DEVELOPING SPEAKING COMPETENCE IN B2-LEVEL LEARNERS THROUGH COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING (CLT)

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Abstract: Speaking competence is part of communicative language skills and for those students who have reached the B2 level of English language proficiency they are able to discuss concrete as well as abstract topics but they need help in speaking fluency, structuring their arguments, spontaneous reactions and interaction. The paper considers how the CLT approach helps develop speaking competence among B2-level learners. It will consider learner needs, content of speaking classes and teaching methods which provide authentic communication opportunities. Speaking activities such as role-playing, structured discussions, information gap tasks, problem-solving tasks and short speeches will be proposed under CLT framework. It will be argued that if goals are clearly defined, language support provided, feedback given and reflection done then activities can help develop speaking skills.

Keywords: speaking proficiency, learners at level B2, CLT approach, oral communication, fluency, interaction

Introduction

Speaking is one of the main abilities in learning a foreign language because it allows learners to communicate, give their personal opinions, discuss and do social/academic activities. Speaking does not only require sentence structuring but also vocabulary selection, idea organisation, clear pronunciation, listening to partners and responding appropriately. So speaking lessons should provide opportunities for using language for communicative purposes (not just repetition of forms). For B2 students they should have enough fluency and spontaneity so that they can talk with other English speakers regularly: they must be able to express their viewpoints, construct arguments, compare options and discuss various topics. CEFR has descriptors which help educators understand requirements and set their goals (Council of Europe, 2020). Still some students may be shy in spontaneous speech,

unable to elaborate more on their viewpoints or use short and predictable responses instead. CLT helps here as it puts language learning through communicative activities in focus. CLT does not think of language as a set of structures but makes learners do communicative activities using linguistic skills. Littlewood (1981) considers connections between forms of language and its communicative purposes while Richards (2006) says that meaning and communication are important in the process of language learning.

The main problem in teaching which this article tries to tackle is the gap between knowledge about English language that learners have and their ability to use this knowledge in a situation of spontaneity. It is possible for a B2 level learner to have right vocabulary and grammar but cannot start a dialogue; answer a question; explain misunderstanding or give an argument etc. In this paper the main aim is to find out what role CLT can play in improving speaking skills among B2-level English students and suggest some activities that can be used in class. The purpose of this paper is not to assume that all B2 level students need the same things. Research question: In what ways can Communicative Language Teaching help the students develop their speaking skills at B2 level English?

B2 level learners are independent users of English. Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2020) states that B2 level learners understand gist of complicated texts and have fluent spontaneous conversations; they can speak and write with clarity and detail on different topics. That means while teaching English speaking skills one can teach students not only to identify objects or answer simple questions but also compare points of view, outline consequences, make justifications and solve problems with multiple solutions as well. Students at the same level of proficiency may be self-confident or not, accurate or not, pronounce correctly or not, have appropriate vocabulary or not and speak in other situations than class (some are self confident but have lots of grammar mistakes, some are accurate in speech but hesitate to find the right word, some work well in pairs but not addressing the whole class). Needs analysis is where we decide where learners would want to use the language as well what they intend to achieve through their speaking skills. It may involve small diagnostic tests, self-assessment forms, peer review as well as some interviews on specific issues. Learners could be asked whether universities ought to

make community service mandatory? In that case the teacher might evaluate how well learners formulate their positions (argue for them), give responses to opposing arguments and call for contributions from others.

Speaking skill has many dimensions. A balanced program for B2 level learners must include fluency accuracy vocabulary pronunciation discourse management intercultural competence All these elements work together in a communication situation so teachers need to create tasks where students can practice all these elements simultaneously.

Fluency means one speaks at the right speed without unnecessary pauses. Coherence is about how well one’s ideas are structured and linked. Learners at B2 level need practice elaborating on an answer structuring ideas providing examples concluding Useful phrases: “one reason for this is...”; “in contrast...”; “for example...”; “to sum up...” Pair speaking tasks with time limits and brief presentations can be useful here

Accuracy is still necessary because mistakes may cause ambiguity or miscommunication but accuracy must go with chances to speak too. The teacher can pick some language focus before any activity (compare, say sure/unsure about something, talk about possibilities using conditionals etc). Vocabulary teaching has to include collocations, expressions on a specific topic as well as agree/disagree, clarify and reformulate phrases.

Pronunciation lessons should help learners get their message across. Word stress, sentence stress, rhythm, connected speech, intonation are all relevant topics in this context. The aim of pronunciation at B2 level is not to eliminate the accent of the learner but increase intelligibility and expressiveness. Tools for teachers could be dialogue practice, role playing, peer feedback and audio recording of students’ work.

Good speakers not only listen attentively but also turn-take, question politely, agree and disagree politely and repair process if needed. Students need to practise phrases like: Can you please explain what you meant? I understand your opinion but… Can I add something here?

