

DISCUSSION AS AN ACTIVE LEARNING IN EFL

PhD, Marsela Harizaj

Department of Foreign Language Teaching,
University “Ismail Qemali” Vlore, Albania

Abstract

This paper brings in focus the importance of using discussion in EFL. Being an international language, English plays an important and crucial role in many people’s life. It is used for different purposes in social, education and social life of people. For this reason, English language students try to acquire, use and master it as much as possible to be effective speakers. English language teachers should provide students to frequently interactive activities in their classrooms. Students feel secure, motivated and willingly participate. In student -centered classes language is primarily a tool of communication. Communication implies interaction and this is done through speaking and interacting with each other. Communication and a supportive atmosphere in our English classes are essential for students’ acquisition. The success of this depends on teacher’s skill. Good teaching requires an understanding of both individual and group methods. Teacher’s goals are to support and give the opportunity to promote speaking through free expression of ideas and thinking. English language students at university sometimes find themselves better in cooperating rather than individual work. Using group and discussion methods promote speaking, language acquisition and an active learning.

Keywords: Effective discussion, cooperative learning, language acquisition

Introduction

Learning English effectively is affected by methodology, teacher’s attitudes, beliefs and also by student’s motivation to learn. Great importance in language acquisition is played by the classroom environment. Students gain positive or negative feelings toward learning depending on such elements. A good teacher tries to differentiate strategies in their classes. Instead of applying just individual learning teachers may use cooperative learning. Because of the increased responsibility to participate, students gain confidence in using the target language. Students are more responsible managers of their own learning. (Larsen, 2008).

Keeping students active and up to pace teachers may use group discussion methods. Communicative activities would keep students interaction to maximum by exchanging information, giving opinions through cooperative work. Developing discussion, students develop speaking skills, acquire fluency and develop positive effects towards friendship.

The classroom and the behavior of teachers and learners in the classroom should be as similar as possible to the behavior of people in the "real world" outside the classroom. Apart from being active, discussion is in many cases problem- based, where students are free to give their opinions. Discussion may be conducted by small groups and it's very important to define what do teachers call small groups (4-6 students). Working in groups not only increases students' active participation, it also encourages social skill development, enhances communication and increases independence. (Westwood, 2008)

But it's also important to make distinctions about group discussion and discussion in groups. It's also important to provide students discussing free topics. The classroom must become like the world outside, where students use language spontaneously and communicatively. Discussion may take place at any time. Group work is an instruction method where learners of different levels form small groups and work together towards a specific objective. (Badache, 2011)

Through good discussion the communication process happens and is facilitated. Every shy or passive student takes part in communicative activities. In student- centered classes teacher's role is less dominant than in other methods. Students know what they want to learn so teachers should help them meet their goals. Because of the increasing responsibility of taking part in a discussion, students feel comfortable and confident in themselves, using that type of language that they intend to learn.

Communication and effective discussion in Albanian context

Foreign language teaching in Albania passed from grammar translation method to communicative approach. Communicative method for foreign language teaching is a new methodology that is being applied this last decade. Foreign language syllabus is conceptualized to enable students using different materials adapted to language level and age of students. Students learn to relate language functions to different relevant topics. Through foreign language students explore language, cultural education and learn to think critically.

“Social relationships in foreign language culture will be studied and understood through student's experience as a person, through familiar and school life, through preparing professional and academic carrier,

through social structures in human society, through funny and challenging activities.” (Kurrikula, 2000).

Considering the aim of learning foreign language students should be involved in communicative activities. Communicative activities mean interaction and communication. Communication in itself includes discussion. *But what are the characteristics of a good discussion?* Discussion is active learning when the participants exchange ideas. Discussion may happen at any level around different topics.

At university level, discussion may happen in a lecture when the lecturer brainstorm a topic and involve students in discussion. In my *Language Teaching Methodology classes* I apply discussion because students are actively involved. I try to involve my students speaking around topics concerning the syllabus about *which is an effective technique or using an effective method*. In such a way they try to give their opinion. The aim is not just making them talk, but discussing, encouraging speaking because active interaction makes them active communicators.

From my point of view in other levels in elementary or higher education teachers can make their students talk about everyday life. Topics like *holidays, family, education, birthday parties, Christmas, New Year est.* are good points of discussion. English textbook used in Albania such as *Click on, Access, Wishes (by Express Publishing)* provide pupils and children with relevant topic from real life as those mentioned above and others concerning *pollution, environment, health, global changes, volunteering est.* These topics attract and raise student’s attention and are very good to start a discussion.

