devise pleasant and successful speaking activities:

• Prepare carefully: Introduce the activity by describing the situation and making sure that all of the students understand it. Refer to the aim of achieving communication between parties.

• Set a goal or outcome and make sure the students understand what the product of the role play should be: a plan, a schedule, a group opinion, a description, a ranking or some other output.

• Use role cards by providing each student a card that describes the person or role to be played. For lower-level students, the cards can include words or expressions that that person might use, thus helping them to replicate a model in their output.

• Brainstorm as a pre-speaking activity. Before you start the role-play, the teacher should ask students to generate ideas as a class to predict what vocabulary, grammar, and idiomatic expressions they might use. Additionally, teachers can use a visual aid to help with idea generation: a diagram, a photo, some physical technical objects: instruments, products, gadgets etc.

• Keep groups small and manageable. Less-confident students might feel more inclined to participate if they do not have to compete with many voices. Moreover, the teacher can manage the groups more efficiently.

• Allow students time to prepare. As forewarned is forearmed, if the teacher allows students time to work individually to outline their ideas and the language they will need to express, they might feel more confident and able to render ideas.

• The teacher should be a resource rather than a monitor. Speaking is very much about students conquering their fears and embarrassment rather than producing language perfectly. If they feel somebody is hunting their mistakes, the inhibition will end up locking their jaws.

- Allow students to work at their own levels. Each student possesses unique language skills, has individual approach to working in groups and a specific role to play in the activity. Do not expect all students to contribute equally to the discussion or to use every grammar structure that has been taught. Just because some students produce less amount of output does not mean their contribution is not valuable.

- Focus on topical follow-up. Students should learn to report to the class on the outcome of their role plays, thus becoming aware of their learning achievement and receiving a boost of confidence.

- Do linguistic follow-up: After the role play is over, give feedback on vocabulary, grammar structures or pronunciation problems identified. Thus, meaningful errors are analysed and prevented from reoccurring and the speaking is not disrupted.

Preparation

Discussions and role plays display a higher degree of success when the instructor prepares students beforehand thus making it clear what the activity will consist of and what is expected from them. There are some preparatory steps the teacher can undertake to make sure the speaking activity is a success:

- Students need input (both topical information and language forms) so that they can make sure they have something to say and the language with which to say it. Diagrams, tables, pictures, technical videos can be put to good use in the pre-speaking stage to provide much needed input. Also, students can pe offered input in the form of a technical quote or a controversial idea they can discuss, debate and brainstorm around.

- A goal or outcome is another mandatory condition that makes speaking activities meaningful. This can take the form of a group product, such as a debate about technical issues, individual reports on the views of others in the group, a plan, a course of action, a summary etc.

- Variety and choices must be made available. Students can be asked to suggest the topic for discussion or choose from several options. Discussions do not always have to be about formal issues. Students are more eager to participate in topics which interest them: television programs/films about scientific subjects, an interesting fact they is a hot issue in the press, or working as an engineer in a foreign country. Intimidating topics like how to combat engine failure are not as engaging and require high linguistic competence on the part of the students. The teacher can provide a variety of topics in a way that they lead to the intended lesson type.

- Shorter is better. Students work better with a defined period of time of about 8-10 minutes, for discussion and up to 20 minutes for

role-plays. Also, they should be allowed to stop sooner if they run out of things to say.

• Small groups are more appropriate than whole-class discussion as larger groups make active and passive participation difficult to balance and manage.

• Students should be allowed to participate in their own way because not every student will feel inspired to talk about any topic. Additionally, they should not be expected to contribute equally to the communication activity and the teacher should take into account individual particularities and encourage stepping outside comfort zones. For instance, introverted students might feel uneager to participate fully and wholeheartedly in speaking activities but they must proceed gradually by being assigned speaking tasks that gradually increase in complexity.

• Linguistic and grammar feed-back should be presented after the discussion either by the teacher or by peers.

In essence, knowing a foreign language is primarily judged by people's ability to use it in communication. Carefully chosen communicative activities encourage students to experiment and play with the language, and create a supportive atmosphere that will gradually make them feel relaxed and without fear of embarrassment. Moreover, teachers should emphasize that the aim of speaking is to help students start to feel comfortable with feeling uncomfortable and will challenge their limitations. This will contribute to their self-confidence as speakers and to their motivation to learn more.

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