CLT sees language as a means of communication and gives learners the opportunity to use the language to communicate. In communicative class the teacher sets up reason for talking; helps when needed; arranges tasks where learners have to communicate information

or make decisions (teacher still plays an important role, but lesson is not teacher talk only). Learners speak to each other. Littlewood (1981) talks about relationship between forms of language and functions of communication while Richards (2006) gives overview of evolution of communicative language teaching. These approaches imply that lessons devoted to speaking should combine elements of study with practice in using it. CLT doesn’t mean neglecting grammar role too. Grammar and vocabulary are studied so they would help achieve communicative goals of particular lesson. Tasks for B2 level students should be such that the learner has to elaborate on his responses, negotiate and reason about them (selecting most effective way to solve a problem; planning party with limited funds; comparing options; sociopolitical problem discussion). There must be something for which the activity will have a result and a good reason why the students need to hear one another out.

The students will be split into pairs or small groups and given roles (e.g., one student plays the role of a customer who has not received his order on time and the other one plays the role of a customer service agent). They define the problem, state their views on the matter, give possible solutions to the problem and try to find some agreement. Useful expressions for polite requests and negotiation can be given by the teacher but the students choose what to say in response.

The instructor asks a question that is relevant for youth (e.g., university students should do internships before graduation). Learners come up with two arguments and an example for discussion. Discussions are done in groups where each participant participates in the discussion, answers at least one fellow learner and asks a question. Rubric may focus on opinion, support, interaction and language use. Feedback is given to participants after discussion without interrupting communication.

Learners are given bits of information needed to do a common task (e.g., two learners have different timetables and must decide when they will hold an event in which they participate). Neither has all the information so they ask questions, get clarifications and finally agree on time to hold event. The information gap gives real reason for communication and makes the learners attentive listeners.

Small groups are given a scenario: student association has limited budget and must choose three activities for campus event. Learners compare options, discuss costs and benefits, justify preferences and agree on plan. Each group presents decision and reasons why alternatives were rejected. Extended speaking, persuasive language, turn taking and ability to build on other people’s ideas are developed.

Learners prepare a two minute presentation on familiar topic (useful technology, book, change they would like to see in their community etc.). Listeners ask questions after each presentation. Peer feedback uses clear criteria (organisation, intelligibility, relevant vocabulary and engagement with questions). Repeating a presentation after feedback helps learners notice progress and apply suggestions.

CLT has the teacher as facilitator, organiser, language resource and feedback provider. Before a task is explained what it is for; procedure modelled if needed; learners checked that they understand what is expected of them; during the task teacher monitors interaction noting recurring difficulties without interrupting every error; after the task focused feedback given on use of language, communication strategies and achievement of task goal. Assessment should reflect objectives of activity. A practical speaking rubric might include fluency and coherence, range of vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, pronunciation and intelligibility and interaction. Each criterion can be assessed using simple scale and descriptors (level dependent) e.g. learners can complete self-assessment by identifying one strength and one goal for next speaking task. Transparent criteria make feedback more specific and support learner autonomy. Teachers need to consider inclusion and participation. Some learners need preparation time before speaking while others benefit from clear turn taking roles. Pair rehearsal before whole-class reporting, group roles rotating and sentence starters can remove unnecessary barriers without reducing intellectual challenge. The aim is to create an environment in which all learners have meaningful opportunities to speak.

Discussion

The principles outlined above suggest that CLT works well for speaking development when tasks involve learners exchanging meaning and responding to each other (role-plays

give context for functional language; discussions prompt learners to develop arguments; information-gap tasks make learners ask questions and answer them etc.); collaborative problem solving involves negotiation and agreement; etc. Taken together these tasks cover several components of speaking competence rather than treating speaking as a single skill. But communicative activity alone does not guarantee learning: tasks need clear objectives, difficulty level, language support and feedback. If learners use inaccurate or limited language repeatedly without noticing it then practice reinforces existing habits; if the teacher corrects every error during interaction learners are reluctant to take risks. A balanced lesson has preparation, purposeful communication and focused reflection. Teachers should adapt tasks according to learner needs observed in the classroom rather than assuming one method will work for every learner/context. A limitation of this article is that it provides a literature-informed methodological discussion rather than reporting an original classroom experiment. The suggested activities are recommendations which could be implemented and evaluated in one teaching context only. Classroom research might compare learners’ performance before and after CLT lessons (using a transparent speaking rubric and learner reflections) so that evidence could be provided as to what activities are most useful for particular groups of B2 learners.

Conclusion

Speaking competence at B2 level is more than grammar and vocabulary knowledge: learners need to speak fluently, organise their ideas, pronounce language intelligibly, choose appropriate expressions and manage interaction. CLT offers a practical framework because it gives learners opportunities to use English for meaningful purposes (role plays, group discussions, information gap tasks, collaborative problem solving, short presentations etc.) when linked to clear learning outcomes and feedback followed up with focused feedback. Teacher should identify needs of learners, select content, create supportive environment where communication and language development go hand in hand. In this way the questions whom to teach, what to teach and how to teach become connected when planning speaking lessons for B2 level learners.

References

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