A method is a reasonable, a community based and coherent principles, linguistic hypotheses, pedagogical needs to respond to defined objectives. (Baylon. CH. & Mignot.X. 2004) To draw student’s attention teachers have to use that kind of method that works best. Using different strategies in EFL helps a lot. In group work students involve themselves in cooperative learning. In cooperative learning, students work in small groups. Discussion in small groups may involve elements such as: small number of students, knowledge of relevant topic, presenting and exchanging information and ideas, guided objectives, oral, affective communication. (Musai, 2003)

The role of the teacher in guiding an effective discussion:

Guiding a good discussion depends on teacher’s skill. An effective teacher has to brainstorm the topic of discussion, setting goals and preparing students just like in other activities. The teacher initiates the discussion and than give time to students to think and speak. The teacher is communicator and interactive when the type of activity is such. (Littlewood, 1981). From

my experience a teacher may participate by sharing ideas. Anyway are the students that should summarize conclusions of their own.

The teacher should act as a supervisor and some of the roles while guiding a discussion may be:

- ❖ *Making sure the problem to be discussed is defined*
- ❖ *Giving enough information*
- ❖ *Make questions that relate feeling to content*
- ❖ *Relate comments to central topic*
- ❖ *Keep discussion moving (Clark,1991)*

The role of the students in participating in a discussion

Students should be active participants in discussion. Being in a lecture or in any kind of classroom participation students learn to be active listeners. If they are even when they speak they know how to relate what they know to the point. They should try to speak freely without emotions. Students benefit from a discussion many things apart from acquiring language structures and communication.

The benefits of students participating in a discussion may be:

- ❖ *Discussion makes student confident in understanding content*
- ❖ *Discussion increases motivation and enhance students' participation*
- ❖ *Through discussion students develop positive feeling towards teaching*
- ❖ *Discussion develops problem solving*
- ❖ *Discussion makes student practice concepts, knowledge and information (Musai, 2003)*

As we can see even teacher's roles even student's roles are well defined to have an effective discussion.

Advantages of using discussion in EFL

There are a lot of advantages of using discussion in EFL: interaction, motivation, cooperative learning and evaluation of student's progress. Cooperative learning helps passive students and low progressive students as well. Group- work teaches learners to respect other learners and improve their English language skills. (Brown, 2008) If the atmosphere in a classroom is relaxing, appropriate, than teachers will have success. Students will benefit by communicating in English, apart from that they evaluate what's the problem and will try to do better next time when they will involve themselves in communication. The point is to connect what students know to what is relevant to their life. In a discussion students may be active participants if the teacher connects his/her goals to student's goals.

Students learn also to become autonomous learners because what they study in school gives them points of searching and using the net to get

more information about what they are interested in when they are at home studying. In lecture students have face to face communication with the teacher and other students as well. When they need to resolve an information- gap exercise they provide information to each -other. We can learn by watching how others think and learn differently from us and this takes place through interaction. (Highton, 2006) For this reason group discussion plays a powerful role. Every member of the group is responsible for participating and sharing ideas with others. Discussion develops even leadership which helps to fulfill the task assigned by the teacher.

Discussion and cooperative learning

We talked about positive effects of using discussion but we should not neglect effects of cooperative learning through guided discussion. There are differences among teachers in how they interpret the concept of interactive teaching and how they accommodate it into their own style. (Jones & Tanner, 2005) This means that teachers should encourage their students to actively participate as it affects their learning. Through cooperation students have a face to face communication. Through cooperative learning students develop social communicative expressions. Developing such expressions they use them to reach success inside and outside classroom. After every cooperative learning student evaluate how did they fulfill the task, how far did they meet their learning goals and what to improve for the next time working together.

The teacher evaluates group work and divides students in groups according to their expectancies. When we organize groups we should select members carefully. Student's proficiency should vary. A mixture of students that belong to different language level is good to make all of them progress with the pace of the others. Apart from discussion students can use such groups even for other tasks as well: reading materials, performing a writing exercise, listening tasks est. To start a good discussion we may use magazines, pictures, film scripts, songs, journals est. In other words bringing and using in class everything that attracts student's attention and develops their critical thinking and judgment.

Conclusion

Teaching through communicative approach teacher's main goal is to teach students how to communicate effectively. English language is practiced and acquired through communication and interaction. This article referred to the way teachers can focus the teaching of the foreign language in the classroom in such a way that students can communicate in a conscious way, taking into account their real experiences.

The article also gives some advantages and starting topics of discussion that can be used in a class from the communicative point of view. My conclusion is that teachers have to refer to the practical use of this method rather than theory. Student's goals are teacher's goals. Communication in English language is the most important principle by applying interaction as much as possible, facilitating the learning process and making it meaningful to our students. Using guided discussion may help a lot of teachers who want to differentiate strategies and have effective teaching in their own classes. Active learning happens through interaction. Through discussion students build confidence in their own learning and social relationship which will help them in real life.

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